

# **Harry Potter and the Magical Tours**

By

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## 01 - The Burrow

Harry Potter sat in the Weasley's kitchen, in his hands a glossy brochure. The cover page showed a family - two adults, three children, lots of luggage. Considering their clothes, these were undeniably wizards. They looked happy, smiling like drugged. Above their heads, a large sign read *Magical Tours*. Astonishingly, nothing in the scene moved a bit.

But then, this was no more astonishing than the scene around Harry.

To begin with, he was in The Burrow, the home of the Weasley family. It would be correct to call The Burrow Harry's home too, except that for him, the time spent here hadn't been enough yet to think in such terms.

Some weeks ago, Arthur and Molly Weasley had come to Hogwarts because of their dead son Charlie, had used the bad opportunity for something good - offering Harry a place in their midst. Four days ago, the Hogwarts Express had arrived at King's Cross, and only gradually, the feeling in Harry settled to something like *being at home*.

Other people had been quicker.

Ginny, sitting to his right, had started immediately to treat him as a brother. Maybe a special one - for example, one who wouldn't tease her, at least not seriously. Harry lacked any experience with this kind of relationship. Yes, some weeks ago, he and Almyra had started to think of each other as brother and sister in spirit, only this was something totally different. Also because Ginny contributed with more than spirit, so to speak.

Daily life close to each other, in particular as close as in such a small house, had its own moments. The day before, Harry met Ginny on her way back from the bathroom, giving him the opportunity to see her dressed in underwear and nothing else. The only embarrassment had been on his side, while he couldn't but notice in this short second - her movements passing him were slightly provocative, her expression somewhere between casual and innocent.

Ron, sitting opposite, seemed unchanged, though only to the outside. Maybe it had to do with the different atmosphere here in The Burrow. At any rate, Ron's conversations with him felt more intimate, shared more thoughts. Basically, this was nothing new, except - in Hogwarts, this would happen twice a year while here - at *home* - Ron could start issues as sensitive as his relationship to Janine, or Harry's to Cho, a moment after they found a minute alone.

And then there was Mrs. Weasley - *Ma Weasley*, working at the sink. Harry had started addressing her that way still at the platform nine and three-quarters, with the effect exactly as predicted by Ron - she was wax in his hands, would have been if not for his sense of justice, or for the fact that a perfectly normal treatment already felt like heaven.

Not that Ma Weasley could treat him perfectly normal - by no means. She had as much difficulties getting used to this state as he himself, was gradually regaining a normal behaviour, helped by a kind teasing every now and then from her own two children still in the household.

The twins' remarks would have been sharper, only Fred and George had moved out the second day. Since then, they worked round the clock to get their business running. They planned to open *Swashbuckle Sweets* within the next two weeks - the rent for a shop close to the Diagon Alley scored so high, every day without paying customers could burn an unpleasant hole in their budget.

Two weeks ... Harry would not be around to visit them at the opening day because - three days from now - he was expected to meet a Zen master in Japan.

And this was the reason for the glossy brochure in his hands.

When discussing his journey the other day, Arthur Weasley had mentioned a company called *Magical Tours Ltd.* It offered travelling services, especially for long-distance travelling where traditional individual techniques like floo powder didn't work well. This company hadn't invented anything new, it simply used common techniques - but it offered a worldwide network of travel routes, based on portkey links.

Beforehand, Harry had pondered the idea of using Muggles technology, meaning an aeroplane - until Arthur Weasley had told him Muggles wouldn't take well to a passenger with a snake around his body. This argument killed any such idea at the spot.

Travelling without Nagini, formerly Voldemort's snake and since the Battle of Hogwarts Harry's devoted companion, was out of discussion. Putting her in any of these boxes the Muggles airlines considered appropriate for pet animals wasn't an option either - for Harry, Nagini counted as a partner, not a pet. She could sense magic, she could distinguish lies from the truth, probably had other skills he hadn't detected yet in these few weeks. Travelling without her would feel like travelling without his wand.

Ginny said, "Why does such a big company use so cheap stuff?" She was looking at the brochure made Muggles-style - no parchment but paper, the pictures unmoving, not the least bit magic in it.

"It's a mass production," answered Harry. "They place it everywhere, send it everywhere ... That's the Muggles technique of advertisement. With parchment and magical pictures, it would be too expensive."

Ron said, "I bet those people in there couldn't hold their stupid grin any moment longer."

Remembering real Muggles advertisements, Harry laughed. "They could - there's quite an industry with people earning lots of money for smiling all day long."

"Sounds interesting," said Ginny, looking thoughtful.

Mrs. Weasley shot a sharp glance at her, however kept silent. This was something new too, the few days had included several lessons how to deal best with her children. Ron, still more Ginny, had aged by another year as much as by drastic events, including the death of their second-oldest brother Charlie.

Ron looked at his sister. "Are you serious? ... Grinning into a camera all the time and holding awkward poses?"

"Why not? ... It's not worse than writing parchments all the time and holding awkward speeches."

Ron turned to Harry. "Tell her - you're the Muggles expert."

Which was less than half true. However, the native Weasleys had developed a tendency to use him as a kind of arbiter, projecting a view of 'Weasley neutrality' into Harry - something he couldn't find anywhere inside himself.

"Think twice," said Harry. "Fleur, for example - she could start a model career tomorrow, there's no doubt with her looks ... But the thought never crossed her mind."

"Maybe that's the problem," replied Ginny. "Or she's just too rich ... Harry, what are the chances for a model with red hair and freckles?"

Harry shrugged. "For the majority, it doesn't matter - they need all kinds of colours, and figures, and faces ... But to make real money, you have to be in the top level."

"What's needed to reach the top level?"

Ron was quickest. "Bigger titties."

"Ron!!" Mrs. Weasley looked indignant.

Without impressing Ron much. "Sorry being impolite," he said, "but - it's only the truth, and I'm just trying to show how crazy this idea is."

Ginny wasn't intimidated either. "Harry - what's your opinion?"

For a split second, the picture of Ginny in shirt and panties came up in Harry's memory. He didn't agree with Ron, however ... "It changes with the fashion," he explained, slightly blushing. "One year, they have to be big, the next year, the models have to be as flat as an ironing-board ... Only if you're at the real top, it doesn't matter."

Mrs. Weasley glanced at him. "My dear, it's amazing how well informed you are about this issue."

Ron was grinning diabolically, while Ginny seemed to be seriously interested in his answer.

Harry looked at Ma Weasley while answering. "If you knew about the newspapers and magazines in the Dursley household, you wouldn't wonder."

The keyword *Dursley* was always good to kill an issue in conversation. Nobody seemed to notice that the last magazines he might have read in Privet Drive dated back two years - in his last vacation, Patronus training had blocked his access to such literature even more than tense relations with the subscribers.

"Whatever," said Mrs. Weasley, "I thought you were going to figure out your travelling route."

Harry browsed through the brochure. *Magical Business Tours* was the standard program this company offered, with daily connections to the major capitals around the globe. Scanning the list, he found an entry *London-Tokyo*. Next instant, he swallowed - two-hundred and twenty galleons!

"Tokyo is a standard business link ... Now let's see how to travel further."

This Zen master lived in the south of Japan, with Fukuoka as the closest larger city. To Harry's dismay, Fukuoka didn't appear in the business part.

He scanned further. *Magical Mystery Tours* was their second program - designed for vacations, for families, for people who liked to be surprised by the destination they reached. Connection links were beyond the scope of this brochure.

At least, he found some addresses listed. There was a tourist office in a side street of the Diagon Alley, and there was of course this new building at the suburbs of London - *London Linkport*, as the paper called it.

He dropped the brochure. "I think we have to visit their tourist office ... This thing doesn't explain how to travel from Tokyo to the south of Japan."

Ron's eyes lighted up. A visit in the Diagon Alley, without the pressure of buying school books, cauldrons, and nasty Potions ingredients - recently, Ron had come across fifteen hundred galleons, and some of this money felt like burning in his pockets.

"Oh yes," called Ginny, "That'll be super."

"Who said you'd come with us?"

Suppressing a grin, Harry watched Ginny glancing at her brother. Ron had tried to sound annoyed, only he wasn't pokerface Bob - his voice left little doubt that he liked the idea of treating his young sister with a shopping tour almost as much as Ginny herself. All she had to do was playing her cards properly.

Suddenly with the eyes and the voice of a small girl, she asked, "Harry - didn't you say so?"

"Basically, yes ..."

Ginny beamed at him.

"... in particular since I have the strong feeling Ron might need some professional - that is, female - advice in one shop or the other ... I mean, someone who would be able to represent the taste of a girl - " he looked at Ginny, "maybe a bit older than you ..."

She grinned, "... but also with red hair ..."

"Right, only less British, more - er ..."

"French ..."

"Exactly ... And for a small fee ..."

Ron had followed the exchange with pleasure. "I can see it already - if we're lucky, we might find the time to visit that tourist office."

Mrs. Weasley showed mixed feelings, and she wasn't used to the habit of spending money for luxury items - not yet and maybe never. "You shouldn't spoil her too much," she said.

"Don't tell me," replied Harry, "because for me it's the last opportunity in the next weeks."

Ginny was listening with delight, while Mrs. Weasley seemed less pleased - probably from the mentioning of his departure. She asked, "By the way - who's paying for your journey?"

Harry realized - the issue hadn't come up in the few minutes of his conversation with Lupin. "I guess I'll pay it by myself," he said. "After all, it's a private training seminar ... Has nothing to do with Hogwarts."

"This - um, Zen master," Mrs. Weasley seemed to chew on her words, "what's he asking for - how much ..."

"Oh - nothing ... Lupin said, this is some kind of test training - like an exam. He's not going to be paid."

"So - if you fail, or don't qualify, or whatever, that's it?"

"Yes, Ma Weasley."

"And if not?"

"Dunno ..." Seeing Ma Weasley's expression, Harry decided to keep his expectations to himself, and to stick with the dry facts. "All I know is - I'll be back after four weeks, and I'm expected back in Hogwarts a week later."

\* \* \*

Early next afternoon, three pinches of floo powder carried them downtown. They used the chimney in the twins' shop as destination, saying hello to Fred and George before quickly leaving the messy place, with old garbage in one corner, piles of new items in another, and dust everywhere. Coming out, they stood at Crescent Square, the intersection of Diagon Alley and Perico Lane.

"What first?" asked Ron.

"The tourist office," said Harry. "Once I know how to travel, I'll be more open-minded to other things."

They walked down the Diagon Alley. Harry felt wonderful - side by side with some people almost as close as brother and a sister, money in his pockets, the shops so inviting, the weather magnificent ... Maybe a little hot.

Very hot, actually - by the time they had reached the *Magical Tours* office, they were sweating. Wizard robes felt more comfortable inside the thick walls of Hogwarts.

The air inside the office was significantly cooler. A young woman came over, dressed in something like the wizard version of a uniform, definitely more suited to the hot weather. Showing a perfunctory smile, she said, "Good afternoon. What can I do for you?"

Harry placed the brochure on the desk. "I was trying to figure out a travel route, only this paper wasn't detailed enough."

"Certainly not, young man. These are just the major links of our intercontinental network."

Harry said nothing.

After a second, the woman asked, "Which destination did you have in mind?"

"Japan ... Fukuoka."

The *Magical Tours* clerk performed a magical transformation. Suddenly, the smile was stronger, and the voice very attentive. "Oh - yes, sir, of course ... Let me see - er, would you like to sit down, sir?"

They would.

The woman scanned through lists, making notes on a piece of paper. Harry couldn't detect any parchment in the office.

After a while, she returned with the paper, sat down opposite him. "Here we are, sir ... Your first leg is from London Linkport to Tokyo ... There you'll find a direct connection to Osaka in the south, and from there to Fukuoka - so far, always with portkey links ... Sir, is this your final destination?"

"No, but I didn't expect to find a link for the last - um, leg."

The woman seemed pleased at his usage of the professional terminology. "That's probably true, sir - however, our services also include those of a normal travel agency. So, if you would tell me your final destination, I'll try to offer a complete travel route in one package."

"It's Gonoura - a town on the island of Iki."

"Just a second, sir." The woman marched to the back of the room. There, she took a wand from a drawer and pointed toward an empty wall. Next moment, a world map appeared at the wall. She pointed toward the Japanese islands, murmured something.

The world map disappeared, was replaced by a map of Japan.

With another murmuring, a third map appeared, showing Kyushu, the southern island, with Fukuoka in the north and the small island of Iki above, about forty miles across the Street of Tsushima.

"That's it," whispered Ron. "That's what we need in the office."

The woman returned with another piece of paper. "We're lucky, sir ... A ferry from Fukuoka to Iki is the last leg we can offer, however, it just goes to Gonoura."

This wasn't too surprising, as the small island held just two larger towns, Harry's destination and Katsumoto.

"Now for the times, sir ... The evening ferry clears port at six o'clock local time, which means you should reach Fukuoka Linkport not later than five o'clock ... So, taking into account some delay between Tokyo and Fukuoka, plus the time difference, it all fits nicely in one day when you'll take our morning link - seven o'clock, sir."

"Yes, the time difference ... How much is it?"

"Eight hours plus, sir ... When stepping through the gate at seven a.m. here in London, you'll come out at three p.m. in Tokyo."

Eight hours lost ... Well, four weeks from now, he would get them back.

"Sir - do you have experience with portkey links?"

"Yes, I do." Next moment, Harry became aware that his jumps so far had been comparably short. He asked, "Is there any difference between shorter and longer distances?"

"No, sir, not for the passenger - this short moment of disorientation isn't an indicator for the distance passed."

"Well, then ..."

"Which day did you have in mind for your travel, sir?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Oh - that's a very short term, sir." The woman presented an expression of professional concern. "Although I'm sure that I can place your tickets for the planned times if you'll book now."

Harry would have liked to hear Nagini's comment on that. Presenting a truth as something likely to change soon, would his snake call it a lie? ... Whatever - booking now was exactly what he had in mind.

Which left one question. "How much is it, altogether?"

The woman looked at her papers, was calculating. "Three hundred and forty galleons, sir - from London Linkport to Gonoura Ferryport."

"All right ... I take it."

"Very well, sir." The woman's smile turned to a happy beaming. From a weird figure in his horrible past - Uncle Vernon and his endless dronings - Harry knew enough about Muggles sales techniques to guess this woman's salary was benefitting from each contract. For wizard companies, however, it was highly unusual.

The woman returned with another sheet of paper. "Sir, would you please fill in your name and address ... and the method of payment." She had a pen ready.

He wrote his name, then almost had to ask for another sheet - barely avoiding to fill in Privet Drive as his address. Under *Payment*, he found two entries - *Cash* and *Bank Order*.

Didn't tell him anything. "Bank Order - how does it work?"

"You sign an order form that specifies the sum, sir - that's all ... I take it you have an account at Gringotts, sir?"

"Yes." He checked the box beneath *Bank Order*. "Okay."

"Thank you very much, sir." The woman scanned the form, looked up, smiling. "Mr. Potter - a very famous name, sir, except ..." The smile faded, her eyes transfixed on Harry's forehead. "I'm sorry, sir - I didn't ... I wasn't ..."

"Never mind - I'm trying to pass through unnoticed."

"Yes, of course ... Certainly, sir." With pinkish cheeks, the woman walked to a desk, put the sheet into a slot, and pressed a button. A second later, something like a pencil jumped up and started to move over a paper booklet, touching the surface in a rapid staccato, like the beak of a woodpecker.

Fascinated, Ron stared at the device. "What's this?"

The woman seemed glad to talk about something harmless. "A hammer pen, sir ... It can handle up to ten carbon copies in a ticket form - very convenient for travelling tickets."

Some minutes later, she came back with the booklet. "This is your ticket, Mr. Potter - one sheet at each station ... Please arrive at London Linkport not later than a quarter to seven ... And here's the bank order, if you would sign it, please."

This form too had been written by the hammer pen. Harry and Ron examined the writing - each letter, each digit was formed from a series of small dots.

He signed.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter ... Have a good trip ... Good afternoon."

Ron and Ginny managed to pass the door before they started to laugh. Ron mimicked, "Mr. Potter - a very nameous fame, sir, except it's the other way around."

"Save it ... Let's find something to drink."

They found an ice-cream parlour, and the ice cones in the magic picture looked just too good, so they ordered three huge cups of ice cream in addition to their drinks - the biggest glasses of lemon soda in store.

Ginny asked, "Harry - what else do you need for the journey, or for your visit?"

"As if I knew ... A lighter robe - otherwise, I'll be dried out by the time I reach that port."

"This woman's dress ... Without the uniform style, but short-sleeved, and light ..."

Ron glanced at his sister. "Whose wardrobe are you talking about? Harry's, or ..."

Ginny glanced back. "Or yours ..."

"She's right," said Harry. "We all need summer dresses."

The large front of Halprin & Myerson, *Finest Wizard Clothes*, could be seen not far up the street. A moment later, it was just across, and then they were inside.

They came out an hour later.

In spite of all the bags and parcels to carry, they felt considerably lighter - small wonder, they had kept the new clothes, with the old ones stored in the bags. And of course, the pockets felt lighter too.

Harry wondered if the old robes would ever see daylight again, as grown-out as they looked. Only - it would be difficult enough to return *with* them to Ma Weasley. On the other side, their shopping had developed in a very natural sequence - first the summer robes, realizing the trousers simply didn't match, same with the shoes ... Same with Ginny ...

To be honest, she had been quickest. After Harry and Ron had changed from head to feet, she had asked, "Done?" with some anxiousness in her face, and Harry had answered, "On this floor, yes ... Now it's your turn."

It became another new experience for him ... Standing between racks of women's clothes, waiting for a young girl to appear from a cubicle, to parade up and down, checking herself in the mirror, asking for his comments while ignoring those from the mirror - they were too prejudiced, found everything magnificent, especially if it was expensive. However, Harry's own judgements weren't too different.

At the cash register, Ron tried to push him away, muttering something like "... my sister, not yours."

Except that Harry had known in advance, had used the time to get prepared. "It's up to you, Ron," he said. "Either we split, or I'm going to start another round with her, all over again."

"That's blackmailing!"

"Really?" Harry touched his temples in a bad imitation of thinking. "Oh yes, I remember, wasn't it a corridor in Hogwarts ... Some evening ..."

Ginny looked from one to the other. "What are you talking about?"

Harry stared at Ron. "Shall I tell her? ... One - two ..."

Ron gave in. Ginny looked relieved with the agreement, disappointed only because she wouldn't hear the story.

Then they went for a guidebook about Japanese habits and culture - Harry wanted to invest a minimum of preparation for this unknown country. The best they could find at Flourish and

Blotts was a travelling guide, which had a lot to say about the proper behaviour in restaurants and shops. At least, it included a short introduction to the Japanese view of things.

Just in time, Harry and Ron remembered what they were missing badly in The Burrow - a Go set, board and stones. Alas, to their deep disappointment, Gambol and Japes didn't offer them. Chess sets, yes - any size and price, but Go? Maybe in a Muggles store.

Harry decided to have a look in Japan. According to Cho's descriptions, Go sets should be found there around each corner.

Now, walking toward Crescent Square, examining the bags in his hands, Ron's expression turned somewhat gloomy. "Mum'll kill us."

Even Ginny didn't look as happy as some minutes before.

"No," said Harry, "because we'll bribe her ... Ginny, what did she always want but never had the money for? ... Something personal, not a household item."

"Household items *are* personal for Mum ... But I know what you mean."

A few minutes later, Harry carried another box with six delicate wine glasses. He also carried the duty to present them - quickly, if possible, once they had entered The Burrow.

He checked the box. "I don't think chimney travel is a good idea with these glasses."

"Oh my God!" Ginny looked horrified. "With these clothes - I'm not going to ruin them in there." All the new items were white, light khaki, or cream-coloured - chimney soot would look just great on them.

Ron was perplexed. "And how do you think we'll return home - walking?"

Ginny seemed ready, should this turn out the only solution.

"The Knight Bus," said Harry.

For him, the expert bus traveller, it was fun watching Ron and Ginny while the Knight Bus drove at neckbreak speed through the streets - more or less, that was, bending aside every lamp mast, car, tree, and house that blocked the path. As much as they enjoyed the ride - it did nothing to soothe their nerves. Reaching the entrance of The Burrow, Ron and Ginny looked definitely scared.

"Okay," said Harry, "that's the moment of truth." He opened the door, glanced in.

Sounds from the kitchen, steps. Mrs. Weasley appeared in the door frame. "Where do you come fro ...?" She stared - at Harry, at the two figures behind him.

"We took the Knight Bus, Ma Weasley - you see, we've been shopping, and we didn't want to risk dirt ... Or to break this here - it's for you, Ma."

Was it the magic formula? The present? In Harry's opinion, it was the result of a full-force attack, not unlike what had hit the Dark Forces in the Battle of Hogwarts - Mrs. Weasley didn't know where to look first, what to say next.

She examined the new clothes, touched here, tested there. "Well," she said finally, "I have to admit - you three can be sent shopping ... That's first quality - nothing flimsy, or poorly stitched."

The full impact of her children's broadside became apparent only later in the evening, after Arthur Weasley had returned from the Ministry. When he admired the dresses and found they looked great, his wife asked whether he could manage an afternoon off from the office.

"Probably, dear .. Why?"

Her face slightly flushed, Mrs. Weasley said, "To go shopping - so we can present ourselves besides our children."

\* \* \*

Harry sat in his room, reading in the guidebook about the *wa* - the harmony every Japanese was always eager to keep, or to reach, and not to lose again. According to what he understood, his familiarity with Giants culture would be a help - the importance of behaviour was nothing new, although the Japanese seemed considerably less flexible toward strangers - *gaijin*, as they were called.

He dropped the book and thought about Lleyrin, the Giants chief, and how naturally Lleyrin had balanced the little flaws and mistakes in Harry's behaviour, without ever losing his *wa* - earned the hard way, as this trick story had unraveled over the months.

A knock at the door.

He twisted from the unexpected sound. "Come in."

A head appeared in the opening door - Ginny.

The view made him smile. "Hello, *gaijin*."

"Huh?"

He showed the book. "Here - I'm reading about Japan ... A *gaijin* is a redhead - that's their term for westerners - although it's not polite to say so."

"Oh, okay ... How do you feel about this journey?"

"I don't know ... I'm looking forward to it - only, I was just getting used to be here ... Like now, this moment - I'm sitting here, in this room, and you come in, and everybody thinks it's perfectly normal ... For me, it isn't normal yet ..."

Ginny kept looking around, touching here and there, showing all signs of someone in desperate search of the first words. Eventually, she said, "Harry ... I wanted to thank you for - for this afternoon ..."

From the corner came a short hissing.

Ginny almost jumped, then looked at Nagini, who was lying calmly, staring at her.

Harry grinned. "Nagini just told me it's not true - and besides, you did that already in the Diagon Alley ... Why don't you sit down and tell me what's on your mind?"

A pinkish Ginny slumped down on a chair. "I forgot - Nagini, I mean ... Yes, I want to talk about something - I might have waited a few days, except you'll be leaving soon, so ..." Her fingers continued to make small girl's movements.

Finally, she looked up. "You're the only one I can talk with about that ... I'm certainly not short of older brothers, but - with you, it's different, for some reasons ..."

Harry had a feeling. "So far, it sounds like something I would have discussed with Fleur ... With her, I can talk about things like with nobody else."

Ginny looked grateful. "Yes, it's something like that."

"Then go ahead ... The first words are the hardest."

She nodded. "Harry ... how is it between you and Cho?"

"We love each other ... Since the end-of-year feast, this is public knowledge, so what do you mean in particular?"

"Is it serious?"

"Yes - dead-serious."

She knew already - had to, after this power had proved against Voldemort. So her questions were still part of the opening.

"And how did it start?"

"The first time I saw her - in a Quidditch match. Only then, I didn't know yet, of course, at that age ... But I was thinking a lot about her, about that feeling."

Ginny grinned. "And I was around, turning red at every opportunity."

"Yes - only that's been your problem more than mine."

This remark seemed a good opportunity to come to the real topic, if Harry's feeling was right, and in a way, he had chosen his words to that intent.

Only she didn't jump. "And when ..."

"... did I know for sure?"

Ginny nodded.

"I can tell you when I confessed it, first to myself, and then to her - only afterwards I realized, the knowledge itself must have been older ... It was during Lupin's imprisonment."

Seeing her expression, and remembering a similar situation with another redhead, Harry told her what had happened in the staircase and afterwards. He finished, "By the way, I had to tell Ron not so long ago - when he was trying to figure out how to - er, get things rolling."

For Harry, this seemed the closest thing to a golden bridge, except that Ginny took the opportunity to sort out a bit more. She asked, "Ron and Janine - do you think it's serious too?"

"Nobody knows but them - only what I've seen in Beauxbatons and the next day at the Delacour castle ..." He smiled. "Imagine - we found these Omniar Twenty-Seven DS in the stable, these family broomsticks, and not even that could take him away from her side."

Ginny nodded - for her too, this was proof beyond reasonable doubt.

Harry decided to take the initiative. "And how are things between you and Grigorij?"

A sigh. "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

"What do you think of him?"

"I like him ... He's nice, looks good - it's fun with him ... Everything's fine ..."

"Except it's not the great love?"

Ginny sighed again. "That's what I'm afraid."

"Do you miss him - now?"

"Hmm ..." Ginny glanced toward the snake in the corner. "No - a few days without him are fine as well."

"Then you know already - don't you?"

Maybe so. "Do you miss Cho?"

"Yes ... Not every minute of the day - not right at the moment, but ..."

"Well, then ... Yes, I think I know."

Harry watched Ginny's face. "But where's the problem?"

"Maybe none ... Knowing I don't love him, what do you think should I do?"

He didn't understand.

"Perhaps I should ask what I should *not* do." She wasn't looking at him - even so, her cheeks were darkening.

A second later, understanding the question, Harry was sure his own cheeks didn't look much different. "If you're talking about what I think you're talking - all I can say, you're asking a blind man for colours."

"Oh ... I thought ..."

He shook his head. "No."

Ginny made a sound, cleared her throat, tried again. "Why not?"

"Blimey, Ginny - it's ... I'm barely used to give Cho a kiss in public ... Everything was happening so fast - maybe it was the lack of opportunity, or maybe I'm just a bit slow ..."

Now she looked at him, showing disbelief. "Slow? ... You're the fastest person I know - you can take decisions in a split second."

He felt extremely pleased. "Thank you - but I think that's only true in critical situations, while ... At least, for these things, it was a hard training." He giggled. "It was Fleur who ordered the day when I had to ask Cho for the ball ... But since then, things have improved."

"That's what I mean - once you're sure about something ... My problem is, I'm not sure at all."

"Well - to give you an answer, I guess I have to combine what Fleur said at one occasion or another with my own knowledge - as good as I can ..."

Ginny looked expectantly. "Yes, please."

"What I can say is, find out what you want - you alone, not Grigorij, not your parents, or your friends in Hogwarts. Once you've found it, you'll recognize it immediately - this feeling of certainty, it's unmistakable ... Actually, that's Zen."

"And then?"

"Then do it - or find a way how to do it ... which, in this case, shouldn't be too complicated, this way or the other."

Ginny giggled.

"Otherwise - Fleur says, the British conventions about the proper age for - er, some things are totally unrealistic. She says, if you can do something, you're old enough for it ... Well, for more details, you might ask herself."

"If it wasn't for the first time ..."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean ... Fleur says, a young man should look for an older woman as a teacher, and a young girl for an older man - except that only the French think this is a reasonable way."

Ginny could meet his eyes again. "That sounds reasonable, better than ..." A grin appeared in her face. "Maybe you should follow that advice too, Harry."

He grinned back. "Yes, maybe - except, where to find her, and how to keep it secret so Cho won't find out - although, for all I know, the Chinese also think this is the best way to learn."

"Didn't you say Zen is about ways and goals? ... Well, so - use Zen, Harry."

\* \* \*

As a reaction to Harry's announcement of his training seminar, Ron had promised the twins to help them - at least until the opening, maybe the full four weeks. The help wouldn't come for free, Ron's intention was to make some money, and the twins had agreed. It looked like a good business for both sides - Ron's job had to do with bookkeeping rather than working in the mud, and - best of all, especially for his salary - he had brought the writer pen with him.

This was the reason why, early the next day, Ron went off.

Harry and Ginny kept to the habit of the previous days - sleeping long, starting slowly into the day.

After lunch, Harry decided to visit his godfather, Sirius Black, commander of the Law Enforcement Squad. Sirius had earned this rank and position in the course of the political landslide after the Battle of Hogwarts. It would be interesting to hear if Sirius had adjusted to his new environment quicker than Harry to his own.

Ginny found this a good idea, expanded it to a visit of additional locations in the Ministry - her father, Percy, and Sirius, so she and Harry had to do it together, provided they would take the Knight Bus.

The Knight Bus had been Harry's intention anyway - he knew already, floo powder would never be his favourite way of travelling. And Ginny's company was a nice change of the plan.

Mrs. Weasley seemed pleased of the idea too - she missed to complain about the waste of money. But then, maybe floo powder was more expensive than Harry thought.

The Ministry of Magic presented itself as an impressive complex of buildings - from the outside. Inside, they found a maze of dirty corridors, lined by an endless number of rooms, probably with additional ones hidden behind tricky entrances, the same architecture as used in Hogwarts. It looked very mysterious and very inefficient.

Harry was reminded of Ron's future plans - introducing some Muggles technology in the wizarding world, and he knew instantaneously, the fiercest resistance would come from these halls. Anybody thinking like Ron could only have left the Ministry long ago - maybe with some notable exceptions.

Percy was none of them. To find him, that meant the Department of International Magical Cooperation, turned out a major task and took quite a while - longer actually than the visit itself.

They said hello, then Ginny told her surprised brother they were passing by on the way to their father, then Percy mumbled how nice, unfortunately he was quite in a hurry for the next meeting, and they finished with a goodbye before leaving quickly, feeling equally relieved at both sides of the closing door.

Harry said, "He hasn't changed a bit, has he?"

"No, not at all ... This visit was a mistake."

"I don't think so - he'll never complain he wouldn't get his share of attention ... Whenever I'll visit Sirius here, I know for sure - right now Percy's in a hurry for his next meeting."

"Yeah ..." Ginny grimaced. "Anyway - let's find Dad."

The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office occupied significantly more space, which didn't mean it was easier to find. However, walking down the corridor to Mr. Weasley's office, for the first time in this nightmarish building Harry found an atmosphere of activity and determination.

Arthur Weasley looked pleased to see them. There was little doubt he'd been busy with some complicated matter, still, he found the time to offer a cup of tea and an explanation of his current task.

"It's an investigation," he explained, "and, by coincidence, Harry, it's this *Magical Tours* company."

Harry said, "I wouldn't be surprised - they seem to use every trick to make their business simpler ... Which artefacts are they suspected to use?"

"Competitors - recently, the Muggles are building them so small, it's difficult to find them."

"Really?"

Harry tried to figure out whether he should tell Mr. Weasley the proper term - *computers*, then decided against it. While Arthur Weasley probably wouldn't mind, always eager to collect knowledge of the Muggles world, it felt just so impolite. Perhaps a side-effect from reading too much about Japanese conventions.

Armed with the description of a clever shortcut to the Enforcement Squad floor, also with greetings for Sirius, they left fifteen minutes later.

"It's strange," said Harry, "your father has to prevent exactly what Ron's planning to do later - bringing in Muggles technology ... But I'm sure, he would be more than happy if this office was ordered to do the opposite - selecting useful Muggles stuff."

Ginny sighed. "He would even start over as the last clerk in such a department ... Sometimes, I wish he'd be a little more ambitious - although right now it doesn't matter, and not for a while."

Harry kept silent. Money in general, the recently earned money in particular, and most of all its true origin were delicate issues in the Weasley household, even more so here in this building where the walls might have ears at totally unexpected places.

They found the shortcut as described, and it worked as predicted - Arthur Weasley was a living example for the differences between ambitious and efficient. They came out directly in front of a small office, its door open.

Entering, they found a woman sitting behind a piece of furniture that looked like a combination of desk and counter, surprisingly modern and good-looking in this environment.

The same was true for the woman. Harry guessed her age at somewhere around thirty, give or take as much as required to compensate for his little experience in guessing, and for her obvious expertise in proper dressing and polished appearance. Dark blonde hair over a robe short-sleeved like their own, lacking the uniform style they had seen yesterday, for example because it was quite thin.

A sign on a triangular piece of wood told them her name - Belinda McGraw. She looked expectantly at the intruders. "Good afternoon - may I help you?"

"Yes, please ... We'd like to see Sirius - er, Mr. Black."

"Indeed ... Do you have an appointment, sir?"

Sir? Was it well-cared politeness, or a nice way to tease him a bit? According to the look in her eyes, it felt more like the latter ... At least, thought Harry, she wasn't calling him *young man*. Aloud, he said, "No, it's kind of a surprise."

"Yes, of course."

Now he felt sure - she was having fun. The dark blonde head tilted to something shaped like a horn. "Chief?"

A grumbling sound.

"Here are two visitors who'd like to see you. A handsome young man - calls you Sirius ... and a young lady with a dazzling mop of red hair."

A squeaking and a rattle.

The woman stood up, smiling. "Miss Weasley?"

Ginny nodded, staring admiringly at the woman.

"And Mr. Potter - nice to meet you ... Sirius - er, Mr. Black is waiting for ..."

Another door opened. Sirius appeared, his eyes sparkling. "Harry - great, seeing you here ... And Ginny - what a welcome surprise." Sirius hugged Harry, shook hands with Ginny, beamed. "You look gorgeous - both of you."

Ginny beamed back, now admiring Sirius.

Harry did the same, and for good reason. Sirius' hair was trimmed short, his complexion healthier than Harry could remember, his dress civilian, suited to the season, still with a military touch - an impressive appearance.

Sirius turned to the woman. "Bel, here he is - the one who's done more for the squad, and for myself, than we can ever pay back ... Think of him as a squad member - with his snake and her abilities too, we might appoint him some day soon."

The woman looked at Harry, now with a warm smile. "I have to thank you, Mr. Potter, because ..."

Sirius interrupted her. "C'mon, cut it ... Bel, meet Harry ... Harry, this is Belinda, the best that could happen to the squad, me included ..."

For a fleeting instant, the woman's eyes were widening. Before Harry found the time to consider this particular choice of words, Sirius spoke again. "... and this is Ginny, of Harry's new family, and the living sign that Arthur has improved a lot after Percy."

He looked satisfied at the reaction to his remark.

In Sirius' office, Harry and Ginny accepted a soda for each of them, extracted from a refrigerator which seemed out of place in this room with its heavy desk and deep chairs. Harry asked, "How's your work?"

"Pretty quiet, currently ... Summer hole - gives us time to hunt the last of the three Firebolt riders, and to clean up some other things."

"And here in the Ministry?"

Grinning, Sirius looked toward the door they had just passed. "Couldn't be better, as you've seen ... I followed the example of your squad team, Harry."

Faking astonishment, Harry said, "I didn't see Steel Wings around."

"Well ..." Sirius didn't fall for this trap. "Before this conversation gets out of hand," he said, "let me ask you for your journey ... Everything settled?"

"Yes - from here to this island."

"How are you going to travel?"

"With Magical Tours."

"Oh ... them." For a moment, Sirius didn't look too happy.

"Something wrong with this company?"

Sirius hesitated. "Probably not ... We got some complaints, but then, considering the number of passengers they handle each day, it's nothing unusual ... Anyway, I don't see a reason not to travel with them."

"Anything particular?"

"No - I couldn't recognize a pattern, or not yet ... That's what I'm still working on, what I'll get only with more routine - to see the patterns behind the reports ... You get a crazy complaint, and nine times out of ten it's really nonsense, while the tenth - an experienced cop can smell what's wrong with the tenth, and I still have to train my nose."

"Crazy reports?" This time, Harry's lack of comprehension was real. "Like what?"

"All kinds of things - lost owls, for example."

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't tell me anything."

"Me either - that's what I said ... By the way, I was quite serious about your snake - she's better than Veritaserum, especially because we're not allowed to use it ... Don't be surprised if I'll contact you for a counsel - and then, I really have to appoint you first."

Harry felt thrilled. "Any time, once I'm back ... From squad to squad - sounds good."

Sirius turned to Ginny. "How is it for you, with this snake around?"

Ginny giggled. "It's okay ... Only, you must be careful what you're saying - each time I try to tune my answers a bit, she's telling Harry."

Sirius laughed. "I can imagine - always honest's a bit too much."

A squeak came through a horn on Sirius' desk. "Chief?"

He bent forward. "Yes?"

Harry didn't understand much from Belinda's words. Then Sirius looked up. "Harry, Ginny - can we finish? Someone's waiting for me."

They said goodbye to him, were guided directly to the outside - obviously, the visitor was waiting with Belinda, and Sirius didn't want them to meet.

Walking back to the exit, Ginny turned at Harry. "This is ..."

He stopped her. "Wait - until we're outside ... These walls ..."

"Yes - you're right."

Back on the street, they looked for the next ice-cream parlour, sat down under a large umbrella. Harry examined at the card, then looked at Ginny. "Okay - what's your choice?"

She selected a very moderate cup.

"C'mon, aim a little higher ... that's the last opportunity for a while."

Ginny seemed a bit embarrassed. "This should be my turn to treat you - except I cannot - erm, Mum hasn't changed yet the pocket money rules ... Ron's better off."

"You mean, with his job?"

She nodded. "I looked for a job myself - no luck."

The waitress appeared. Harry ordered two *Caribbean Crowns* - chocolate, fruits, cream, a dash of liquor, and far away from what Ginny had said.

She smiled. "Thank you - although you shouldn't do that."

He looked sternly. "You know that I bear a Giant's life in my heart?"

"Yes - Lleyrin ... Why?"

"Don't you know? - It's very impolite to tell a Giant what to do - or not to do."

"Oh - sorry, I wasn't aware ... It won't happen again."

"The Japanese have something similar - except, if that book's right, they take every opportunity to feel another obligation ... They call it ON, otherwise it's the same what I know as an ob. The Giants are a bit more flexible - to create an ob, it must be something serious, like, um ..."

"... saving someone's life," helped Ginny.

"Yes." He glanced at her, had the feeling she was teasing him, and this was a hidden reminder at a scene deep in the dungeons of Hogwarts, some years ago.

The waitress arrived with their cups, wanted to see money right now. So close to the Ministry, high prices, as well as low ethic standards of the clients sitting outside, seemed to be common practice.

Ginny had watched Harry counting the coins. The embarrassment was back in her face.

He saw it. "Please - it's just an ice cup ... I didn't even save you from starving."

She laughed. "You're right - I'm too sensitive with such issues."

"It's in the family." He told her the story of his negotiations with Ron about the present for Fleur, raising her spirit enough so she could relish the *Caribbean Crown* adequately.

Harry was trying to find a way how to pass some money from his pockets to Ginny's, fully aware a simple present would be rejected. Then he had an idea. "I knew a job for you."

"Really?"

"I need someone who's handling my mail while I'm off."

"Yeah, that's definitely hard work - now that you're living with us, and Sirius around the corner ..."

"There's enough left - Cho, Almyra, Hermione, Fleur, Marie-Christine ..."

Ginny grinned. "Nice collection, Harry."

"... people at Hogwarts, and maybe others ... You know, like a business agent - while in Japan, I'm supposed to avoid any intervention from outside. So you have to read them, answer them ..."

"Cho's letters too?"

"I trust your sense of decency - If you're the one to handle them, I know it's nobody else."

This argument seemed convincingly enough.

"So - altogether, I think it's worth a galleon per day, isn't it?"

Ginny's eyes were shining. "Not really - but I've been told not to tell you what to do ... Okay, we have a deal."

He counted out thirty galleons. "The rest is for paying the owls - remember, double fee when it's Hedwig."

Ginny beamed. "Now I can treat you with a soda - this stuff makes thirsty."

"Okay - but not here, it's a waste of ..."

"Here!!"

The soda arrived - not as big as that from Sirius' refrigerator, not as cold either. They glanced at each other, then laughed. A moment later, Ginny said, "Harry - your godfather looked great. And his secretary ..."

"... sees him outside the office," finished Harry the sentence.

"You think so?"

"Well, I mean - Sirius couldn't have been more specific without - er, saying it aloud, could he?"

Ginny giggled. "No, probably not ... But then, why did this woman start flirting with you the moment you came in?"

"Did she? ... I thought she was teasing me, the way she spoke."

"The way she looked at you ..." Ginny flushed slightly. "Remember our conversation from yesterday - about, er, teachers in the proper age? ... She would have been the proper age."

Harry stared at her, then laughed. "Maybe so - only, I don't think Sirius needs my help in this field."

"Nor mine, for that matter ... What a pity."

For a second, Harry felt speechless. Then he asked, "Are you suffering from too much ice and soda?"

"Erm - no, not really ... The thought crossed my mind already before."

"You shouldn't think all the time about ..."

She saved him from finishing the sentence. "Why not? ... And besides - tell me how."

## 02 - Ways and Goals

Ma Weasley was up to make him breakfast, but Harry couldn't eat so early in the morning. He emptied his cup, then hugged her before climbing the staircase once more to fetch his snake and his suitcase.

A last check - everything packed? About to grab Nagini, a sound from the door made him turn.

A sleepy Ginny in a pyjama trotted closer. "... nice trip, Harry." She hugged him, smelling of warmth and sleep, then returned to her room.

He draped Nagini around his shoulders, so she could settle comfortably by herself, took the suitcase. Outside, the air was amazingly chilly, considering the heat that would come later.

In the Knight Bus, it was warmer.

London Linkport presented itself as a complex of modern buildings in light colours, all of them quite flat - none more than two storeys. Following the signs, Harry reached the check-in counter for Far East links. He was too early, had to wait a few minutes.

The woman in the *Magical Tours* uniform seemed still half asleep, or maybe nervous because of Nagini. She made a fuss, found him in her list finally, then seemed in a hurry to check him off.

With the top sheet taken off his ticket book, he passed the door to a waiting room - empty still, he was the first passenger. On a desk waited cans with tea and coffee, paper cups - self-service offerings for the early traveller.

He poured a cup, reached for sugar. Some noise behind him, probably the next ...

"Master - attention!!"

Something in Nagini's voice pushed all his senses to full alert. He wheeled around, his hand seizing for his wand ... In the door to the link gate stood a man, a second one closer into the room. They looked at him, their wands pointing the same direction, their lips already parting.

His knees flexed, his body ducked low.

Two red flashes cut through the air, crossing the spot where, a split second before, his head and chest had been. He heard a banging - a can sent flying.

*"EXPELLIARMUS!"*

Two wands shot through the air, converging courses, joining just in front of him. His free hand caught them, then his gaze flicked back at the two figures. The closer one was struggling to regain his balance, the one behind laid on the floor - the pull from the flying wand had struck him down.

"Don't move!" Harry stepped closer, his wand pointing toward the standing figure.

Nagini's voice. "Master, he's not obedient - only surprised."

Harry stopped. "Get down - on hands and knees!"

An expressionless face was staring at him. The man stood motionless while his companion muttered in a low tone, holding a knee that had taken the full weight.

Harry tilted his wand an inch, pointing at the upright man's legs. "*Wingardium leviosa*."

The legs jumped up, like an artist's for a salto. In falling, the man turned his body, used his arms to suspend the fall. A moment later, his legs followed the body to the ground.

Now Harry stood behind him. "Stay where you are - the next spell's worse."

"How right you are."

The other man with the hurting knee presented no threat, while the jump artist still seemed totally unimpressed. Harry was pondering his next action, ready to stun the man, should he move the slightest bit. A noise from the other door made him look up - two men entering the room, obviously business travellers.

They saw him, stopped, their eyes widening. The one in the trail stepped back, turned, hurried out through the door.

Some seconds later, a woman appeared, also in uniform, older than the counter clerk a minute ago. After a quick glance across the room, she turned to Harry. "Sir - would you please take off your wand? And would you please let these gentlemen stand up?"

"No I wouldn't - they attacked me."

"Certainly a misunderstanding - maybe it was this snake what made them believe you were ... Please, sir, I must ask you to drop your wand."

When in doubt ... "Nagini - is she honest?"

"She isn't lying, master. I feel determination, and surprise."

The looks in the other faces told him - his Parseltongue wasn't exactly improving the atmosphere. More figures were entering the room, stared at the scene, tried to gain information what was happening here.

Then another man pushed his way through the crowd - civil clothes, movements and gesturing those of a manager. He stopped right in front of Harry. "Sir - please accept my apologies for this incident ... An unlucky misunderstanding, obviously you've been confused with another person ... Would you please follow into my office, to resolve this problem - your luggage will be taken care of ... Is this your suitcase, sir?"

Another office? Harry didn't like the idea, however felt it wiser to follow at least out of this waiting room. Walking toward the door, he found his path opening miraculously - the familiar Nagini effect.

In the hall, he stopped. "The seats over there are private enough for my taste."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Potter - I understand your feelings, after this embarrassing ... Yes, we can talk here."

Harry sat down, checked the time. "What about my link? It's due in a few minutes."

"I'm sure we'll reach an agreement quickly, and you'll reach your destination in time for the connection links ... We'll make sure there's no further problem, or delay." The man reached in his robe.

Jumpy as Harry still felt - without the knowledge of Nagini's early-warning system, this movement would have been enough to point his wand again.

The man, in contrast, didn't even realize how much he owed Nagini's special abilities. He presented a business card - Harry's first. Well, Goblins and Giants didn't walk around with small pieces of expensively printed paper.

Harry examined the card. *Bernie Bondelaw, Managing Director*, under a nice emblem and the title *London Linkport*. Looking up, he said, "Mr. Bondelaw, if I call the Enforcement Squad now, they'll come and thrash your link schedules for the next three days."

"You're totally right, Mr. Potter - and your link would be the first to be cancelled. That's why I'm sure we'll find an arrangement." Then Mr. Bondelaw apologized once more, and explained, and assured, and suggested, very fluently, very eloquently - a beautiful suada of words, none of them the least bit convincing.

Still, Harry had one interest in common with the managing director - he wanted to take his link in time. He would talk with Sirius about the event, but only *after* his time with the Zen master. Whatever these men had intended, he couldn't see any benefit from dropping his travelling plans in favour of police inquiries.

Also, he felt at a loss to come up with the slightest idea of their motives. The only reasonable explanation he could think of was an order from Voldemort, except that such an order seemed so unrealistic ... The only explanation still more unrealistic was Mr. Bondelaw's version, which hinted some recent incidents with passengers, and pet animals, and over-zealous employees.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bondelaw had reached the single meaningful item in his speech - compensation for the bad feelings Harry had encountered. As a sign of good-will, and to make sure Harry could recommend this new and promising technology further ...

Checking the time again, Harry cut the stream of words. "How competitive is this compensation, Mr. Bondelaw?"

"Well - assuming you'd like to return the same route, Mr. Potter, I'd think a free ticket back to London Linkport is an adequate means for this unfortunate scene." There was a faint change in the manager's expression. Negotiations were his daily business, and Harry's question had told him - this weird passenger would get along.

Harry had no idea what seemed adequate. However, the manager's change of attitude gave him a first bearing, and a recent negotiation provided the required argument. "I don't know yet how I'll return," he said, "and when. But I know how we can turn this attack of two linkport employees into a pleasurable event - something that holds against rumours, even against someone like Rita Skeeter from the *Daily Prophet*."

Mr. Bondelaw's expression signaled total understanding, and full attention to Harry's suggestion.

"You're doing a lottery here, with your passengers. And this morning, the next ticket was due, and it so happened it was mine. When your men came along to congratulate me, I took it the wrong way, but luckily, nothing serious happened. Now, the ..."

"Excellent, Mr. Potter!" The manager beamed. "Brilliant, really. I must say, your quick mind is fully up to your reputation."

"Yes. The lottery premium is five hundred galleons, and the beneficiary I specified is Miss Ginny Weasley, The Burrow, London ... As soon as I'll hear she has received a message about her new account at Gringotts, I'll keep to that version toward press, police, and other people."

Hearing the sum, almost twice the fee for the return ticket, Mr. Bondelaw hadn't twisted a bit - giving Harry the impression he should have aimed higher. Anyway - five hundred sounded nice enough.

The manager held his hand outstretched. "Mr. Potter - we have a deal ... Now let me escort you to your port gate, just in case, haha ... And may I have these two wands, please?"

Five minutes later, Harry stepped out in Tokyo Linkport.

\* \* \*

The link to Osaka was due in thirty minutes. Harry deposited his suitcase and started toward a line of shops in the hall, then took a minute to look around first.

Tokyo Linkport looked bigger than its London counterpart - maybe not in the proportions of Beauxbatons compared to Hogwarts, but enough. And the hall was buzzing from traffic - only after a moment, Harry realized that here it was three o'clock in the afternoon. The buildings seemed older than those in London. Signs, as far they showed writing rather than pictograms, presented everything twice - Kanji and Latin letters, Japanese and English. So far, he had no trouble getting along.

Examining the people passing by, Harry didn't feel like a *gaijin*. Thin, black-haired, wearing glasses - this description matched every second figure. Of course, nobody else had a snake for a garment.

But then, nobody seemed to care much.

And it was true, Go sets could be found around the next corner. The shop offered only traveller sets in three versions - with holes and pins, magnetic ones, and a combination of Muggles and wizard technology, sticking to a place until a small spot on top of the stone was pressed, or until a button was pressed to release the entire board at once.

This type came more than twice as expensive as the others. Needless to say, it was Harry's choice.

The saleswoman wrapped the parcel, took his money, chirped some words. Every second movement was a bow. Remembering his guide, Harry bowed back. "*Domo arigato ... Sayonara.*"

The effect was a beaming, another bow, and the repetition of his words, showing him how to pronounce the Japan traveller's most helpful words - thank you and goodbye.

Wandering back, Harry noticed another difference. Japanese wizards had no objections using Muggles technology wherever suitable, his Go set giving just one example out of many.

Reaching the transit lounge, he felt relieved to see other passengers already waiting. Actually, an empty corner seemed the only thing impossible to find in these buildings.

Osaka Linkport could have been a duplicate of the London version, in size and in age. The signs with bi-language titles represented a minority here, however, the word Fukuoka, expressed as a question, was sufficient to earn a smile, a pointing, a brochure with the Kanji version of the name encircled, plus several bows.

Harry tried his new pronunciation, satisfied with the result.

His connection was already due. After passing the check counter, he found the other passengers busy forming a line - very much like in his own country, only with more bowing.

Bowing, as he realized, formed an art of its own. The angle, the motion, individually or as part of another movement - he remembered his tea with Cho's parents, how Mr. Chang had managed a bow that went only a fraction of an inch, and yet so graceful and adequate.

Fukuoka Linkport was something like the Pigwidgeon version of linkports - a tiny hall, a few doors, two counters, English words nowhere in sight.

Was the *Magical Tours* service worth its name? Harry marched to the next counter, presented his ticket. "Gonoura?"

A bow. "Yes, sir - a van cab will take you to the ferry port ... It's waiting outside - this direction, sir." Another bow.

"Thank you - er, *domo arigato.*"

A last bow.

A van cab was a kind of mini bus, offering room for ten passengers. In contrast to the Knight Bus, this was a Muggles item, limited to an open lane, except that the driver seemed to think differently.

Even so, they reached the port unharmed.

There was still more than an hour's time before the ferry would put to sea, and Harry felt hungry. He found a snack bar which apparently served food from dawn till dusk, or maybe around the clock, considering the large number of fish trawlers in the port.

The titles were all Kanji. The pictures told him hardly more. Using his nose as much as his eyes, Harry collected an assortment of trays and cups, including tea, rice, and various types of seafood.

He had taken pains keeping to stewed, baked, or smoked alternatives, avoiding what only could be raw - well, maybe fish. Just in time, he remembered his companion. "Nagini - do you eat raw fish?"

"I'm not sure, master, but there's a way to find out."

The man behind the desk had listened to this exchange with great interest. Now he smiled, bowed, and rattled something.

Harry smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry - I couldn't follow."

It didn't matter. The man's excitement held all through Harry's careful selection of some raw fish, and paying at the cash register. The prices were surprisingly low - or had he received a bonus for the casual traveller with a snake?

He fed Nagini first, watched by pleased looks from the man. After some pieces, he asked, "How's the taste, Nagini?"

"Quite unusual, master, although I might develop a taste for that."

With his snake fed, Harry tried his own food. It tasted good, no - it was superb, once you got used to the sharp alterations between very spicy and almost tasteless. If this could be rated as an indicator for the food in the Zen master's house, he wouldn't suffer from starvation.

Satiated, Harry ordered more tea, then opened the parcel from Tokyo Linkport to inspect his Go set more closely. He was tentatively placing a stone when a shadow fell on the desk. A young man sat down opposite him.

"... .. Go ...?"

If Harry wasn't mistaken, his desk neighbour had asked him for a game. He pointed toward the clock, then toward the ferry dock. "Thirty minutes at the most ... The ferry for Iki."

The young man nodded, said something. From his gestures, Harry got the impression his game partner was bound for the same ferry. He bowed his agreement. "*Hai.*"

The set was excellent. With the board's small dimensions, Harry found it even simpler to keep an overview than with a regular-sized one. He also realized immediately - his opponent played in another league.

He was slaughtered - eighteen points. With the effect that his opponent seemed contrite, embarrassed.

Harry smiled. "I'm sorry - I'm still a beginner."

"You - American?"

"No - English."

"Ah, so desu ka."

Had this been a name? Harry bowed. "Harry Potter."

Had not, because it came now. "Atakai Ishii."

Harry pointed at the Go set. "Your playing's far better than mine. *Domo arigato.*"

The young man seemed uneasy, being reminded of his victory. "Potter-*san*, to Iki? - Gonoura?"

"*Hai.*"

"A - visit, Potter-*san*?"

"*Hai, Ishii-san ... Matsuo Shigura.*"

At hearing the name of the Zen master, Ishii's eyes widened. Then he looked grateful, probably seeing a chance to balance the ON from Harry's trick to lose so disastrously. "Shigura, yes ... I help you for Shigura, Potter-*san.*"

Harry bowed. "*Domo arigato, Ishii-san.*"

They walked to the ferry gate. With his new acquaintance, Harry's language problems were gone - Ishii knew the way, the procedure, indicated that the gate porter expected a small tip, was familiar enough with the ferry to find the best places immediately - aft deck, with the bridge giving protection from the strong breeze on sea.

Harry watched the scene around him, here on his first sea trip. The other passengers arrived, found seats, then the ship started to vibrate. A minute later, the vibration grew stronger, and the dock slowly fell behind.

While the coastline was fading to the horizon, Harry took in the details of this new world - the steady beat of the ship engine, the sharp wind pulling his robe as soon as he left the cover behind the bridge, the waves from the screw, the line of unruly water marking their path, and the cloud of birds in the air, flying with the ship.

Nagini had scanned the other passengers shortly, since then, her eyes were following the birds.

After a while, the excitement in Harry faded. The next thirty miles wouldn't be any different. Returning to his seat, he looked at Ishii. "Another game, Ishii-*san*?"

The Japanese nodded eagerly. "Yes, Potter-*san* ... There is time, and I know how ..."

He couldn't find the words, however as soon as the box came open, Harry saw what Ishii had in mind - with quick movements, his opponent placed eight of Harry's stones on the pre-defined positions for a beginner's handicap.

No sooner had they started when two passengers moved closer to watch. Looking up, Harry was greeted with bows and smiles.

The game in the snack bar had reactivated his, although limited, expertise. Together with the eight handicap stones in front, he was a match for Ishii. As it turned out, eight stones had been too much - he won by two points.

Ishii beamed. "Excerrent, Potter-*san*."

Harry shook his head. "I had too ..." Just in time, he realized - a remark about too many handicap stones would be an insult. Most likely, Ishii had done it on purpose. He bowed. "*Domo arigato, Ishii-san.*"

Cleaning the board, he mused about languages and pronounciations. Japanese had trouble with the 'l's, converted it to 'r's, while the Chinese did just the opposite - according to Cho and her Hongkong English.

The two spectators hadn't left. Harry lifted the box and held it in an offering gesture.

They smiled and bowed, accepted immediately. Ishii looked very pleased, no doubt, Harry had won them both some face with his offering.

Now he and Ishii were the spectators while the two men played. Even though Harry considered himself as a poor judge for the finer details, the game rewarded him with a lesson in attack and counter-attack.

When the players finished, the harbour of Gonoura was already close.

After the inevitable amount of bows and smiles, Harry stored the set and watched the arrival until, with the last slow movement, the ferry touched the dock.

Ishii guided him through the building. Outside, the Japanese marched toward a short line of young men on bicycles, all of them with a trailer. Coming closer, Harry realized these were *rikshas*, and the bicycles were motorized. Ishii stepped into the trailer of the first - not much more than a bench on wheels - and watched as Harry entered the second *riksha*.

They drove along the perimeter of Gonoura, toward a hill rising in the distance. A motor *riksha* wasn't the most comfortable vehicle, not on these streets - and the fumes from the exhaust pipe smelled horrible.

Ishii stopped the *riksha* at the crest, before the road sloped down again. Too quickly for Harry's reaction, he paid the drivers - no doubt, winning by eighteen points had to be a horrible ON.

Ishii pointed to the right, where the hill climbed further up. "There," he said and started to walk.

Glancing back, Harry saw that the first *riksha* driver hadn't moved. So Ishii would guide Harry to the Zen master's house and then return with that vehicle.

Harry's suitcase felt unpleasantly heavy, until he found the presence of mind to issue a little levitation spell. Following the steep path, he felt Nagini's weight too, however dropped the idea of another levitation charm.

In the wonderful evening air, the snake seemed to recover from the exhaust fumes. Harry smelled a strong scent from the trees - cedars, as he would learn later.

Close to the peak, Ishii stopped. "There, Potter-*san* ... You must be alone."

Harry bowed. "Ishii-*san*, your guidance was very helpful - I'll have to find a way how to balance out."

Ishii smiled. "No - we played, you lost ... and you come for the *sensei*."

"*Domo arigato ... Sayonara, Ishii-san.*"

"*Sayonara, Potter-san.*" Ishii turned, walked away.

\* \* \*

Harry followed the path, which no longer appeared as steep as at the beginning. He expected to find the house on top of the hill, but coming around the next turn, he saw it ahead, placed in an opening of the light forest.

Walking closer, he examined what he could see. Between the foundation, made of raw volcanic stones, and the flat roof with green-lacquered tiles, the house looked as if built entirely of wood. There was no visible sign of hiding or camouflage, still - the building seemed to melt into the surrounding forest.

As short as Harry's experience with Japanese culture was, considering what he had encountered on the journey, taking into account what he knew about Zen - suddenly, the thought of finding the house on top of the hill felt ridiculously wrong. No, it stood exactly where he should have expected.

He reached the entrance. About to make the last step, he saw the door open.

A woman stood inside. Young, slender figure, fine-carved face, jet-black hair put up with some needles, dark kimono - these were the impressions Harry caught in the dim light.

She wasn't blocking the entrance, stood aside, looked at him in calm expectation.

He bowed. "Good evening. I am Harry Potter."

His bow was replied. "Welcome, Ha-ri, after your long journey."

He stepped in, stood waiting.

The woman closed the door. "I am Tamiko ... I will assist you ... Please follow me."

Her English showed a clear accent, seemed limited as well as unused for quite some time. Each sentence was preceded by a short pause, obviously to phrase it carefully before speaking.

They reached a room. To the untrained *gaijin's* eye, at first sight, the room looked flat-out empty. A few mats, a thicker mat, a bench, a stool.

Soon, Harry would learn - the mats were *tatamis*, the thicker mat his *futon*, the Japanese equivalent of a bed, and cabinets were always built-in, hidden behind wooden doors. In contrast, doors to the outside or to other rooms were made of wooden frames with oiled paper as cover - *shojis*.

"You will refresh yourself ... Afterwards, the *sensei* will await you."

"*Hai*, Tamiko-san."

She smiled. "Only Tamiko, Ha-ri ... We are not - formal in the *sensei's* house."

"*Hai*, Tamiko."

He had dropped his suitcase, now watched with some disquiet how Tamiko opened it and started to store its contents here and there. She opened a wooden door to one of the built-in cabinets. "Here are your clothes for this house, Ha-ri."

He inspected them - kimonos, garments of white cotton, other pieces still unidentifiable. As far as he could see, the material was either finest silk with delicate patterns, as the kimonos, or the simplest fabric and cut, white and shapeless.

He deposited Nagini on the *futon*. Seeing Tamiko's glance, he explained, "This is Nagini ... Sometimes, we talk to each other."

Tamiko bowed. "We have heard about Nagini ... Can I do something for her, Ha-ri?"

"No, thanks - she's been fed on the road ... The only thing is - if she's hissing, or if I'm doing the same, this is not ... Then we talk."

Something like curiosity appeared in Tamiko's face. "Would you show me, Ha-ri?"

"Sure." He turned to Nagini. "So what's your first impression here?"

"Quietness, master, and clarity. There is a very powerful mind pretty close."

"Yeah - must be the Zen master." He turned to Tamiko. "Nagini is very satisfied with the atmosphere - and she has sensed - er, Matsuo Shigura ... I mean, it must be him."

Tamiko's eyes were shining. "The *sensei* - we are honoured to host you, Ha-ri, and your serpent Nagini."

He bowed. "Please - what exactly is a *sensei*?"

Tamiko thought for a moment. "A *sensei* is a master, and a teacher ... It's a title of honour - only an accepted student can use it ... For the next weeks, you are accepted, Ha-ri ... So it is appropriate to call him *sensei*."

He bowed. "*Hai*."

So far, he found the atmosphere in this house not quite as expected, at the same time, not unexpected either. According to the traveller's guide, he should have been prepared for lots of apologies, and a constant stream of declarations how unworthy things and conditions were. He had encountered difficulties when trying to map such a behaviour to his interpretation of Zen.

And now this. He still had to wait for the first apology, or the first expression of unworthiness in the eyes of the honourable guest.

Tamiko went to the door. "I will show you the refreshment rooms, Ha-ri."

He followed her into a large - well, bathroom was definitely the wrong term. He saw sanitary devices, yes, a shower, but the wooden bathtubs were totally unfamiliar.

Tamiko left the room.

Harry undressed, inspected the sanitary devices, then used them. There was nothing primitive or provincial. Everything in this room seemed at the top level of efficiency, without replacing genuine materials more than necessary, as could be seen with the wooden bathtubs. Well - cleaning, bathing, using water in all forms for relaxation, the guide had announced this was a very Japanese habit, and this spacious room here confirmed it.

He was walking toward the shower cabin when the door opened again. Tamiko came in.

He froze.

Tamiko looked at him - in his face, nowhere else. "Ha-ri, do you know the Japanese bathing - procedure?"

"Er - no." He didn't even have to suppress an impulse for covering himself - maybe from the shock, certainly because it would look too ridiculous.

"You will clean yourself in the shower ... Then comes the hot water tub ... Today, we will drop the steam room - so, next is the cold water tub ... That's it."

Tamiko smiled, some sparkling in her eyes. "You will get used to it - and to being seen naked when this is the obvious - state."

Really?

He stepped into the shower cabin, started to soap himself, still shaky. Through the rippled glass, he could see her distorted shape moving around. She left the room again, was back before he had finished.

He opened the door. She was standing at one of the wooden tubs. Steam curled up, dissipating instantly. What could he do? He walked over.

"Be careful, Ha-ri. It's very hot ... Move slowly."

He climbed the short ladder. A second later, his embarrassment was forgotten - the task of entering this scalding water took all his attention.

He sat down on a seat inside. It was impossible - within the next five seconds ...

"Do not move, Ha-ri."

He didn't - the only way to avoid pain. Seconds passed, and he still sat inside. Sweat was running - no, streaming over his face. At the same time, the heat was melting every tension, every knot inside his body.

Tamiko watched him, until his expression told her he had settled to the extreme heat. Then she moved to another tub.

Harry didn't turn, didn't move a muscle. He felt drowsy, wonderfully relaxed when Tamiko's voice said, "Enough ... Come out, Ha-ri."

Carefully, he stepped out. A towel wiped his sweaty face.

Tamiko led him to a padded table, covered by a large towel. He stretched, face-down. A moment later, he smelled something like menthol, then hands started to knead his shoulders, ribs, upper arms.

He felt like wax. These hands were remarkably strong.

After a while, the kneading stopped. Tamiko pointed. "This is the cold water, Ha-ri ... I'll wait in your room." She headed toward the door.

Harry was very grateful - he no longer felt like wax, not entirely. After the door had closed, he stood up, walked to the tub, still a bit unsteady.

The cold water offered another shock - liquid ice. He came up, snorting and bursting, jumped out.

Within seconds, the cold was gone. He felt great, energetic, wonderful, the blood singing in his veins.

There was a towel, and there were clothes. Drying up, he inspected them - undershorts, a kimono - no shirt, nothing for the feet. When he was dressed, it didn't feel like something missing.

In his room, he found Tamiko waiting. Seeing him, she laughed. "What I thought ... The other way around, Ha-ri."

"Huh?"

She came closer. Next moment, Harry watched in frozen horror as she unlocked the belt of his kimono, opened the robe, and closed it again - this time clockwise.

As he learned, this was a *yukata*, and the counter-clockwise arrangement - so naturally for a westerner - would be appropriate only for a corpse.

The sparkling in Tamiko's eyes faded. "Now I'll take you to the *sensei*, Ha-ri."

Still off balance, he asked, "What about Nagini?"

"Is she part of your *wa*?"

He answered without hesitation. "Yes."

"Then come with her."

\* \* \*

Stepping into a large room, Harry saw the Zen master sitting in the lotus stance behind a low table. At the side of the table, another woman was kneeling. Behind him, the door closed, Tamiko hadn't followed.

Matsuo Shigura's hair, cut short but reaching deep down the neck, showed a lot of grey. Aside from that, it was impossible to judge the age of this motionless face. Dark eyes, sharp features, an unblinking stare - in this position, the *sensei*'s size was difficult to guess, although his shoulders looked broad.

Harry moved closer, stopped, bowed.

"Ha-ri - and Nagini ... You have found your way over here."

"*Hai, sensei.*"

Shigura showed a faint smile. "Place Nagini at your side, Ha-ri, and sit down ... You see, your seat is a bit higher, to help you get used to the lotus position - during the next days, it will shrink down."

Harry did as ordered.

The woman started to prepare tea. Later, Harry would learn her name was Shihiko, and she was the ruling power in the Shigura household.

When the tea was steaming in the tiny cups, and Shigura as well as Harry had taken the first sips - hot, strong, bitter, the *sensei* spoke again. "Did you have trouble finding us, Ha-ri?"

"No, *sensei* - I met a young man, and we played Go, and I lost so high - when he heard your name, he was determined to guide me."

"What was his name?"

"Atakai Ishii."

"Yes ... Your sensei at home told me about your habit to make the acquaintance of just those people who can help you further."

For the first time in a sequence to span four weeks, Harry found himself confronted with a statement that could be interpreted along the full range, from accusation, over casual remark, to praise.

Thinking about the remark, taking into account that nobody had given him more information than the name of Matsua Shigura and Gonoura as the location, he came to the conclusion this had been a first test.

"Did your journey go as expected?"

How to answer that? A yes felt as wrong as a no - soon Harry would know, this was a very simple question, compared to many others.

"I was attacked by two men ... And I got many new impressions - this is my first visit to Japan."

"These men didn't stop you, nor did the accident delay your arrival."

Harry felt grateful for every second spent with Giants and their mode of conversation. The absence of a question mark, at the end of a sentence, meant nothing. Then, probably, this was also true the other way around.

"I disarmed them. Then I agreed with a manager about a public version - in exchange for some compensation."

"So this journey was already profitable." Shigura's tone didn't bear the slightest hint.

"The compensation goes to - er, the family I'm living with - a very satisfying solution. And then I could ..." Harry stopped before getting lost in details. "Yes, *sensei*, the journey was profitable."

"Why did you come, Ha-ri?"

Because ... A large number of answers was spinning through Harry's mind, all of them true, none feeling adequate to this question. He took his time, being aware this was another test, and nobody expected a quick reply.

"I have to learn, *sensei* ... I came to ask for your teaching."

"Why should I do that?"

Yes, why? Because he was a friend's friend's friend of Lupin, and because he had promised to spend four weeks with him? Because he shared Harry's goal? Even so - what did Harry know about Shigura's conclusions?

He looked up. "I cannot answer this question, *sensei*."

Shigura kept silent, his face still unmoving, while his eyes ... There was no doubt - Harry had found the only possible answer, he had passed the test!

The woman stood up, moved out.

"One of the goals in our training," began the Zen master, "is control over your wand, which recently has gained significantly more power - a level of control sufficient to handle it properly, while true mastery will come over time."

"Yes, *sensei*."

"How is your control now?"

"Not accurate - not in the finer tuning."

Shigura's arm came forward. "Then give me your wand, Ha-ri, to keep it safely until we'll come to this part of your training."

Harry swallowed. The last time without his wand - with surprise, he realized it had been not so long ago, although this feeling of nakedness had lasted only a day and a night.

He seized for his wand, bent forward to reach the outstretched hand.

The Zen master deposited the wand under the table. "You'll find it here."

Another remark to chew on. *When* would he find his wand? ... When it was time for this specific training? Or maybe - when, for some reason, he couldn't stand the thought any longer that he was stripped of his magical power? After a moment, Harry saw still another interpretation - when either side would end his training prematurely.

Shihiko returned with a tray - food.

The table filled with small bowls and cups. Harry watched as the woman prepared two pans with rice, fish, and dressing, the first for Shigura, the second for himself. He noticed also - a bow was at least as good for saying thank you than the words, whether in English or Japanese.

Thank God, his experience with foodsticks proved sufficient to eat with decency, rather than spilling rice all over the place.

Talking about decency - eating slowly was *not* part of good table manners, considering the speed at which the food disappeared into Shigura's mouth. On the other side, talking with a mouthfull of food wasn't done here either.

Shigura spoke between pans, while Harry tried desperately to register the communication between the Zen master and Shihiko. Did Shigura stop talking because she passed him another fill, or did she prepare the next pan at some sign? Harry failed to register a sign, however realized that his western scaling was too coarse by far.

"Ha-ri - did you come to learn Zen?"

Chewing, Harry nodded.

"Of course ... Certainly, Lu-pin talked to you about a Zen master, and when I agreed to see you, you expected to find someone who'll teach you Zen. Isn't that so?"

Harry nodded again.

"But it is impossible to teach Zen ... You might as well say, 'Master, teach me *shibumi*' - both demands are senseless."

And what, if you please, was *shibumi*? Only this wasn't the time to ask. Harry waited for Shigura's next words.

They didn't come.

So monologues weren't the habit here, which was just fine, while a decent amount of explanation wasn't the habit either, which was a shame, because you had to think all by yourself, and speak out your result, to be judged by the *sensei*. Well, then ...

"But isn't it possible to come closer to Zen?"

With surprise, Harry saw - the *sensei* could beam, did so right now.

"This is indeed possible, Ha-ri, and this we'll do in the next four weeks ... It is a desperately short period of time, and in my exchange of letters with Lu-pin, I stated more than once four weeks were simply not enough for the most elementary level ... But he insisted, arguing we didn't have to start at point zero ... I didn't really believe him - until now."

With a hot rush of joy, Harry bowed.

"Of course I know about your goal - to destroy the master of the dark ... If this is your ultimate goal, Ha-ri, you will fail, and we might stop right now."

"I know already, *sensei* - although probably not in its entirety ... But after finding out it's my destination to defeat Voldemort, I had to modify this goal already once."

Seeing the *sensei*'s expression, and realizing he might wait years before hearing something like, "Go ahead" in this house, Harry explained how his goal became inseparably linked with the obligation to return unharmed to Cho.

"Your *karma* is benevolent, Ha-ri - it has gifted you with abilities together with your *giri* ... This is a rare combination, and this is why I feel confident none of us will waste his time."

They had finished eating. Shihiko was preparing more tea.

"What you have to achieve in your pursuit, Ha-ri, is a state of mind - and body - in which destroying your enemy is a natural result - not exactly a by-product, but not more than your genuine reaction to a problem ... As challenging as it sounds, it is possible to reach such a state - with determination, although not in four weeks."

Harry smiled at this apparent joke.

"These four weeks will be hard. Your smile will be the last for a while ... Only true determination will give you the strength to hold out."

"Your words will help me to withstand, *sensei*."

Shigura surprised Harry again. He was grinning openly. "Flattery won't help you, Ha-ri, and you'll curse my words ... You'll ask yourself - is it the true pressure of time, a stress test, a test of your determination, or simple chicanery ... Only the answer will always be the same - it doesn't matter."

"Yes, *sensei*."

"Zen is a horizon ... You come closer, not more. While basically Zen is a state of mind, there is no way of training the mind isolated from the body - which saves us from figuring out whether such a method would be desirable ... So we will train quite different disciplines, in any mix and sequence as seems fit."

Harry made his own first try to ask without using words. He was rewarded.

"Meditation is one of the most elementary disciplines. Meditation is training as much as recovery from strenuous exercises. You'll receive tasks for your meditations - questions as well as individual terms."

Harry nodded.

"The basic equivalent for your physical training will be *aikido* - the art of combat without weapons, and - " Shigura smiled, "without wands ... Other people measure the expertise in *aikido* in levels called *dans*, and appoint belts of different colours - while here, the resulting skill is just the counterpart of your depth in meditating, and nobody scales this in levels and *dans*."

So he would be able to stun other people without a wand - why not, might come in handy one day.

"A more advanced discipline is *haragei* - like many terms you'll hear today and later, it is too complex to be translated adequately, but for a beginning, think of it as an integrated intuition ... *Haragei* is essential when entering hostile territory - although, thinking of the two men who tried to attack you, we might find your skill in that discipline is already quite high."

"It was Nagini, *sensei*."

"Maybe so, but then, where's the borderline between you and Nagini, Ha-ri? ... The opposite of *haragei* is *jaho* - hiding your intention in combat, and more so beforehand ... Thinking of your enemy, this will play an essential role, while the four weeks ahead will only touch the basics of this discipline."

Harry remembered the scene on board of the ship, when Voldemort had disappeared without warning. Whenever he thought about his goal, this picture resurfaced in his memory - he knew, as long as he wasn't able to prevent something like that, he hadn't mastered the basics. And now, Shigura's words gave a first hint of the direction he had to follow.

"To keep mind and body balanced, we will train *bujutsu* - the martial arts in general, and *kenjutsu*, the art of swordfight in particular."

Harry stared. "Swords?"

"We'll use *bokken* - long pieces of wood, at the beginning and for a long time ... There's no other discipline to train your body as good as *kenjutsu*."

Long pieces of wood ... Harry beamed. "*Sensei*, do you know quarterstaves?"

Shigura nodded. "Yes - the principle is the same, although *bokken* are flat at both ends to prevent injuries during the training ... Lu-pin told me you have seen real quarterstaff fights, Ha-ri."

"Yes, *sensei* - several times."

"Then I don't need to tell you - a wooden sword, call it *bokken* or quarterstaff, is as deadly as a *katana* or a *wakizashi*."

Seeing Harry's blank expression, Shigura added, "The long sword and the short sword of the *samurai* - the sword warrior ... You'll see examples in your time here."

They would certainly look impressive, however, right now Harry was more eager to see a *bokken*.

"Other disciplines will come later ... *Saiminjutsu* is the art of hypnosis - also something of importance with your kind of enemy, Ha-ri ... It is part of a wider range of combat techniques called *ninjutsu* - the art of hiding and stealth ... From the perspective of a true *samurai*, this is distasteful and a violation of *bushido* - the way of the warrior, but your goal is to defeat the master of darkness, not to become a *samurai* ... In these disciplines, there's no longer a distinction between body and mind, which is exactly what we have to achieve."

Harry's head was swimming. All this in four weeks? Right now, he couldn't even remember the terms.

"All these disciplines come together and sum up to *zanshin* - your physical constitution and your mental vigilance ... This will cover the combat aspect of Zen, Ha-ri. To balance out, you'll learn to create a *haiku* - a verse of seventeen syllables ... And of course, for recreation, we will play Go."

Shigura watched Harry's face. "You may have questions now ... Afterwards, a game will help us learning to know each other."

Harry had many questions. Only - Lleyrin the Giant chief had been an excellent teacher in the fine art of skipping stupid questions, as well as those which would be answered in time by themselves.

"Yes, *sensei* ... What is *shibumi*?"

Shigura looked pleased. Did Harry grow better in reading his face, or was his *sensei* switching between masks of stone and open-hearted feelings? ... Probably the latter.

"*Shibumi* is the most complex term of all you heard this evening, Ha-ri. I might say - it is the poetry version of Zen ... It is a concept of ultimate refinement - hidden within totally common appearances."

Harry thought it over. "When I first saw this house, surrounded by the trees ..." He looked up, saw the Zen master smile, asked, "So *shibumi* is a horizon too?"

"More, Ha-ri - it's a different horizon for each individual ... A *shogun* - an emperor - might find *shibumi* in authority without inordinate ambition, or even despotism ... Finding a good description for the particular *shibumi* of, say, a warrior will be an excellent task of a meditation."

The Zen master waited for Harry's next question.

After some more thinking, Harry said, "There's no other question really urgent - or so that I could value the answer right now, *sensei*."

"Then let's play a game."

Moments later, Shihiko appeared with a board and two *Go-ke*, containing marvellous stones of black and white.

Either Shigura was using a hidden signaling system, or Shihiko had listened outside, or she was a telepath. Thinking about this riddle, the only alternative Harry felt ready to rule out was the signaling system.

"Ha-ri, how did you play against Atakai?"

It took him a second to remember - this was Ishii's first name. "In the first game without handicap stones, he won by eighteen points ... In the second, he placed eight stones for me - this I won by two points."

Shigura placed six handicap stones for Harry.

It was the slowest game Harry had ever played. The longest, he corrected himself - realizing while unable to prevent his style suffering from his impatience. He lost by twelve points - some of them due to his haste in playing, the others because Shigura had honoured him by placing not more than six stones in the beginning.

Shigura said, "You'll suffer from the time difference, Ha-ri. I recommend a potion that'll help you finding sleep."

Harry was reluctant. Starting a training seminar in clear thinking with a sleeping drug?

"It will calm down your mind - nothing else ... Without this help, you'll fall asleep tomorrow in your first meditation."

"All right, then."

Shihiko had it ready. Harry drank the mixture - in the tea as it was brewed here, his untrained palate wouldn't have recognized anything. He grabbed Nagini, said good night, and returned to his room.

A first test with the futon dissipated his worst worries - it felt harder than his four-poster in Hogwarts or his bed in The Burrow, however he would be able to sleep - or if not, then for other reasons.

Then he checked the cabinet with his *local* clothes, trying to figure out the Japanese equivalent for a pyjama. Maybe there was none, expecting him to come with his own, which was the case, or he was looking for the wrong format. Some kimonos - *yukatas*? - felt as if these were the night versions of this all-purpose garment.

After returning from the bathroom, when opening the cover of his futon, he found his assumption confirmed. Somebody - most likely Tamiko - had placed a night kimono there.

Determined to adapt to this new environment as completely as possible, he stripped the pyjama and took the kimono, remembering the clockwise arrangement. Then he laid down and waited for sleep.

It came, after a while - rather quickly, considering the few hours this day had lasted for him. Until then, some figures seemed to parade up and down his mind in slow motion - Japanese ones in a clear majority over Chinese ones.

### **03 - Body and Mind**

Harry came awake because someone was shaking his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he knew the shaking had pulled him out of a weird dream, only he couldn't remember any detail. Which wasn't unusual for him, except that the sight of Tamiko, kneeling at his side, certainly hadn't helped to remember.

He glanced at his watch. Six o'clock in the morning!

Tamiko rose graciously, walked to the cabinet with his Japanese clothes, and took out what would be his dress throughout all training lessons - wide-legged pants and a loose-fitting jacket, held by a belt of the same material, white cotton.

Nothing for the feet.

This done, she left the room. Harry's horror faded. For a moment he had thought ...

The breakfast table offered tea and rice cakes. Watched by a smiling Shihiko, he reached for the sugar pot to flavour his tea as sweet as it was strong.

Then Tamiko guided him to the training room. Glancing around, Harry saw that calling it a hall would be a more accurate description, with large windows at one side and a floor covered by a polished parquet. This room seemed perfectly suited for dance lessons.

Shigura was already waiting for him. The *sensei's* first lesson wasn't too far away from dancing - Harry had to learn *walking*.

As if he didn't know.

Minutes later, he realized - he really didn't know.

It had to do with balance. The *sensei* showed him which problem he had to overcome. Like all westerners, Harry tended to place his centre of weight in the shoulders while people in Far East, and certainly *aikido sennin*, walked with their centre of weight in the pelvis.

So far, the explanation seemed easy to follow. Unfortunately, having located the problem provided no help for solving it. Shigura was walking, and Harry had to push him, trying to bring him off balance. All he mastered was a break of the rhythm, a short swing of the bulky figure.

Then they changed roles. At the *sensei's* first pushes, which were not even hard, Harry lost his step, did one-legged jumps to regain his balance, only to fall down headlong when Shigura let another push follow at exactly this moment.

After a while, Harry caught the principle.

Not to be confused with the mastery of said principle.

Shigura said, "You'll train your balance with every step you make, Ha-ri ... I'll push you whenever I see you out of balance - and every now and then when I see you walking properly, just for positive feed-back."

Balance done - well, not really, however settled as a permanent task ... What would come next?

How wrong he was. It had only just begun.

Later, in retrospect, Harry would recognize the full four weeks as a lesson in balance ... Physical balance, mental balance, analytical balance, strategic balance, emotional balance, the balance of desires and goals, of thoughts and ideas, of talk and silence.

Balance the second was about standing. Simple, wasn't it?

No.

The principle looked the same. The test - pushing a motionless body - also was the same, only it turned out considerably more difficult because a motionless body had no momentum to balance out.

Or so he thought - until the *sensei* showed him that thinking of momentum and motion as equivalent was a bad misjudgement of the corrupted western mind.

And sure enough, as soon as Harry demonstrated the first slight trace of understanding, Shigure declared this exercise as another permanent one.

Feeling slightly exhausted from things as simple as standing and walking, Harry wondered - wasn't it time for the first mental training?

However, as he had the opportunity to register now and during the following days, Shigura preferred a majority of physical exercises in the morning, and an equal share with mental training in the afternoon. And often enough, the Zen master hinted to Harry he might balance out any lack of brain stimulation in his spare time - after all, a Go match was mental training, wasn't it?

Even so, the next lesson balanced out quite nicely, because Harry was ordered to do exactly the opposite of the previous exercises. He should learn how to fall.

He had to collapse. He had to fall forward, backward, sideways. He had to do jump falls.

Shigura pushed him.

Next moment. Shigura's leg swung hard, flat over ground, from behind, kicking Harry's legs into the air. A moment later, the *sensei* did the same from front.

Harry kneaded his ankle, which was hurting like hell.

"Does it hurt, Ha-ri?"

Stupid question. "Yes, *sensei*."

"Small wonder ... Why are you standing like a rock, seeing my leg coming?"

Maybe because Harry had thought he'd been ordered to *stand*. Maybe because the *sensei's* leg had come so incredibly fast. Maybe because he was a bit slow ... Damn, today was his first day!!

The goal was to fall without being hurt, and to get up again in the same motion - the force that made him fall had to be used as the force that made him rise.

Harry remembered the man at London Linkport - suddenly realizing this had been a *sennin* - an adept of *aikido* with a remarkable skill to fall like a cat.

The first exercises were done on a large mat, until Harry's initial clumsiness had faded a bit. Then Shigure said, "Pain is a wonderful teacher," and ordered Harry to continue on the unpadded parquet.

When every single bone in Harry's body was aching, the *sensei* stopped the lesson. "We'll continue outside," he said, "under the trees."

Next moment, Harry was flying - Shigura had caught him off-balance, looking pleased nonetheless as Harry managed to finish the single fluid motion in upright position.

The light cedar forest offered a wonderful atmosphere. Harry loved it at first sight - not only because the ground was soft, dampening every fall, even more for the quietness, the scent, the delicious air.

Shigura sat down, motioned him to sit opposite.

Lotus position - of course. In Harry's current state, the additional pain was hardly noticeable.

"For your first meditation," said the Zen master, "I have selected something you might know, Ha-ri, to make it simple." Shigura extracted a piece of paper - rice paper, as Harry learned later, and passed it to him.

Harry read with growing bafflement.

- "The name of the song is called 'Haddock's Eyes'."  
"Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?" Alice said, trying to feel interested.  
"No, you don't understand," the Knight said, looking a little vexed. "That's what the name is called. The name really is 'The Aged Aged Man'."  
"Then I ought to have said 'That's what the song is called?'" Alice corrected herself.  
"No, you oughtn't; that's quite another thing! The song is called 'Ways and Means'; but that's only what it's called, you know!"  
"Well, what is the song, then?" said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.  
"I was coming to that," the Knight said. "The song really is 'A-sitting On A Gate'; and the tune's my own invention."

Having finished reading, having caught no idea what it meant, Harry looked up. "No, *sensei* - I don't know this text."

"It's a quotation from *Through the Looking-Glass*, a novel written by Lewis Carroll, and the sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*." Shigura seemed astonished, seemed to expect every English wizard would nod and say, *Yes, of course*.

"Sorr ..." Harry stopped, started again. "No, *sensei*, my relatives didn't feed me with Muggles literature - which means they fed me none at all."

If the Zen master recognized the irony, it bounced off without leaving a trace. He just said, "Then this exercise is a bit more complex than expected, which is fine as well ... Think about it, Ha-ri."

Harry did.

First, his hurting ankles seemed a bit dominant in his thoughts. Telling them to shut up seemed useless, so he decided to ignore these complaints. With some success, because suddenly he remembered how the Giants had it with names. Complete ones ...

According to the many names, this song should really be complete, except you never knew. And the text was only about the name, or the name for the name ... A name's name's name from a friend's friend's friend of Lupin, whose name was a joke by itself, while Voldemort's name was a play of letters ... What did Tamiko mean in English? Come to think of it, what did Cho mean in English, or Chang? The power of names - had they power of their own? Yesterday morning, the syllables Ta-mi-ko had meant nothing to ...

"What have you found, Ha-ri?"

He twisted. "I was thinking about the power of names, *sensei*."

"Do names have power?"

"That's what I was trying to figure out ... Giants use names to address people and, at the same time, to express an opinion ... For a while, Lleyrin only used my first name, because I was incomplete."

"And why did he stop doing so?"

About to answer, Harry saw Sigura's grin, decided to keep silent.

"How do you arrange the names mentioned in this text?" The Zen master wasted no time to wipe off his grin before asking.

When Harry started to explain, Shigura extracted another piece of paper and a pen - a Muggles artefact. "Draw a picture, Ha-ri."

Harry made a first attempt, then used the back, then had to ask for another sheet. Finally, he felt satisfied with his picture, passed it to the *sensei*.

Haddock's Eyes	----->	The Aged Aged Man
!		!
!		!
!		!
!		!
V		V
Ways and Means	----->	A-sitting On A Gate

Shigura examined his diagram. "Very accurate, Ha-ri ... Do you know what it is?"

"No, *sensei*."

"A mathematician would call it an *isomorphism*, something like a figuration shaped after another figuration ... Actually, Carroll was a mathematician, and this little conversation is one of the many jokes in his novel - a very useful one."

The Zen master passed the diagram back. "Now - translate it into strategies, Ha-ri."

For a moment, Harry felt as bewildered as this Alice.

Fleur's words came up in his mind. "*If she says no, perhaps she means no, or perhaps she means yes.*" ... Suddenly, he saw it, felt familiar ground under his mental feet which, by the way, hurt considerably less than his physical ones.

His eyes fixed on the paper, he said, "If *A-sitting On A Gate* is the real strategy of the enemy, it can be countered by *The Aged Aged Man* ... But the enemy might hide his strategy, might appear as if *Ways and Means* is what he has in mind - which would be countered by *Haddock's Eyes* ... So the obvious action is probably not more than a cover for the real intention ..." He looked up. "And one must figure out the hidden thing from the visible one."

"Yes, Ha-ri ... Your strategic skill is clearly better developed than your balance, or your *jaho*."

Harry tried the *zare*i - the sitting bow, with moderate success, and not so moderate stings in his back.

"We call the covering fake a *shadow*," explained Shigura, "and the strategy to uncover the real intention is called *moving the shadow*. You attack the apparent front, fully aware this is just a shadow, to get a glimpse of the real planning."

"And what if the shadow turns out to be the real planning?"

"Then you must be still balanced, Ha-ri ... Moving the shadow has to be done without compromising yourself."

Next moment, the *sensei*'s body swung around, his leg coming like a blade toward Harry's head. Harry barely managed to duck low, creating a perfect *zare*i.

It didn't help. An instant later, something hard was pressing his neck.

The *sensei*'s voice had a mocking tone. "Keeping your position in defense is hardly a good manoeuvre, Ha-ri - you should have rolled away. In defending against my shadow, you compromised yourself ... This is a nice example, and a good exercise we might train in your first *aikido* lesson."

\* \* \*

After a light meal, barely covering Harry's need for food, Shigura invited him in the garden. Within the next days, Harry would learn this was a habit, and these times were devoted to some light conversation - light in the sense of the Zen master.

A moment of silence passed, then Shigura said, "This is a good place to ask questions, Ha-ri."

Harry bowed.

Taking his time, he said eventually, "I would like to hear about Zen, *sensei*."

"Then I'll tell you a *koan*," replied Shigura, who seemed to have expected this request. "A *koan* is a tale about a Zen master and a student, or some students - it might be a story, a tale, a fable, a myth - a farce ... It is in the nature of a koan to hide its true nature."

Harry felt reminded of a Giants' tale, waited expectantly for Shigura's *koan*.

"A student asked his master, 'What is Zen?' The master said, 'Zen is a man hanging above an abyss, holding to a tree with his teeth. His hands are free, not holding a branch, and his feet are in the air. Someone below asks him, 'Why did Bodhidharma, the first Zen master, come from India to China?' If the man in the tree doesn't answer, he has failed the test - if he answers, he'll fall into the abyss ... What should he do?"

Had this been a question, or just the end of the *koan*? ... Unable to decide, Harry kept silent.

If Shigura had asked a question, if he had expected an answer - two totally independent conditions, as Harry realized, at least the *sensei* showed no reaction at his silence.

After a while, the Zen master told him a bit about Zen buddhism, supposedly the pure form. In contrast, references to Zen in the context of combat techniques were considered a contradiction, because the goal of zen was *satori*, a state of non-thinking. But then, Zen was the solution of the impossible, a contradiction in itself, and nobody else but the monks in the Zen cloisters had developed techniques like *aikido*.

Then it was time for the next exercise - the first with the *bokken*. Harry followed Shigura into the training hall.

A *bokken* was a polished piece of wood, almost two inches thick, more than three feet long. From the proportions, these were the human equivalents of Giant quarterstaves.

"In *kendo*," explained Shigura, "there is the top, the bottom, and the middle ... Then there is left and right, although they appear only in transit." He illustrated his words with slow movements of his *bokken* - striking from an overhead position downward, thrusting straight at half height, swinging the *bokken* low like a club.

Then he demonstrated a sequence of movements, with a forward step in which the full body stretched, returned, tilted backward in a parade, then the *bokken* wheeled from the right to the left side of the body, and the same sequence again.

From Shigura, it appeared as a fluid motion, graceful and dance-like.

For Harry, it was hard work. Further, after some time, it was unbelievable how heavy the *bokken* felt. Close to his first cramp, Harry was saved by the *sensei*'s command to stop, to flex his hardening muscles in another sequence of fallings, and to sit down for another meditation.

Shigura sat down opposite him. In his hands was a bamboo stick.

"First I'll tell you another *koan*, Ha-ri ... The Zen master Shuzan presented a short stick to his students and said, 'If you call this a short stick, then you are contradicting its reality. If you don't call it a short stick, then you are ignoring the fact ... Then so, how would you call it?'"

Glancing at the stick, Harry was afraid he had to answer that question. Only when Shigura spoke again, he became aware - this had been a *koan*.

"Ha-ri," said the Zen master, "for the next minutes, think about the difference between right and true, or correct and true."

That felt easy. Truth was ... Glancing at the stick again, Harry's mind made a step back and started again. True - which truth did he know? He felt true determination to fight Voldemort, so it was right to come here ... True love had won a battle - could love be right? Or wrong? ... Was it right to think of Tamiko? On the other hand, it was true. His agreement with this linkport manager felt right, while it couldn't be farther away from the truth. But what was the truth? He had been attacked - had he? Yes of course, because ... No, he hadn't - he had ducked and disarmed them, which had been the right action at the right time.

Startled, Harry looked up. The Zen master had said something.

Shigura spoke again, by no hint revealing whether this was a repetition or another remark. "I'll leave you alone now, Ha-ri ... When you think the time is right, you may follow."

Harry bowed, wondering where he should follow - maybe into this big room. Coming up, he wondered still more.

Because the *sensei* sat motionless, his eyes closed.

A trick ... No, a Zen command. Shigura was still sitting there, so he wasn't ... No, only his body was there, while his mind - then why did he feel certain the *sensei* would recognize his every movement?

Suddenly, Harry felt trapped. Maybe he should rise, step over, sit down at the Zen master's side. Could this be rated as following? It seemed ridiculous - they had each other in full view. Would have, with eyes open ... If he left the room, he had disobeyed an order, or so it felt. If not, he was sure of that, they would sit in eternity ... The picture of two skeletons appeared in his mind, sitting in this hall. With difficulty, he suppressed a chuckle.

And what if he simply turned? Then his teacher was out of sight - only, this was like a child's play, not a meditation ...

A giggle escaped his throat.

Shigura's eyes opened. He smiled. "Right, Ha-ri."

\* \* \*

Next came another *kenjutsu* training, kept until Harry felt unable to raise one more *bokken*.

Shigura deposited the two *bokken* at the wall, came back. "This is the best time for *aikido* training, Ha-ri ... You have no strength left, all you can use is the attacker's own force - exactly what we need."

It worked so well - for a few minutes, Harry suspected the *sensei* of faking. But this was impossible. Then he realized - all Shigura did was performing the attack figure to the end, not trying anything else while Harry was defending and defeating as instructed. True, the *sensei* acted like a stupid one-trick pony, totally unrealistic for a real attack, however it was very encouraging to see a man, outweighing Harry almost twice, fly through the air - provided the grip was properly set.

Then the day's lessons were over. It really had come true.

Harry bowed, walked out to fetch Nagini, who had enjoyed the fresh air and the smooth ground of the forest, would do so during the next weeks.

By the time he arrived at his room, he was barely able to walk, cramps twisting his muscles every few seconds.

Tamiko wasn't surprised, sent him under the shower, awaited him at the tub with the hot water.

He felt embarrassed again - this time because he needed help to sit down in the steaming pool.

Slowly relaxing, he studied a nice collection of spots and bruises on his body, representing all colours of the rainbow - plus some others a rainbow wouldn't offer, due to lack of appeal.

"Come out, Ha-ri ... Time for the steam room."

It was hell on earth.

Sitting on a wooden bench, mist curling around him so dense he couldn't recognize anything farther than two yards, a steam pipe close to him, sending new clouds of unbearable heat while sputtering and howling like the ghoul in *The Burrow* ... Harry had to fight a wave of claustrophobia.

An eternity later, he heard the ringing of the bell which signaled the end - exactly five minutes after he had entered the room.

The cramps were gone. Now he felt almost like quicksilver - not as quick but as fluid and heavy. Wouldn't it be nice to sink down right ...

Instead, he had to lay down on the table, exposed to Tamiko's kneading hands, the mentholized liniment - and to her wand, which erased the last remnants of his bruises.

Hearing her murmured spells had a calming effect. For a while, Harry had wondered if all people in the *sensei*'s household held magic - in the common sense of the wizarding world.

Then he had to expose a bit more, because Tamiko ordered him to turn, so she could deal with the remaining bruises. It didn't matter, not today.

Halfways recovered, he joined the evening meal.

Afterwards, when Shigura asked him about his interest in a game, Harry bowed. "My playing would be unworthy, *sensei* ... even of these magnificent stones."

With his last reserves, he changed into the night kimono. A moment later, he laid outstretched on this wonderfully soft *futon* ...

\* \* \*

Next morning, he woke without Tamiko's help. Simple hunger - less pleasant while equally insistent. As limited as his appetite had been the evening before, by now his body ferociously claimed its supply to stand these long days.

The exercises started to feel manageable, even familiar. New grips, new moves, new techniques, yes, however all of them based on the same principles - balance as the most elementary one.

"To be successful," explained Shigura, "you must keep to *ai uchi* - which means fight your opponent how he's fighting you. More exactly, defeat him by his own attack ... Which also implies the absence of wrath."

Absence of wrath ... Sometimes this was easier said than done, in particular when the *sensei* took care to fulfill his promise, treated him every which way and all the time. One teacher for one *sennin*, this alone felt hard enough, but in addition Shigura didn't bother with something like a five minutes' break. However, normally Harry's rage was directed toward himself.

However, sometimes Harry's rage had another target, and such an emotion could even be profitable, as this remarkable scene on Harry's third day had shown. But then, wasn't Zen the contrary of itself, meaning his *sensei's* words were always right while sometimes not true? ... Or maybe the other way around.

At the morning of this day, Shigura awaited him in the training hall as usual. Skipping any welcome, the Zen master said, "You will not speak, Ha-ri, unless told otherwise."

Harry bowed.

They trained. They meditated - silently. They trained more. Still more. They sat down.

"Tell me who you are, Ha-ri."

A moment of thinking. "I'm a ..."

The bamboo stick hit him hard at the left shoulder, exactly where it hurt most. With a sharp voice, the *sensei* barked, "You were not allowed to speak!"

"But you just ..."

This time it was the right shoulder. Incredible how fast this stick was coming ...

And similarly fast, white hot fury shot through Harry - about Shigura and his tricks, about himself, stupid himself, who had failed to notice the difference between telling and speaking ...

The bamboo stick again hissed through the air, as fast as before, only - upward! Pulled out of the *sensei*'s hand by an irresistible force, bounced it at the ceiling, fell down with a clang, lying motionless a few yards away.

Harry stared at the piece. Had he ... He glanced at the Zen master ...

Shigura's eyes were sparkling. "So I have my answer, Ha-ri ... You're a wizard, as you just told me."

But dusk had fallen before Harry was allowed to speak again.

He lost the few ounces of fat that could have been found on his ribs before. The weight returned, and more - in the shape and structure of muscles. Until the end of the first week, he had callouses on his fingers, on the edges of his hands, and at the soles of his feet.

Carrying Nagini outside, he asked, "Hey, what's up with you? - Did you lose weight?"

"I don't think so, master, as I'm eating more than usual ... It has to do with this raw fish."

Well, in this case, the only explanation possible - Harry was considerably stronger than a week before.

He got used to the habits, the food, the bitter tea, the Japanese terms, even quite a bit of the language. He learned to sit in the lotus position, which seemed less painful every day. He settled to the heat in the steam room, could relish it. He settled to the presence of Tamiko, felt very aware of her, more than he was ready to admit to himself.

Here at the island of Iki, close to Gonoura, China was far away.

\* \* \*

Harry and his *sensei* were in the training hall, had practiced *aikido* - the art of combat without weapons - for quite some time. Now Shigura walked out, came back moments later with a vase.

He placed it in front of Harry, sat down opposite, the ever-ready bamboo stick across his knees. Calmly, he said, "Study the beauty of this, Ha-ri."

The vase was about seven inches high, a wonderful piece of craftsmanship, very delicate sides. Harry had seen Shihiko arranging a single flower in it. The shape ... well, it was shaped like a vase, widest slightly above the middle. It was beautiful, yes, although - after Harry had seen it with the flower, the vase alone felt incomplete. In which case, according to Lleyrin, it shouldn't be called by its full name ... Was it a *va*, then?

He looked up.

The bamboo stick hissed through the air like a whip, cutting the vase in two pieces, sending splinters to the end of the parquet.

Shigura rose in a single fluid movement. "Let's go outside."

Harry followed, knowing - the picture of this vase was burned in his memory forever.

\* \* \*

Sunday in the Zen master's house - leisure time. After lunch in the garden, as always, Shigura encouraged Harry to ask questions, or to think aloud.

"I'd like to hear another *koan*, *sensei*."

The Japanese smiled. "Fairytales ... A student asked his master, 'Which is the way?' The master replied, 'It's just before your eyes.' - 'Then why can't I see it, master?' - 'Because you're thinking only about yourself.' - 'And you,' asked the student, 'can you see it?' - 'As long as you're seeing twice and saying, 'I don't see'', and, 'You see,' your eyes will be clouded,' answered the master. 'If there's neither *I* nor *You*, can it be seen then?' - 'If there's neither *I* nor *You*, who wants to see?'"

Harry had stopped any attempt to examine each new experience for its usability, to map it immediately into a strategy, whether against Voldemort or anything else. So he didn't ask himself whether he could see the way.

Aside from that, he wasn't much thinking about himself, more about somebody else ... Thanks to his eyes, which didn't feel clouded at all.

Leisure was not to be confused with spare time, at least not entirely. The Zen master ordered Harry to write a *haiku*.

Harry went into the house to fetch rice paper and a quill, came out again to join Nagini, although a few steps apart - his snake preferred the sunniest spot while Harry's choice was the shadow of a tree.

After a few minutes, Shihiko appeared, selected a place from where she could watch Harry as well as Nagini. After kneeling down, she said, "I'm here to help you with your *haiku*, Ha-ri ... But maybe this is just an excuse."

He smiled. Probably, this remark contained more words than they had exchanged until this moment. He said, "I'm thankful for any help, Shihiko ... Right now, I'm trying to find a topic."

"The great Japanese poets, like Matsuo Basho, wrote a lot about very morbid topics - loneliness, death, the fleeting nature of life, decay ... I hope yours will express more joy, Ha-ri."

To be honest, a topic had already crossed his mind. Only - he would present his *haiku* afterwards, and in this case ... More joy, or happiness - for him, happiness and death were sometimes very close together, maybe that made him a perfect candidate for a *haiku* poet.

He said, "I have something I'd like to put into a *haiku* - but not my first one, it's too challenging."

Shihiko looked at him, warmth in her eyes. Of course, she would never ask.

"It's the memory I use for my Patronus ..." Almost by themselves, Harry's words came out, explaining the scene. Shihiko created an aura in which it felt simple and natural to talk about such things.

Having listened to him without any recognizable change of expression, Shihiko said, "You're right, Ha-ri - this is something for later ... Although I wouldn't know any form of poetry other than a *haiku* to find words for this experience ... Maybe your last fight with the master of darkness is good for a start - there's everything in this encounter, isn't it?"

Harry stared at her with surprise - not only was she fully informed about him, she had found the topic that seemed perfectly suited for a beginning. Registering his impolite stare, he quickly said, "Yes - you're right, Shihiko," before dropping his eyes to the paper in his hand.

A *haiku* consisted of seventeen syllables - five plus seven plus five. Harry started to think, forming words, counting syllables, writing lines.

Just one rule - five plus seven plus five syllables, freedom otherwise. This freedom seemed to be a close relative of the freedom in Go with its just three rules ... The freedom to miss the point.

Finally - almost an hour later, as he became aware then, his first *haiku* looked as though he could improve no more. Looking up, he met Shihiko's eyes. Had she watched him all the time?

"Here it is ..."

"Will you read it to me, Ha-ri?"

He blushed. "Later ..." He walked over and gave her the paper.

She read, then read aloud.

- *Water spun flying  
just before a ruby grew  
to fade into death.*

"Very good, Ha-ri."

From the sunny spot with a snake came a sharp hissing.

Harry turned to Nagini. "Shut up ... I know by myself it's not true."

A ripple of laughter erupted from Shihiko. "She caught me with a lie - isn't that so, Ha-ri?"

He bowed. "Yes, Shihiko."

"Although she's a harsh mistress of the truth ... It was only a small lie."

"Please tell me what's wrong, Shihiko."

The woman studied the paper again. "It is formally correct, of course ... The rhythm - it has rhythm, not a masterpiece, agreed, but it has something, speeds up, slows down ... Reading it, I have a picture, only it's probably wrong - this is the only flaw, Ha-ri."

He told her how the patrol of five had attacked the ship of the Death-Eaters in the Battle of Hogwarts, how Cho had driven her Steel Wing through Lucius Malfoy's throat, creating a fountain of blood - for him lasting less than a second as his vision had locked with Voldemort an instant later.

"I see ..." Shihiko read the lines again, then said, "My judgement stands for a public view, Ha-ri - while for an insider *haiku*, you might present it any time ..."

He bowed.

"... to her."

For a split second, Harry's mind had confused two pictures, or maybe not exactly confused ...

Shihiko smiled faintly. "Or to somebody else."

\* \* \*

In the evening, after Shihiko had poured two cups of tea, she didn't continue by serving them to Shigura and Harry. Instead, she rose and left the room.

"One of these two cups," said the Zen master, "contains a mild potion - harmless, just enough to feel sick, and probably to vomit."

Harry stared at his *sensei*.

"Would you please serve us tea, Ha-ri? ... This tea."

He wasn't joking, was he? ... A Zen riddle? Then it was a joke of its own, because Zen riddles were jokes in themselves, offered no solution other than laughing them away.

Shigura sat waiting.

Then it was a test. Of course it was.

Harry studied the cups. They looked identical. Did Shigura know? ... It didn't matter - he would drink his tea in any case.

The thought of vomiting in this room was horrible ... Still worse felt the thought of the *sensei* vomiting in front of Harry. Only he had no choice - within the next minute or so, he had to serve the cups, before the tea was too cold ... This tea - so he couldn't put it away, had to ... No, this tea was ...

Harry stood up, took the two cups.

Next moment, he dumped the tea from the cups back into the earthenware can, quickly stirred once.

He poured two cups from the can, took one of them, offered it to Shigura. "It was already too cold, *sensei*."

He took the other, sipped, watching the Zen master, watched by him. The taste seemed no different from any other tea.

Harry waited, for a revolting in his stomach, for a remark from his teacher.

His stomach kept quiet. Had there been a potion? He was pretty sure ... Then, it had been measured perfectly - diluted in the full can, it didn't cause any effect.

Between sips, Shigura said, "There's a quotation that comes to my mind, Ha-ri ... It's not a *koan*, it's something one of your great *shogun* said - Sir Winston Churchill, who wasn't suspected of Zen."

Harry waited.

"He said, 'We must be aware of needless innovations, especially when guided by logic.'"

This tea, poised with a potion ... And now this approval, poised with a teasing strong enough to stand a re-dumping in the can. Harry felt pride having found a way that avoided vomiting - still, he couldn't shake off his suspicion that, somewhere, a more elegant solution had been waiting.

\* \* \*

Harry stepped into the steam room, sat down. He had learned to benefit from this treatment, this ritual, to the full extent. Actually, it had been the same technique his *sensei* taught him day after day - not resisting, using the oncoming force for his own advantage.

The steam pipe hissed, shrieked. A new wave of heat blurted out, enclosed him, took his vision.

His body was melting. So was his mind.

Before his sightless eyes, a scene appeared ... Somewhere in open air, a perfect sky, grass on the ground, a few flowers. In some distance, trees ... It looked a bit like a place in the Forbidden Forest, only he had never seen such a place, and the trees - they looked different, certainly not like those at home, not like the cedars here either.

He was alone.

He could look around - it wasn't the same as during his visits with Nagini, although, there seemed no need to look around ... The scene felt perfect as it was, just being there.

Was he there? Did he have a body? He couldn't see himself, which didn't matter either ... His perspective felt slightly unusual, somehow a bit too high above the ground. But he wasn't flying, more as if ... A Centaur! This might be the perspective of a Centaur, or was it that of a Giant?

Somewhere, far away, a bell.

Unusual. The sound didn't belong here. Also, it meant there was something else, or someone else, somewhere out of sight in this perfect harmony. Anyway, the sound had faded, didn't return.

A figure appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, Harry hadn't seen her come closer. A woman - black hair, light tint, two soft-sloping mounds with dark spots, a still darker triangle, exquisitely shaped thighs, her skin shimmering, like from sweat, or steam ... Tamiko.

"... hear the bell? You must come out, Ha-ri!"

She stood very close. He could admire every detail in this incredibly sensual picture.

"You are so beautiful, Tamiko."

She disappeared out of sight. Next moment, he felt her grabbing him from behind, pushing him up.

He could feel her body against his own. The soft twin pressure at his shoulder, her belly muscles tensing at his weight, a lighter touch, feathery, still deeper ... It brought him awake.

He steadied. "Okay, I'm back," stepped out, hurried to the table, laid down, his mind racing, trying to store the pictures he'd seen moments before.

Moments later, Tamiko arrived to the table. Glancing carefully, Harry saw she was wearing her kimono again.

"What happened, Ha-ri? Why didn't you come when the bell rang?"

"I'm sorry ... I was - somewhere. It was so ... wonderful. Everything felt right ..."

"Can you describe it, Ha-ri?"

He could remember every detail, explained to her what he had seen. "... then I saw you - you appeared just before me ..."

"Yes, and you were making compliments, not moving a muscle to help me."

He felt his face darkening. "Yes ... Sorry."

Tamiko laughed. "I'm teasing you, and probably just because I'm envious ... I think I know where you have been, Ha-ri."

"Where? ... I never saw this before."

"How is your experience with trances, Ha-ri?"

"Trances?? ... I got some very special experience with trances, and quite different ones. But none of them felt like that."

"I think you should discuss this with the *sensei* ... He'll be very interested to hear about your trances, and about this one - and he'll explain what it means."

Harry knew - if Tamiko wouldn't be present in the room, she would sit behind some *shoji*, listening. And the others would hear about his rescuing - an embarrassing thought.

Just in time, he remembered his manners. He bowed, the first time doing it naked. "You rescued me ... Thank you."

Tamiko smiled. "I was rewarded - something I might not have heard otherwise."

Shigura was indeed very interested. Harry had to describe his vision in the steam room, then his journeys through the void when visiting Nagini, his dreams with real scenes in which Voldemort was acting, and the only calming state he had known so far - under the influence of Fawkes.

After having listened to the end, the Zen master said, "What happened to you, Ha-ri, would in your own country be called *mystic inspiration*, or *entrancement*. Here in Japan, we call it *kokoro* - the heart of all things ... But it's the same, and maybe it's as close to *satori* as we can reach."

In Zen terminology, *satori* was the desired state of non-thinking. Considering the large amount of thoughts that had crossed his mind in the steam room, Harry had to rate himself pretty far away from Zen - except that he saw no reason to complain.

Shigura smiled. "Whichever name - it looks different for everyone who is lucky enough - or enlightened enough, to reach this state of mind ..." Now the *sensei* grinned. "Although a steam room isn't the best place for that, since you shouldn't stay longer than five minutes ... Will you be able to follow the bell when it's happening again, Ha-ri?"

And if not, then ...

Blushing, he nodded. "Yes, *sensei* - I'm sure. This aspect isn't too different from the other visits."

Shigura still had fun. "With all your gifts, Ha-ri, you shouldn't wonder seeing other people jaundiced ... That's why I recommend to think about a Japanese proverb every now and then."

Harry waited. However, his grinning teacher suddenly liked to play the western style of conversation.

"Will you tell me this proverb, *sensei*?"

"Yes, Ha-ri ... A certain amount of fleas is good for a dog - otherwise, the dog might forget he's a dog."

\* \* \*

Harry shifted on his *futon*, trying to find sleep, unable to calm down sufficiently. There hadn't been physical exercises today, so he wasn't as tired as usual, but he knew - even after hours of *kenjutsu* training, two pictures would fill his mind.

Or maybe one.

Was it his rudimentary level of *haragei* - or just a change in the room's aura? ... A soundless movement made him open his eyes.

A silhouette was coming closer.

The starlight from outside was hardly enough to recognize details. Still, he didn't need *haragei* to know who had entered his room, inaudibly stepping closer.

A soft rush of silk. She knelt down, within arm's reach.

"Ha-ri ... Do you want to visit the clouds and the rain with me?"

Never before had he heard this expression, knowing perfectly well what she was talking about.

"I ..." He cleared his throat. "It's impossible, Tamiko ... I love Cho."

"Of course you love Cho, and you won't stop loving her ... Is this a - barrier?"

A pained sound. "Yes."

Silence for a moment.

"My knowledge of western culture is limited, Ha-ri ... I know that your people mix emotions and longings in a complicated way - a way I don't understand completely ... I do not challenge your love - quite the opposite."

How could this be?

"All I know, Ha-ri ... Your desire is strong - it is blocking your progress in your exercises ... And it's me you desire."

He felt it, pulsing, hammering.

"Have you visited the clouds and the rain with Cho?"

A croaked reply. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because ..." Almost a sob. "I felt too young ... wasn't sure, didn't know how ..."

"I can teach you, Ha-ri ... I can show you how to walk with her toward the ultimate harmony - how to guide her on this journey ... And yourself."

She was kneeling motionless. Even so, he felt her presence all over his body, all through his mind.

"Do you want me to be your teacher, Ha-ri?"

He heard his ragged breathing. "Yes, Tamiko."

Another rush of silk. Her kimono fell down. A bare shoulder in the dim light, over the line of her back.

He felt her hands on his chest, lightly, reaching the belt of his *yukata*, opening it, exposing him.

Cool air was touching him, inflaming his skin, melting his power, gathering all force in a still increasing centre of sensation.

With a fluid movement, she came to him, was kneeling over his body, her silhouette illuminated from the side, creating soft shapes and deep shadows.

He felt her thighs at his sides, her weight on himself, softness pressing hardness, stroking, unbearably light.

A wave of hair fell on his chest, silky, heavy.

Her mouth touched his skin. A faint whisper, "Follow me, Ha-ri."

His senses were drowning, expanding, focusing on the borderline, on the burning confrontation with her flesh. And moments later, he felt guided, welcomed, encircled, his self pushed through a soft opening into new territory.

## 04 - Body in Mind

The clanging of the *bokken* filled the training hall. Shigura was attacking him, Harry had to defend and simultaneously find a counter-attack.

"In battle," the *sensei* said ever so often, "whenever you spring, strike, hit, parry the enemy's sword, you must cut the enemy in the same movement. If you think only of springing, striking, hitting or parrying without the inner sense of cutting, no damage will be done."

It explained perfectly why, facing Voldemort on the ship, Harry had parried so magnificently without gaining more than a power wand. The others had celebrated another defeat of Voldemort, while for himself, it wasn't - not really.

Still, no reason to complain - not now. His edginess was gone, there was a new quality in his movements, more so in his anticipation of Shigura's attacks. Did his *haragei* improve, the sense to feel your opponent's intention? ... Maybe so, while a simpler explanation would mention the fraction of a second won for Harry's own reaction, because he could concentrate better than ever.

Of course, the exercises with his *sensei* circled through a very limited number of strikes, parries, counter-strikes, Harry could defend only because his teacher restricted himself to this repertoire. Even so, he felt very satisfied with ...

Wham! Shigura's *bokken* hit him full-force in the ribs - a tiny moment's lack of concentration had been enough.

Harry jumped sideways, backward, rolled over, came up. He did the *ritsurei* - the bow before the *sensei*.

"*Shimata.*" - I made a mistake. It was a bit of an apology, but mainly a shameful confession.

Shigura nodded. "As long as your senses are with this *bokken*, your progress is appropriate, Ha-ri."

Harry blushed. The *sensei*'s face was expressionless, still - his choice of words had given the message clear enough, even without any unusual intonation.

Well - measured by western conventions, there was no privacy in this house, not with these thin walls and these *shoji*. Oiled paper didn't block sound much. Privacy appeared as a concept of the mind, based on other people's cooperation, on a layer of formalities rather than isolating walls or distances. Nobody pretended not to hear, they just treated their knowledge as part of his privacy.

This short lack of concentration earned him another embarrassment - later that day, on the table in the recreation room, when Tamiko said, "Turn, Ha-ri ... I have to clear this bruise."

He turned. A second later, he reacted to her, strongly, uncontrollably.

Tamiko smiled. "This isn't the time of your next lesson, Ha-ri ... Maybe we should use a *fundoshi*." A *fundoshi* was the Japanese version of a loin-cloth.

He blushed. "Maybe."

As if in response, Tamiko's wand pointed. "Or a *kobudera*."

A spell?? "No! ... Please don't."

The thought alone was sufficient to solve the problem - although, he felt seriously tempted to ask her for this particular spell.

\* \* \*

Harry had finished his evening game of Go with Shigura. Admiring the stones, he asked, "*Sensei* - we always play Muggles Go ... Is there a reason?"

"Why should we play wizard Go, Ha-ri?"

Of course - a question as an answer. In some cultures, this was considered impolite ...

"When Cho taught me the game, and the wizard version, her argument was - this ability, to move fine pieces across small distances, might be helpful."

"Maybe so ..." The Japanese looked innocent. "Anywhere in particular?"

"She mentioned door locks, and how to unlock them ... It was during Lupin's imprisonment."

Shigura came up, making Harry wish he'd mastered the same grace in rising from the lotus position. "Follow me, Ha-ri."

Harry headed after the *sensei* - surprised to see a staircase, a basement, a cell with a door made of iron bars.

Shigura ordered him to enter the cell. Next second, Harry heard the key in the lock.

"This is your opportunity ... Play Go, Ha-ri." The Zen master disappeared out of view.

After a moment, Harry's stunned mind recovered, only to boil in raging fury. A few minutes from now, he had expected to reach his room, to find another *sensei*, or to await her in growing expectation. And now ...

He directed his violent urge toward the bars, the lock, the hinges, his mind screaming in rage.

Nothing. The only recognizable movement was in his tensing muscles.

For a moment, he felt like crying. So close ... If he couldn't free himself, the earliest time he might expect the *sensei* back was in the morning - maybe not even then.

The cell went black.

Damn!! ... He hadn't even inspected the lock.

His anger returned - toward the *sensei*, toward himself, asking stupid questions, not using opportunities when they were offered ... Well, some offer he hadn't denied, and that's why now every minute here in this cell felt like the ultimate torture ...

Use Zen, Harry.

*Ai uchi* - fight your opponent the way he's fighting you. Defeat him with his own attack ... The absence of wrath.

Harry sank down to the lotus position. Breathing deeply, slowly, he calmed his emotions, cleared his mind.

His opponent - was it the *sensei*, or this lock which refused to open? Neither, or both ... The lock didn't object to be opened, hadn't objected to close when the *sensei* had turned the key. The key ...

He had no wand, but maybe ...

Deep concentration. "*Accio key!*"

An instant later, he heard a bang, then a lighter sound. Something had dropped to the floor - upstairs, behind the other door.

Harry suppressed a wave of desperation, concentrated on the good news in this result - he had managed the spell without his wand, had moved the key, found himself defeated only by another door.

So he had to open the lock without a key.

Another moment of deep breathing.

His mind recalled the scene he had watched in stunned shock - Shigura turning the key, the metallic sound ... Harry tasted the sound, examined it, tracked down this particular rhythm, a short oily smack, ending in a click. So the lock wasn't rusty, seemed willing to move, if only ...

*Think of it like a railroad track, Harry - only from here to there.*

Think of the target spot as if dented, as the only place where the movement can ...

*Click!*

Disbelieving, Harry stared into the black. An instant later, he was up, suddenly able to rise from the lotus position in a single fluid motion, stepped forward, felt the bar.

Without resisting, the door swung outward.

Tamiko waited in his room, not showing surprise. "I'm flattered, Ha-ri ... Such a strong desire - it's very stimulating."

Clever *sensei*, knowing it, using every trick ...

"Still, this is a lesson, Ha-ri, no matter how pleasurable ... Yesterday, it was just an introduction. Today, we'll build the basics ... You'll learn to undress me."

"Oh ... nothing else?"

Tamiko laughed. "Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end."

He did.

After all, she hadn't finished the quotation, hadn't said, "... then stop."

\* \* \*

Coming into the garden, Harry sat down opposite his *sensei*. These conversations could still be rated as a highlight of the day, although lately they had found a hard competition. Or maybe a soft one, depending on ...

Seemingly without introduction, Shigura started, "Let me tell you a tale, Ha-ri. This is no *koan*, although it takes place in a Zen cloister."

A moment before, Harry wouldn't have known what to ask for. Now, he had a question - how the *sensei* had recognized that.

"This cloister hosted a small library with precious parchment rolls. One roll in particular was famous among the experts, considered as an early document written by Bodhidharma, the first Zen master. In the eyes of the Zen monks as well as in those of connoisseurs, the roll counted as a priceless treasure."

Harry remembered Ollivander's essay, musing idly whether this Bodhidharma's words had encountered a similar event to render them outdated.

"Every now and then, visitors came to the cloister to have a look at this document. The abbot would give permission quite reluctantly, and only after examining the visitors thoroughly for their seriousness. Then, one day, the cloister had three visitors at the same time, all of them very interested in this document, and of course only in the wisdom that had to be expected from the master's words ... Or so they said."

Shigura smiled. "However, the abbot was fully aware that all three visitors were driven by simple greed. They thought of the document as a collector's item, conspirating against each other, tiptoeing through the cloister corridors at night, raising mischief, hoping for a chance to steal the roll in the uproar and disappear with their trophy."

Thieves in the night ... In the abbot's place, Harry would have known what to do - kicking them through the door and down a staircase ...

"The abbot decided to solve the problem in the best tradition of Zen, following the principles of *bujutsu*. He used *ai uchi*."

So the abbot fought these nogoods the way they tried to trick him. Except Harry had no idea how, and this was a bit disquieting because the *sensei* didn't continue, would ask him any second now ...

"He gathered all three visitors in the hall. There, he announced that this unmistakable competition between them, as understandable as it seemed, did not fit well to the cloister's quest for contemplation, and that he had taken measures to re-establish quietness and dignity."

Here it comes, thought Harry, maybe a fight between ...

"Then he gave a copy of the document to each of them, assuring these were the exact words, with all the wisdom any reader might find in them. At these words, the abbot held up the original roll - and watched by his horrified visitors, he threw it into the fire that was burning in a large pan. 'This,' he said, 'will ensure that never again Bodhidharma's words can become the object of greed and mistrust'."

After a pause, Shigura asked, "What do you think about the abbot's solution, Ha-ri?"

In the first moments, Harry had only thought about Ron's copy pen, and whether the poor monks had complained as much as Ron, before this pen finally arrived. Feeling the *sensei's* expectant eyes resting on him, he hurried to say, "Er - it's really *ai uchi*, isn't it? They said it's just for the words, and they got the words."

When Shigura didn't reply, he added, "I was just trying to map this to the idea of moving the shadow ... To me it looks as if this abbot found a way to counter the real strategy by countering the shadow strategy."

"Does the solution satisfy you, Ha-ri?"

Another one of these disquieting questions. Harry decided to stick to the truth. "Well, *sensei*, it's very elegant, and doesn't compromise anyone - only, to be honest, I wouldn't have minded to see these visitors a bit compromised by themselves ... A few pushes and kicks, something like that."

Shigura smiled. "The absence of wrath - you might learn it in time, and of course it's the purpose of a story to let the listener feel as upset as possible."

Something in his teacher's voice made Harry ask, "And you, *sensei*? Does the solution satisfy you?"

Shigura sent a glance toward Nagini, lying not far away. With a rueful grin, he said, "I admire the abbot's elegance. Only - why couldn't he find a way to save the original?"

\* \* \*

Despite his growing skill, Harry felt the challenges in his lessons increase. This was true during the day, more so at night. Even knowing he would be rewarded, he found it difficult to muster the required equivalent of *balance* in these exercises.

In the training hall, or outside, Shigura's occasional blows and pushes no longer sent him flying, made him stumble at the most. His balance had improved, maybe his centre of weight had moved too - considering these other lessons, Harry wouldn't be surprised ... And undeniably, his sense of anticipation, his *haragei*, was growing.

In his room, Tamiko could push him off easily, although more often it wasn't her movements but his own young, undisciplined self-control that sent him flying, leaving her behind.

Then, she comforted him, immediately using the opportunity to teach him more, astonishing him with alternative paths toward the clouds and the rain he wouldn't have dreamed of - at least not for a long time.

Invariably, and thanks to his young, undisciplined body, these alterations brought him back on track shortly afterwards, enabling him to resume the journey together with her.

Tamiko's own self-control was highly developed, used skillfully in these encounters. Harry's progress could be measured in the amount she had to invest, and this amount, as she admitted, was growing - slowly, but steadily.

While Harry felt no urge to beat his *sensei* in any discipline, even if this thought - like with Go - might be within a realistic scope, it was this self-control which stipulated an ascending desire to break it, to change roles, to be the one who still held balance while she was trembling uncontrollably, moaning ... Alas, any attempt so far bore his defeat in itself - the thought alone, and the first signs, were enough to push him dangerously close to the limits of his own control.

\* \* \*

Harry sat with the *sensei* in the garden, by habit the time when he was allowed to ask questions, if just out of curiosity. Afterwards, he would find a place in the forest to work on another *haiku*.

"*Sensei*," he said, "I heard about the great Japanese *haiku* poet, Matsuo Basho ... His first name and yours are the same."

"Yes ..." Shigura showed some amusement. "Isn't there a great man in your own country's history whose first name is Ha-ri?"

"Probably so, *sensei* ... Although right now there's none that crosses my mind."

"My parents might have been influenced, hoping for poetry from their son ..." Shigura grinned, "while my own preferences seem in conflict with the serenity of *haikus* and other forms ... I'll show you a poem I detected in your country's literature - I found it very intriguing."

Shigura went into the house, came back after a moment. He gave Harry a sheet of paper. "Here - for me, it seemed very Zen-like."

Harry took it, read.

- One day  
a mad poet with little to say  
gave a poem away  
that started:  
One day  
a mad poet with little to say  
gave a poem away

that started:  
One day  
...

Harry laughed. "Yes, it's definitely no *haiku*, while I can see what you mean with Zen-like."

"But then I came across the rest - here."

Harry read the second piece.

- ...  
To bring his mad poem  
to some sort of close  
were the words that the poet finally chose  
to bring his mad poem  
to some sort of close  
were the words that the poet finally chose  
to bring his mad poem  
to some sort of close.

"And this, Ha-ri, is of course the opposite of Zen." Shigura sighed. "Would that I never had seen it."

\* \* \*

Outside, under the trees, Shihiko kept Harry's company like most often when he had to work on a *haiku*. Only, today she was the reason why he had trouble concentrating on his task. He was thinking about her.

Did she travel with the *sensei* to the clouds and the rain? Yes, probably ... He corrected himself - after the days spent in this culture, in this house, he knew, the answer was yes of course. Anything else would seem unnatural.

In another time, in another life he might have been tempted to find out for sure. For example, by listening to sounds in the night. But he was here, studying - among other things - Zen, which replaced knowledge by feeling and curiosity by empathy, here in Japan where privacy was sacred. And, besides - listening for sounds in the night required to keep quiet by oneself.

Shihiko was older than Tamiko, a bit smaller, maybe not quite as slim. How did she look without ... A pity, these kimonos hid details thoroughly, or maybe he simply wasn't trained in judging a figure under these garments, certainly not as much as with wizard robes. Small wonder - for some time, there hadn't been much of an opportunity, no need either.

He had never seen Shihiko using a wand. Was she a witch, after all? - Had to be, in this household. Probably used it quite a lot in the kitchen. In another house, in another life, strolling into the kitchen would have been the most natural step, just to be sure. Not here.

"How is it to be without a wand, Ha-ri?"

The lotus position proved very helpful when trying not to jump. Shihiko's question came so close to his own thoughts - for a horrible instant, Harry had the feeling she could listen to what he was thinking.

"Er - quite normal, Shihiko ... Seeing it under the table always reminds me - there is still a task waiting."

"From your story, I know its core is phoenix feather ... I was admiring the wood but couldn't find out what it is."

"It's holly - except for the new top, of course ... I don't know what that is, maybe blackthorn."

"Mine is boxthorn - supposed to be perfect for a woman, only it always feels a bit sticky."

So she was a witch - and if she couldn't read minds, her skill in reading body language was a dangerously good replacement.

"Boxwood," explained Shihiko at this moment, "is a famous export article of this area ... A boxwood comb is the best comb of the world - that would be a nice present ..."

For whom?

"... to come home with. I don't think you could find it anywhere else."

This conversation felt very disquieting. Not the words themselves, no - and maybe the messages between the lines existed only in his imagination. Still, if he had learned anything here, then it was listening to inaudible sounds, unspoken words.

"I have put your mind off the topic of *haikus*, rather than helping you." Shihiko smiled. "But maybe your concentration wasn't that deep anyway."

He bowed, admitting she was true.

"Think about dragons, Ha-ri ... Dragons are the rulers of the sky, while tigers are ruling the earth - it's a good topic for a beginner in *haikus*. A kind of dualism - like day and night."

Was she really talking about *haikus*?

Shihiko rose. "I'll leave you alone, Ha-ri - so you're no longer distracted."

\* \* \*

It wasn't correct to say Harry had trouble writing *haikus*. They formed in his mind, not quite by themselves, not necessarily at the times he was ordered to do so. His only difficulty - they weren't intended for public knowledge.

As a consequence, he didn't know if they were good. But he could live with this lack of feedback - much better actually than with the thought someone might read them. This was the reason why, after they had formed in his mind, he wrote them down, to see them written once, only to burn the pieces immediately afterwards. Rice paper was suited to such tasks considerably better than parchment.

For him, the thought of a *haiku* which grew into form, to fade in a flame moments later, had its own poetry. There was little doubt - other people in the house would agree, would maybe

see it even as a step toward *shibumi* - the ultimate refinement - if they had been offered a chance to know.

But they hadn't.

For all he knew, that was. In this house ...

Only, after the last flame had faded, the *haiku* wasn't gone, not entirely, or not always. Some of them remained, like the picture of the vase, the instant before the *sensei*'s stick had sent it shattering. Like this one.

- *The shadows in your  
face - so deep, so bitter-sweet  
the taste of your skin*

It had formed in his mind after some lessons with his second *sensei* in which alternative paths toward the clouds and the rain had been explored, less familiar but enticing nonetheless, if not to say breathtaking. One path in particular had left its trace, the one Tamiko called *the way of Yin and Yang*.

At the end of this lesson, Harry had asked, "Why's this called the *way of Yin and Yang*? ... I mean, for what I understand about Yin and Yang, wouldn't the name fit to all we're doing here?"

"Certainly, my diligent *sennin* - in a wider sense it's true, only that the name is used only for this - exercise ... If you look at the symbol of Yin and Yang, you know why."

Harry wasn't familiar with the symbol.

Tamiko thought for a moment. "I'll show you - but maybe I can explain right now ... You know French, Ha-ri, don't you?"

"Oui, Tamiko."

"The French have their own term for it. It's not as poetic as Yin and Yang, but also very imaginative. They call it *soixante-neuf*."

\* \* \*

Harry entered the room, finding Shigura and Shihiko as expected. The tea ceremony would start any moment, now that he'd arrived.

The Zen Master looked at him. "Ha-ri, would you bring Nagini in here?"

Harry bowed, turned, headed back to his room. When he returned with the snake, Shihiko was gone, had taken the earthenware can with her. There were two cups on the table, steam rising from them.

"Put her down, Ha-ri."

He placed Nagini at the next *tatami*.

"One of these two cups," said the Zen master, "contains a deadly potion - so strong it works immediately ... strong enough to kill with the first sip."

A *déjà-vu* - not quite, but almost ...

"Would you please serve us tea, Ha-ri? ... These cups."

This was why he had been ordered to fetch Nagini - the snake who could discern truth from lie, who was lying calmly, silently on the *tatami*. So it was true.

Harry examined the cups. They looked ident ... no - there was a tiny difference in the delicate patterns, seen only by the trained eye. But his eye was trained after the weeks in this house.

So the *sensei* knew which cup held the deadly potion.

Harry felt no need to ask - the potion would be tasteless, would be undetectable by smell. Which meant - when serving the two cups, a random chance would determine who'd receive the deadly one.

Totally random?

He looked again - the two cups stood in equal distance from his own position, not indicating any preference, maybe except for the tiny aspect of left and right for a right-handed person.

But then, for weeks, he had exercised techniques to reduce the importance of left and right in the art of *bujutsu*.

What if the deadly cup turned out his own?

He wouldn't know. Drinking the tea would kill him. Only - Shigura wouldn't let this happen. So much for sure. He might have been a Death-Eater, Voldemort's right hand - it wouldn't matter. He wasn't going to let Harry die in his own house.

So even if Harry had no idea how the Zen master might prevent such an accident, this possibility felt safe.

What if it came the other way around?

Would Shigura refuse to drink? - Unlikely ... The *sensei* expected him to find a solution, that was the purpose of this test. That was the only explanation - otherwise, this deadly charade made no sense at all.

Harry stepped forward, took both cups, offered one of them to the Zen Master, who accepted it.

"Sit down, Ha-ri."

He sat down, crossed his legs to the lotus position, the cup steady in his hands, untrembling.

Shigura held the cup ready, waiting for Harry to drink.

Harry moved the cup to his lips - a quiet movement, without haste, giving time to follow, to act. His nostrils flared at the bitter scent, familiar now after the weeks in this house.

He sipped.

Strong, hot, bitter - as expected, nothing else. He gulped, breathed deeply after the hot rush ... so he was alive.

Looking up, he saw the *sensei's* arm move the cup to the lips, a movement as quiet as Harry's own, as steady, as fluid - it would have reached its destination long before he'd found the time to jump, to reach Shigura, to throw the cup out of his hand.

The cup was before Shigura's face, supported by fingers and thumb of one hand. Now it touched his lower lip.

The *sensei's* lips parted.

Like hit by an invisible stick, the cup went flying, shattered, splashing tea through the air. The drops fell to the floor, followed by the splinters of what, moments before, had been a delicate cup.

The Zen master looked at Harry, a dark fire glowing in his eyes. "We'll need some new *tatamis*, Ha-ri - even the dried remnants are highly dangerous ... But first, we need another cup and more tea."

\* \* \*

With only days left from the four weeks, Shigura ordered Harry to follow into the big room. They sat down like for the tea ceremony, except it was early afternoon.

"Ha-ri, your wand is lying under this table, waiting for the day when you'll take it again."

Harry bowed. How much more graceful this felt than a remark such as "Yes, *sensei*."

"When will this day come?"

Harry's eyes widened - his only reaction to a question which, some weeks before, would have raised a jump and a blurt of protest. Still, compared to what he was trying to achieve, even this involuntary movement seemed too much.

Thinking about the question, Harry knew - this game was lost before it had started. He said, "I don't know, *sensei* ... I'm waiting for the day when we'll start training my control of this new wand."

"This is a very Zen-like answer, Ha-ri, although you may not be aware ... That day has passed weeks ago."

This time, it felt hard suppressing a "But ..."

"Where's the way, Ha-ri?"

Not knowing better, Harry answered, "Just before my eyes, *sensei*."

Shigura smiled. "Exactly."

Oh, how wonderful it would be to ask ten stupid questions in rapid succession. Harry felt seriously tempted, had to use all his self-control to weigh his words. "How good is my control now, *sensei*?"

"I don't know, Ha-ri ... You're the only one to answer this question."

He would bite his tongue before ...

"Call your wand, Ha-ri."

For an instant, Harry was about to rise. Just in time, he registered the exact nature of the Zen master's words.

"*Accio wand.*"

In a graceful arc, the wand moved up, passed the edge of the table plate, reached his waiting hand.

Shigura said, "One of the disciplines I didn't mention in the beginning is *iaijutsu* - the art of quick drawing ... Originally, it was intended to draw a sword, more specifically the *dai-katana* - but obviously it suits a wizard as much as a *samurai* ... And you just practiced this art, Ha-ri, sufficiently to train it further by yourself."

Harry examined his wand, saw it unchanged - the familiar grey, seamlessly changing to black after eleven inches.

Shihiko appeared. She placed a vase on the desk, then left the room again.

Harry recognized it immediately - a twin of the vase that had lost its delicate shape from the vigorous blow of a bamboo stick.

Shigura said, "It's the last of its kind, Ha-ri ... Please move it to the window-sill."

There was no question - Harry was ordered to do it with his wand rather than with his hands ... With a wand suited to blow a ship to pieces, but hardly to move an irreplaceable piece of art across some *tatamis*.

Removing the block top didn't occur as an option either ... Doing so would have felt worse than whacking the vase against the wall. Harry felt sweat trickling down his temples.

*Think of it as a railroad track, Harry. Think of the destination like dented, as the only place where it fits.*

And don't forget, Harry - it's so delicate ...

He pointed. "*Mobilivas.*"

The shape rose - trembling, steadying, floated through the room, slowed down, inching forward, downward ... With a faint thud, it came to rest on the marble ledge.

He exhaled deeply.

Shigura said, "Your wand is a mere tool, Ha-ri ... It helps you focusing - basically, that's all. It's not the wand that holds the power - it's the wizard. The magic of the wand is just good to bundle this power, to give it the proper direction - but only as good as the wizard's own magic."

"What about this new top, *sensei*? ... When removing it, my wand has another effect than with its new size."

"Is this true, Ha-ri?"

Well, it was correct to say so, wasn't it?

"Within the scope of your magical power," explained Shigura, "your wand does exactly what it's ordered to do, Ha-ri. After gaining this additional power from your enemy, you examined your wand, and you found the black top ... Then you found out how to remove it ... Believing you were limited to your former power, you issued spells, found them working as expected. Then you applied the top again, and naturally, your own belief reactivated the full power ... The new top is a nice little joke - very Zen-like, I'd say."

"Then ... without the top, I could use the same power - provided I stop thinking of *with* and *without*?"

"Correct, Ha-ri ... and also true."

Shigura grinned. "You should try it, just as a final test, to end this particular training ... But please - don't do it inside this house."

\* \* \*

A large moon hung outside, perfectly round, illuminating the room with a light that showed every detail, shaped without colours.

Werewolf time.

Time of losing control.

Harry knelt before his *futon*, determined to do the opposite. Power and control, he had learned today, was in the belief - nowhere else. Time to prove it.

Before him, outstretched, was Tamiko, the object of his desire, the soft touchstone of his control, moving slightly under his administrations.

His lips scanned her skin, caressing soft arcs, harder peaks, tracing back, passing the gentle curve of her belly, pulsing under his touch.

He paused, continued, going deeper, creeping over a landscape of mounds, slopes, valleys. A musky scent ... He inhaled, then blew his breath through this damp forest.

He heard her own breath quickening.

His fingers trailed the lines, following borders, barely touching, sending a promise only to leave it unfulfilled, a tip here, a fleeting touch there.

He felt her thigh twist, heard a gentle moan. "Come, Ha-ri."

Keeping control. "Not yet."

His lips wandered away, down her thighs, her calves, reached her feet. He moved to the end of the *futon*, parted her legs, knelt between her ankles, his hands taking them, putting them apart, moving upward, stroking with more pressure on their way back.

A sigh, a husky whisper. "I didn't order you to torture me ..."

"No ... Turn, so you're protected."

A moan of protest - aside from the central zones, Tamiko's most sensitive spots were all in her back. But she obeyed.

He closed her legs, crawled forward, let his lips move all the way up to her neck. His weight was lasting on his hands, another exercise he wouldn't have mastered weeks ago.

Sinking down, he felt his hardness stroke her buttocks, rest in the soft crevice. Another moaning escaped her, however - his own reaction told him the effect was cutting both ways.

He raised a bit, took her arms, moved them to her front, exposing the sensitive armpits, stroking them, feeling mounds underneath, simultaneously pressing them inside.

Her breath came steady, although in long jets.

With his weight again on his hands, he let his lips trace back, down to the hollows of her knees.

Parting her legs again, he knelt down, inching forward, spreading her more. His hands took her hips, pulled her closer, careful to keep his own flesh out of the critical range that would make him lose control quickly.

Tamiko was on knees and elbows. Her breath came ragged, he felt the trembling in her thighs.

His hands found her earlobes, stroked down, passing the neck, turning around, finding her globes, caressing them, supporting them, to let go and move further, along the ribs, the pulsing flanks.

He reached the inside of her thighs, gently pulling, widening. His fingers traced the wet rift, passed - for a fleeting, torturing instant - the silky tip, then encircled it, following swollen outlines around and around. He felt sharp twists in her vibrating body, heard a choked gasp, a sob, his own pained breath, all his senses thrilled, wavering close to the point of no return.

With a last parting pull, his hands clawed, his nails digging into her thighs, almost at the top.

At the same instant, his flesh tilted up, hitting her wet core.

As involuntarily as it had been, it sent her over the edge. He felt her spasms, the jerks of her body, heard this throaty sound ...

With the remnants of his control, he thrust himself into her, felt stopped from a contraction, went deeper the next instant, felt another contraction.

Only seconds after Tamiko, he reached the clouds and the rain.

Lying at her side, he let his fingers play along the lines of moonlight and shadows, feeling the stickiness of her dried sweat.

"Today you've mastered your wand, Ha-ri ... With tip and all." Her voice was low, teasing.

"Yes, Tamiko ... Or maybe it was the moon - it affects everyone differently ... Or maybe just the moonlight ..."

Her hand brushed lightly over his hair. Traced his scar with a finger, she said, "Then, my *sennin*, your lessons should be over ... What is there more to learn?"

Was she serious? Two days left - who'd be so accurate ...

He examined her face. "Maybe we have to find out whether it works even without full moon."

"It won't change much within two days."

"No, but for a werewolf, it's just this one night ... Who knows what will happen tomorrow?"

"So we should explore your wolfish nature, Ha-ri? ... Or maybe, in a final lesson, we should change roles, and I'll do to you what today you did to me?"

Her mocking tone, the thought of such a lesson, still more her mocking fingers had the inevitable effect. He felt himself hardening again.

Her fingers were playing harder, although no longer on his forehead. "Does your control span beyond the lesson, Ha-ri?"

He glid over her, into her, heard her surprised gasp, her breath which was quickly gaining speed. Fortunately, Tamiko required considerably more time to return from the heights of sensation, an advantage he was going to use.

"We'll find out."

\* \* \*

Harry was sitting in the big room, opposite the *sensei* as usual. It would be their last tea. They were alone - Harry wasn't even sure whether he might see Shihiko once more before leaving.

He wouldn't see Tamiko once more. Not today, never. She had made it very clear the night before.

"This is our last time together, Ha-ri. You won't see me tomorrow - if you'll ever return, you won't find me again ... Even this night is almost beyond the boundaries of our agreement - which doesn't raise a conflict for me but for your own codex ... To make it acceptable in your western ethics, I'll give you a final lesson - exactly what I promised yesterday ... There's one rule - if you move, or try to grab me, I'll leave you at the spot."

And she had presented her skill in *torturing*, not using anything other than her body. Unfortunately, or fortunately for him, a body as young as his own could be tortured only up to a point, before it found the only possible release. Still, it had been very informative, if not to say fruitful.

Harry looked at Shigura. "*Sensei*, I feel an enormous ON, after these four weeks with you."

The Zen master's eyes were sparkling. Harry could feel the unspoken question, *Only with me?*

"And you don't know how to balance out, Ha-ri?"

"No, *sensei*."

"Then it's true Zen, Ha-ri ... The riddle that cannot be solved."

As much as the Zen master seemed to have fun, for Harry, the thought felt depressing. The idea of sending a present - any present - afterwards was simply ridiculous, not to mention money. What else could he do?

"Your face shows me, Ha-ri - you have adapted to Japanese culture so much that the thought seems unbearable ... Not a common state of ethics among westerners ..."

He wanted to protest - he wasn't the only ...

"... although I know, in Hog-wa-tse you're not alone with this thinking."

Harry calmed down.

"Your *karma* already established a *giri* - a duty on your shoulders, Ha-ri ... It's heavy enough, and it is right to say these four weeks have been part of this *giri*. Therefore - " Shigura's eyes were sparkling again, "and to make your heart not sinking deeper than necessary when leaving - your ON will be balanced after you have achieved your goal. Destroy *kyoki* - the master of darkness whom you call Voldemort ... Then you'll be free."

Harry's *ritsurei* was flawless.

The four weeks had been a beginning. How to continue? He would be able to train, to exercise, to meditate, to keep balance - still, without a *sensei*, he would lose track. "*Sensei* - will there be more training for me, aside from what I can do by myself?"

"I'll answer with another Japanese proverb, Ha-ri ... Talk about next year, and the devil's laughing."

Shigura had fun - considerably more than Harry. "Where's the way, Ha-ri?"

Damn! "Just before my eyes, *sensei*."

"So follow it."

Harry stood up, bowed, was rewarded with a slight bow. He walked into the room which had been his own for the last weeks, although not for him alone. He draped Nagini around his body, took the suitcase.

Walking out, he saw Shihiko standing in a doorway. He bowed. "*Domo arigato, Shihiko ... Sayonara.*"

She smiled. "Good luck for your journey, Ha-ri."

Downhill, reaching the street, he found a *riksha* waiting, felt little surprise - the signaling systems in, from, and to the house were the riddle he hadn't solved a bit, while certainly no Zen.

On the ferry, his thoughts moved ahead. Fukuoka, Osaka, Tokyo - along this route, he had to do some shopping, to find some garments he'd learned to value, like kimonos, and feathery light *getas* - sandals, further small Go sets, big Go sets, a boxwood comb, maybe several of them - after all, exclusivity was just a state of mind, wasn't it?

He would leave Japan at the evening, to arrive in London around noon.

From his seat on the aft deck, he looked up to realize - the coastline of Iki had already disappeared beyond the horizon.

## 05 - Conversations

Excitement greeted Harry in The Burrow. The Weasleys found him changed, which struck Harry as a real surprise. The first thing they recognized was his athletic figure, with more muscles than ever before.

Ginny had a look in her eyes - for a moment, Harry felt retransmitted in time, at least two years, only she didn't blush, actually was deeply tanned, her freckles more prominent than ever, the hair bleached from the sun, altogether looking terrific.

For someone with a taste for younger girls.

Ron had gained muscles too, the working in the twins' shop hadn't been restricted to penpushing. He nudged Harry joyfully. "Say, have you been training with a *sumo* wrestler?"

"No, and it wasn't exactly wrestling." Well - not with Shigura.

Harry had to describe his exercises. Feeling a censoring filter inside himself, he spoke about *aikido*, the art of weaponless combat, and about *kenjutsu*, swordfight training with a *bokken*.

Of course, Ron wanted to give it a try - a simple, straightforward measuring of strengths between brothers, or something similar. As foolish as it sounded, Harry welcomed this suggestion as a means to feel *western* again.

They went into the garden.

As a first exercise, they threw some gnomes as far as they could. Harry was in the lead, while not much, more from technique than from sheer force - working to build up *Swashbuckle Sweets* had left its traces in Ron as much as working with a *bokken* in Harry.

Then Ron wanted to test Harry's skill in *aikido*.

"It's not a good idea, Ron ... You don't know how to fall without hurting yourself, how ..."

"Oh, don't I?" Ron tried a surprise attack from the side. Next second, he was lying on the ground, Harry's flat hand a fraction of an inch above Ron's larynx.

"Sorry - it was a reflex." Harry straightened quickly, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Ron massaged his ankle. "My own mistake ... Harry - in Hogwarts, you'll show me, will you?"

"Sure - I'm looking for a training partner anyway ... The first you have to learn is how to fall."

Ginny's eyes were shining. "Me too."

Ron glanced at his sister. "Karate kid, huh? ... How does this fit with your plans as a model?"

"That comes later ... And besides, I don't see a conflict."

"Me either," said Harry. "The trick is to use your opponent's force." He pointed at his biceps. "These muscles result from *kenjutsu*, not from *aikido*."

Then he had to explain again, and to demonstrate a simple throw in slow motion.

Both Ron and Ginny wanted to train it right away. On the garden's soft ground, a wrong fall wouldn't hurt too much.

Ginny was delighted to see her brother sail through the air from her own defense. She asked Harry to attack her.

As it turned out, Harry was totally untrained as a *sensei*, unable to restrict his skill as required. The result was a short squeak, then he stood over a Ginny who was stroking her elbow.

"Sorry," he said. "I used more skill than was allowed ... I'm no trainer yet."

The next changes they detected were his different walking and standing. Harry explained the concept of balance, and the differences between east and west in the weight centre.

"I'll learn this quicker," said Ginny. "Women have a deeper centre of weight anyway."

Ron grinned. "Really? ... I thought you were trying to develop a centre of weight somewhere - um, closer to the shoulders."

"Don't you worry - I've got no complaints so far."

Ron gave no reply to that - maybe he found none, or didn't want to cross the invisible borderline between teasing and insult.

Harry wondered if Ron had recognized the dual meaning which, for himself, seemed so obvious in Ginny's remark. A moment later, he wondered if Ron had indeed recognized, and had dropped a remark for his own reasons.

And of course - the story of Harry's lottery ticket was another topic to discuss, had been the first, actually. Now, sitting in the garden, out of Ma Weasley's earshot, Harry took the opportunity to tell Ron and Ginny the true story.

Ginny looked startled. "Harry - if I'd known ... I should give you back at least ..."

"Will you stop that nonsense! ... The only mistake I made - I should have said thousand, this guy would have agreed as well."

For once, Ron was with Harry, about the money's destination as well as about his mistake. "You're still aiming too low, Harry ... But maybe that has changed with your training too."

Harry felt it wise not to answer, used his new skill to keep his expression balanced.

Coming back to the incident itself, Ron asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'll see Sirius, and tell him - unofficially, of course ... What about a city tour tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Ginny. "I owe you a *Caribbean Crown*."

Her native brother demonstrated hurt feelings. "And me?"

"Oh - you'll get one ice cone after the other, until your centre of weight has come down sufficiently."

Other changes of less significant nature weren't noticed - except by someone with a sharper eye for them. Rummaging in his room, Harry heard the knock at the door.

"Come in."

It was Ginny. She found a seat, watched him store the items on his arm. Hands empty, Harry sat down, looked at her, felt her scrutinizing stare. "What's up?"

"Do you remember our last conversation here?"

"Yes - every word, or almost."

"Yeah, me too ... And I could repeat mine, because ... But you've made progress."

It was a statement, not a question, no sense in denying, and no intention either. So Harry simply asked, "How did you know?"

"Seeing you arrive, how you moved - I suspected it from the very first moment ... And then - " Ginny's cheeks turned slightly pinkish, "how you touched me - at the greeting, and in the garden."

Wonderful. Cho would know instantly.

But then, had he really expected to hide it? Maybe until ... Not really, he just had put the thought aside.

Ginny's eyes were pleading. "How ..."

Well, maybe except for Fleur, Harry wouldn't know anyone with whom this topic could be talked about better ... No, not even Fleur - at least theoretically, she belonged to another category than Ginny.

"Her name's Tamiko. She taught me - a lot ... It started after a kind of trance - do you know about Japanese culture?"

Ginny didn't.

Harry described the recreation procedure, told Ginny what had happened in the steam room. "Well, then she came to me and ... I said no, because of Cho ... Then she said my - er, it would block my progress, and ... Anyway, we agreed she would teach me - how to guide a woman ... and myself ..."

"And then you said yes?"

He nodded.

"And now you know."

"Yes."

Ginny was looking at him. After a moment, he recognized this look - this particular expression he'd learned to interpret in the past weeks. He shook his head. "No, Ginny - forget it ... No."

The expression faded. "Yeah, you're right ... It would solve a problem for me, only to create a bigger one for both of us."

"Exactly."

She sighed. "What a pity. The thought ..."

"Ginny - I can talk with you so openly only because I'd never ... You're not my real sister, but ..."

"That's just the point - it's not really forbidden, only ... Just from listening to you, I'm ..."

"Will you stop! Now!"

"Are you scared to ... Okay, okay - I'll drop it." She giggled. "It's just because ... You know, it's not exactly you, only ..."

"Yes, I know." He watched her, saw the feverish glance fade.

A moment later, Ginny grinned. "Although - Harry, you simply don't know what an effect you have ... In Hogwarts, the girls will eat you alive."

Harry grinned back. "I don't think so - certainly not as far as I'm concerned ... And a bloody nose is a very convincing argument - the Ravenclaw girls know from experience."

"And what about her?"

Yes, what about Cho? Short of a honest answer, Harry said, "That's really none of your business, is it?"

"Probably not." Ginny's expression made clear - for her, this had been a side remark, rather than an answer.

Harry laughed, although not too convincingly. "Whom do you think I learned for? ... But it needs two who want the same."

Ginny nodded. "Which means, it's only a question of opportunity."

\* \* \*

This time, they entered the Law Enforcement office as a threesome - Harry, Ron, and Ginny.

Belinda looked up, smiled. Watching her, Harry saw - not only had Ginny been right, Belinda was flirting with her eyes, she also had recognized a change in his own look, and her eyes signaled him that she knew, and appreciated, and ...

It was just a game. Hopefully - because Belinda McGraw belonged to another category than Ginny, and played in a different league.

Belinda's head tilted down. "Chief?"

A grunt.

"The Potter-Weasley gang - three of them."

Another rattle.

The woman stood up, came to the desk. With amusement, Harry saw the heavy artillery change tack. "Hello Ron - I'm Belinda."

"Erm - hello, Belinda ... Nice to meet you."

"Your father really did improve after Percy - and still before it was time for your sister."

Harry and Ginny tried to suppress a grin while Ron blushed over his ears. Harry felt pity. "That's unfair, Belinda."

"Really? ... But you know the old saying about fairness, don't you?"

Sirius saved them, took them away from a battle that would have been lost soon. Inside, after offering some bottles from his refrigerator, he examined Harry, looked appreciating. "Harry - I wouldn't wonder if you'd need a bodyguard to keep the fans at bay - I mean the ..."

"Yes - I've been told, and I know who's suited well for that job, and you know too ... But talking about bodyguards, you're closer to the truth than you think."

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "What happened?"

"I was attacked - in London Linkport, four weeks ago."

"You were what??" Only after a moment, Sirius registered the time difference. "Four weeks ago? Did it slip your mind all the time?"

"This is totally unofficial, Sirius - just between you and me."

"Why?"

"Because we had an agreement ... But let me explain ..."

His godfather interrupted him. "Wait a second, Harry ... Inofficial, okay - otherwise ..." Sirius' head turned to the horn. "Bel?"

A squeak.

"Please come in."

He looked at Harry. "I stopped keeping information in my head only. If we cannot register officially, someone else knowing is my absolute minimum ... Someone you can trust."

"Okay."

Belinda came in, sat down, looking expectant.

Harry described the incident with the two wizards, and his agreement with Bernie Bondelaw, managing director of London Linkport.

"Bernie, huh?" There was satisfaction in Sirius' voice. "For once, he had to bleed a bit ..." he smiled at Ginny, "and for a good purpose." Then Sirius turned to Belinda. "What do you think?"

The answer came immediately. "The first time it's waterproof - official or not."

Sirius beamed toward Harry. "Bel's my memory - she's longer in the job, and she's suspicious by nature."

Harry tried to think of another woman who might have looked as pleased as Belinda at such a compliment ... Maybe Hermione.

His godfather said, "Okay, Harry - you did the right thing, except you should have told me four weeks ago ... Yes, I know, and of course I'd have interrupted your training ... Anyway, it's a step forward."

Not feeling wiser than four weeks ago, Harry asked, "What did they want?"

"It wasn't your luggage they were after - that's all we know for sure ..." Sirius shrugged. "Otherwise, your guess is as good as mine - maybe you, maybe your snake, maybe something we don't see."

Harry turned to Belinda. "Have there been other cases?"

Belinda looked at Sirius, saw him nod, explained, "None as clear as yours ... Some complaints, some disappearances, some cases where we suspect memory charms - only, how to prove if the victims refuse to cooperate?"

"Disappearances?"

It was Sirius who answered. "People disappear, Harry - an astonishing number, and for many reasons ... And if they disappear by their own free will, it's only natural if their track ends in some travelling station. Only ..."

Belinda said, "We have a feeling, nothing else."

"Do these people have ..." Harry stopped, realizing his question was, if not stupid, then insulting.

Only Sirius was no Japanese, didn't feel offended from being asked for the obvious. "... something in common? ... Too much, and not enough. But with this new knowledge, we'll scan again."

Belinda looked at Harry, a beaming smile on her face. "And we two will look through our family album."

Harry decided to play along, smiled back. "A pleasure ... Here?"

Sirius laughed. "I'd like to hear more about your time in Japan, Harry - but another day." He turned to Ron and Ginny. "This will take some time, and contrary to what it sounds, it's pretty boring."

They agreed to wait for Harry outside, to be found close to a *Caribbean Crown*.

Harry followed Belinda into a room with desks. He looked at a large cabinet full of albums. "Arrgghh."

Belinda smiled sweetly. "Do you mind sitting here with me, Harry?"

"Well ..."

She came over with the first album, sat down beside him, close enough so he could smell her perfume, and chirped, "I know what you mean - but today it's about pictures - and not even, er ..."

He laughed. "Please, Belinda - how can I concentrate, if you don't stop playing with me?"

"Only joking - as you know perfectly well, don't you? ... I mean, with Sirius and me?"

He looked at her. "Sure - and that's super, honestly ..."

Now her beaming was genuine.

"... but did it ever cross your mind that even your joking might be a little - er, heavy for me?"

"Sorry - I forgot ... Somehow, you appear much older - but then, that's a very nice compliment." At least, she moved a bit aside.

The people in the pictures looked sullen, or scared, or impudent. More than once, Harry had to wait a moment before they were ready to show their faces. In the fifth album, he stopped, pointed. "Here - that's the one who fell down, the one that wasn't dangerous."

Belinda checked. "Uh-oh."

"What does that mean?"

There was a new quality in her face. "It means bingo - this guy was reported missing about four weeks ago ... He was found dead a week later." She looked at him with a fierce expression. "A hit ... May I kiss you, Harry?"

"Er - better not."

The other wizard - the jump artist - wasn't registered.

\* \* \*

Harry stood in his room, dressing for the big event - the invitation from the Chang family. For this reason alone, more so because he remembered Cho's mysterious remark some months ago, he did it very carefully.

Using Japanese clothes.

He felt challenged by this visit. As a natural consequence, after his training with the *sensei*, he reacted by presenting his own challenge - Japanese clothes in a Chinese house. Of course, he expected to find the Changs in kimonos, planned to adjust himself to that, so this would be his official explanation.

In addition, it would be a surprise for Cho. This thought bore a few resonances he instinctively avoided exploring deeper.

And quite frankly - they were just so comfortable.

The invitation had been sent with an owl. Well, Japanese wizards used Muggles technology without hesitation, and Chinese Muggles used wizard ornithology without objections.

And an English wizard would use a Chinese Muggles car with pleasure, because the invitation had informed Harry that a limousine would pick him up at The Burrow - and probably return him after the evening, which was very convenient because of the distance.

The car turned out German manufacturing. Actually a very expensive one, among the biggest Harry had ever seen.

The chauffeur, apparently Chinese, held the door open, bowed.

Harry bowed back, climbed in.

Cho! In a witches' robe.

She beamed. "Without a few minutes for us alone, this evening would have been a torture ... Hello, Harry."

Alone?

Then he saw the dark glass separating the front compartment from this miniature luxury suite they were sitting in. Rich parents ... So Fleur wasn't the only one with this problem.

The thought faded quickly as he hugged Cho, kissed her.

After a moment, Cho's head jerked back. She looked at him, something in her expression, a hunger in her eyes Harry had learned to interpret only recently. Her voice was a bit breathless, and husky. "Harry ... what happened to you? You've changed ... You feel like ..."

"You mean the clothes?"

"No, I don't mean the clothes, although they're part of it." She examined him closer, something like suspicion creeping into her eyes. "What happened there in Japan?"

"I ... learned."

"Oh yes, you did - no denying that ... And what exactly was it you learned?"

"Er - balance, mainly."

"Balance, huh? ... Yeah, you look very balanced - only, a moment ago, I felt rather off balance, and it took me quite by surprise." Cho's eyes narrowed. "Who taught you balance, Harry?"

"My *sensei* ... Matsuo Shigura."

"And where did you learn to - hold me, and touch me, as you did right now?"

His silence was as bad as any explanation.

No - worse, as Cho's hissing told him. "I'm waiting for an answer, Harry!"

He inhaled deeply. "Her name is Tamiko."

"So you had more than one teacher, huh? ... For the different disciplines, one for balance and one for ..."

"Yes." Although it might have been informative to hear how Cho planned to finish this particular ...

"More than two?"

"No."

"How consolating." Cho's eyes were a flaring green. "You slept with her!"

"Er - no ... She didn't stay ..."

"Spare me the details!! ... You know exactly what I mean!"

He nodded.

Next moment, Cho herself wanted to hear more details. "How did it happen?"

"It was ... It started with a - kind of trance ... In the steam room - the Japanese have these recreation rooms ..."

The term made Cho look still more furious, if this was ever possible. However, she knew about Japanese bathing procedures.

"... came to me, and asked ... I said no, because I love you ..."

"Only this wasn't your last answer, was it?"

"No ... She said it would block my progress ..."

For an instant, Harry expected to need *aikido* in this luxury car to prevent serious injuries.

"... and she said she would teach me how - how to guide a woman to the clouds and the rain."

"Just for the sake of balance, and to round up the training program, huh? ... And pleasure didn't play a role in that - how could it, such stressful lessons ..."

"Cho ..."

She burst into tears. "Damn you, Harry, damn you ... and your bloody progress ... And stupid me, why didn't I grab you in that barn, and ... Young Potter, hah! ... So determined to achieve his goal, travels to Japan to get his wand under control ... Some control, and some ... Oh, nooo ..."

Carefully, he inched closer. This limousine was awfully spacious. "Cho ... I love you, didn't stop loving you ... I did it because I wanted to learn how ... not to be clumsy when ..."

His words weren't unheard. "You managed, Harry - quite well, I've to admit ... A true expert, at this young age."

"Tamiko knew about you - about our love ... She said this conflict is only in the western culture ..."

"Then I'm too western-minded, huh? ... Should think more Chinese, or what?"

"I don't know ... All I know - I love you ... I went to Japan to learn how to fulfill my destiny and come back to you."

A tear-stained face looked at him. "How did *you* solve this western conflict, Harry?"

"I ... Somehow, I was out of time there, and the way ... It was more learning than - it wasn't simply ..."

"Oh yes, I bet."

"I never kissed her."

Some hope in Cho's face. "Really?"

"Not on the mouth, I mean."

He ducked her blow toward his nose, then kept unmoving, only tensing his muscles while Cho's fists struck him hard - on the chest, in the ribs, in the stomach.

Eventually, she stopped. "Damn - you're a bloody rock, Harry ... I'm hurting myself more than you."

After a moment of silence, Cho said, "Some people might think this would be a good time for an apology - what do you think, Harry?"

He bowed. "For all that's hurting you from what I did, I'm deeply sorry."

"That's all?"

He found the answer instantly. "I've learned - it's the intention that counts, and it's love that matters ... There's no conflict between my intentions and my love for you, Cho."

She studied his face. "You've really learned, Harry ... That sounded very much like a result from your other teacher."

"From both ... In a way, they weren't that much different."

"Oh, no? - Don't tell me you're ..." Cho stopped herself, extracted a tissue, started to wipe her face.

Harry's hand stopped hers. "May I?"

"What?"

He extracted his wand. "Repair the damage in your face."

Cho looked horrified at the black top. "With this wand?"

"If you think it's too ..." He dropped his wand. His fingertips held her temples, his thumbs at her cheeks.

She didn't push him away.

*"Detumesco."*

Cho examined her face in a mirror, turned to him, a grudging admiration in her voice. "Well, well - not bad ... You're just too good to be sent to hell, Harry."

He bowed again. "Thank you, Cho."

"What for?"

"Shigura said - even the best intentions are insufficient to reach acceptance, because - well, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"So, said he? ... And what did she say?"

The question was probably more rhetorical than serious, still, Harry had learned - no parry was good unless combined with a counter-attack. "She said - I do not challenge your love, quite the opposite."

A moment of silence. "I want to know everything, Harry."

"I'll answer all your questions."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"How to answer that? So far, she's the only woman I've seen ..."

He was quickly interrupted. "Her face."

Harry felt the time ready for another counter-attack, in particular since he saw an opportunity to use the truth very effectively. "You want my objective opinion, taking aside - er, prejudices?"

Clenched teeth. "Yes."

"Okay ... For obvious reasons, I'm extremely prejudiced regarding two faces - yours and that of my mother. Aside from that - I'd rank her as number three or four, I'm not quite sure because here again my prejudice might ..."

"And who are the other two - or three?"

"The most beautiful face I've seen is that of your mother - immediately followed by Fleur's mother ... Then come Shihiko and Tamiko - or the other way around."

His strike broke the barrier, as expected. Cho inched closer, a pleading in her face. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I never lied to you, and never will."

"And who's Shihiko?"

"The first lady in Shigura's house ... I always thought she could read minds."

Cho looked curious. "And still ..."

"Oh - she had a way with her remarks, but aside from that - er, without rubbing a touchy spot more than necessary, they really look at those things differently - and it was clear that she and Shigura ... Anyway, she was the one who helped me to find my presents for you."

This topic was good enough to cut a break in his interrogation. He presented the boxwood comb. "This is the present which isn't quite as exclusive as the other."

"Oh - wonderful ... I heard about them, but ..." Cho tested the comb immediately, then asked, "And why isn't it exclusive?"

"Because I simply didn't know what else to find for Ginny, and Al, and Hermione, and Fleur ..."

The list produced short and somewhat angry grin. "Then show me the other - and woe you ..."

He presented his first *haiku*. "Here."

Cho took the rice paper, read, read again, had no question, had only to extract a softer piece of paper, had to look at him, this expression back in her eyes ... And then it disappeared, giving room to a grimace of distaste.

Feeling startled, Harry asked, "What's wrong?"

Cho looked almost hateful. "I was just trying to imagine us together - doing it ... And you won't believe, Harry, but - in my little trance, there was also a figure appearing, and guess who it was?"

"Oh."

"Yes, oh ... Isn't that a pity - all these lessons for nothing?"

The limousine slowed down, came to a halt in front of an impressive building.

Harry stepped out on his side of the car, not waiting while the chauffeur was busy opening Cho's door. Looking around, he recognized style elements that seemed familiar, more in the garden than at the building itself.

The door opened. Mr. Chang stood in the entrance.

Another *deja vu* - an opening door, a figure in a kimono, not blocking the path.

Mr. Chang's eyes had widened for a very short moment. His bow was measured. "Welcome, Harry, to our house."

Harry bowed back, deeper. "I feel privileged, Mr. Chang."

Mrs. Chang was as beautiful as he remembered her, maybe even more, or maybe his eye was a better judge than some months ago - and her warm smile was a relief after the recent moments. He offered the single orchid - selected as carefully as his dress, strongly influenced by a memory of Shihiko and a vase.

"Harry - it's so kind of you, you'll blend in perfectly ... and this flower - did you learn *ikebana*?"

"Not really, Mrs. Chang - but I could watch it."

"Then you must have been very attentive."

Oh yes - very.

Mr. Chang's smile was faint, and slightly teasing. "Can I offer you a *sake*, Harry?"

"No thanks - I'm not used to drinks, as I found out ... Tea would be fine, sir."

"Is alcohol a contradiction to Zen?"

Time to parry, and to look for a counter-strike. "I don't know, sir - for me, Zen is still a contradiction in itself ... But of course I've heard only the Japanese side of it."

"And now you come to the lion's den to show your flag?" His host was looking at Harry's kimono.

"To be honest, sir - I wouldn't know how to distinguish a Chinese from a Japanese kimono ... Although I'd like to hear more about the - differences between these two cultures."

"What did your Zen master say about this topic?"

"When the *sensei* spoke about China, then always in the context of historical origins ... What I understood is, almost all Japanese arts originate in China."

Mr. Chang seemed ready to drop the challenging tone - at least for a while. "More or less it's true, Harry ... China was a centre of culture when the Japanese islands were populated by primitive barbarians. This is the reason why the Chinese detest the Japanese. Only - they're no longer barbarians, and for the last six hundred years, it's just a prejudice ... But as you know, prejudices hold long, and for a China which counts its history in millenia, six hundred years is nothing."

Cho had changed into a kimono, had joined them. When Mr. Chang spoke about prejudices, Harry felt her stare.

The food was excellent, and Harry felt delighted to find something other than fish - quite a lot of other meat, actually.

Mrs. Chang watched him using the foodsticks, smiled. "For the short time of four weeks, you've adapted admirably, Harry."

"With foodsticks, I had more training - since Christmas, actually."

The topic of foodsticks made Cho smile, the topic of training ended the smile abruptly.

Mrs. Chang asked, "How is Chinese food for you - compared to Japanese?"

"It's more to my taste - with chicken, and pork ... Fish is nice, but fish day in, day out ..."

Mr. Chang laughed. "Especially the preparation, isn't it?"

"Oh yes ... Although - Nagini's got a taste for raw fish. The other day, she hinted quite discreetly it might be found here too."

Mrs. Chang said, "I was wondering whether you would come with her, Harry."

He looked startled. "No - certainly not."

"Why not?" It was Mr. Chang who asked.

"It ... Do you know about her special abilities?"

"We've heard - stories."

"She's empathic - to say the least. She can tell me if someone's saying the truth - but she cannot distinguish between politeness and purposeful lies ... The thought of having her here and commenting on ... while you're unprepared and cannot even understand - no, that's impossible."

Cho was grinning.

Mr. Chang said. "It wouldn't be *bushido* - but a perfect technique of *ninjutsu*."

The remark reminded Harry of Mr. Chang's knowledge as well as his technique of conversation. He replied, "Yes, sir - although the *sensei* didn't go into much detail on the ethics of the various disciplines." He avoided to look into Cho's direction at these words - unbearable how every remark suddenly could present a second meaning.

"Then he's an exception," said Cho's father, "which is no surprise, considering it was Mr. Lupin who selected him."

Had Harry been Japanese, Mr. Chang would have won great face with this remark. Instead, he simply beamed.

Dropping the slight challenge in his voice, Mr. Chang said, "You asked about the differences between the two cultures, Harry ... The term alone is a keyword in that matter - but before explaining what I mean, let me ask you a question ... What impressed you most during your visit in Japan?"

More than before, Harry took pains to avoid any glance in Cho's direction. After a moment's thinking, he said, "I didn't see much outside the *sensei*'s house, except for the ferry tours ... But even so, I'd say - the way how these people treat each other, their tactfulness ... And then, of course, *shibumi*."

"Of course." Mr. Chang smiled. "All very cultivated ... You see, the Chinese think the Japanese are uncivilized, and the Japanese think the Chinese are uncultivated ... In my own opinion, they're both right."

What was the difference between civilized and cultivated? It sounded like the Zen question for the difference between true and right.

"Sir - could you explain this a little more?"

Mr. Chang's answer came with some emphasis. "It doesn't fit to a truly civilized society if the caste of the warrior ranks on top, while a farmer, a fisherman, a merchant is found much lower in the social hierarchy ... On the other side, whenever the Japanese took over an art from China, they immediately started to cultivate it, to refine it - with the result that they left their former masters behind centuries ago. To understand this, and why *shibumi* is the truly Japanese ideal, you have to look at a map - compared to its population, in particular compared

to China, Japan is desperately poor and dangerously small ... Refinement and simplification is the only escape from this dilemma."

Harry pondered this thought, tried to remember the maps in the *Magical Tours* office.

"Another aspect," continued Mr. Chang, "in which both societies don't look good, certainly not from a western perspective, is the role of women."

Harry felt a piercing stare, although not from his host.

"China is a step farther - there has been an empress, to give an example ... But it's everybody's guess how big the differences really are."

Harry had no intention to express his own opinion, or his feeling that, in the *sensei's* house, the women seemed equally privileged.

Mrs. Chang asked, "Is *shibumi* an attractive concept for you, Harry?"

Gratefully, Harry followed the change of course in the conversation. "It's fascinating, because it bears a resemblance to Zen ... But I don't think it could be my personal way of life."

"Why's that so?"

"Well ... For what I understood, *shibumi* is the ultimate refinement in the seemingly mundane. As desirable as it seems - thinking the concept to the end, the only possible solution would be suicide - otherwise, for me the idea would play around itself ... But maybe I didn't catch it yet - I'm no philosopher."

Mr. Chang asked, "Are you more the action type, Harry? - Or the newest invention of our society - the fun-lover?"

Time for another parry. "I'm not familiar with this term, sir ... My own understanding is - I accept the concept of *giri* in the sense of a goal, an obligation ... Not as a self-repeating force, since I don't feel like a *samurai* ... Then, and until then, if there's room left for some fun, it doesn't feel wrong."

Was it a nod, the tiniest bow?

They had finished eating. Mr. Chang guided Harry into another room, giving him the opportunity to examine the decoration, the furnishings. They were very tasteful, although not quite as *classé* as the Delacour house. But maybe just as an effect from first-generation richness, and all that was missing were another hundred years to let the polish fade a bit.

Mrs. Chang and her daughter hadn't followed. A moment later, Harry knew why - Mr. Chang started a conversation from man to man, more specifically, from possible future father-in-law to possible future son-in-law.

And his opening was first rate - he came as close to an apology as could be expected. "How's life with your new family, Harry?"

"Wonderful, sir. It has been only days so far, but even so - this feeling ..."

"Since we met the last time, I had the opportunity to learn more about your - relatives. Considering what I've heard, this is indeed the first time you have a chance to see the true value of family."

Harry's eyes met those of Mr. Chang. "I think I could see it there - within their own scope, they're doing okay. It was just - any sign of magic makes them panic."

Tiny movements of heads were an expressive way of communication. Next moment, Mr. Chang asked, "How are your own family plans, Harry?"

This shortcut from one topic to the other was somewhat breathtaking. Harry felt stunned.

"You love my daughter, isn't that so?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"And fate has already given proof of that ... Will you ask for her hand?"

Every word now counted twice. "I will propose to her - in due time, yes."

"Which time will that be?"

"After I have destroyed Voldemort, sir."

"Which means - maybe never."

Harry stared in the man's eyes. "No, sir ... I'll come back, and then I'll ask Cho."

"Only her?" Quite obviously, Mr. Chang wasn't referring to alternative daughters.

"Sir - so far, I didn't plan any further ... If her answer is yes, and with respect to her own demands and beliefs, I'll certainly respect traditions, or conventions ... In this order."

Mr. Chang's voice didn't change a bit. "So anything else is just tradition?"

"No, sir ... When that day has come, and if Cho agrees, I'll ask for your acceptance - as well as that of your wife. This acceptance has value and weight - it would complete what's my intention, while it won't change it."

"This opinion may not find - agreement."

Harry remembered a picture of strategies and their shadows. He also remembered some Zen meditations. "Sir - in the last weeks, I had time to think about the difference between true and right, and to recognize them ... If there are differences I cannot avoid, I know what will always be my choice - toward Cho, toward you, sir, or your wife ... It will be the truth."

Mr. Chang's head showed another tiny movement. Then he said, "I wonder how this understanding of honour will fit to your future profession, Harry ... Do you think you'll make it fit?"

Was this a new topic, or a change of tack?

"I don't know, sir ... A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have been able to express my belief. I don't see myself as a warrior - at the most, I feel it's a temporary state ... I don't know how I'd qualify as a farmer, or merchant, or businessman in general. I feel like a crusader who doesn't know what lies ahead, once the journey's over."

"Zen says, the way is the goal."

"Yes sir, although Zen seems quite tricky in giving answers ... Anyway, for me, the way is just a path, and of course a direction."

"Other people think in simpler terms - for example, money ... I am a merchant, and the topic of inheritance is something I have to think about ... Cho is our only heir - a fact from which I feel entitled to ask you, Harry, for your own situation."

"Of course, sir, although I'd answer this question anyway ... I have some money from my parents, enough to come through Hogwarts - that's all."

"Then you may understand my concern - and may reconsider your opinion about intentions and approvals."

The Chang house was built of solid stone, in contrast to a Japanese house made of wood and paper doors. Otherwise, however, the habit of listening outside seemed to be common, as Harry realized a second later - when Cho stepped into the room and said, "He won't ... Money doesn't impress him at all."

Mr. Chang looked at his daughter. If he disagreed with her appearance, disagreed ferociously, his expression didn't give a hint. He turned back to Harry. "That's hard to believe."

Cho said, "He can prove it too ... Harry, tell my father the story."

Harry kept silent for a moment, checking in his mind whether this would violate promises he'd given, or bounds to hold. Then he said, "Sir, what Cho means is - for some reason, last year I was rewarded a Goblins Request."

"Indeed ... And ..."

"Privileged, sir."

"Ahh ... Well, that's certainly an information which puts things into a different light."

"Not at all," said Cho. "He spent it for a few broomsticks ... That's where the Steel Wings came from."

Mr. Chang stared at Harry.

"Yes, sir ... And I'd do it again - with due respect to all people involved, it were the Steel Wings that won the Battle of Hogwarts."

Mrs. Chang entered the room. She smiled at Harry, if not to say, she beamed at him.

Harry, still in full guard from this conversation, smiled back, unsure why Cho's mother was looking at him this way.

Mr. Chang turned to his wife. "My dear, Harry just told us that he had been rewarded a Privileged request ... and that he claimed it for the broomsticks of the Hogwarts Flying Squad."

Mrs. Chang said, "A natural decision in your situation, Harry."

"Our daughter lists this as proof that Harry isn't impressed by money."

"Which doesn't mean he isn't impressed by other things." Mrs. Chang was beaming even more, looking very remarkable. Suddenly, Harry had an idea what the reason might be. He blushed.

Mrs. Chang saw it, reduced her expression to a warm smile. "I have no reason to complain about Harry's taste - or his choices."

He blushed deeper, saw Cho grinning maliciously.

Mr. Chang apparently had a fine sense for encrypted messages, even when he couldn't decipher them. He looked at his wife, at Harry, at his wife again. "No - there's little doubt, it's our daughter he loves, not our money."

Still pinkish, Harry said, "I didn't know, sir ... I mean, Cho never ..." He looked around. "All I knew was, you're doing business with - er, different cultures."

"But you won't object a comfortable environment, would you?"

Harry shrugged. "So far, my experience with - er, houses like this one is very limited - the Delacour castle is the only other one I saw ... Anyway, that's Cho's business, not mine - aside from that it's still far away."

"Your understanding of roles doesn't conflict with a present from a woman?"

"No, sir - I don't think so."

The sound coming from Cho was decipherable only for Harry.

\* \* \*

The last days of summer vacation passed before Harry's eyes, eyes which rested on walls and floors in The Burrow without ever losing a picture that burned and hurt.

Cho.

She had escorted him to the limousine that evening. Looking at her, he had asked, "Will you say goodbye to me?"

Not caring of the chauffeur, she had really kissed him. "See you, Harry."

He had looked surprised.

"I believe you," she had said. "A kiss on the mouth - that's my realm. Otherwise - well, maybe I feel a bit inferior ... Maybe I have to look for a teacher of my own, Harry - to cope with you."

Fleur had sent mail - invitations, of course. Harry had answered that, once in Hogwarts, travelling would be simpler, and he needed some days just to recover. It wasn't a lie, after all.

Marie-Christine had sent mail - an invitation, a meeting, whatever suitable to talk with him, to interview him. Basically, he had answered the same.

Hermione had sent a postcard - from Bulgaria. She would meet them first time in the Hogwarts Express.

Ron was still busy, mainly with the twins, as he said, maybe also with travels to France - if so, it had to be linkports, because he came back in the evening, ready for a Go match.

Ginny took Harry to swimming, to the place where she had developed her tanning. He had an opportunity to study her body in the thin swimsuit, feeling pride of such an attractive - sister.

She felt his glance, blushed. "Stop looking at me that way."

"Which way? ... I'm just admiring your body."

"That's exactly what I mean. It feels ..."

"C'mon - you know exactly why I can look at you that way. You look ..."

"Yeah - but it's not quite the same the other way around."

Examining closer, he recognized what she meant. Under the thin fabric, the signs were unmistakable. He grinned.

Ginny turned dark red. "It's not funny."

He sobered up. "No - not at all."

Seeing his expression, Ginny asked, "She didn't take it well, did she?"

His head was shaking slowly. "No - not the least bit."

"Well - what did you expect? ... Imagine - you come back from vacation, and meet her, and she tells you, I found a teacher for making love, quite good-looking actually, and we - um, but don't you worry, my feelings for you are unchanged ... How would you feel?"

"I don't know ... But I might find out." He told her about the scene at the limousine.

Ginny looked sympathetic. "That's hard ... But she won't do it."

He glanced at her. "You think so?"

"I'm pretty sure ... I mean, if it's just about - you know, I could solve my problem with Grigorij any day, except he's not the one I'm looking for."

Ginny wasn't Cho, more precisely, Cho wasn't Ginny, still, Harry found the remark comforting. Then he felt the need to improve the fluency of such conversations. "By the way, the Japanese have a very nice term ... They call it *the journey toward the clouds and the rain*."

"And the clouds and the rain ..."

"... are where the journey ends, yes."

Ginny blushed again, less from the topic than from her obvious state, visible again under the swimsuit.

Not totally untouched by himself, Harry found another topic. "Say - I wonder how a freckled redhead like you can manage such a deep tan?"

"Oh - that's simple," was the grateful reply, "a little spell does wonders in this regard."

The last day, Harry didn't follow to the swimming-pool. Ma Weasley found him in the garden, sitting in the lotus position, his eyes idly watching Nagini while she guarded a gnome hole. "Harry," said Mrs. Weasley, "vacation's over tomorrow, and neither Cho nor Grigorij have found their way over here."

"No, Ma Weasley."

"What a pity - I'd have liked to see them."

Harry kept silent.

"You and Ginny - you can talk to each other quite well, Harry ... I'm glad about that, for a girl in her age ..."

Feeling surprise, Harry glanced at Ma Weasley. He wouldn't have expected a message as decent, still as clear as this one - not from her. After a moment, the unspoken appeal had its effect. He said, "Grigorij - he didn't come because Ginny didn't invite him ... Let's say - er, it's not the big love."

"I had the feeling ... In contrast to ..."

This second appeal bore no immediate effect.

"Some trouble in the atmosphere, Harry?"

"Erm, a bit, yes ... Nothing serious."

"By the way - it was very kind of you, to nominate Ginny as the beneficiary of this lottery, Harry."

He looked up in astonishment - startled by this seeming change of subject as much as by Nagini's hissing.

Ma Weasley looked him in the eyes. "Harry - I've lost a son, but I've won a son - if you allow me to say so ..."

"Of course, Ma."

She smiled. "... but we hadn't too much time together so far. That's why I want to ask you a favour."

"Yes, sure."

"Harry - please don't treat me as if I'm blind, naive, or stupid."

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I went to the *Magical Tours* office the other day. There is no such lottery."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh ... Was it your own money?"

"No, Ma ... There was an - er, incident. It was money to keep my mouth shut."

Mr. Weasley sat there, looking at him.

"Please, Ma - I'm in touch with Sirius about that ... It's unclear what it was, at least, nobody can see something like a threat toward me."

"Good, Harry - I can live without the details, probably even better."

He grinned.

"Talking about money - about the insurance from Hogwarts ... My own children are too scared to tell their delicate mother about the details, but you, Harry, you've dealt with death more, and you're not frightened of the truth."

He stared again, now truly speechless.

"It comes from the dark wizards, am I right?"

"Yes, Ma ... We charged all of them, according to the severity and to their wealth."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. "I don't have a problem with that - it's not justice, it's only money ... Arthur doesn't know, Harry, and never will, okay?"

"No, Ma Weasley. We agreed - I mean, Ron and I, and ..."

She smiled. "Yes, of course - and this conversation here is just between the two of us, right? ... I don't mind if my children think they can drag the feet of their old mother."

Harry grinned. "Yes, okay."

"That was about naive and stupid, Harry. Now about blind."

He stared again, reddening.

Ma Weasley kept looking along the garden. "I was wondering if Cho would come to visit, and whether maybe an overnight visit would be an issue. I think I have a clear impression why, or why not ... You know, Harry, seven children are not the result of a wish list ..."

He giggled.

"... So you've gained some - experience, although not with her, but with someone else, and older than Cho ... Let me tell you, Harry - she will settle, after she made you pay for that - but still, I think you were quite lucky, and will be more so with her."

He cleared his throat. "How do you know ..."

Now she looked at him. "I couldn't talk that way with my own sons, Harry ... But don't you think I see the glances between you and Ginny, and the differences, and know there's no need to worry? ... And then ..."

Ma Weasley was blushing!

"... the way you looked at me, after you returned, making me think it's high time to lose a few pounds ... It wasn't an inexperienced girl, Harry, that's for sure."

"Erm - no, Ma."

Mrs. Weasley smiled. "All right, Harry - after this shocking news, something more mundane ... What do you need still for Hogwarts?"

\* \* \*

The Hogwarts Express felt empty.

This was of course nonsense, although Harry, who had arrived with Ron and Ginny just in time, who was wandering through the train right now, couldn't help thinking so.

One reason - the absence of people he hadn't expected, would have been more than surprised seeing them here, only that knowing and seeing were two different things ... Fred and George, Lee Jordan, Angelina, Bob, some others. Without them, Hogwarts would feel different.

A more objective reason was - the train seemed less crowded than in previous years. Harry didn't know why, the only logical explanation, less first-years than students finished, seemed unrealistic.

And then his own, private, subjective perspective, the reason why he was walking through the train ... Cho. And Almyra.

They weren't in the train.

He couldn't believe it. Wandering back, he scanned each compartment again, unable to admit he might have overlooked them, still less able to accept the fact.

Reaching again their own compartment, he hesitated, halfways determined to scan a third time.

Hermione asked, "Didn't you find them?"

"No - but it can't be."

"Of course it can." Hermione showed the know-it-all look Harry hadn't seen for weeks, hadn't missed either. "They'll use the Hogsmeade link."

"The what??"

"My God - is The Burrow behind the moon? ... There's a new linkport connection from London to Hogsmeade, for quick travelling - of course for Hogwarts, not for this sleepy town, only that Dumbledore didn't give a permission for a more direct link - sometimes he feels a bit old-fashioned, now that ..."

"Who's running the link?"

"That new company, who else? ... Something Tours ..."

"Magical Tours?"

"Right - so you've heard at least that."

Harry and Ron looked at each other. "Oh shit." It was Harry's comment.

Somewhat shocked, Hermione looked at Harry, then at Ginny. "Hey, this language isn't allowed for ears below sixth year ... I know it's hard, but you'll see her in Hogwarts."

Ron wasn't ready to stay behind with bad language. "You know a wet fart, Hermione."

It earned him an approving glance from Ginny, and a very indignant stare from Hermione. Ron just said, "Harry, tell her."

Harry informed Hermione about his acquaintance with *Magical Tours*, the incident in London Linkport, and their meeting with Sirius.

Hermione had dropped any concern about bad language. "They'll be there, Harry ... People don't disappear in links."

"No - not from malfunctions."

"Did the police find out anything about the two men?"

"I went through the register, and found one of them."

"And?"

"He disappeared a day or so after this incident ... He was found dead a week later."

Which gave Hermione another concern to worry about. But it was Harry himself who changed the atmosphere. "No - of course they'll arrive ... Even if there's anything fishy with the links themselves, they wouldn't make two girls disappear who'd be missed minutes afterwards, with clear times of departure and planned arrival."

Hermione seemed relieved, still sceptical. "How do you know?"

"We discussed it. My case is the first hard evidence, that's what Bel said."

"Bell?"

"Bel - Belinda McGraw ... She's Sirius - secretary ... And a cop."

Hermione had registered the pause, and the grinning in Ginny's face, which was considerably broader than Ron's.

"Bel, huh? ... And - is she something else?"

Harry had learned keeping emotions out of expressions. "What might that be?"

Hermione looked at Harry, seemed to examine him more closely for the first time in the train. Then she looked at Ginny, making a face as if she would say more without the younger girl around. "Hmm ..."

"By the way," said Harry, "thanks for the postcard ... Bulgaria, huh?"

Hermione got the message, grinned, then blushed a bit. "Yes - two weeks ... Swimming and so."

"Swimming, of course ... How was the weather?"

"Well - cloudy, and rain."

An instant later, Harry and Ginny were rolling in howling laughter. Ron looked downright blank, while Hermione turned seriously dark.

A moment later, Ron was blushing.

The effect, inevitably so - Hermione had a challenge to return. She studied Harry again, tried to map what she saw, and thought, with her knowledge of Harry and a person not in the train, found it difficult - a riddle to be solved in conversation, to be interpreted with personal experience. "How was your trip to Japan, Harry?"

He spoke about Zen, and *aikido*, and *kenjutsu*, also about balance.

Hermione listened attentively. "Which other persons were in that house, Harry - besides this Shigura and you?"

"Two women - Shihiko and Tamiko."

Hermione looked again at Ginny, who was slumped on her seat like someone who'd heard it all before, however still interested to see the reaction of other people.

"These women ... how old were they?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno ... Shihiko's the older one - she's the boss in the house."

"And the other - Tamiko?"

"She's the younger one, then ... Maybe twenty-five, maybe thirty - I'm not good at guessing ages, and that's something you just don't ask."

"Did they speak English?"

"Yes - all of them ... In the beginning, Tamiko was a bit unsure, speaking slow, and carefully - but then she got more fluent."

Hermione started to grin, tried to suppress it, glanced at Ginny, her eyes widening at what she saw there.

Ron had watched the exchange of glances. After a moment, he stared at Harry - it was his turn to look very astonished, blushing once more. Then he murmured something like "... trolley" and left the compartment.

Hermione looked at Harry, at Ginny. "You two get along well, huh?"

Feeling less restrained than a moment before, Harry answered, "You can say that ... We talk a lot."

Ginny looked pleased, and a bit pinkish.

Hermione remembered something. "Before I forget - what was so funny about my remark with - er, Bulgaria?"

Ginny had trouble to suppress another fit.

Harry said, "The Japanese have a very nice term ... *The journey toward the clouds and the rain.*"

Quick as ever, it took Hermione just a second to understand. "Yes, that's very nice indeed." Then she grinned, giggled, started to laugh.

Harry asked, "Wasn't much with swimming, was it? ... I mean, with such a bad weather, I guess you were mostly inside."

Before Hermione had time to answer, Ginny said, "No, I think Viktor was."

Ron found them still laughing. Their fun did nothing to improve his mood.

\* \* \*

It gave Harry a sharp twist in the stomach, hearing the words, the unexpected voice, the reminder that Hagrid was dead. "First-year's - over here!" Damian Loew's voice.

The three friends looked at each other, the same expression in each face. Ron's grumpiness was gone in an instant, replaced by sadness. "C'mon," he said. "Life goes on."

They passed the gathering group, greeted the new Keeper of Keys and Grounds with a warmth that made him look surprised, and pleased, in particular seeing Hermione.

The new students watched them with wide eyes, widening more at the sight of Nagini around Harry's neck and body. Excited whispers started a second after they had passed.

Harry deposited his luggage, returned into the Great Hall together with Nagini - for him, the Sorting Ceremony required the presence of all thinking creatures.

Passing the Slytherin table, he was stopped by Timothy Brenton, the sixth-year who had once broken the ice between Slytherins and Gryffindors in Potions. Timothy called, "Hey, Harry - you know, there's always a place for you and Nagini at this table - you've won more points for Slytherin than some students here."

Harry grinned. "Thanks ... Good to know, if Gryffindor ever decides to banish me, and maybe for the same reason."

"Yeah - the day hell's freezing."

Sitting at his place, he saw Cho and Almyra arrive. He felt better than a second before, also more startled. How much did Cho share with Almyra?

He had no opportunity to walk over; the Sorting Ceremony started immediately. Then Dumbledore stood up and started to speak.

Harry's concentration was only halfway with the Headmaster; the rest lingered at the Ravenclaw table. How was Cho going to play? With uneasiness, Harry became aware - he and Cho were something like the *official lovers* of Hogwarts, only that the term was quite platonic, and might be still for some time.

"... new times, we have enhanced the education program of Hogwarts by two new faculties. Both take into account the old knowledge that a healthy mind can reside only in a healthy body - and both faculties will be optional."

What was Dumbledore talking about?

"The first of them deals with something I felt missing in our portfolio for quite some time. But it was only recently that I gathered a majority of votes in the respective circles." Dumbledore grinned. "Don't be surprised if you'll find students as well as teachers among the participants. This new faculty offers dance lessons ..."

Tumultuous applause, especially from the female students.

"... and the teacher is someone who'll add this responsibility to her old role - Miss Fleur Delacour!"

"Hiss, Nagini - as much as you can." Harry was doing his best to increase the noise level, watching an excited-looking Fleur.

"Miss Delacour," continued the Headmaster, "will need an assistant, as dancing requires two people, so I've been told." Dumbledore paused for the reaction to his joke. "She asked me to announce - this job is not necessarily permanent, not necessarily exclusive either, and volunteers may contact her in her office."

Harry felt glances in his direction. Two of them seemed to originate from the Ravenclaw table.

"The second faculty also has to do with sports, training, and exercises. At least one of the included disciplines is a dance of its own kind - but I'll leave the details to a more experienced person, since here I'm really a bloody amateur."

Harry's eyes were scanning the teacher's table in anticipation.

"The teacher of this faculty is a new colleague in the Hogwarts community - a last-minute agreement for which I'm more than glad. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome in our round ...

A figure entered the room, approached Dumbledore.

"... Mr. Ichiro Kenzo!"

The new teacher bowed toward Dumbledore, turned, bowed toward his new colleagues, turned again, bowed toward the audience.

By then, Harry was up, bowed back. For an instant, his eyes linked with those of the Japanese.

Middle-sized, not as broad as Shigura, considerably younger too - around thirty, maybe a bit more, guessed Harry. And he had recognized it from the first step - the graceful, perfectly balanced gait of the *aikido* expert.

"Hey, Harry." It was Ron. "Do you know anything about that guy?"

"No - never seen before, not heard his name ... But it doesn't mean anything, Shigura wasn't the talkative type."

Hermione grinned. "No, not him, huh? *He* could speak English from the beginning."

Ron immediately steered the conversation back. "What do you think? Shall we join?"

"No question about that - both courses, for sure."

Hermione knew it all. "Drop Divination, to balance out."

A wonderful idea. Harry looked at Hermione. "Can I drop Astronomy too?"

"Sure - optional faculty versus optional faculty."

"Can I drop more?"

"What's on your mind?"

"Speaking in Hogwarts terms - I'll try to do a graduate work with this *sensei* ... In practical terms, I want to reserve as much time as possible for these exercises."

"Hmm ... Maybe History - I'm not sure. Ask McGonagall."

After the meal, leaving Nagini at his place, Harry went over to the Ravenclaw table, suddenly feeling as if put back in time by one year. He had no trouble with the glances of the other students, would kiss Cho - hopefully, that was ... No, he wasn't put back in time - hopes and fears had switched roles.

He reached Cho, bent to kiss her, was allowed so, felt her kiss. Thank God for this realm ...

Almyra hugged him, looking pleased after the questioning glance she had sent first to Cho, then to him.

Harry sat down. "I'm awfully glad to find you here."

Cho smiled drily. "That was a surprise, wasn't it?"

"Not finding you in the train, yes ... But it wasn't the worst."

"I feel flattered, really." Cho's voice raised another look from Almyra.

"This portkey link - this company, *Magical Tours* ... When I heard from Hermione ..."

"Why - didn't you travel with them by yourself?"

"Yes - and that's why I've been worried like hell."

Cho's flippancy was wiped off at once. She looked at Harry. "What happened on your journey?"

"Let's go outside ... It's a wonderful evening."

They walked to the lakeside, had to walk a bit farther, not being the only group, although most of the others consisted of two students rather than three.

They sat down, with Almyra looking admiringly when Harry, quite reflexively, stripped barefoot and took the lotus position. To be honest, Cho would have looked appreciative too, had her expression not been overshadowed by some worry.

Harry told them the story of his incident, his agreement, his meeting with Sirius, finding the presence of mind to use the full first name of Belinda McGraw.

Cho sounded a bit angry. "You didn't bother to tell me when ... Well, we had other things to discuss."

A grin had started in Almyra's face, faded an instant later.

Harry said, "Now you know ... and why the train journey was so ..."

Cho looked at him. "We didn't see anything unusual ... It's not us who find trouble."

"No."

Almyra stood up. "Harry - I've a million questions, about meditation, and Zen, and ..."

"Balance," helped Cho.

Almyra stared at her, the question back in her face. "Yes, whatever ... But not this evening - See you." She headed toward the buildings.

Cho watched her leaving. "Tactful girl, isn't she?"

"Yes - together with the entire school ... We're the exhibit of Hogwarts - all that's missing is ..."

"... the key for that suite - exactly, Harry, and that's another reason why I'd like to grill you over a low fire ... You've compromised me, put me into a trap from which escaping is as much embarrassing as staying inside."

"You're right ... I didn't foresee ... I'm sorry, Cho, that's not what I intended to do." He bowed.

Coming up, he saw a pleased look in her face. She said, "I know, Harry ... I accept the Japanese pardon ritual - actually, you're awfully good at it."

He felt hope. "So how shall we play it?"

Cho showed a malicious grin. "I thought it over, Harry ... The idea of me looking for a teacher isn't too far away, although ..."

He kept silent, remembering the words of the Weasley women.

"... in any case, I know what your role will be."

He waited for her to continue, saw her waiting too. "Please tell me, Cho."

"You will court me, Harry ... That's the perfect solution - there hasn't been much of a courting so far, has there? ... I fell to you like a ripe - er, fruit ... Maybe that was the mistake - but it's not too late."

He suppressed a reflexive grin at her correction in mid-sentence, although now, even in the lotus position he could avoid blows quite well, only ... And he remembered another mistake she had mentioned, saw in her eyes she remembered her own words as well, and woe him he would remind them ...

Thinking about the prospect, a beaming appeared in his face, taking her by surprise. He said, "That's a wonderful idea, Cho ... It's so appealing - you're right, it fits perfectly - and ... Oh yes, I'll do that, with all my ..."

He stopped, avoiding another trap of words, seeing her approving reaction. "Cho, I love you ... I'll court you, no matter how, and how long."

She gave no reply, seemed satisfied so far, not completely, although it didn't look as if she was blaming him for the slight doubt still visible in her face - this face which refused to be ranked, refused to fade from Harry's mind.

## 06 - Getting Started

Compared to the start of the new school year in Hogwarts, Harry's time in Japan had been a simple, single-minded business. Agreed - maybe not quite single-minded, although with *balance* as the common factor ... At any rate, these four weeks had offered a quiet, comforting environment with very few people around.

Here, in contrast, people came storming at him - people in flesh and bone, people in his mind, and sometimes they were identical.

More so during the days.

Everybody wanted to grab him, pull him to a quiet place, and talk with him. Harry wanted to grab too, and a quiet place certainly would have been a prerequisite, except ...

Lupin grabbed him after Transfiguration. "Harry - can we meet in my office?"

There was no tea today, not shortly before lunch. Lupin asked, "First question, Harry - is your wand under control?"

"Yes, Prof - with and without the new top, because it doesn't matter at all." Harry repeated Shigura's explanation.

Lupin looked thoughtful. "In a way, it's no surprise ... We all encounter situations in which our own magic manifests itself without the help of a wand - only that it's usually in a moment of extreme emotions ... Did you test it?"

"Erm - Shigura made me test it ... I was locked in a cell, and had to open the lock with my mind."

A quick cloud crossed Lupin's face, hearing about cells, very much as expected by Harry. Then his teacher and friend tried to grin. "And no snake guarding the door ... But how did the Zen master put emotional pressure on you, Harry? I can't believe you managed just so, only because this was a test."

"No, Prof."

Lupin waited, curiosity in his face.

Harry felt the blood rushing into his cheeks. "Someone was waiting for me," he murmured.

Lupin looked blank for a second, then smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, Harry - I didn't intend to break into your privacy like that ... But it explains a few changes I noticed in your appearance - and of course it's exactly what to expect from Shigura."

Still shaky, Harry asked, "You know him?"

"Not personally, no ... But I've heard about him."

Glancing up, Harry could see that there was neither a question nor any confusion in Lupin's face. For a few seconds, this was some relief, after his embarrassment, only next moment the effect seemed more disquieting, and then Harry couldn't hold his curiosity any longer. "Prof - have you been in Japan?"

Lupin smiled. "Why do you think your answer was all I needed to hear, Harry?"

A sudden suspicion flared up in Harry. "You don't seem surprised, Prof."

Lupin held his stare calmly. "I sent you to Japan, Harry, because I knew this training was mandatory, and I was right ... I might have had speculations - and if so, I accepted any possible conflict of lesser importance, and accepted any responsibility for that."

Harry bowed, feeling certain to be understood. "No ... I don't hold you responsible."

The teacher's glance was sympathetic. "I'm sorry for the obvious conflict, Harry ... I'll do what I can to help you resolve it."

"Thanks, Prof ..." Harry couldn't imagine any support Lupin might contribute, maybe except for sympathy. Then another question came up in his mind, and this moment seemed just right. He said, "I'd like some help with another conflict - in my understanding of changed roles and faculties."

Lupin grinned. "Harry - I remember a time when you were more blunt than today ... Then, you'd have said, 'You can't even transfigure, so how come' - maybe not exactly with these words."

Harry grinned back. "Hopefully not - otherwise, it's correct - true, I mean."

Lupin laughed. "Overdose of Zen, huh? ... But I owe you an answer. I'm working at something with AI - and until the time has come when we'll be able to present some results ..."

"With AI?"

Probably Harry's surprise - hearing this particular name from Lupin - was to blame for his rude impoliteness, and maybe also his first signs of feeling back in Hogwarts, where people cared less about privacy and feelings. Whatever - there had been something in Lupin's expression which kept idling in his mind, after leaving the office and strolling to the lunch table.

Recently, he had a fine eye for some movements, and a fine ear for undertones that came with words or names - even very short ones.

\* \* \*

Katie grabbed him before he could sit down. For a change, the quiet place wasn't immediately necessary. She said, "Harry, we have to meet - you, Alicia, and I."

This grouping told Harry at once what Katie was talking about. The three of them were the only survivors of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, now that the twins, Lee Jordan, and

Angelina had left Hogwarts. Only - for Harry, Quidditch suddenly seemed so far away, so ... unimportant. Could that really be?

"Yes," he sighed, "I know."

"Your excitement's unbearable ..." Katie looked at him in bewilderment. "What's wrong - do I smell from the mouth?"

In a reflex, though still an unfamiliar one, Harry replied, "Let's have a test."

Katie stared at him. Now she made a step ...

"Okay, okay - test passed ... When, and where?"

"As soon as possible, which means tomorrow - today I'm booked out ... Where - I'd say, we get our Steel Wings and find a quiet place somewhere at the lake ... This weather's just too good to sit in some sticky classroom."

"Sounds better by the minute."

Katie examined him thoughtfully. "Well, well - Young Potter, look at him ..."

"Where did you hear that??"

She grinned. "Doesn't matter ... Anyway, I don't think you'll hear that much longer." Before he could answer, Katie left.

Glancing over, Harry saw that Cho had watched the short conversation. From the distance, her expression was hard to decipher. Still, in addition to the situation in general, he felt the need for a closer inspection. After the meal, he marched over, asked, "May I sit down?"

Almyra gaped at him.

Cho smiled. "Certainly, Harry."

"The Gryffindors have to form a new Quidditch team - Katie spoke with me about that ..."

"Oh, Quidditch was it, then?"

"Yes." Harry could remember harder tests probing his temper. Calmly, he added, "She, Alicia, and I are the only ones left ... How's it with your team?"

"Is this your problem?" Cho's answer.

"We've lost three." Almyra's answer, after an incredulous look at Cho.

Harry kept to his topic. "Then you aren't better off much ... Right now, I've got some trouble gathering enough interest in Quidditch to stand these endless trainings ..."

"Why not?" Cho faked astonishment. "It's all about *balance*, isn't it?"

There was little sense in continuing this conversation, only Harry had promised to court Cho, no matter how. He looked into her eyes. "Are you going to keep your position? - Seeker?"

"Sure - and I dearly hope you will, too ... We won't fight with Steel Wings, but Firebolts are fine as well - for each of us."

The hidden command was obvious. He saw it, saw in her eyes it hadn't been ordered by accident. He bowed, coming pretty close to the fine measure of her father. "Okay, then."

"Salu, copains."

Harry turned, looked up. Fleur stood there, smiling. "Sorry to interrupt - 'arry, can we talk in my office?"

Her grabbing, pulling to a quiet place felt more like a rescue operation. If Fleur had sensed it, her expression didn't show. "We're waiting for your visit, 'arry - that is, my parents and I, while with Gabrielle, you might expect an invitation to Beauxbatons, or a visit here - she's very determined, as you know ... But that's not the reason why I wanted to talk with you."

Fleur smiled - seductively the only fitting term that came to Harry's mind. She said, "I'm looking for an assistant, 'arry - it's not that I don't have volunteers, but ..."

"Oh - yes, I see."

Fleur's eyes widened. "But, 'arry - you sound as if the thought is bearable only with a Veela shawl around your neck ... Taking into account that, some time soon, I might be something like your sister-in-law ..."

Harry felt the heat in his face. "Please, Fleur - I haven't forgotten what you did for me, when nobody would have dreamed of this new relationship ... Please excuse my remark ..." He bowed, changed from French to Japanese. "*Shimata.*"

"What does it mean, 'arry?"

"I made a shameful mistake."

Fleur examined him. "That must have been a remarkable seminar - I'd like to hear more, but not now ... I'll need several assistants, 'arry - so you could combine with your own plans ... But I want assistants who can move, and seeing you walk - " she smiled, "oh-la-la."

He bowed again.

"What are your own plans about this new faculty - and those of Cho, of course?"

"I planned to join your lessons anyway, Fleur ... I didn't discuss it yet with Cho, so ..."

Fleur searched in his face. "A dispute, 'arry?"

"Er - yes."

Assuming what appeared most natural to her, and definitely no conversation tabu, Fleur asked, "Different opinions about an - er, elementary topic?"

"No, not exactly."

Only now, Fleur seemed to remember that non-Veela, or non-French, might have different opinions. "Pardon, 'arry - it's none of my business ..."

Which felt even worse to Harry. "No," he said quickly, "I mean, maybe not, but - I'm glad to talk with you about that, Fleur ... You've been the first ..."

Disbelief appeared in her face. "Another woman??"

He nodded.

"I can't believe it, although ..." Fleur seemed to remember something. "It's not Ginny, is it?"

He grinned. "No - but I know why you're asking."

Fleur grinned back. "You've got some sister, or will have soon ..." After another second, perplexion appeared in her face. "An older woman!"

He nodded again.

Fleur beamed. "Excellent, 'arry ... And about a year ago, you couldn't imagine the two of us ..."

He had to smile, remembering his embarrassment then.

Fleur looked mischiveous. "Pardon my nasty curiosity, 'arry, but - have you been a diligent student?"

A moonlit room appeared in his memory. "Yes, I'd say so."

Fleur was delighted. "More than - er, ground course?"

Tutor or not - Harry found it high time to stop her curiosity. He said, "I didn't have in mind to discuss details, Fleur, so just to answer your question - in Japanese, *soixante-neuf* is called *the way of Yin and Yang*."

Apparently, Fleur knew the symbol. "That's nice - very poetic, indeed." Her grin returned. "And how's the term for ..."

Harry shook his head, grinned somewhat helplessly. "Fleur, you're impossible."

"I know - like any other woman, be it Veela or not."

"Well, then ... *The journey toward the clouds and the rain*."

Fleur clapped her hands. "Wonderful ... Thank you, 'arry - that's definitely an enrichment of my vocabulary."

"Yes, isn't it?"

Fleur took his hands. "Don't you worry - she'll forgive you, I'm sure about that."

Unfortunately, Fleur didn't express an opinion when this day might come, which for Harry seemed hardly by accident - maybe Fleur didn't know Cho as well as he himself, however enough to avoid unrealistic predictions.

\* \* \*

His Headmistress grabbed him before supper. "Harry - can we talk in my office?"

"Yes, Prof."

Inside, she smiled at him. "You look changed, Harry - quite a bit, I might say."

He bowed.

McGonagall smiled more. "Your answer - I know that I cannot recognize all the intricacies in it, except that it makes me think we all should do it ... Anyway - Harry, did you talk already with our new teacher?"

"The *sensei* - no, not yet."

"How do you call him?"

"*Sensei* - a master in combat techniques, a teacher ... A title of honour, allowed only for a *sennin* - a student, I mean."

"What makes you sure he knows combat techniques?"

"The way he walks, Prof ... It's obvious."

"Hmm ..." McGonagall seemed to have received more answer than expected, or demanded. "What are your plans for this new faculty?"

"Prof - without being pompous, or trying not to be - it's not by coincidence that this *sensei* appears exactly when I'm asking myself how to continue my training, is it?"

"You're right, Harry ... Although more common sports are a welcome enhancement of our program, too."

"Well - my planning is this, I want to drop as much as possible of other faculties, to join this new one, and to extend it as much as I can ... If necessary, I'll build it as graduate work, although I have nothing in mind other than learning."

"That fits nicely, Harry, because - Mr. Kenzo asked for some assistance, mentioned your name, actually ... That's why I thought he may have talked with you, before ..."

"No, Prof - and he'd never done that."

"Yes, he's very polite - although I seem to miss the finer points here." The Headmistress looked curious. "Why is it impossible to ask you before asking me?"

"If I would have said no, he would have lost much face ... If I would have agreed, but you would have said no, we both would have lost much face."

McGonagall seemed a bit perplexed. "And what if I would have said no to him, coming to me?"

"Then it would have been you losing face, Prof."

"Well - I'm relieved this wasn't a situation in which only Mr. Kenzo could lose face, but - why me?"

"Hogwarts has asked him to come, and he came ... So far, both sides have won much face, okay?"

Suddenly, Harry realized the tone in which he was talking with his Headmistress, but right now she didn't care, just said, "Okay."

"Now - his request is just a consequence of his task ... Refusing necessary help, I mean you saying no, would increase his face while Hogwarts would have lost some, and you, as the one to blame, would have lost incredibly much."

McGonagall looked as if her head was dizzying. "I'm awfully glad I didn't say no."

"Pardon the question, Prof - what did you say?"

"I said I'll ask you." She saw his expression. "It wasn't the right answer, was it?"

"It wasn't wrong, Prof."

With some impatience, McGonagall said, "Please, Harry - I'm not too old to learn, and not too proud to learn from a student, especially ... So what should I've said?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Your first answer should have expressed your own opinion, Prof. You said, 'I'll ask him,' which means you didn't answer the part of the question which demanded your own vote. That was insulting - but probably within the scope a Japanese expects from us *gaijin* - er, barbarians."

The Headmistress sighed. "And what else?"

"Assuming your own answer was positive, you should have said you will do what you can to obtain a positive answer from me - meaning you not only accept his request, you also support it."

"But wasn't it quite obvious you'd agree?"

"Certainly - only it doesn't matter."

"So I've lost some face - because I'm a stupid - what's the term? ... Yes, *gaijin* ... Well, so be it." McGonagall's smile looked almost like a grin, only this could hardly be. "And besides, there's a famous example in literature - I never fully understood it before, but now I can imagine."

Harry looked at his Headmistress with bafflement. "An example, Prof?"

"Yes, Harry." This was definitely no longer a decent smile. "The cat of which only the grin was left - no face and no body, just the grin." McGonagall laughed, saw Harry's face, sobered up. "Alice in Wonderland, you know?"

"No," replied Harry, "but my *sensei* in Japan quoted her too."

Which seemed to send his Headmistress close to another fit.

Aiming for the opportunity, Harry asked, "Prof, what can I drop in favour of these exercises?"

The issue was good to let her recover. "Your optional faculties, Harry."

"What about History?"

McGonagall showed some amusement. "No, Harry ... By the way, it won't be History any longer, since this has been finished last year. Instead, it's Social Ethics, and - " another short grin, "at least from the topic, it's definitely in the scope you should cover."

"Anything else? Care of Magical Creatures?"

McGonagall thought for a moment. "An hour ago, I'd have said no, Harry ... But your explanation has rattled me up a bit - about the face, I mean." For an instant, her lips twisted again. "I might know a solution - if we say, you take care of a magical creature all the time, and if you agree to assist every now and then - that is, you and Nagini, we can justify this exception."

"I really hope Professor Grubbly-Plank won't be insulted - a pity it's her I have to drop, but I'll need all the time I can get."

McGonagall beamed. "I know from your description - I'm the one to ask her first ... But don't worry - for her, you and Nagini simply can't do wrong."

\* \* \*

Almyra grabbed him after supper, before Harry had a chance to reach the Ravenclaw table, which had been his intention. She asked, "Harry - can we have a walk?" and looked quite determined.

"Pleasure, Al."

They headed for the place with the two graves, that of Hagrid and that of Flitwick. In contrast to the lake, which attracted many students, here it was quiet *and* private. For Almyra the Voodoo witch, sitting close to a grave was nothing unusual. For Harry, sitting close to what was left of Hagrid felt comforting.

They sat down, side by side - quite appropriate to look somewhere else when talking about complicated matters, Harry automatically in the lotus position, after stripping shoes and socks.

Almyra watched it. "Have you turned Japanese, Harry?"

"No - it's just very convenient, once you're used to it."

"Talking about convenience ..." Almyra paused, waited a moment for a reply which didn't come, said, "I don't know how to begin ..."

"Oh - sorry, Al - I recently stopped remarks like *Go ahead*, because waiting silently means just the same, without expressing a command."

"Great ... Now - can we put aside Japan for a while?"

Suppressing a chuckle, Harry said, "Probably not, if my assumption's right, but - go ahead."

"Harry - do we feel like brother and sister?"

"Absolutely ... You're a different type of sister to me than Ginny, but - yes."

"I love you, Harry - in a spiritual sense."

"And I love you, Al - in the same sense."

"I also love Cho."

Rather than giving the obvious reply, Harry asked, "In which sense?"

Almyra's voice was angry. "I'm not lesbian, if that's your question."

"No, it wasn't - I know you're not."

Almyra's head jerked around. She swallowed. Before the moment could develop more embarrassment, Harry added, "I know Cho isn't - my question was serious."

"I don't know - maybe in the same sense, except she doesn't feel like a sister ... Anyway, all I'm trying to say is, you two are equally important to me, although Cho can - er, claim older rights ... Okay?"

"I never thought you'd party against me, Al."

Almyra made a snarling sound. "Okay's just fine, Harry - keep it simple for once."

He bowed. "Okay."

"What happened between you and Cho?"

He had seen the question coming for the last quarter of an hour. His answer was given immediately. "Our problem is - something happened, but not between the two of us."

"Oh."

"Exactly."

Almyra glanced in his direction. "Something ... serious?"

"If you mean, do I love someone else, or did I stop loving Cho - no in both cases ... I met a woman who taught me how to - walk toward the *clouds and the rain* with a woman, and she did so quite thoroughly ... Her name's Tamiko."

Almyra sounded a bit breathless. "Harry - when I said keep it straightforward, I didn't mean you should dump it. A piece a time's just fine for me."

"Sorry, Al - I just had time to formulate it since we left the hall."

"Sometimes you're a bit scary, Harry."

"For you? ... Please don't - but I know what you mean, I've got trouble enough mastering the changes by myself." Next moment, hearing the sound from Almyra, it was his turn to stare at her in astonishment. "What's this - I thought you never giggle, Al?"

She did it again. "Usually not, but at the moment ..."

Looking down at the grass, he said, "I'm not trying to kill the subject - not at all ... But maybe it's simpler for both of us when switching from an interview to an exchange."

In the corner of his vision, he could see Almyra's head come around, staring at him again, apparently more than startled. He added, "Recently, I got used to some conversations with - sisters I wouldn't have dreamed of six weeks ago."

Almyra found her balance, grinned, blushed, found her own grass to watch while talking, exhaled deeply. "All right, Harry ... This summer, I lost my virginity."

"And this is the reason why you started giggling - that's strange, Al."

Of course, she did it again. "No - it's only temporary ... His name doesn't matter, it was in Jamaica, and his only function was to perform the task - as far as I was concerned."

It answered one of Harry's question. "I know what you mean ... To be - prepared, not to behave clumsy."

"Yeah - that's exactly what I had in mind."

"For Lupin."

Almyra twisted, gasped. "Harry - stop scaring me to hell ... Please tell me you cannot read minds."

This giggle was his own. "No, not at all ... In Japan, there was another woman, Shihiko - for a while, I thought she could, but now I've got a better understanding how ..."

"How do you know??"

"Over there, I've learned to interpret the slightest intonation, and choice of words, in a conversation - and at the same time, I've learned - er, what Tamiko taught me ... And today, I had a conversation with Lupin."

Almyra stared at him, disbelieving, anxiously, expectantly. "What did he say?"

"I asked him about Transfiguration, and his - er, missing qualification. All he said was, he's working with you at some project, and I should wait till there are results."

"And from that ... From one ..."

Almost apologetically, Harry said, "Al - it's simpler than it sounds - actually, similar how Cho found out about the Goblins ... When he mentioned that project, he said, 'with Al', and, 'until the time we'll be able to present results' - and how he spoke your name, and this *we* ... And I was so surprised, I asked, 'with Al?' ... It wasn't polite, only - when I saw his face ... By accident, I had moved the shadow ... Well, and then, of course, your reaction a minute ago."

Almyra nodded, didn't object his usage of Japanese terminology, seemed to understand anyway, seemed to have listened to more important meanings. A shining appeared in her face.

With this embarrassing *confession* outspoken, Harry felt easier, and the thought filled his mind with joy. "That's - super, Al ... You and Lupin ..."

The words blurted out of her. "We're not that far yet ... Until now, it's just - we didn't talk about it yet, but when working together ... He's a teacher, and I'm a student, and for him, this barrier could never ... But I could feel it, and I did what I could from my side, but you know how it is ... And this is my last year in Hogwarts - as a student, at least, so ..."

"So you hope, with a little bending of the rules, it won't take still a year?"

Almyra nodded. "That's why ... I was sure, knowing I'm still a virgin, he'd never ..." She giggled again, stopped. "You're right, Harry - but now it's out, so I think this has been the last giggle for a while."

"Which means Cho doesn't know yet."

"Well, she might suspect some feelings in me, only Cho can be very tactful ... But the newest - er, developments are not yet shared with her, because I know she's still ..." Almyra stopped, blushed. "Damn, Harry - there are traps all around in this ..."

"Oh yes, there are." To soothe her deep embarrassment, he said, "Which brings us back to my own case."

Almyra looked grateful. "Yes - half an hour ago, I only wanted to find a levelling between you and Cho, and now ..."

"It wasn't really news to me - with Cho, I mean ... So you didn't slip a deep secret ..."

"You're too damn clever, do you know that? ... How ..."

He giggled. "To swap one slip for another, and since most of this conversation will never leave these four walls that aren't there ..."

Almyra nodded vigorously.

"... I'll tell you how ... At the morning of the Hogwarts battle, Cho and I had a watch shift at the Giants, and Lleyrin told us, all we could do was to find some sleep in a barn - lots of hay and straw."

Almyra listened very attentively.

"Well - there was nothing, of course, except for some remark ... Only when I came awake, saw her looking at me, and she said something like keep me at a straw blade's distance ... I mean, even then, I knew what she was talking about ..."

Just in time, Almyra shifted from a giggle to a chuckle.

"... but it's only now that I can decipher her motivation ... Well, and then, some days ago, when she heard about ... It was in her parents' limousine, on the way to the Chang house, there was another remark." He glanced at her. "You see, it's simple, in a way."

"In a way, yes ... With some special training."

They chuckled both. Then Almyra asked, "And now, Harry?"

"We agreed that I'll be courting her - that I have to - er, conquer her, I mean in this particular sense ... We love each other as before, and somehow, that doesn't make anything simpler, quite the opposite."

"And this courting ..." Almyra's voice sounded as if carefully inching forward. "You're allowed to kiss her - is this any indicator for the level you've reached?"

"No, unfortunately not ... It's - I told her I never kissed Tamiko that way, so kissing isn't compromised - and of course, everybody in the school expects us to do so ... And it's some kind of safety-valve."

Almyra grinned. "Then maybe not doing it might speed up things."

"Maybe so. Only - of course I've compromised her, and my lessons in Japan dealt with more than ... It was a lot about honour, and face, and acceptance - it's no question, I won't blackmail her."

Almyra nodded. "Only joking - at your account ... Do other people know?"

"Sure - it's nothing you can hide from people who know you well, and I've stopped playing hide and seek, or trying to ... Ginny was the first - Hermione, Fleur ... Even Ma Weasley noticed immediately."

"What did they say?"

"Basically, all the same - she'll make me pay some, and then she'll appreciate it."

Almyra smiled. "Basically, that's my guess too."

\* \* \*

Next morning, Hermione announced that she was going to do a graduate work - about Potions, with the werewolf potion as her obvious choice.

Harry asked, "What's your goal?"

"To make it last - to make it a real cure."

"No, that's your planned result ... What's your own goal?"

Ron looked flabbergasted. "Hey - cool, Harry ... Listening to you, it seems Zen can be used even for organization."

"If it's *Management by Chaos*, certainly."

Hermione said, "Yeah, our Harry has learned a bit."

"Will you answer the question, or are you trying to come through with a bit of flattery?"

She smiled archly. "Harry - what you still have to learn is, compliments aren't just a one-way street from men to women."

Ron showed the familiar signs of uneasiness, raising the suspicion in Harry Hermione wanted to tease Ron as much as she tried to avoid the answer to his question. He said, "So you won't ... Is it more than just a challenge with AI?"

"I'm not challenging AI."

Harry smiled inwardly at the double meaning nobody except him could see. Aloud, he said, "Your project has nothing to do with hers, and her topic?"

Hermione seemed to register how little credit her explanations earned. "True, it's been her project that made me aware of graduate works, yes ... Aside from that, it's really coincidence ... I think I'll run for a Potions job in Hogwarts - maybe not immediately, at least, I want to make a name for myself." She looked challenging at Harry. "I wouldn't mind being famous."

He nodded. "Sounds reasonable ... I wish you luck, in more than one sense."

Hermione seemed a bit surprised.

It wasn't really complicated to extract the truth from Hermione, as Harry just had realized. All you had to do was presenting the truth as more profitable than some cock-and-bull story, then she would deliver, would use it immediately as a bastion to counter-strike any attack.

He recorded this in his mind, for conversations with her as much as a pattern against which other people might be checked.

\* \* \*

Before lunch, Harry found the opportunity to talk with Ichiro Kenzo. Calling him *Professor* felt flat-out wrong, while calling him *sensei* wasn't allowed yet. He met Kenzo outside his office, bowed deeply.

The teacher bowed back.

"My name is Harry Potter ... I ask for the privilege to be a student in your lessons, master."

Another bow. "I am honoured with your determination ... I will be your *sensei* here in Hog-wa-tse."

Bowing. "*Hai, sensei.*"

In Kenzo's office, Harry explained that he would be a student in the full sense of *aikido*, including assistant services as something the *sensei* could demand any time. He informed Kenzo that he had dropped three other faculties in favour of this one - and of some dancing.

Kenzo smiled. "Very good, Ha-ri ... I'm still a student myself in the mystery of Zen, so together we might exchange a dialog of letters with the master in Japan."

"*Hai* ... This exchange will be limited, due to the long time the letters will be under way."

"No - we'll use this new service."

This new service, as Kenzo explained, used portkey links to send letters, with mail agents at every station. It was totally new for Harry.

Then Kenzo explained the training hall would be ready day after tomorrow, he would give an inaugoratory presentation, and he hoped Harry would assist him.

Harry bowed again. "My skill is limited, *sensei* ... What I can offer is at your command."

Kenzo grinned, showing that Shigura wasn't the only *aikido sensei* who could talk western-style. "I spoke with your Headmistress, Ha-ri, and heard about your conversation ... We're in England here, so we can talk like normal *gaijin* - but it's comfortable to hear about unworthy services every now and then."

Thinking about the proceedings ahead, Harry asked, "*Sensei* - will we have Japanese recreation features here? Hot water, cold water, steam room?"

"It would be helpful, Ha-ri, and comfortable as well ... I didn't address the issue yet with the Headmaster."

The message was clear. "With your permission, *sensei*, I will explain to Professor Dumbledore why such rooms are more than a demand from personal preferences."

Kenzo bowed back. "Your word has weight with the Headmaster, Ha-ri."

\* \* \*

Alicia told him their meeting would be a little later this evening. Harry used the opportunity for another visit at the Ravenclaw table. "Hi." He looked at Cho. "Are you in the mood for a walk? ... Only, I have to stay close to the building - Katie and Alicia will fetch me in a while."

"Too great a privilege, to find a slot in your tight schedule with women."

Aside from that, Cho was in the mood.

Almyra was about to leave. For a change, Harry saw somebody grab someone other than himself - Cho had caught Almyra's arm. "Oh no - you come with us."

Harry looked questioningly at Almyra, saw her bite her lips.

They reached a place distant enough from other students, close enough to be found by the two remaining Gryffindor Chasers. Cho looked at Almyra, then at Harry. "You two have talked."

"Yes, ma'm."

Cho flared, "Not that way!!"

Harry bowed. "Yes, queen of my heart, dragon of my castle."

For a moment of dangerous balance, Harry watched Cho's hands, which might turn to fists, saw Almyra's widening eyes at the border of his vision. Then Cho smiled. "Green dragon, if you please ... What did you tell her?"

"What happened."

"What exactly?"

"Basically what I told you - a bit less, maybe, and what we agreed afterwards ... Certainly not a detailed report."

"Hmm ... What did she tell you?"

Time to parry, and to cut. No time to hesitate. "That she loves both of us equally much - and that your rights are the older ones."

Cho's expression softened. She glanced at Al, smiling, turned to Harry, smiling wryly. "Yeah ... When I said you'll court me, of course I had in mind to make you dance like a puppet on a string. I wasn't aware - it's no longer as easy as some time ago ... To be honest, I think it's impossible - which is fine as well, saves me from ..."

The hope in Almyra's eyes was stronger in in Harry's.

"... Anyway, I'll reconsider my strategy." Cho turned back to Almyra. "This evening, the two of us will talk."

Almyra seemed relieved, and a bit scared.

Harry said, "Cho - to make sure you're fully informed, and you don't think I'm hiding anything - some others know as well, inevitably so."

"Who?"

"Ginny, Hermione, Fleur - even Ma Weasley found out immediately."

"Uargh ..." The flare was back. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"Not at all ... I'm not going around telling lies, to anybody - and women have eyes to look."

"Eyes, huh? ... Among ..."

Harry stared at Cho - her face, her body. "Yes, among ..."

It seemed to speed up her answer, which came slightly out of breath. "Okay ... So we have, er - spectators. Well - I take it back what I said about blackmailing. And ..."

She stopped, because there where two figures appearing whose names hadn't been heard in the list of spectators.

"Hello, everybody." Katie looked at her teammate. "Are you spying or treasoning, Harry?"

Cho answered for him. "We spoke about roles in general. Seekers are sometimes a bit single-minded, even naive ..."

"Oh, really? I'd never ..."

"... especially with Chasers ..."

"Ahh - that's where the wind blows."

"... who might watch out for Beaters."

Katie grinned. "You're a true multi-talent, Cho - all this, and goal-keeper too ..."

Harry rose from his lotus position very fast. "If it's the heat you're suffering from, Katie - the cool air will help ... Let's get our Steel Wings." He turned, bent down for a goodbye kiss, heard Cho's whisper. "Thanks."

The three Gryffindors enjoyed the cool breeze high in the air, drove a moment longer than required to find a nice place opposite the lake. The trees had accumulated the heat of the day, were still emitting more warmth than agreeable, so they sat down close to the water.

Katie opened the discussion. "We need a Chaser, two beaters, and a goalie ... Any suggestions?"

"We need four players," said Harry, "but not necessarily these four positions."

Alicia stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I could imagine myself in a position other than Seeker."

Katie grinned. "You mean you've found ..."

He interrupted her. "I'm talking about Quidditch, because that's why I'm here - and I was thinking of Ron, who'd join us at the spot ... The two of us could be the Beaters - provided we find an adequate Seeker."

Alicia looked incredulous. "You - a Beater?"

Katie turned to her. "If you'd ever open your eyes, Ali, you wouldn't ask that."

Harry cut in. "I've trained with *bokken* for weeks - they are like quarterstaves for humans, not too different from a club ... Ron and I - we're no replacement for the twins - otherwise, I'm sure we'd score better than anyone else."

Katie seemed finally able to concentrate on Quidditch. "And where to find a Seeker?"

"Well - we have to look in the younger classes anyway, because - if we choose only older students, a year or two from now the Gryffindor team would fade from seven to nothing ... Now, assume there's another boy with that gift ..."

Alicia said, "Harry - you were the youngest seeker in hundred years."

"Yeah, okay, but - I never felt special, I mean not for that reason ... More than once, I thought - it was just by luck, because Draco provoked me, and just by accident McGonagall saw it ... If we're ready to believe there's a natural in the first year, all we have to do is check if it's true."

"And how?"

"I'll ask Viktor for permission to join the first lesson - guest of honour, something like that ... I'll watch them - and then, with Viktor, if there's someone promising, we'll run a test ... Viktor is neutral, officially, but ..."

Katie, of course. "He's been a Seeker himself, and it was the Gryffindor house where he struck, um ..."

Harry stared at her. "Gold!"

She grinned mischievously. "I take your word, Harry - although I still wonder if you're as well informed as ..."

"I've got a postcard from Bulgaria, Katie - and can we now talk about Quidditch, please?"

She looked impressed, gave a rueful smile. "Yes, okay ... I promise."

"Then - any idea who might replace Angelina?"

Alicia sighed. "No, none whatsoever ... She's a real loss."

"Yes ... You three were the Chasers of Hogwarts."

Alicia beamed, then looked sorrowful again.

Harry said, "I think it should be another girl."

"That's what we thought too, but just out of habit ... What's your reason?"

"Well - if it's not a girl - how should that poor boy concentrate on a Quaffle, with you two as ..."

Alicia looked flattered. "Didn't you say we should talk about Quidditch?"

"Yes - and that's exactly what I'm doing ... Isn't it true what I said?"

Katie answered. "Obviously, you shouldn't ask us ... But we take your word for that, Harry - actually, more than ever."

"Well, then ... All that crosses my mind is Ginny, although I don't know whether she's interested ... Wouldn't it be funny - two Weasleys for two Weasleys?"

"Wouldn't it be nepotism?"

Harry shrugged. "We could run a selection test ... With Ron, there's little doubt he'll qualify - with Ginny, to me it seems the bigger question is her own opinion ... If she's interested, I'd put money on her in a test - quick reaction, not frightened of the big guys in the other teams ..."

Katie grinned. "No, she isn't, is she?" Seeing Harry's look, she added, "I'm talking purely Quidditch, Harry."

Maybe so, if not for her grin. "Other candidates?" asked Harry.

A few names, none of them listed full-heartedly, however good enough for a test.

"Then what about our new goalie?"

Nobody had anything close to a suggestion, regarding names, that was. Katie had a suggestion - big, broad-shouldered, assured yes, she was talking about Quidditch, was opposed by Harry who argued quick reflexes and a calm hand were more qualifying, agreed to him, at least for the calm hand, while the quick reflexes might be a bit ...

She was admonished again to keep to the subject of this meeting.

At the end, they agreed to ask Viktor for suggestions and, failing that, either Dean Thomas or Seamus Finnigan. Harry would ask Ron and Ginny, and the task of finding a promising Seeker would be crucial in the process of forming a new Gryffindor Quidditch team.

The last question was about the new captain. Katie and Alicia weren't interested in the job, asked Harry to do it.

He said, "Only as a last resort ... But I think I know a perfect captain - Ron. He's awfully good with administration, and ordering people."

The girls agreed immediately, expressing surprise not having seen the obvious. This done, Alicia glanced toward the water. "We were stupid."

"Why?"

"I could do with a swim - I feel sticky all over ... Only we didn't think of swimsuits."

Swimming - that would feel great at the end of a long, hot day, now that dusk had fallen. Refreshing, and a bit unearthly in this dark water.

Katie asked, "Do we need them?"

Alicia looked at Harry, looked away, said hesitantly, "We could use the - um, ..."

Harry stood up. "In Japan, people consider it normal to be naked in water." He started to undress.

Alicia quickly looked away. Katie did, too, but slowly.

Stripped naked, Harry said, "What are you waiting for?" reached the waterline, jumped in.

It was wonderful. He crawled a moment, turned, pausing on his back. The two girls were still busy undressing. He turned again, inhaled deeply, and dived down.

Dark water, cold - an eerie sensation, although not feeling dangerous, not insidious at all, with the merpeople somewhere down there. A Grindylow was the only risk, but Harry kept in fair distance from the ground ... Unable to see, to feel anything other than cool liquid passing his body, he *knew* - his sense of orientation was strong, genuine ... Was this *haragei*?

With surprise and pleasure, he also realized - his timespan of diving had increased significantly. He could control the first signs from his protesting lungs, knew there was still oxygen left, blew some air to reduce the pressure.

He came up, bursting. Treading water, he balanced his breath, inhaled again, dived down. And again. And again.

His last dive brought him back toward the lakeside. He could feel the vibrations from the two girls paddling somewhere close, heard noises of splashing, and laughter.

He broke through the surface, yards from Katie and Alicia. A gasp, and a squeak.

"It's me - calm down."

He reached dry ground, stepped out, walked to his clothes, none of which seemed suited as a towel, or if so, would be wet and chilly afterwards.

He walked a few steps farther under a tree, feeling still some warmth from the leaves. He sat down, took the lotus position.

With a few breathings, he had reached calmness. In his view, two girls were splashing through the water. In his mind, scenes at the lake were passing - Flitwick had been not too far away in the exam patrol, somewhere down there, four dragon skeletons might be found, or maybe not even that ... Two years ago, he had found four people down there, among them Gabrielle, establishing the basis of a precious and important friendship. Also among them Cho.

Something called his mind back. A figure - standing in front of him, naked, water gleaming on a body whose details were mostly hidden in the shadow, with its outline illuminated by the low moon.

Fully awake, he said, "Hello, Katie."

"Are you waiting for something, Harry?"

"I was meditating a bit, and waiting for my skin to dry ... You have a fine body, for what I can see."

"Want to see more?" She turned a bit.

"It's all very nice." He saw the moonlight on her nipples, which had reacted to the cold water.

"Then why don't you step out of the shadow?"

He looked at her. "What's this, a contest?"

"No - it sounded more like an invitation, didn't it? ... Maybe - " she turned, looking in Alicia's direction, turned back, "with an enhancement, to let nobody stay in the cold."

"Katie - if you stay a moment longer there, you'll certainly trigger a natural reaction - but that's all, and it won't be an invitation ... Please sit down and get dried."

She sighed, sat down to his side, just out of reach, but then, the zone of warmth from the tree wasn't that big. "Well," she said, "could have been ... I wasn't sure, on the other hand, I didn't want to miss an opportunity."

Harry smiled. "It's okay ... It wasn't a matter of quality, only - I couldn't warm up to the idea."

Katie giggled. "If I weren't the wrong person - *this* problem I could have solved."

"No doubt about that."

Alicia had reached the ground, lingered there, not knowing what to do, or what to think of ...

"Ali," called Katie, "come up here, drying, under the tree it's warmer ... And stop worrying - or hoping, he's resistant because of some Chinese spell."

## **07 - Getting a Team**

The day after his Quidditch conference with Katie and Alicia, Harry used the first opportunity, which meant after lunch, to visit the Ravenclaw table for a conversation. Cho looked at him expectantly, while Almyra smiled openly.

He said, "Hi ... May I sit down."

A queen-like movement of Cho's hand gave permission.

He asked, "How was your conversation yesterday?"

Almyra's pleased smile looked very informative while Cho, a bit less queen-like, snapped, "That's none of your business."

"That's not how I see it ..." Harry glanced at Almyra, back at Cho. "I might repeat the question later, and separately."

"Oh, might you? ... Well, there's a freedom of speech ..."

He nodded.

"... and a freedom of silence."

"Freedom?" Harry looked at Almyra, his eyebrows forming two bows at once.

Cho smiled, although different from Almyra. "Or something similar ... How was your meeting yesterday?"

"We've exchanged opinions, and agreed upon measures." He stared at Cho in disbelief. "Do you really expect details?"

"See what I mean? ... Freedom of silence."

Harry grinned. "After the confidential part, we were swimming ... It was great."

Cho's eyes narrowed. "Swimming? ... I didn't see towels, and swimsuits."

"True - we had none, but we managed without. Under the ..."

"Did you? And you're really sure this part is non-confidential?"

Harry felt a bit annoyed, from being interrupted for no good reason, maybe from more. "Yes, I am ... There was something that sounded like an invitation to a threesome, but I'd say it was a joke."

Cho's incredulous stare flew to the Gryffindor table, back to Harry, her voice almost a hissing. "Those two overheated Chasers were trying to round up the evening with ..."

Considering the lake's cold water, overheated was probably the wrong term, but then, maybe Cho's snarl still came closer to the truth than expected. Anyway, Harry wasn't going to comment on her unfinished sentence.

Nonetheless - time to parry. He dropped to his right knee. His left arm crossed his chest, the other reached into the air, palm upward. "Mylady, I swear - no improper thought crossed my mind, no unchaste harm was done ... Never would your devoted knight do so untrustful ..."

Laughter from the Ravenclaw girls around, applause ...

"... after he has vowed eternal faith."

Cho's face tried the impossible - to look pleased as much as murderous.

Harry stood up, sat down again. "Now that this's settled - I came over to talk about dance lessons."

Cho seemed to struggle with the change of subject. "Go ahead," she said, "you might benefit from them ... Although, dancing needs a partner, right?"

"Yes - and that's why I came to ask you."

"Well - it's a thought ... I'll give it a careful consideration."

Time to strike. "In the meantime - Fleur asked me whether I'll be her assistant."

So far, Almyra had followed the conversation with alterations of suppressed grins and suppressed gasps. Now her expression showed admiration mixed with curiosity, depending on whom she was watching.

Cho, in contrast, looked trapped. "And what was your answer?"

"I have an obligation toward her ... My answer was yes. I'm not the only one, so it doesn't conflict with taking lessons too."

Cho kept silent for a moment, then smiled. "Your manoeuver meets all qualifications for a perfect blackmailing, my clever knight - with two exceptions. You're honest - of course you couldn't say no ... And of course I want to dance - with you, Lucky Potter."

\* \* \*

Just when Harry thought the storm of new year negotiations was settled, Ron grabbed him - after supper. "Harry, can we talk - somewhere quiet?" Ron glanced around. "Not here in the building ..."

"That fits nicely - I have to talk with you, and I know where ... Let's go swimming."

This time with bathing drawers and towels, they fetched their broomsticks and flew to the place of the Gryffindor Quidditch meeting. Naturally, a round of swimming came first. Then Ron sat down, the towel still in his hand. "Who's first?"

Harry had a feeling what Ron's topic might be. "Mine is about Quidditch," he said, "shall we discuss this first?"

Ron agreed, relieved as well as expectant.

Harry explained the plan - to form a Beater team of Ron and himself, provided they found a new Seeker, however in any case to have Ron in the team, under the condition that he'd take the captain's role.

Ron beamed. "What a stupid question."

"Maybe so - but for the sake of completeness ..."

"Yes, I will." Next second, Ron looked startled. "Harry - do you remember the Mirror of Erised? ... I'll never make it Head Boy, but otherwise - I'm prefect, kind of, and soon I'll be captain of the Quidditch team ... It's a bit frightening, know what I mean?"

Harry remembered his own reminiscence. "I'm not trying to scare you, but - what makes you so sure you won't be Head Boy?"

A choked laugh. "I think it's no question who that'll be - you."

Harry shook his head. "Probably not ... I'm kind of a special case with some weird abilities, that's all. And I'll reduce my investment in anything that's not crucial for my goal ... Consider me out of the game in this regard."

Ron looked thoughtful. "Well, then ..." According to his expression, he seemed to search for a smooth transit to his own topic.

Harry tried to help. "By the way - yesterday, we were swimming too, after the meeting ... Without suits - Cho had almost a fit when she heard about it."

Ron glanced at him, cleared his throat. "Recently, you seem to get along quite well with such - er, situations."

"Yes ..." After several conversations in the recent days, Harry found his next words easily. "I had a teacher in Japan - not Shigura ... Tamiko's her name."

Ron nodded. "I thought as much ... Although, it would have been decent of you to tell me ... I mean ..."

Harry nodded. "I know - except I didn't know how to ... I'm sorry - it wasn't my intention to make it so embarrassing for you like in the train."

"Yeah ... But it's okay - I wouldn't ..." Ron glanced again. "Although - with Ginny, you had less problems to talk."

"It wasn't me who started that conversation - she found out immediately ... And besides, talking with the other sex about that is somehow simpler - I mean if it's serious talk."

"Then you're ahead of me ..." Ron laughed, a bit shakily. "Nonsense - you're ahead of me anyway - that's why I want to talk with you."

"Yes, I know ... Ask."

Easier ordered than done - Ron seemed at a loss to find the first question out of a million.

After a moment, Harry said, "Ron - lemme guess ... You want to do with Janine what the Japanese call *the journey toward the clouds and the rain*, and it's the first time, at least for you, and you want to get as much information as you can get."

"Erm - yes ... Clouds and rain? That's nice ..." Ron stopped, seemed to remember a scene in the Hogwarts Express, grinned, laughed, "... that's why," found his way back to his own topic, sobered up again.

His first question had to do with general approaches, and communication.

"Ron - I don't think that's a problem at all. You recognize her signals quite clearly, I'm sure about that - the only difference between you and me is, I *know* what these signals mean, while you aren't sure yet."

"Yes, I think you're right ... There were ... And I had the feeling - only, where we've been then, it would have ..."

Location was an issue.

"Yeah," said Harry, for whom this particular issue felt less urgent, "neither Hogwarts nor Beauxbatons is properly suited, definitely not."

They laughed both.

"But it's summer, isn't it? ... Warm outside, and it's nice to go swimming, find a place, and wait for darkness ... This lake isn't small - and there's no hassle with clothes." A picture in his mind made Harry giggle.

"What's so funny?"

"Clothes ... In my first lesson, Tamiko taught me how to undress her - no, it wasn't the first lesson - well, let's say the first real lesson ... Without getting lost in details - having to take off just a swimsuit isn't a disadvantage for the first time."

"Probably ... Only, I don't know if ... When it hasn't developed that far yet, and it's not yet dark, and ..."

In some sense, the conversation felt as difficult for Harry as it certainly was for Ron. Where Ron lacked topic-related information, Harry wasn't used to brothers talk. So he swallowed once before saying, "Ron, to put it quite frankly - if you have a hard-on, and her nipples are trying to come through the suit, you two won't have any question whatsoever."

"Sure, agreed, but - what if it's only me? ... I think I would ..."

"It's no reason for embarrassment ... Think of it objectively - it's a clear signal, and considering the state between her and you, I can tell you - she'll be pleased, and she'll respond immediately."

Then Ron had a question which hadn't been answered by dry facts from different sources.

"No, it can't be confused with anything else, not even shortly after swimming ... It feels differently, smells differently, its taste is ..."

Ron gasped a bit.

"... even at the first time, it's unmistakable and quite - er, thrilling, take my word for it."

Ron did.

"Which reminds me ..." Having come that far, Harry felt the obligation to address an issue to which he couldn't realistically expect a question from Ron. He said, "Erm - there's an inevitable bit of clumsiness at the first time, although it might be the same for her ..."

Ron felt pretty sure about that, except he doubted that she would behave clumsily.

"... anyway, it might happen you're a bit too quick for her - um, leave her behind ... In this case, no need for panic. Women need much longer to come down, while for us ... Ron, you'll be surprised how quickly afterwards you can start over again."

Ron, definitely eager to believe, still had some doubts.

"If you think it takes too long, or if your eleventh finger needs a little rest, there are ten others left to help, right?"

Ron agreed, reluctantly.

"Let me put it that way ..." This said, Harry took his time to figure out which words to use, finally continued, "There's foreplay, and midplay, and afterplay, which has a tendency to turn out foreplay ... Then, there are two bodies, with lots of things, including hands, lips, tongues ... What I've learned from Tamiko is - if you try something, and her reaction tells you it would be awfully wrong to stop now, or if she tries something, with the effect that you can't think clearly, there's nothing wrong. Nothing."

Ron was impressed, mentioned the thought he would have liked a similar opportunity.

"Well," sighed Harry, "I had it, and now I have to pay for it, while you - the path is open for you, and you can ask me."

Ron laughed, then his voice turned sympathetic. "She's giving you hell, isn't she?"

"Oh yes, she does."

"When will it stop?"

Harry sighed again. "Good question ... She loves me, and I *know* she wants it as much as I ... But she also wants to punish me, quite naturally - what I have to do is to suffer as much, or as quickly, as possible while at the same time doing what I can to make the other wish stronger."

"Well, you had your training - it should be helpful in that task."

"Oh yes, it is ... only a bit torturing."

Then Ron had a final question about variations, more exactly, positions.

"Hmm - we didn't want to perform artistically, so ... The variations come very naturally, depending on who's doing what, and who feels like being on top ... It's the same rule - if both think it's a great idea, they'll do it, if not, they'll drop it."

"Sounds simple, after all."

"It is," replied Harry the expert, "it's just because it's the first time ... In a way, it's like before you were flying a broomstick for the first time - you were pretty sure you'd be able to do it, and at least as good as the others - only, you never did it before."

Ron admitted this was exact the feeling, wanted to discuss broomsticks, or Quidditch, a moment longer before returning to Hogwarts - maybe to round up the conversation, more likely to calm down before walking to their own Firebolt and Steel Wing, lying in the grass a few steps away.

\* \* \*

Marie-Christine had no chance to grab Harry, from sheer distance. But she sent a letter, through Fleur who passed Harry's desk at breakfast, dropped it, "arry - mail for you," and it was Harry himself who grabbed the parchment before it trundled to the floor.

Marie-Christine wanted to meet - in Beauxbatons, in Hogwarts, anywhere - and right you guessed, to pull Harry to a quiet place and talk with him.

He decided to invite her to Hogwarts, for the weekend - Saturday. It would mean, Cho had a chance to be around. The thought of meeting Marie-Christine in Beauxbatons, certainly without Cho, didn't strike him as a good idea - not right now and maybe never.

After lunch, he walked over for the habitual question - "In the mood for a walk?"

Cho was, invited Al, after asking Harry sweetly, and rhetorically, "Mind if Al joins us?" Actually, he didn't mind at all.

Outside, Cho asked, "Was this your schedule as a dance assistant, at the breakfast?"

Of course, the letter from Fleur. "No, it wasn't ... Marie-Christine wants to talk with me."

"And what do you want?"

"I want to talk with her - now that I'm no longer involved in Al's project." Harry watched Cho's reaction carefully, trying to find out more about her knowledge of Almyra's current project.

Unfortunately, another issue dominated in Cho's mind. "Then go ahead," she said, accelerated her step, about to walk away.

"Cho - please!" He took step with her. "Marie-Christine certainly has information about Voldemort I can use. It's a mutual business."

"Mutual business - is this the nice *English* term, Harry?"

It was so childish, and had so much to do with reaching adulthood.

"No - we're not going to ..." He stopped himself, just barely. "I have to deal with Voldemort, and I promised to come back to you, and for that I need all preparation I can get - " anger was boiling in him, "and if this implies dancing naked around a fire together with three witches, I'll do it!"

She giggled - she really did.

"I've invited her for Saturday."

Cho stiffened instantly. "You didn't ask me beforehand!"

"No ... When I said I'll court you, I didn't say I give up my free will ... We'll meet here, so you can join us," he turned to Almyra, "and you too."

"You didn't ask her if she agrees to that."

Hearing Cho arguing in favour of Marie-Christine felt strange in Harry's ears, and somehow still more childish than the remark from a moment ago. He waved dismissively. "Marie-Christine's so much after what I can give her, she'll agree to anything."

Something in his choice of words had been awfully wrong. Cho stopped, turned, walked away.

Harry watched her leaving, looked at Almyra. "Please follow her - she won't beat *you*."

\* \* \*

The conversation hadn't been the best preparation for Harry's role in Kenzo's inaugural demonstration. The Japanese would present an overview of the disciplines in the new faculty, and for that he needed Harry's assistance. However, the thought of the first exercise with his new *sensei* was enough to put anything else to the background.

Several rooms had been combined to create a training hall - the same hall which also would serve for dance lessons. With great disappointment, Harry became aware that one of the three rooms had been their old meeting and lesson room.

But then, if you believed in omens, this should be a good one.

He recognized a familiar-looking camera. Kenzo confirmed - their performance was recorded and simultaneously presented in the spectator room. And the seats there, as Harry learned, were booked out as well as the limited number of spectator seats in the hall.

He wondered who might sit in the spectator room. Coming into the hall, dressed in the unshapely cotton clothes, he had a short moment to glance around, could see Ron, Almyra, Ginny ... And less familiar faces.

He reached the spot several yards away from the *sensei*.

Kenzo bowed.

Harry bowed, deeper.

Coming up, he saw the *sensei*'s body already in the air, coming toward him, leg outstretched, one arm flat forward, the other up in the air, ready to strike the blow, should his own body still be within reach.

He fell down, forward, jumped, rolling head over heel, turning, ducking low, ready to act, open to all sides.

Kenzo was already coming, step by step in perfect balance, his left arm outstretched, palm flat, hard, his right arm close to the body, from the elbow to the fingertips forming a blade.

Harry came up. His right leg came up higher. Like a dancer, he stretched, turning, then his leg shot forward, outward, no longer finding a target, as expected, while his crossed arms blocked the counter blow he knew was coming.

It was perfect, wonderful, breathtaking, more for the audience than for the two of them. Harry felt a strong harmony with the *sensei*, anticipated every move, fully aware of Kenzo restricting himself to Harry's limited repertoire.

Less than a minute later, it was over. For the final blow, Kenzo had released himself from the limitation, had struck an artful blow, bringing Harry off balance, followed by a hit with the leg. Now he knelt over Harry, his flat hand barely above Harry's face.

The *sensei* stepped back. As if pulled from strings, Harry's body came up, stood.

They bowed simultaneously.

It took a second before the roaring applause started. When it faded, Kenzo explained to the audience what they had seen. Then he moved to a corner, came back with two *bokken*.

He walked to Harry, passed one of them over. Their eyes met for an instant, shining light and burning fire.

Kenzo turned, made a step to reach his position.

"*Hai!*"

The cry had come from Harry's lips. He pushed forward while Kenzo didn't find even the time to turn, had to parry with the *bokken* at his back, had to retreat, defending against Harry's fierce attack.

Close to the end of the hall, Harry felt - his momentum had faded, the *sensei* was in full balance again. He stopped, retreated quickly, not turning, his *bokken* outstretched, holding the *middle*.

In the centre of the hall, he stopped, raising the *bokken* to the *above*.

Kenzo was coming, accelerating at full force, his own *bokken* in the *middle*, close to the body.

Harry stood motionless, until the *sensei* was in striking distance. His *bokken* crashed down, at the same time as the other came forward, hit, struck it to the *below*, retreated, wheeled around, regaining the *middle*, ready to push.

But of course, Kenzo was out of reach by then.

This dance lasted longer, with short pauses. It ended with Harry's *bokken* stopping a fraction of an inch from the *sensei*'s temple, while Kenzo's sword was pointing Harry's heart, barely touching either.

They both stepped back, bowed again.

After the new tumult had faded, Kenzo explained how the lessons would be organized, that classes would be formed by experience rather than age, and what would be the first topics.

Harry had to demonstrate these first topics - walking balanced, pushed by Kenzo, falling, rolling, moving up, to fall again while avoiding the *sensei*'s leg which came like a sword, fast only in the eyes of the spectators.

After the demonstration, Ron as well as Ginny tried to join Harry, admiration in their faces. He pushed them off, "Later," had a more urgent question of his own, to be asked before the spectators left, making room for the dance lessons that would follow soon afterwards.

He reached Almyra. "How did it go?"

Her eyes met his. If he hadn't known better, and with Lupin, he would have thought ... She sounded more out of breath than he himself. "I never saw anything similar, Harry ... It was ..."

"No - I mean after lunch. Did she say ..."

Almyra's hand was on his shoulder, soothing, maybe a bit caressing. "Don't worry - and don't ask me, because ..." Almyra's eyes hinted upward. "See that camera up there?"

\* \* \*

The dance lesson was for beginners. By the time Harry had showered and changed clothes, there was hardly time enough for Fleur to prepare him for the first steps to teach, more exactly for the typical mistakes he should detect, and correct.

He saw mainly fourth-years, fifth-years, the girls younger than the boys, of course, both sides equally embarrassed in the first minutes, the awkwardness fading quicker here, slower there, not at all in this first lesson with some of them. Fleur had restricted this course not only to beginners but also to this age, fully aware of the disastrous impact older students would have, not to mention beginners among the teachers.

Harry felt a strong empathy with them, could remember his own feelings so well. After a short break, while everybody was still waiting for Fleur, who had used the time to handle something in her office, he took the magiphone, stepped forward.

"While Fleur is still outside," he said, "let me tell you something ... It's not more than a year ago when I was here, in one of the rooms joined to form this hall, and did my first dance steps with her ... I had asked her to teach me, because - there was this girl, you know."

They listened breathlessly.

"Well - what I'm trying to say ... I felt so clumsy, and young, was turning red all the time, what with her body so close to mine ..."

The word alone had the same effect in many faces.

"... anyway, the message is - get your feet dancing, and don't care whether you're pink from a quick waltz or from something else."

Fleur appeared. She saw him, smiled. "Telling secrets, Harry?"

"No - I just explained how come I know this room from the past year."

\* \* \*

After supper, Harry was about to do his standard travel to the Ravenclaw table when he saw Cho walk away, not waiting for him.

Fine as well ... No, not at all.

At least, it gave him the opportunity to find out about another item on his agenda, to grab someone by himself in search for a quiet place. He hurried after his young sister. "Ginny - can we talk?"

She looked a bit surprised, maybe self-conscious, nodded.

"Ask Ron for his Firebolt," said Harry, added, "... oh yes, and don't forget a towel and a swimsuit."

Ginny's expression changed to a naughty grin. "Do we need them?"

"Yes, we do! ... See you outside."

In the air, he asked her to chase him. She didn't understand, said, "I think I shouldn't?"

"Up here it's okay." He pushed forward.

She wasn't up to his skill, naturally so, however, what Harry saw looked promising. Then he changed roles, ordered her to escape from him as the hunter, ignoring another remark.

Ginny's repertoire of manoeuvres was quite limited, while her handling of the Firebolt, her balance, her lack of hesitation at driving the broomstick to its limits, again was enough to confirm his guess - she would win any contest against other candidates. The only question left - did Quidditch appeal to her?

They reached the place, touched down.

Ginny stripped to her swimsuit underneath, her movements suddenly a bit awkward, anxious to keep away from him. Not waiting, not turning, she reached the waterline, jumped in, started to swim in strong crawls.

Harry suppressed a smile, reached the water moments later, for himself eager to explore the depths with more light than two evenings before. When he came out, Ginny was already sitting there, looking calmer than at their arrival.

He toweled himself, sat down beside her, looking in the same direction.

"It's about Quidditch ... The Gryffindors need some new team members, among them a new Chaser together with Katie and Alicia."

He saw her glance, her deep inhaling.

"On the way over here, I checked a bit whether my assumption was correct. I was pretty sure you'd be good on a broomstick, only I didn't know about your interest ... What I saw in the air confirmed my assumption ..."

Ginny looked very pleased.

"... and if I'm not much mistaken, what I didn't see answered the other question."

A deep red filled her face.

"Sorry - that wasn't very tactful." With surprise, Harry registered this amazing example of the difference between right and true. "Okay - for compensation, and maybe to prepare you for your future team ..." He informed her about the scene at the same place, two days ago.

Ginny had calmed down, wasn't surprised. "See - I told you so."

"Yes, you did."

"Especially Katie - she never struck me as the type to miss an opportunity."

"That's funny - she seemed to have a similar opinion of you - except that she spoke more in future tenses."

Ginny grinned, this time totally unembarrassed. "Well, she's two years ahead - aside from that ... Yeah, I think we'll be a very harmonic team - some shared interests ..." with a glance to him, "if not shared experiences."

Harry grinned, taking her mood. "Well, in the Gryffindor team, you won't find many - er, candidates to share some interest."

"No - but maybe it doesn't matter."

Harry examined Ginny's face, scanned back, tried to remember the past days, their past conversations, what he'd seen and heard recently. Then he knew. "Will you do *kenjutsu* as well?"

Ginny's head flew around, her expression frightened for a split second, then calming down, filled with something like awe. "Whew ... For a moment ... Harry, that wasn't very kind - much worse than some minutes ..."

"Sorry - but then, take into account my Japanese - lessons."

"Yes ..."

She had forgotten his question, preoccupied by her own. "Well, then," she said, "what's your comment?"

Harry was thinking of teachers and students, wondering if there was a case somewhere with changed roles, couldn't think of any. "Aside from the obvious problem, because he's a teacher - an excellent choice ... I wish you luck."

"Really?"

"Yes ... In our performances today - you know, with a *sensei*, you exchange more than blows and strikes ... It includes feelings, and spirit ... I think he's a wonderful teacher - " Harry grinned, "in various disciplines."

"Watching you two ..." Ginny glanced at him, turning red again when he met her eyes.

Maybe to compensate for his tactlessness before, and maybe just because it was true, Harry said, "If it's any comfort - you're not alone with your problem, these days."

Ginny hadn't caught the message, looked perplexed.

"Maybe not in an anatomical sense, but in a metaphorical one," explained Harry.

"Oh ..." With wondering in her voice, Ginny asked . "And then you refuse ..."

He interrupted her. "So what - isn't it the same with you?"

She nodded, recalling in his mind the picture of Grigorij, who walked through Hogwarts like Harry had felt some time ago. Then she said, "Anyway, Harry - I'll keep you informed."

"Huh?" It wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

"Yeah," explained Ginny, "for once, because you're a bit too good at guessing, and in my jumpy state ... And then, erm - I might need some advice some time soon."

"Soon?"

"Well - hopefully so."

\* \* \*

In Charms, Madam Hooch asked Harry whether he'd find the courtesy to listen to her explanations.

In Potions, Professor McGonagall asked him whether they should switch to a love potion, so he would pay attention, earning laughter for a seemingly excellent joke.

In Transfiguration, Lupin simply asked him for the favour to keep his mind at the subject, doing so with a sympathetic smile.

None of them had been exactly wrong with their assumptions, although it wasn't Cho who lingered in Harry's mind, neither this way nor the other - at least not alone. A few minutes from now, he would join Viktor for the Gryffindor first-years' introduction to broomsticks, and his mind was travelling back in time - six years back.

And of course, they needed a Seeker.

Harry and Viktor were the only ones with a Firebolt. True, the idea of a first-year on a Firebolt matched exactly what Harry had in mind - however only *after* checking them on old Cleansweep Sevens, or Comets at the most.

Viktor introduced him as a guest of honour, youngest Seeker in hundred years, here to show the Gryffindors there might be a short path to fame and glory in a Quidditch team, and to assist him, the teacher, just in case.

Viktor had an excuse for this introduction - after all, Harry's presence had to be explained somehow. Even so, Harry followed a very un-Japanese impulse and rewarded the favour by telling the gaping audience that their teacher, until two years ago, had been the Seeker in the National Quidditch Team of Bulgaria.

It earned him an angry look from Viktor. Totally unimpressed, and with some gloat inside himself, Harry called, "And Mr. Krum came here to Hogwarts ..."

Viktor's face froze in horror.

"... to fight with us in the Battle of Hogwarts. He was the leader of the Hogwarts Flying Squad."

This said, Harry needed all his recent training to hold his face steady, while admiring Viktor's skill in this regard - the Bulgarian had to balance gratefulness, for Harry's censored version, with some murderous impulse, to scare him that much, and all this while more than a dozen students were staring at him in awe.

Then Viktor ordered the students to take position next to a broomstick, and Harry watched their different grades of nervousness. He knew - sweaty fingers didn't tell anything.

The broomsticks jumped into the hands of seven students, five boys and two girls. The other six had various problems, minor ones or serious trouble. Harry dropped them immediately from his mental list.

He watched the first flights, dropped another boy. He crisscrossed through the air, passing the students in some distance first, closer then, unexpectedly, watched their reactions, dropping additional non-candidates. One of the remaining two looked promising.

He closed in on the boy, seized for his wand, pointed upward in an angle of forty-five degrees. "*Globosortia*."

A glittery ball shot up into the air.

Harry waited a moment while the boy's eyes followed the ball. With the projectile still in the upturn, he asked calmly, "Can you catch it?"

An incredulous stare, then the boy was pushing, bending forward, gracefully so, speeding up.

Harry's gaze followed the figure, saw it change course, starting a dive, as the ball would be on its way toward the ground by the time the Comet would reach the intersecting position.

The ball seemed to float in the air, hiding its forward momentum away from Harry's position.

At the border of his vision, he saw another figure coming across, approaching, bending sideways, arm outstretched, next second, it would start to fall, no it didn't, had the ball, had to struggle regaining balance, the broomstick diving steeper from the body motion, had to avoid crashing into the boy, did so with another jerk of the body, driving an arc, perfect balance again, returning, reaching him, stopping in mid-air.

"That's yours, sir."

Two pieces of coal looked at him, softly glimmering, in a face of deep tan, or maybe it was tan on top of bronze, framed by a black mane, the same colour as Cho's, otherwise totally different.

Harry took the ball. "Thank you ... Sorry, I don't remember your name."

"Rahewa Lightfoot, sir."

"What a poetic name for someone as quick as you ..." Next moment, Harry became aware how patronizing his words sounded - at least for someone who didn't know about Harry's overdose of Japanese culture. Searching desperately for a more ordinary remark, he said, "Rahewa - that's certainly unique in Hogwarts, isn't it?"

"Probably, sir ... It's a Cree name - we're immigrants from Canada."

"Cree??"

The girl seemed to straighten more on her broomstick, if this was ever possible. "Yes, one of the First Nations, sir - what you might call American Indian, or Canadian Indian."

"Oh, yes ..." Harry knew little about American Indians in general, and nothing about the Cree in particular. However, it crossed his mind that it might be better to close this gap in his knowledge through a visit in the library. And only now, he registered how this girl was addressing him all the time. He grinned, then bowed ... Was it the first time in mid-air? "Sorry again," he said, "lost my manners for a moment ... Please call me Harry ... Rahewa - can we talk after class?"

Her face didn't move, reminded him of pokerface Bob in its play of expression. Only in her eyes, he saw the understanding appear, grow, expand to certainty. Somewhat breathless, the girl said, "Yes - er, Harry." A nod confirmed her determination.

He watched her pushing forward, sensed her joy that would have suited a Firebolt, not this old Cleansweep Seven.

\* \* \*

Supper time, then after-supper time. Cho could still be found sitting at the Ravenclaw table. Had to be on purpose, so Harry walked over. "May I sit down?"

A nod, seemingly not in the mood for games.

"Today I was with Viktor to have a look at the new students on broomsticks. Our team is forming."

Cho smiled incredulous. "First-years? ... Would be fine for a goalie - the Quaffle will push him through the goalposts."

"Probably - but no need to worry ... We've found a new Seeker."

She boiled up at once. "What does that mean??"

"I'm going to play Beater, together with Ron ... Don't you worry - we'll meet. Except not as Seeker against Seeker."

"Well, well." The thought seemed to have appeal for Cho, leaving it to everybody's guess whether a tiny bit of relief was part of it ... Probably not, according to Harry's own estimation.

Then she grinned. "So you have a new Seeker - the youngest in - um, six years, is it?"

"Depending on how to count ... It's a she."

He saw the question in her face, swallowed in her throat not only because it was beyond the limits of good taste, more so because she knew, the answer was no - his taste was different, oh so different.

He said, "Her name's Rahewa Lightfoot ... An immigrant - from Canada."

Almyra asked, "A Native?"

"You mean a member of the First Nations?" Harry felt pleased at this opportunity to present his freshly gained knowledge. "Yes - a Cree."

Almyra grinned toward Cho. "She has much in common with you - same origins, same state, same team role ... Maybe also Muggle parents."

Cho glared at her.

"Same hair colour," continued Harry, "but I see big differences too."

Cho glared at him. "Like what?"

"Compared to her, Bob was a blabbermouth. She has her temper in tight control."

It was the perfect Zen dilemma. Hitting him would only confirm Harry's remark. Cho knew it, looked at him, saw he knew that she knew, that she was trapped in a contradiction that could only prove true.

After a moment, Cho started to laugh.

## **08 - Getting Further**

Saturday morning, pretty late, Harry was still sitting at the breakfast table, discussing matters of the Gryffindor Quidditch team with Ron. In Harry's eyes, Ron was already Captain, so it had to be Ron's job to find a goalie. Harry considered himself as a mere player, however feeling a special responsibility for the new Seeker, Rahewa Lightfoot.

Rahewa had accepted the position of the Gryffindor Seeker at once, although this time with a short moment of disbelief visible even in this controlled face.

She was impressed from everything, certainly, while not afraid. Seeing the question in her face, Harry knew it could only be politeness. He said, "Rahewa, it's not official yet, but we might as well start behaving as teammates right here ... So what's your question?"

"You were the Seeker - Harry ... And now you'll be Beater."

Rahewa was fluent in Quidditch terms and rules, as well as in the public opinions about the different team positions. Beaters ranked low in this hierarchy - the twins, who had gained a reputation for their incredibly synchronized performance, represented the exception rather than the rule.

Harry didn't know a bit about American Indians, Cree or otherwise. However, the style of conversation felt familiar. So he prompted, "And you ask yourself why I'm going to drop from the dream position to the depths of a Beater?"

She looked at him, didn't even say "Yes," probably due to his impolite choice of words.

Taking this as answer, Harry said, "There are several reasons ... Ron and I follow the footsteps of the twins - brothers of Ron, who have changed the way how people look at Beaters ... This is a true challenge. Also, we need young blood in the team, but for the other positions, a certain age's prerequisite."

Rahewa nodded, said nothing, showing only through her eyes how little his arguments had convinced her.

Harry wondered if his rationale could hold against himself. Had he looked for a way to avoid the competition with Cho? He didn't think so, but then, you could be honest toward yourself only up to a point.

And there had been another reason, only difficult to express. "Aside from that," he said, " ... I don't know how to explain - it sounds so weird ... All I can say - I had a feeling, to go and look for a Seeker among the new Gryffindors."

Again a nod. "Yes, that fits."

She hadn't explained this fitting any further, and Harry hadn't really felt an urge to ask. It sounded just right. And now he was sitting here with Ron, dumping all loose ends into his friend's lap.

Fleur came into view, apparently heading for the Gryffindor table. Then Harry saw another head, considerably closer to the floor, obscured until a second before. And then he saw a third head.

"Salu, 'arry," said Gabrielle, owner of the second head. "I thought we might visit you ... This is Chloe, my friend."

Harry smiled, saw Fleur arrive, Fleur who could master the most complicated problems in relationships so elegantly, who was standing there, shrugging in helplessness.

Suppressing a grin, Harry said, "Salu, Chloe - enchanté ... How long is it since you two had your own breakfast?"

Hours had passed since then, and the girls seemed inclined to give English breakfast a try.

As Gabrielle explained, the example of Harry and his friends had struck her as quite convincing, and she was going to copy that - of course after transmigrating the structure to the proper sexes. So she and Chloe were the equivalent of Harry and Ron, and all that was missing was a boy to take over Hermione's role.

The thought alone made Harry and Ron cringe inwardly from suppressed laughter.

"We already have a candidate," said Gabrielle. "His name is Fabien, and he looks quite promising. But we still have to think it over."

"That's a perfect match." Ron kept his voice admirably serious. "It took us quite a while to settle with Hermione - and she still feels challenging, if you know what I mean."

Gabrielle knew, or had her own understanding of this state. Fortunately, Hermione wasn't around for challenging, only Fleur, sitting there, rolling her eyes to get her fit under control.

Harry asked for the girls' planning, was told they had all day long, open minds, and what was his offer?

After a moment, he saw the solution. "At two o'clock I expect another visitor - Marie-Christine ..."

Gabrielle knew her, if only for a few days.

"... we have to talk a bit. But I know how to bring us all together - we'll go swimming."

Gabrielle and Chloe hadn't come with a swimsuit, how should they, but Fleur found the idea magnificent, promised to take care of that, also to inform Marie-Christine, stood up to do it right away, was trailed by Ron.

Cho and Almyra appeared, came over - they had seen Gabrielle.

Harry explained the changes in the planning, and asked whether Cho and Almyra were interested to join. They weren't, with considerably more emphasis from Cho's side.

Gabrielle had followed the exchange, sent a very quick glance toward Cho, another toward Harry, reminding him of a quarter Veela's nature even in an eleven-year-old. Then she expressed the hope to see the girls' rooms of Hogwarts, taking Ravenclaw as an example.

Harry promised to await them in the hall.

Almyra brought the girls back, disappeared after trying to signal amusement, and admiration, and regret, using only her eyes.

Harry offered a tour through Hogwarts, found little resonance - understandably so after Beauxbatons had set standards. He hadn't expected another reaction, the offer just for the sake of completeness, or politeness. Then he recommended a visit in Hogsmeade, including a sweets shop, and of course through the secret passage, taking with them his Invisibility Cloak, plus a detour to the Whomping Willow.

His suggestion found grace, and the tour filled the time until a late lunch.

Hermione found the idea of a swim party excellent, after all, there hadn't been too many opportunities so far. Then she and Gabrielle discussed the intricacies of terms between two male and one female, or vice versa, in a friendship of three.

Harry used the time to ask Ginny, who was delighted. Then he organized broomsticks for the guests, had the foresight to reserve one more, was confirmed shortly afterwards when the other guests appeared - Marie-Christine and Janine.

He had selected one of the Hogwarts Firebolts for himself. In such a crowd, with two girls at a broomstick's steering position for the second time in their life, using a Steel Wing would be a stupid idea. The thing showed a very unfriendly behaviour toward bodies other than the owner's.

The fly-and-swim squadron reached the place at the lake, draped blankets, deposited drinks and all the other items mandatory for an afternoon close to the water. People stripped down to their swimsuits, while only some of them jumped into the water - others kept to the shade, after the meal not so long ago.

Harry and his guest were among the latter. Marie-Christine inspected his muscular shoulders and chest without any trace of self-consciousness. "I remembered you differently, 'arry."

"Some training." He looked at her, her womanly body, less athletic than others he'd seen recently, with or without swimsuit, softer, with a full bosom. "I didn't remember you as much."

She smiled, unembarrassed, not surprised either. Talking French, this conversation seemed perfectly natural. Then she asked, "How's Cho?"

"Fine, thanks."

Marie-Christine accepted the answer, not asking more, a question only in her eyes. Not in the mood to deepen the subject, Harry used the obvious opportunity. "How's Gérard?"

A mocking smile appeared in Marie-Christine's face. "Jealous knowing me here."

"Really?" Harry recollected his memory of the evening in Beauxbatons, trying to find comparable signs there. But all he found were memories of the inverse situation.

And next moment, Marie-Christine's short grimace confirmed his memory. "As if he had a reason!" she hissed.

The other party members kept out of earshot, a reflexive politeness toward Harry and his guest, and the two young girls were in the water. So Harry saw no conflict to follow his combined impulse of sympathy and curiosity. He looked at Marie-Christine. "But you."

She shrugged, a very French movement. "Not really ... He has a knack for the sportive type, flat belly, lots of tennis ... Like Cho."

Using his new skill in calm faces, Harry said, "In this case, he shouldn't hold his breath."

"He doesn't - trust my word, 'arry ... Marie-Christine showed a wry smile, shrugged again, said, "Let's talk about something nice - Voldemort, for example." Seeing Harry's reaction, she blushed. "Pardon, 'arry - what a stupid remark ... Not even my bad mood is an apology." And a moment later, she looked as if she would break into tears any second.

Harry checked around. Anyone not in the water had personal reasons to use the spacious place to its full extent. He asked, "Marie-Christine - how is it for a woman to be - er, cheated?"

"Its awful. Just awful ... Like a cruciatus at low grade - the knowledge." Tears were filling her eyes.

"I'm sorry - maybe we should really talk about ..."

She hadn't heard him. "You know - the act itself isn't the worst ... If it was something like a party, and alcohol - except, he really stopped drinking ... Anyway - I could get along with something like that, or even curiosity, might have a similar thought one day - " she smiled at Harry, not really seeing him, "but here - he loves me, or so he says, and I think it's true, only I'm not his type, and that's why ... It's worse than cheating, it's treachery ... I'm not going to change, even if I could, so - if he's not getting in the mood from this body, to hell with him."

Only she didn't believe her own words.

Was it his urge to change Marie-Christine's mood? Was it her effect toward him, in some sense like Fleur, only so different? Whatever the motivation, Harry said, "I had more than one reason to ask you that question, Marie-Christine."

It took her a moment to register his words. Then she stared at him in perplexion. "You?? ... And that's why ..."

He nodded.

Marie-Christine's face reflected a rapid sequence of calculations. Then she looked around, as if trying to see someone in a new light. Following her thoughts, Harry said, "Not here - in Japan."

Marie-Christine had heard about Japan, smiled. "I guess I got the picture ... I don't think your case is the same, 'arry - at least, it was far away."

"Maybe - but not long ago."

Marie-Christine examined him. "And what if she'd be around?"

"Tamiko? ..." Harry shook his head. "That's not even a hypothetical question - she taught me, and made very clear that we won't see each other again."

Marie-Christine smiled, bitterness in her face. "See - it's something else. You got some lessons from her, now you get another one from Cho, and in a while ..."

"Yeah ..." Seeing her miserable face, Harry said, "I'd like to give a lesson too - Gérard, I mean."

"By threatening him?" Marie-Christine snorted. "That would be the day - actually, it might even work, you're the only one he isn't talking about with detest, not even in bad mood." She smiled again, this time warmer. "Thank you, 'arry - you helped already, letting me talk."

"Well - it's a mutual business, as I said to Cho, although not exactly as planned."

"No." Marie-Christine glanced at him. "Of course, it's different for every woman ... In your case - in her place, I could say, all right, show me what you've learned ... But I'm not in her place." It was a simple explanation, neither an invitation nor anything else.

Harry asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I wish I knew." Marie-Christine looked at him. "And you?"

"We agreed I'll court her - as if we were still at the beginning."

Marie-Christine looked appreciating. "That's nice - and a very intelligent idea." She thought a moment. "Maybe I should think of something similar, keep him in suspense for a while ..." A grin toward Harry. "Except - it cuts both ways."

"That's what I hope."

She grinned broader. "Oh - no denying that."

He laughed. "Aside from that - I'm playing open, not hiding from the others ... Maybe, if Gérard knows you're discussing this with others ..."

"Yes, you're right ... With your permission, 'arry, I'll tell him about this conversation."

"Well - okay, yes." He grimaced. "I'll get trouble, but so what - Cho always reminds me that I'm asking for it."

"Are you sure, 'arry?"

He nodded. "Yes - in particular since I'll tell Cho about this conversation."

Before really starting on the subject of Voldemort, they decided to have a swim. Unsurprisingly, Marie-Christine didn't share Harry's preference for diving, while Gabrielle was eager to join him, hoping to see the place where she was held hostage two years ago. Of course, Gabrielle's diving timespan was much shorter than Harry's own, and diving just to achieve a feeling like in a liquid void wasn't her cup of tea either.

Checking the time, Harry realized - this meeting was too short to cover the basics, because he had an appointment with his *sensei* in a while. "Marie-Christine," he said, "I think we should meet again tomorrow, in the school, so you can use parchment and pen, and then I'll stand a real interview. Today, I'd like to do a little brainstorming about Voldemort."

She found the idea very appealing.

"Then let me ask the first question," began Harry. "What do you think is he doing now?"

Marie-Christine thought it over. "Two things - licking his wounds, I mean biting pieces out of the furniture at the thought how you and Cho defeated him - and gathering a replacement for the Death-Eaters."

"But it wasn't a defeat."

Marie-Christine shook her head. "For him it was ... If I got any knowledge about his motivation, then he's driven by the thought he can put himself outside any rule and power ... The memory that you two were standing there, and any attempt from his side would only kill himself ... 'arry - I think he's never been as close to suicide as in that moment."

He stared at her in astonishment. "That's exactly how he looked ... It was eating him alive."

"No doubt ... And now he has to rebuild his perception so that he can live with the thought of being treated that way."

They looked at each other, chuckling about this reference to their own situation. Then Harry asked, "What might that be?"

"Something in which your appearance, or performance, was the inevitable result of his own planning, but only a temporary state, until his final strategy takes effect, making his former defeat a natural prerequisite to the final victory."

"Wow - I'll need to think about that."

Marie-Christine snorted. "Harry - that's a request list what I said ... So far, I couldn't think of any realistic scenario that would meet the qualifications."

"Even so ..." Harry couldn't either, while for him, finding a way appeared less difficult once knowing the goal. He asked, "Do you know Zen?"

"Only the name."

"It's good to think about the impossible."

"Then I might give it a try."

"Japan's good for that." Harry felt pleased, seeing a short laugh erupt from Marie-Christine. Concentrating on Voldemort again, he asked, "And where might he be?"

Marie-Christine raised her eyebrows, said, "And what is your next question?"

"Does it matter where he is?"

"Probably, because it's where he gathers new helpers."

"Even though he can jump around the world with his skill ... or with portkey links?"

Marie-Christine made a dismissive gesture. "We all have a tendency to take residence at the centre of our activity - or nicely separated but close by."

After some more speculation, fruitless but pleasant with such a conversation partner, Harry had to leave for the appointment with his *sensei*. Gabrielle was very eager to watch him, of course together with Chloe.

Harry had mixed feelings, in contrast to Fleur who told her sister this was out of discussion. Only that Gabrielle wasn't ready to accept any vote other than Harry's.

Ginny had watched the dispute. She turned to Fleur. "I'll take care of them - if the exercises take longer than their interest, which is probably the case."

Fleur saw Harry nod, looked grateful at Ginny. Then she looked sharper, then she beamed, although still grateful. "That's a wonderful idea, Ginny."

It was the first time Harry could watch someone female blush from Veela effects, or instincts.

In the training hall, he bowed. "*Sensei* - with your permission, I have two guests who'd like to watch, Gabrielle and Chloe ... For Gabrielle, I'm something like a - um, hero, since an event two years ago ... And Ginny will take care of them."

Kenzo bowed back. "I heard about that event, Ha-ri."

He bowed again before the two girls. "I'm honoured to work with your hero," wisely avoiding any attempt to pronounce Gabrielle's name.

Gabrielle was deeply impressed, delighted when Kenzo complimented her on her bow and the balanced grace of her gait.

Then Kenzo bowed to Ginny, who had trouble with her response. Obviously the teacher remembered her name from the list of volunteers. "Gi-ni, you may examine your determination while watching Ha-ri and myself."

Then he gave Harry hell.

Three hours later - the two girls were long gone, only Ginny had returned, sitting in a corner, getting used to the lotus position - Harry wished dearly Hogwarts could offer a Japanese recreation room, no matter which personnel. All he had was a long, hot shower, a do-it-

yourself cure at some bruises, and the fierce determination to squeeze such a room out of Dumbledore.

\* \* \*

At the Ravenclaw table after supper, Cho asked him, "How was your swim party?"

"It wasn't much of a swimming for us ... Marie-Christine talked, although not too long about Voldemort - we'll meet again tomorrow for a real interview."

"So you had more interesting topics to discuss?"

Keeping his own voice calm, Harry responded, "For an - er, present reason, we talked about cheating ... I wanted to know from her how it feels for a woman."

A moment of stunned silence. The Cho asked, "What did she say?"

"She described her own feelings, and explained that it's different from one to the other ... And that the exact details have different impact from one to the other."

"Was this new to you, Harry?"

"Hmm ..." He hadn't the answer ready, at least not the words. After a moment, he said, "Basically no, while - hearing it with personal involvement, and with a counter example, it was new to me, yes."

Cho took her own time for a thoughtful silence. Then she looked up. "And what's your conclusion?"

"For my own case - I'm still thinking about it ... For hers - well, I have my opinion about Gérard's behaviour, but who am I to judge?"

"Why - with your expertise, Harry?"

He looked into Cho's angry eyes. "If her description's correct, he's torn apart between his love for her and his preference for more athletic bodies - like yours, I'm quoting her ... To me, that looks like a serious deficit in maturity and self-confidence ... These aren't my problems - the recent loss of some deficit is the only similarity I can see."

"A very detailed description, and analysis ..." The sneering in Cho's voice sounded a bit hollow, but next moment, she had found new ammunition. "I wonder if she'd agree to your discussing this so openly."

"You and Al - that's not exactly a public forum ... Aside from that - we exchanged permissions to do so."

Disarmed again, Cho seemed to chew on the permission Harry had given, except this could hardly be used as another weapon - Harry playing open was nothing new. Eventually, she asked, "What was your recommendation?"

"None ... I told her how we handle it. She seemed reluctant to give it a try."

"Why?"

"I'd rather you asked her about that."

"I wouldn't ... Why?"

Harry's eyes met hers again. "She said - it's cutting both ways."

\* \* \*

He would have favoured a Go match this evening, only there was no partner. Cho had left him sitting at the Ravenclaw table - not unfriendly, rather thoughtful actually ... Ron was nowhere to be seen, and Harry didn't feel like asking Kenzo. Maybe the *sensei* would have liked to, only it felt too obtrusive asking so early in their relationship.

So Harry spent the evening with some meditation, thinking about Marie-Christine's words, those in the first part of their conversation as well as those in the second. Well, the topic was the same, somehow, wasn't it? He and Cho coming together, here in the metaphorical and there in a more physical sense ... And Voldemort benefitting from that??

*Ugly beanpole* had Cho called him. Voldemort as an oversized garden gnome in their future home? As pet wizard? The thought was absurd and a bit sickening, not funny at all - after Marie-Christine's words, Harry saw less reason than ever to call his last encounter with the Dark Lord a victory. Only he couldn't imagine any realistic scenario in which the love between him and Cho formed the basis for Voldemort achieving his final goal.

Harry saw Ron again next morning, at the breakfast table. When he asked his friend about his plans for this Sunday, Ron hesitated, struggling with an answer.

Hermione did it for him. "Making progress, Harry, that's what he has ..." She stopped, apparently seeing something in Ron's face, started to grin. "And regress too, I'd say."

Ron blushed, very much so.

Harry stared disapprovingly at Hermione. "Awfully funny - really!" Then he turned to Ron, "Anyway - while on the subject, welcome to the club, Ron, and ... er - Marie-Christine's going to arrive after lunch, I wonder if she'll be alone."

Ron had recovered, smiled somewhat self-consciously. "I don't."

Hermione, meanwhile, looked a bit more sympathetic while otherwise totally unimpressed from the reprimand, reminding Harry of Fleur's remarks that female decency was a male myth.

Now, after lunch, he stood at the exit of the Beauxbatons link, waiting for Marie-Christine, feeling disappointed because their meeting and lesson room was gone. Behind him stood Ron, sharing Harry's expectancy while not his disappointment.

Janine appeared first, had a short wave for Harry, "Salu," had only eyes for Ron then, was gone an instant later. With Ron.

Marie-Christine came out. She smiled at Harry, then looked over his shoulder, a bit surprised, smiling more.

Before Harry could turn, someone behind him said, "Salu, Marie-Christine - I hope you don't mind some company in your interview." The voice accelerated Harry's wheeling-around simply because it was Cho's.

There she stood, smiling like sunshine. Almyra at her side smiled more guiltily.

Harry turned back to welcome his - their - guest, just in time to hear Marie-Christine answering, "... not at all, quite the contrary." Only now he found the time to stare at the unexpected welcome committee.

Cho's voice was polite, serious, maybe a bit pleading. "Is this okay with you, Harry?"

"Yes, of course - I'd ..." He stopped, suppressing a remark badly placed here, maybe fitting nowhere.

Almyra beamed. "I can trade, Harry - a room and a pen."

Marie-Christine felt as if it were Christmas, with a password-protected room, a steno pen, and Cho ready to answer questions by herself.

Harry felt as if he were in Wonderland, although not for long. Marie-Christine started immediately, asked him to describe all his encounters, in time order if possible, starting with the green flash that killed his parents.

At some point, Marie-Christine looked up, glanced toward Cho, toward Almyra, toward him. "I take it - I can ask any question, and nobody's presence is preventing answers?"

Almyra was up. "I'll leave you for a ..."

"No - sit down!" Harry and Cho looked at each other. They had called it simultaneously.

Marie-Christine smiled, turned serious again. "Cho - what made you think it's Harry's destiny to kill Voldemort?"

"Well - it was the only answer fitting some questions, and fitting perfectly ... I think recent events have confirmed that."

"Not at all."

"Huh??"

Marie-Christine showed the appearance of a scientist in full swing, nothing else. "There's another explanation that fits as well ... Harry's special to Voldemort, of course, but so are you - which suggests something else much more."

"What?"

Marie-Christine looked astonished. "Isn't it obvious? ... It's your child who has to defeat Voldemort."

Some gasps.

Cho tried to play for time, or something else. "What makes you think we'll have children?"

"My God, of course you'll have children - with whom else?" Marie-Christine's voice expressed impatience with someone not too bright, or a bit stubborn, or handicapped for some other reason she felt hard to tolerate right now.

A speechless Cho turned to Harry, saw an expression of utter sickness. Her eyes widening in disbelief, she turned back to Marie-Christine. "Then have a look at his face, at the thought of that."

Harry had a bitter taste in his mouth. "You don't understand." His voice stopped any thought this horrible expression had been caused by Cho's involvement, or the idea itself.

Cho asked, "What is it, Harry?"

He looked at her, at Marie-Christine. "That's it ... Yesterday, Marie-Christine speculated that Voldemort will try something to make our defeating him look like a necessary step - but she couldn't think of any realistic scenario ... While all the time, she had it in her mind."

Marie-Christine went very white.

Harry saw Cho still trying to follow. "Our child," he said, "he'll try to overtake it - its mind, its body, its magic - combining it with his own magic and his own foul spirit."

Nameless terror started to fill Cho's face.

He grabbed her hand, looked at Marie-Christine. "No - your own conclusion proves it's wrong, and Cho's right."

"I want to believe you more than ever before, Harry - but I can't see it."

Harry's words came like a torrent. "Your conclusion, that's correct of course - there's no doubt, that's his plan, and for figuring this out, Marie-Christine, I owe you - more than I can think of right now ... And because that's his plan, it's obvious he has to be killed before having a chance - and that's why it will be me who does it."

Marie-Christine looked hopeful, doubtful. "But no, Harry - your argument can't be right - it tries to prove itself, it doesn't hold closer scrutiny."

Harry beamed, raising more questions in the other faces. "So it can't be right," he said, "which means it can only be true! ... That's Zen in perfection - I went to Japan to learn that ..." There was awe in his voice. "Don't ask me to explain ... It can't be explained, because it's impossible, and that's why you cannot understand ... Only know."

Marie-Christine watched him with quite some scepticism, ready to believe while at a loss to accept. Which was just fine for Harry - after all, she hadn't visited the same seminar, hadn't

met his teacher ... He knew beyond any doubt, he could feel it. As real as Cho's hand holding his, not letting go.

\* \* \*

Harry could sympathize with Ron's happiness, very much so, however sometimes it was torture. In particular when Ron, by accident, put him under a more serious stress test. They were alone, and Ron said, "Harry - I'd like to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"I mean - referring to your special knowledge from, um ..."

"The word is Japan, Ron."

"Er - right ... What's your own preference - I mean, which - er, position ..."

It happened rarely with Harry. Anyway, it happened here. Glancing incredulously at Ron, seeing his friend's self-conscious smile, easily confused with a stupid grin if you were in Harry's position and, like him right now, lacked the tolerance toward a pretty normal young man's question, he exploded. "Considering my current state, the one that's called *Chinese Deadlock* - her legs are tightly closed, and you're dangling with your ..."

Ron's hands were up. "Sorry - was a stupid question, Harry."

The expression in Ron's face calmed Harry down, while the blood didn't fade from his own, although for another reason. "Dammit - I swore to myself, I'm not going to make other people suffer from my problem - and now this ..." Staring angrily at Ron, who still confused himself with the target of this rage, Harry bowed, bowed again. "*Shimata!*"

"Er - what's ... was this a curse?"

The anxiousness in Ron's voice made Harry chuckle. "No ... I made a bloody mistake, that's what I said, and that's what I made ... I'm sorry, Ron."

"It's okay ... I wasn't really up to myself when asking you."

Harry agreed to that, saw no reason to avoid a normal teasing between friends. "Is your head a bit bloodless, recently?"

Ron might have agreed to that also, quite happily, if not for his friend's state.

Halfways balanced, Harry said, "Well - to answer your question ... I had no real opportunity yet to develop a preference ... With Tamiko, it was a bit like Transfiguration - let's start with that, and now's the time to turn a little, see what I mean?"

Ron looked stupefied. "You mean - in the middle of the action?"

"Yes, of course."

"Oh - that's cruel, Harry."

"It's a hard test of control, oh yeah ... Tamiko agreed that, in a way, it's beyond our age - except ..." Harry grinned. "Ron, far be it from me to give you advice in things you can handle perfectly well without me, but - give it a try, it will drive her crazy."

"Yeah, provided I can keep my - er, senses."

Harry grinned broader. "Yes, of course - that's a prerequisite."

Sobering up, Ron looked thoughtful. "There's no denying, Harry - this special education has its advantages."

"Absolutely - especially for you, right now ... Any time it crosses your mind, you can come and ask me, and any time it crosses your - er, mind, you can say, 'C'mon, Janine, let's look for bad weather'."

Ron nodded, grinned admiringly. "Harry - I think we agree that, speaking generally, I can beat you any time in wisecracking ... But in this topic, I'm no challenge for you."

"Maybe still for a few weeks, until the advantage has balanced out."

Ron shook his head. "No ... You talk with more women, and what's more important, they talk with you ... Ginny, for example."

Harry registered the fine change in Ron's voice. "We have a few advantages," he said. "For example, we're not really brother and sister - that's why we can talk like we do ... Do you feel excluded?"

"Not really ... True, there was a sting or two seeing you two looking at each other, but - honestly, I couldn't handle the troubles of a girl her age, certainly not at the moment." This said, Ron still seemed to look for words, to dismiss them, to balance a thought ...

"You'd like to ask another question, right?"

A careful glance. "How ..."

"Except - asking would reveal something with Janine which is definitely none of my business, isn't it?"

Ron gasped. "Harry - dammit, you can be pretty scary ... How do you ..."

"It's simple - I just had more training."

"No - tell me how you found out ... Yes, of course you're right."

"Okay - you had a question," explained Harry, "was painted in your face ... Most likely with this particular topic - I mean, while on the subject and so ... With me so far?"

"Sure - that's the simple part."

"And since some other discussions, if it had been something with you, you'd have asked, that's clear ..."

Ron nodded, looked pleased at the implicit message.

"There was a tiny chance you might have pondered asking something about Ginny, since we just spoke about her - only, it simply didn't fit - wouldn't have been your style ..."

Ron looked more pleased.

"... aside from the fact that your own activities are currently predominant in your mind ..."  
After this little sting for his own peace of mind, Harry finished, "So it had to be Janine. And you weren't searching for words, but for a decision."

"Harry - how come I can beat you in chess so easily?"

"Maybe I cannot take these funny figures seriously enough ... Anyway, I think you were right not to ask me - but why don't you ask Fleur?"

A horrified look. "Her? ... For Heaven's sake - I'd shrink to nothing just from the thought ..."

Harry smiled. "Look - Fleur's a woman, she can see Janine's perspective ... And she's a Veela and French, she considers such questions as an intelligent conversation about important issues ... She's your future sister-in-law, meaning she'll answer that question."

"That's all well and fine, but ..." Ron shook his head. "I just cannot ask."

"Would it help if she trances you a bit?"

"Probably - only the thought of talking to her while tranced is scaring me even more."

"But you want an answer? ... Badly enough to ask, if possible."

A nod.

"Then why don't you write a letter? 'Dear Fleur, I'd like to ask you something about what Janine and I are doing, only I'm too embarrassed to ask you directly.' ... You know what'll happen, don't you?"

"What?"

"She will catch you, with nobody around, and before you can react she has tranced you a bit, and - well, that's it."

Ron's expression changed from frightened to thoughtful, to beaming. "Brilliant, Harry - why didn't I think of it myself, after all, I'm supposed to be the administrator?"

Harry grinned. "You're so busy with other things - something as flat as a parchment has slipped your mind completely."

\* \* \*

After breakfast, Harry was about to walk over to the Ravenclaw table, for exchanging a good-morning kiss - recently, these kisses had started to feel different, to taste different - when he saw and heard something that made him smile in sympathy.

A howler - the angry voice filling the hall, yelling at a boy who was sitting there, turning red, hiding his face.

Harry waited a moment, then approached the planned table but a different target. The boy was Damon Harker, and his face had struck a chord in Harry. He reached Damon's place, sat down without waiting for an invitation. "Hi, Damon ... Take it easy - such things happen."

A tear-strained face glanced carefully up, reddening even more seeing him, hiding again.

"C'mon, Damon - we've shared worse things ... And we've mastered them together - remember?"

A sob. "Yes, Harry ... You're right - it's even ... I didn't do anything wrong, none that I know of ... But that didn't help ..." The face appeared again, showing surprise. "It's strange - each time there's something so bad and I don't know why, you turn up ..."

Harry saw the glances of two girls, smiling warmly. He bent lower. "Then it must be fate, Damon ... Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Shortly afterwards, he reached Cho and Almyra, sat down, an expression of wonder in his face.

"What's that?" Cho stared at him. "You don't kiss me, you don't ask for permission to sit down - Harry, young Damon's crime must be quite horrible."

Harry looked up slowly. "No ... And that's exactly the point."

Something in his face made Cho forget the kiss, at least delay it. "What's up??"

Rather than answering, Harry looked at his sister in spirit. "Al, tell me - how can an owl get lost?"

The howler had complained that Damon Harker wasn't responding, seemed to have forgotten his Muggles family from all that magic in Hogwarts, not reacting to a first owl, not to a second, and now their patience had worn thin enough to put it a bit more bluntly ...

Almyra's expression showed her feelings. "It can happen, Harry, although ... Anyway, you don't know whether his version is true."

"Yeah ... Only, if that was the only problem, we could solve it with Nagini any time. Point is - I believe his every word."

Cho started to look as worried as Almyra. "You know something else, Harry ... What is it??"

"Something Sirius said ..." Harry exchanged a glance with Almyra, looked at Cho again. "Owls get lost - these were his words. And now this - and with Al, and Hedwig ..."

Late afternoon was the first opportunity to meet, and to discuss it thoroughly. Entering Almyra's interview room, Harry said, "I've got reinforcements."

In his trail appeared Ron and Hermione.

Anticipating any protest, Harry said, "What we have to do is a brainstorming - and there's nobody as good in that as Hermione ... In addition - nobody can think as nasty as her."

Hermione beamed.

Cho said, "The latter is still to be proven, but otherwise - Hello, Hermione."

Watched by the others, Hermione got ready, parchment on the table in front of her, pen in her hand. "Well then - what's our problem?"

Harry said, "Owls get lost."

Hermione wrote. "Is this verified?"

Harry again. "Yes ... Witnesses - Sirius Black, Damon Harker."

She wrote. "Why's this a problem?"

Almyra jerked forward, baring her teeth. Hermione held her stare. "I'm only brain ... Al, why's this a problem?"

Almyra fell back, exhaling. "Sorry - it's just, the thought alone makes me sick ... You're right, of course."

Hermione wrote, reading aloud. "Almyra ... Hedwig ... sympathy with owls in general." Her head came up. "Why else?"

Almyra had grasped the idea, looked better. "Because it's unnatural - it's too many in such a short time."

"Do you have numbers, statistics?"

Ron said, "Consider the probability of two owls for the same message, and in such a short time - it's astronomically small."

Harry added, "Sirius had a reason for his remark ... We'll ask him for details, or Bel." He felt Cho's stare at him while Hermione was writing.

Hermione looked up. "So owls get lost, more than can be explained by natural reasons, and we feel deeply concerned - concerned enough to take measures ... Right so far?"

The thought of Harry taking measures brought a grimace into Cho's face, while the thought of Almyra being involved made her nod instantaneously.

Hermione looked at Almyra. "How can an owl get lost?"

Almyra's face was pale. "By getting caught, or killed ... There's no other explanation."

Hermione was more than brain. "Al - please, I know why I'm asking this ... Assume you had to make sure an owl as powerful as Hedwig doesn't reach its destination - how would you do it?"

Almyra nodded, thought, then looked as if retching the next moment. "I would ... it had to be ..."

"Killing." Hermione wrote, not waiting for Almyra's nod. Then she looked up. "Which means, it's not about collecting owls without paying for them ... Do we agree on that?"

They did.

"Are they after the messages, or the parcels?"

Maybe so, except nobody was ready to believe the message to Damon Harker had any relevance outside this family of Muggles parents with a wizard child.

"What's the effect if the messages do not appear?"

Harry said, "There are howlers."

They noticed - this owl had arrived; put the question aside for the moment. Then Cho said, "They have to send another message, or to use something else - like this new message service."

Ron said, "Which probably speeds up their business."

Cho turned to Harry. "The same company which has accidents."

Ways and goals, thought Harry ... A shadow strategy and a real strategy. This could only be a shadow, although a clearly visible one. He turned to Almyra. "This company is improving if owls do not arrive ... But an owl which makes it public that owl mail is unreliable comes through unharmed."

Now it was Hermione who seemed unable to accept conclusions. "You think it's *Magical Tours* - or their messaging department?"

Cho answered. "Makes perfect sense - you should have a look at some companies in China, or Japan."

Mentioning this particular country raised a short moment of uneasiness in the room, until Harry himself pushed it aside. "While their benefit is obvious," he said, "that's just their shadow strategy ... The question is what's really on their mind."

He had to explain about shadow strategies and real ones, was supported by Cho in that. Then Almyra asked, "What can we do?"

"Talk with Sirius," said Hermione.

"Send a time-bomb," said Cho.

"Analyze the pattern," said Ron.

"Move the shadow," said Harry.

He had to explain what it meant, this time with Cho as part of his audience. Then Almyra asked, "And how?"

Harry looked at her. "You move the shadow to make them show their *katana* - their long sword ... We have two owls, to look for that sword."

"NO!" Cho stared at him, fury in her face. "Are you mad? Do you know what you're talking about - it's her, and ..." She turned. "Al - tell him, there's no way, he's out of his mind!"

Almyra, her face pale, looked at Harry, not saying a word.

Cho grabbed her, shook her. "Al - no, please ... Please say no, I beg you ..." She spun around, toward Harry. "You - you ... It would never have crossed her mind, not if ..."

He held her stare. "It would - not today, but tomorrow."

Finally, Almyra spoke. "He's right ... Just a bit quicker than myself - and not as scared."

Cho had listened, desperation in her face. She slumped back, looked at Harry. "You and your damned Japanese training ... If something happens to her, if ... I'd never forgive you, Harry."

He nodded. "That makes two of us."

## 09 - Owl Order

Strange as it seemed - Harry's first step involved the services of the suspected culprit. Because he had to make a visit in London, more exactly in the Law Enforcement office, and a travelling time spanning just a second was hard to beat ... Well, agreed, counting only from linkport to linkport, but reaching them added little more.

The journey took place late in the afternoon, with a ticket these people called *One-Day Stand* - a bad joke. It covered a day, to and from, for two persons. The two persons were Harry and Cho, using Steel Wings toward the Hogsmeade Linkport and the Knight Bus in London.

Seeing someone appear in Harry's trail, Belinda stopped her beaming quickly, although not quickly enough.

Sirius's smile faded similarly fast when he heard Harry's report, Listening to his godchild's plan, Sirius saw little reason to cheer up again, more to the contrary. Sighing, he looked at Cho. "What's your comment - the spoken one, I mean?"

"I hoped you'd stop him."

Sirius nodded in some kind of resignation. "I tried once," he said, "only to learn better. Although ..." He walked to his desk, bent down. "Bel - can you join us?"

Belinda came in, sat down, her face hardly moving while Harry explained his plan again. When he had finished, her comment was short and to the point. "No."

Cho glanced at Belinda, apparently trying to adjust feelings. Harry also looked at Belinda, just waiting.

"Well," she said, "the plan is perfect, Harry - you might join the squad any time ..."

Cho seemed to re-adjust feelings in mid-step.

"... it's the classical police technique - only there's a tiny problem."

"Only one?" Harry's voice made clear - this was a serious question, rather than an ironic reply.

"Only one, yes ..." Belinda glanced at Cho, back to Harry. "From a statistical perspective, one of your two bait birds will get killed - and you cannot influence which."

Harry thought it over, then said. "Bel - according to statistics, I'd be dead for the third time."

Belinda nodded. "True, Harry ... If it was you in the bait position, I'd say - go ahead."

Cho dropped any attempt to adjust.

Belinda recognized it, not showing any reaction. She said, "Statistics only tell you so much ... There are people you could send any time, and only one out of hundred would be a loss ... Only, there aren't that many of this kind."

Cho stared at her in open hostility. "Have you been bait?"

It was Sirius who answered. "More than once ... And more than bait."

Cho understood, saw no reason to look impressed or to change her attitude. She asked, "Would you take over the role?"

Belinda's head tilted in Harry's direction. "With him as my cover? ... How long does it take to learn an owl Animagus?"

Months, at the least ... Too long.

Belinda looked at Harry. "Is she one of the few?"

Harry nodded. Then, to his slight surprise, he heard Cho answer, "Yes, she is," and without surprise, he heard Sirius add, "She's been a member in the guard for Lupin."

Belinda's face didn't reveal which of the three answers had convinced her most, assuming she had levelled at all. Her eyes at Harry, she said, "Okay ... You'll send her here, and I'll talk with her ... Then, and only then, and only if you're right, I might say yes."

Cho said, "I'll come with her."

"Sure, why not?" Belinda showed a polite and very professional smile. "There's a nice cafe outside, for the time while we talk." Smile or not - Belinda's voice didn't offer room for negotiations in this regard.

Cho, daughter of a negotiations expert, asked, "Why don't you come to Hogwarts?"

Belinda's smile turned to a dry grin. "I'm a cop, Cho Chang, and my face isn't unknown out there ... The moment they saw me, your stunt would be blown to pieces."

Only on their way back, watching how Chow took her time to chew at this reply, Harry became aware of the little twist in Belinda's explanation ... *Your stunt*, she had said - to Cho, mind, and this alone seemed enough to reignite her wrath every five minutes.

\* \* \*

After supper, Harry made his usual indoor walk - from the Gryffindor table to the Ravenclaw table, fully aware that the common pattern would change in a few seconds. "Hi," he said. "Al - can we talk?"

Almyra nodded.

Cho asked, "Is it about this owl stunt?"

Harry didn't want to answer, had to. "Yes."

"Then I want ..." Cho stopped, corrected herself. "I'd like to come with you."

Which was exactly what Harry had awaited, maybe except for the formulation. "Obviously so," he replied, "but I'm sorry ... No."

Cho had some difficulties holding her temper, however managed. "Why not?"

"Cho, your position's clear - you'll try to convince her it's suicide ... I, in contrast, want to figure out whether it's indeed suicide - and if not, I want to establish a strategy how to do it ... I don't think it's useful to represent two approaches as different as that in the same discussion."

"I thought it was already clear for you - for you two ..."

Harry shook his head. "It was clear that we want to do it ... That's not the same, not at all."

"Then ..." Cho stopped, bit her lips, kept silent.

Almyra followed him, looking as uneasy as Harry felt. Outside, he asked, "Same place?"

Almyra agreed, and they went to the spot close to the graves. This time, they sat down opposite, in contrast to the conversation not so long ago. Almyra opened the discussion. "Harry - what did you mean there at the table? ... Me too, I thought it was a given that we'll do it."

"I spoke with Sirius, and with Bel ... She wants to see you, to talk with you - if she nods, I'm ready ... Only then."

Almyra looked astonished. "Why's her judgement so important for you?"

"It's important for both of us ..." When the joke didn't catch, Harry explained, "Bel's been the bait in stunts before - she knows what she's talking about ... She says, if it's the right person, the odds are ninety-nine to one - otherwise, they are about fifty-fifty."

"And - am I the right one?"

"Yes - I'm sure about that, and establishing the same belief in you is what I want to do here - not me alone, with Bel's help and maybe Sirius too ... But first I want to know something else ..."

Almyra looked expectantly, obviously expecting something about another topic, started a smile, stopping abruptly when he asked, "Al - how do I kill an owl?"

She swallowed, swallowed again.

"An owl is flying from here to a city. It starts at dusk - soon afterwards, it's dark ... How do I get her?"

Almyra nodded, saw his point. "To get her for sure, it must be an air attack - a broomstick rider, for example ... The attacker must be able to follow her, must have an overview ... Standing on the ground with a wand, or a gun - imagine, what are the odds the owl's going to fly just the stripe where he is?"

Relieved, Harry exhaling deeply. "Okay ... Then we might be in business."

Almyra looked wondering. "I thought you knew."

"That's what I expected, yes, but ... I had to be sure - this is a prerequisite because with such an attack, we can ..." Harry stopped, because he had registered a figure coming from the building - a very familiar one.

Cho arrived, a friendly smile in her face. "May I sit down?"

"If you ... Please."

Cho sat down in the grass, forming a triangle with Harry and Almyra. She looked better than the last hours. "I've changed my mind."

For once, it was Harry's turn being astonished and clueless. "Why?"

"Because I just found out that Al will survive."

"Just so? ... Without the help of Trelawney?"

"Yes, just so - using not more than my brain." Cho relished the moment.

Harry had the good sense not to spoil her triumph, instead waited a moment before asking, "And why is it for sure?"

"Oh, it wasn't difficult ..." Cho was in no hurry to spit it out. "Although I have to admit, only for me ..." Registering that Harry's training in Japan, among other things, had included the ability to sit and wait patiently, if only to the outside, she gave up, "If Al would be killed in that stunt, I'd ..." she faltered, continued, "first I'd kill you, Harry, and then myself ..."

A gasp from Almyra.

"... but as we know, thanks to Marie-Christine, our destiny's a different one ... Which means - Al will survive, because it's mandatory." This said, Cho turned to Almyra, grinned, "You didn't really think I'd refuse covering your back on a Steel Wing, did you?"

With a small outcry, Almyra lurched upward toward Cho, grabbed her, fell onto her, hugged her, was hugged back, almost rolling through the grass.

Lying on her back, half buried under Almyra, Cho glanced at Harry, a playful expression in her face, looked up to Almyra's face above her. "Look at him - right now he's thinking of something that's just impossible for him to learn."

Harry had caught the meaning already with Cho's first words - not surprisingly so, not at this sight, not after a recent conversation here at this place. His weight was on his hands. His legs inched upward, flew outward, flat over ground, coming together, passing the momentum to his body which turned, jumped, rolled, had reached Cho, lying alongside her, opposite Almyra, his head over Cho's.

A short squeak.

"You don't know all that I know." He kissed her, closely watched by a beaming Almyra, who saw no reason to move.

Cho's voice was a bit breathless, for more than one reason. "Harry - how did you come over - I didn't even see you move?"

"Well - sometimes you have to be fast, and sometimes you can take your time." Like in slow motion, using his new strength, and skill, he bent his body over Cho, not touching her, moved his face toward Almyra, reached hers, kissed her, receiving response.

He bent back, relaxed his strained arm, looked at Cho. "See?"

"Now, now - this here's getting out of control ... Lemme get up, this's not the best position, considering ..."

Harry giggled. "If Katie could see us, she'd never believe any explanation."

For an instant, Cho tensed. Then she came up, sitting. "Harry - it wasn't a joke, was it?"

He shrugged. "Whatever - it just doesn't matter, and the last thing I want is to - er, be a winner from Katie's grace, so to speak ..." Before Cho had time the sort out all the emotions that were crossing her face, he said, "Let's do a bit of meditation, to get Al prepared for Bel's examination - and for her role as bait."

They did - quite successfully so, as Almyra's thumbs-up confirmed when returning from her trip to London.

\* \* \*

Ron wanted to be the customer, but Hermione only snorted. "You with your never-ending grin ... They won't believe it's urgent, and if so, they'll be sure you'd realize the loss only at the end of that honeymoon."

Ron turned to Harry. "What do you say?"

"I wouldn't agree with every word she just said, but - in the essential point, she's right ... Nobody can give you hell like our Hermione."

For a change, only Ron looked pleased, while Hermione was up to her reputation, retorting, "I might know someone else, but maybe not exactly in a mail office."

When she returned from her errand, still with the parcel under her arm, Hermione looked satisfied. Yes, she had made a fuss, and how urgent it was, how important to have it there come dawn tomorrow. No, she had pressed the value only after a while, and developed her doubts, her suspicion it might get lost, her disappointment about the high fee, had left without coming to terms, muttering loudly enough that two owls from the Hogwarts pool would be fine as well, to say the least.

That was early afternoon. Now the sun disappeared below the horizon, dusk would fall soon, and four figures would climb into the air within the next minutes - Almyra and Hedwig, tied to a long box containing a *bokken*, Harry and Cho, riding their Steel Wings.

Harry had his Invisibility Cloak with him, didn't use it though. There was no way of hiding Cho, so the stealth effect seemed almost zero, while the impact on Cho's morale, flying side by side with the tail part of a Steel Wing, would be the opposite of what he had in mind.

Almyra's hooking to the box could be opened with her other claw - they had made some tests, and it worked. Already in her owl shape, Almyra stood at the ground, calmly - owls didn't twist, didn't pale.

Harry heaved the box up, with the two owls sitting at the ends. Then he gave them a jump start together, his first for Hedwig as much as for Almyra. He reached Cho, kissed her. "I knew we'd do it together - that's never been a question."

She nodded, and they jumped up.

They flew only fifty feet behind the owls, close enough that the trap they'd set might be obvious. The owls' powerful wings were exposed to attack from above, but there had to be some exposure to lure their prey into the trap. And fifty feet was the maximum Harry could justify to himself, not earning protest from anyone in the team.

Cho used her patrol routine, eyes scanning from left to right, flicking back, scanning again, and again. She had done so for the last three quarters of an hour, not wavering, not changing the rhythm, not moving a muscle in her face.

It would have been hypnotizing, had there been a spectator. But there was none - not even Harry.

His eyes were open, yes, only they didn't recognize the surroundings, hadn't seen while the last daylight faded. Rather, they recognized a patterned half-sphere, aware of differences only, of movements, unusual shapes, focusing only for instants, to widen the vision again immediately.

More than twenty uneventful miles.

Harry's newest sense - *haragei*, developed over the past weeks - wasn't limited by a sighting angle. Using *haragei* was totally different from scanning - like his vision was it more comparable to a motionless guard, a sphere of watchful awareness.

Without seeing them, he could feel the owls' presence - Almyra stronger, Hedwig finer, sharper, smaller. He felt the steady beat of their wings, their determination, their own awareness, scanning the air, their reactions when something unusual came into sight.

The two presences were quiet, balanced in the air as much as in his *haragei*, not twisting, not reacting to the minute density which appeared at the border of his sphere, approaching - growing, quickening ...

"Hai!!"

He pushed forward, Cho's instant reaction lost from his vision, still not seeing, only feeling clearly, painfully, then sensing the movement, focusing on the spot that was shooting through the air, darker in the dark.

A harpy.

The bird-like creature shot toward the owl that was Almyra, that was trying to gather, to dodge in the short instant of clear sight, hit her where the wing extruded from the body, did not stick, came through in a cloud of feathers and splashes which could only be blood.

Toward Cho, Harry shouted, "Stay with her," pushed harder.

Almyra the owl's wing hung like a flap. At once, the couple lost its drive, was losing height - Almyra hanging powerless, Hedwig unable to hold the weight of box plus Almyra, desperately trying to soothe the fall.

Harry didn't see the second harpy coming, not in the fading light, not until it was just ahead of him - he only felt it, with his senses vibrating since he'd seen the outburst of feathers and blood, with his *haragei* stretching still wider, scanning for small dents in a void.

The harpy came fast, aiming toward Hedwig. Harry had a wand, only he didn't know how to shoot a harpy. No time to regret not having asked for that after the Battle of Hogwarts, no club like the twins, no *bokken* at hand - only an arm trained in *aikido* blows and in the classical positions of *kenjutsu*, a hand flat, hard, calloused from weeks in Japan.

The harpy closed in like a *bokken* in the *middle*. Harry's memory recalled Fred's manoeuver, his eyes had a split second for calculation, then his arm came down from the *above*, cutting like a sword's blade, hitting the harpy right behind the sharp beak, feeling the impact, sending every ounce of power from his muscular body on the still accelerating Steel Wing.

He drove the sharpest turn he ever had, felt the blackness in his head when the blood was rushing toward the legs, regained sight first, clear mind a moment later, the power of decision when the harpy came into view.

The creature he'd hit was sailing, calmly, unfluttering, not changing course, a flat dive toward the ground.

Pushing forward, coming closer, he saw - the head hung at an impossible angle to the body. This wasn't a sailing harpy, rather a dead bird, the air spanning its wings, coming toward the ground in a last flight through the evening air.

The other harpy was still busy gaining height, speed, its wings working steadily.

Harry reached it, coming from behind, his wand ready.

What now? Which spell ... Stupid him, why hadn't he found the time, the presence of mind ... He had to make do, had to be inventive here ... He mobilized the full power of this frightening - no, the full power of his magic, focused and directed in this magnificent wand.

"*ENGORGIO!*"

The harpy grew like an exploding balloon.

Harry bolted up, barely avoiding a crash into this monstrous creature. Still turning, he heard the deafening bang, felt pieces whoosh past his legs, others splashing into his back.

He slowed down, scanned again, with eyes, ears, *haragei*.

No more harpies - nothing but three figures on the ground.

He reached them. Cho had released Hedwig from the harness, had stretched Almyra on the soft ground, Almyra who was a girl again, a bloody mess on her shoulder, toward the neck, a pained moaning coming from her clenched teeth.

Harry knelt before Almyra, opposite Cho, took Almyra's hand. "How do you feel?"

"Don't ask ... I hope you've got better news - did you catch them?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He turned to Cho. "What about your healing skill?"

"Not good ... And I'm scared giving it a try with her."

"All right then ..." His wand slid under Almyra's robe, under her shirt, cutting like the gentlest knife, not finding glued spots, only fresh blood, more blood, undressing Almyra's chest, in a way never taught by Tamiko, nonetheless exposing beautiful breasts, a shoulder blade with a deep, nasty wound, something shimmering white in the open cut, blood trickling steadily.

There was no water, no first aid set, Madam Pomfrey far away.

Harry looked at Almyra, saw her eyes meet his own. "Okay, Al ... We have to get this under control - with our magic, and with our belief ... All right?"

She tried a smile. "Are you going to use Zen?"

"And a bit more."

He moved around, sat down behind her head, in the lotus position, Almyra's head between his legs, calves touching temples, his hands on her shoulders, thumbs on the blades, fingertips feeling the soft swelling farther below. "I'm with you, Al ... Now we'll work together - ready?"

"Ready."

"The first part isn't too nice ... Empty your mind, Al - breathe, slowly ... Calm down ... Close your eyes, you're safe, let your mind fly out ..."

His palms were feeling, his ears listening, his *haragei* sensing.

After a minute, his fingers probed gently, touching the wound, probing deeper ... No twisting from Almyra's body, soft raising and falling before his eyes, his fingers feeling something hard, slightly out of order, another piece, fitting together after a gentle push, a harder pressing ... Think of it like a unit, two pieces which belong together, like a grey wand of eleven inches

with a black top fitting seamlessly ... Leave it there, take your fingers out of the wound, straightening carefully, gently, lovingly, holding.

Sending a first wave of strength, he felt it fade - she wasn't there, couldn't receive.

"Al? ... Come back, Al - come here, set your mind up a notch."

He sensed her returning, sent the next wave, felt it reach its destination.

His mind calmed, dropping anything other than this single-purpose sending of strength, and power, and warmth, and love, the most arcane qualities of support and reinforcement, while his body, his head, his hands were motionless, holding touch, not breaking the contact nor the stream of *wa*.

He barely noticed how Cho covered Almyra's body, his hands as well, how she sat down, her own hands holding Almyra's, then almost as motionless as the other two bodies.

Time passed.

Harry came awake, still in the dark, realizing from the first signs of dawn that he'd been sitting there for hours. He tensed his muscles, relaxed, careful at these first movements after such a while. Checking around, he saw Cho sitting a step apart, half asleep, her head lolling forward.

His hands under the cover probed at Almyra's shoulder. What he could feel made him push the cover aside, get his wand and whisper, "Lumos," to have some light - just enough and with a scaling of his spell he wouldn't have managed a few weeks ago.

He inspected the wound - or what was left of it ... Dried blood. A dark red stripe, long, broader in the middle, swollen against the surrounding flesh. Closed, except for a tiny slit in the middle, some colourless liquid visible there.

About to notify Cho, Harry saw her examining the shoulder. After a moment, she looked up, met his eyes. In the scarce light, he saw relief in her face, and something more ... Gratitude, perhaps. Or love.

Carefully inching backward first, he stood up, stretched, bent his torso, flexed his legs, feeling the pain and the rushing blood. Having regained the bare minimum of control over his limbs, he reached Cho where she stood, embraced her, two bodies still stiff from the cold, pressing against each other, holding wordlessly.

After sunrise, Ron would raise alarm. Harry bent down again. "Al - wake up, time to leave."

Almyra opened her eyes. He saw the sensing, the careful movement, her head eying sideways, then her hand probing.

She came up, more fluid by the second, had to find a spot some steps away, assisted by Cho, while Harry walked to a sleepy Hedwig. "C'mon, old girl ... Yesterday it was a jump start, today it's a lift back to Hogwarts." He took the owl, bundled her in his cloak, in warmth and darkness for the flight on the Steel Wing.

Almyra came back, blood-stained shreds of a former cloak, a former shirt around her chest. She looked at him, at the torn pieces, grinned. "It's just too ridiculous."

The shreds fell to the ground, exposing breasts covered only by some dried blood. Next moment, Almyra shrunk down to an owl - with some spots, otherwise a perfect layer of feathers.

Cho stored Almyra the owl in her own cloak.

Harry had dropped any thought of scanning the environment. One reason - he felt tired to death. Aside from that, this was a job for the Law Enforcement Squad, or maybe for the remnants of the Hogwarts Flying Squad, or both.

Two Steel Wings at full speed raced high over ground across a lightening sky. Ten minutes later, they reached the school, to find three figures on the stairs to the Entrance Hall, covered in coats - Ron, and Hermione, and Lupin.

\* \* \*

Belinda checked the time, looked at the angry man. "Is the building completely evacuated, sir? If the warning's right, this is about the time."

Matthew Gallagher, managing director of *Magical Tours*, glanced toward the building - the company headquarters, located nicely at the outskirts of London and showing a lot of shiny glass panes. "Yes, officer," he said. "But I still don't understand - why didn't your own people ..."

"We are the demolition team, sir." Belinda smiled pleasantly, turned to the figure at her right side. "Harry?"

The wand with the black top came up. Harry's mind focused on the target, activating all he could muster.

A white-hot flash shot toward the building, hitting the front at half height in the right part. A sound like from tingling bells, and from aching wood, then a few sharp bangs when stone broke, or steel. A rain of splinters and larger pieces of glass clattered to the ground.

Mr. Gallagher stared at the image for an instant, then his head spun around toward the origin of this destructive power. At Harry's second curse, his face turned to grey, expressing disbelief and horror.

At Harry's third curse, he was moaning.

Belinda said, "Calm down, sir - it can be rebuilt ... In the meantime, you'll appreciate some owls taking over orders - and afterwards, you'll appreciate if owls still take orders, and continue so, because - next time, there might be a bomb in your own house, maybe without a warning .... Xanadu Manor, was it?"

"What ... what are you ..."

"Oh - still questions, sir? ... Just a second ..." Belinda's voice changed from polite astonishment to glee. "Harry, see that wing over there - looks almost as if in one piece."

Harry's wand came up.

"No - please, no ..." The manager's arms, though empty, were up too.

Belinda's voice had lost any friendliness. "Do we understand each other, Mr. Gallagher?"

Lips tightened. "Yes, officer, I think so."

"Then we might help you from thinking to knowing." Belinda pointed. "Harry?"

Ignoring the protest, the confirmation, Harry opened room for air in the wing she had indicated, and for quite a number of manufacturer contracts.

Mr. Matthew Gallagher understood perfectly, had so already an expensive moment before, only a remark too late.

Belinda said, "There won't be an inquiry, Mr. Gallagher - about missing owls, that is ... Should we learn about more owls missing, after today, there won't be an inquiry either - although this mightn't be any of your concern any longer, if you get my bearing."

Mr. Gallagher got - it was showing in his face. He asked, "With whom am I doing business, officer?"

"That's a funny question." Belinda's face, in contrast, showed little fun. "We'll find out, and then we'll come back ... *This here*, Mr. Gallagher, that's no business, just a warning you might remember ... And a promise you shouldn't forget."

"Does it mean - that's it?"

The manager had to turn a little because it was Harry who answered, "There's an owl Animagus, who has seen a harpy where none should have been, actually has been hurt ... Although I'm sure, for, say, ten thousand galleons, this Animagus might forget."

Negotiations, the life elixir of a managing director, seemed to blow some spirit back into Mr. Gallagher. "That's unrealistic," he said in a dismissive tone.

Harry smiled. "I fully agree, sir - while twenty thousand are certainly enough ..."

"You're joking!"

"Yes, sir, how right you are, haha, what I meant was actually forty thousand."

Cho, at Belinda's left side, was staring at him.

Mr. Gallagher's lips opened - closed, tightened. His head nodded.

"Gringotts," explained Harry, feeling sure his bankerese was understood. "Two-way keywords, the initial one is *Falcon*." Harry's wand touched his own temples lightly. "You won't forget, sir, and then you'll forget quickly, am I right?"

"Falcon, yes."

"Then there's another witness who had to take pains shredding these harpies, and was hit by some foul dirt - actually, it's me ... I still can feel this awful mess of blood and bones - but with a sponsorship toward Hogwarts, for three recreation centers in Japan style, I'll overcome that."

Silence.

Harry glanced at the tip of his wand which, seemingly by accident, slowly tilted down toward a building with many parts left intact. "Was it three, sir?"

"Three." The word could be spoken with clenched teeth.

"And then," said Harry, "there's this young lady who suffered a severe stress - but she may express herself ..." He turned. "Cho?"

For an instant, Cho looked stupefied. Then she said, "Oh - that takes me by surprise, really - I'm still a bit slow, after this awful accident, I mean a minute ago ... Well - oh yes, I know."

She smiled. "A little rest in a nice place will help me recover - there's this valley, what's-its-name, the one with the Giants - except it has no portkey connection yet, naturally so, because the Giants don't tolerate it there - so it has to be a mobile one, to be activated on call within, say, two hours."

Harry added, "The other end is Hogsmeade, sir. By the way, we appreciate this service very much, won't miss it ... Although you won't find *all of us* there at any time, most unlikely so, don't know why ..."

Mr. Gallagher was able to register all these details in his head - small surprise, considering his position in this company. While nobody expected him to use this skill in daily business, there had to be quite some meetings for which his secretaries lacked the clearance for more confidential issues. Like this one here.

"Oh - " called Cho, "I almost forgot - we'll need some network tickets, extended at the end of each year - I think six will do ... Global network, of course."

Mr. Gallagher nodded. "Of course." Then he turned to Belinda. "Officer?"

Belinda smiled sweetly. "I've waited long to hear that - someone trying to bribe me ... People knowing me better never found the spirit." She turned to Harry. "See that corner there - yes, already battered, but ..."

Mr. Gallagher watched the spectacle in calmness, only his breath sounded a bit hard.

This done, Belinda smiled again. "Mr. Gallagher - how do you guess the age of that young lady?"

The manager turned toward Cho. "I don't understand ..."

A flash, a click, this time from the camera in Belinda's hand. "Well," she said, "it's because I have this picture here, showing you with a - oh, what's that? The girl is considerably younger, must have been at the photo plate already, and - oh my, she's totally naked, and ... Sorry, sir, please spare me to tell the details - I'll store this picture at a safe place, safe from your wife, for example, and you may wish me a long life because - ah, I see, I really can spare the details ... It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Gallagher - have a nice day."

They walked away.

Cho beamed at Harry. "Brilliant ... I'd never thought of it, to squeeze some money out of them."

"Well - I had a lesson, still here in London actually, on the way to Japan."

Cho turned to Belinda. "This picture - is this really necessary?"

"You can bet your - arm, very nice actually ... This is my life insurance."

Cho looked incredulous. "Seriously?"

Belinda nodded. "'I just don't take chances, although, in this case - he took it hard. It was more than money ... But in his marriage, *she's* the one with the money," Belinda grinned maliciously, "and she wouldn't appreciate this picture a bit - although it's very artful, honestly."

Harry's giggle earned him a sharp glance from Cho, while not a single question from Belinda who assigned it to her clever usage of photographic tricks.

Belinda stopped, turned. "So - that's it? ... Harry - Miss Chang?"

"Not quite." Cho looked at her, swallowed once. "Erm - please call me Cho ... You're a hell of a cop, er - Belinda ... Yes, okay, Bel ... And then - please tell me where we can treat you at least with a drink and an early dinner, might turn out a late one."

\* \* \*

Harry sat on the blanket, lotus position, and gazed over the lake's surface where the splashing of water interchanged with suntanned skin and spots of colour. The *flatwater gang*, he had dubbed them, because no one in this group of students could follow his dive courses, longer and deeper than ever, neither in the speed of his underwater swimming nor in the timespan he could keep down.

Close to two minutes already - without stressing himself, lacking any ambition for setting records, driven only by this magnificent world, supported by his mind, his magic and its influence toward involuntary body functions.

The *flatwater gang* included Cho, recognized by her red swimsuit, Almyra, easily detectable in her white one, then Ron and Janine, red hair and freckled faces safe from being confused because they were always found close to each other. Then Hermione and Viktor, green and

black, and Ginny - sometimes with, sometimes without Grigorij, herself always in a suit of light peach which could have been called skin-coloured, except that Ginny's own skin showed a deep tan. Even so - skintight was certainly a proper description.

Ginny and Grigorij - Harry watched this discourse for quite some time already, knew it was trouble in progress. Grigorij was starving - the only term describing the situation properly, dangling at Ginny's outstretched arm. He came only because of her, was uneasy with the older students. Ginny concentrated her full interest in older people, invited Grigorij only when annoyed from being a single in this group.

Her growing skill in several techniques did nothing to relax the situation. To begin with, this included *aikido* and the ability to let Grigorij sail through the air at leisure. More importantly, Ginny had mastered a graceful gait with a balance approaching perfection, good enough to turn many heads, even from the distance. Still worse, her repertoire included a collection of quite provocative movements, result of genuine talent, personal interest, and careful study of people like Fleur, Katie, Janine ... and Almyra.

Almyra didn't provoke by habit or on purpose. Much simpler - seeing her walk in this white suit over the dark-bronze body was a provocation by itself. Long legs, wide hips, wide shoulders, high breasts, this small belly much better than flat, and a total ignorance toward all these attributes, aware of a face whose features were too strong, too remarkable to be nice, envious of girls with long, black manes like Cho's.

Cho was smaller, altogether less curved - flat belly, hips not as wide, same with the shoulders, leaving enough places with less straight profiles, prominently enough for Harry's taste, above and below. And then her face, of course, and her hair - if life would be fair, they had to stay out of competition, like Almyra from shoulders to toes, because then, as Hermione had stated, she would win easily. The remark had earned a challenging glance from Ginny and the unspoken words, "*How long, still?*"

Hermione represented the perfect compromise, seemed to benefit from sunbathing, waterbathing, and, lacking that, periods of bad weather. This was also true for her mood, less edgy, more tolerant than ever. But then, maybe it was the graduate work.

Almyra appeared at the waterline, stepped out, followed by Cho. Reaching Harry, Almyra asked, "So - how's your Waterese?" Which meant, could he talk already with the merpeople?

"Doing okay," replied Harry. "We're on bubbling terms."

Cho had arrived, looked at him expectantly. "While on the subject - can we let the big bubble blow?"

"Any time - once you two have stopped dripping."

"Not so saucy, young man!"

Harry looked innocent. "I was talking about lakewater - what's your ..." avoided the blow with the towel effortlessly, though not for lack of Cho's try.

Almyra had toweled herself, glanced from Cho to Harry, and back. "Bubble? What bubble?"

Harry could see - Almyra expected something else, was fully unaware. He said, "It's total nonsense - because it's quite flat." He seized for the Gringotts' booklet, stood up. "Almyra, sister in spirit, this old buddy of mine at Gringotts asked me to pass this over to you - saved him a hobble."

Almyra scanned through the booklet, examined the entry at the first side, looked blank. "So?"

Cho's face was shining. "The first password is *Falcon* ..."

Harry finished, "... And the second is *Jamaica* - a one-timer, you need an update the first time you're going to use it."

"Me? ... Why me?" Almyra shook her head, offered the booklet toward Harry. "Must be a mistake." Not finding a hand to take the booklet back, she glanced at Harry again, at Cho, slowly starting to realize.

Harry found the shortest version. "*Magical Tours* would have liked to pass it over by themselves, with compliments and apologies, but they felt a bit shy."

Almyra melted down, her remarkable legs suddenly quite unsteady. The rest of the *flatwater gang* took this moment to join them.

Seeing the newcomers, Almyra glanced at Harry, a booklet in a trembling hand. "Can I tell ... is it ..."

Harry smiled. "Al - it your's - your decision, your story, your account."

The others had heard the story of the damaged headquarters already before. Now they learned the full story, told by a beaming Cho.

When she had finished, Ron looked indignantly at Harry, then at her. "Cho - you have to do something with that bad habit ... A Privileged for Steel Wings - a compensation for Ginny - the next one for some bathrooms ..."

"I've got no problem with that," replied Cho with a mocking grin. "My side is buttered, quite well so ... And besides, Harry has a high opinion of bathrooms."

Harry preferred to answer Ron's remark. "At least I've improved since that negotiation with the London Linkport manager - won't you agree?"

Oh yes, Ron would.

Almyra's voice was shaky. "It's too much."

Harry's voice sounded like an apology. "I'm sorry - I had ten in mind ... Didn't work out that way."

Almyra glanced around. "Who's going to share with me?"

Nobody was - least of all Ron, followed by Ginny.

Almyra looked at Harry. "I don't deserve it. You ..."

"Stop that crap!" Cho's voice, sharp.

Harry nodded. "Right," ostentatiously staring at the fine line still visible on Almyra's shoulder, tracing downward.

"But at least some presents ... It's so ..."

Presents would be accepted, up to some point. Ginny hinted that her own point left room for a nice kimono, since Harry's sample seemed so convincingly ...

Harry grinned, hiding the true reason. "Al - if you want to make a nice present, I'd know a boy who might be happy about a little comfort - actually within your reach."

Catching Harry's thought - Damon Harker - Almyra seemed extremely pleased. "Harry, that's a wonderful idea ..." Then she looked baffled. "Only - what might that be?"

Now Harry laughed loudly. Still, Almyra couldn't follow, in contrast to Cho, then Hermione, also Ron. Finally, Harry said, "I shouldn't have to tell you ... An owl, what else?"

"You see," said Ron, "that's the bad side-effect from money ... It stiffens your brain."

Unfortunately, he had made his remark within reach of Cho's fists. As anyone else could tell next moment, Ron also lacked Harry's skill in defense.

Almyra laughed, stopped, then another beaming lit up in her face. "Yes, Harry - your idea's better than you know by yourself, only ..." She glanced toward Cho, was soon afterwards in a hurry, left the group, "to get things in order," as she said, while Harry had little doubt about this order, about someone in the school who never would cross the invisible borderline between teachers and students, at least not for a late afternoon swim party.

Ginny, who had intended to follow immediately, dropped the idea after catching Harry's nearly invisible shaking of the head. She let a decent amount of time go by, then disappeared.

Ron involved Harry and Viktor in a conversation about Quidditch. This felt a bit surprising, but then maybe Ron's captain role had to do with it, or there was simply too much daylight left.

Hermione talked with Janine, after a look toward Cho who had fallen asleep on the blanket, face down, presenting nice - yes, arms too.

Then Janine lost patience with Quidditch, and the conversation lost Ron from the round.

Hermione sent Viktor for the broomsticks, smiled at Harry. "See you - not too soon, hopefully."

He grinned. "Don't hold your breath."

"No ... Harry, a riddle to kill the time - what's the complement of brainstorming?" Not expecting an answer, Hermione left together with Viktor.

Harry watched the two broomsticks fade to dots across the lake. Then he turned to look at Cho, lying on her stomach, the black hair still drizzled from the water and its dirt.

He reached into the bag, found the comb, boxwood, slightly sticky. Kneeling at her side, he started to comb Cho's hair.

The comb was superb, its manufacturing masterly to the finest edge of each tooth.

Cho had awakened, maybe already before, maybe hadn't slept at all. She accepted his combing, tilted her head forward so he could stroke the full length of this magnificent mane.

"Harry?"

"Hmm."

"I saw how you looked at Al."

His stroking didn't falter. "She has a fine body, hasn't she?"

A longing in Cho's voice. "It's perfect ... If I had the the slightest tendency to ..." She stopped.

Harry completed the sentence in his mind. "Yes, I could understand that."

"Oh, could you?"

"Yes."

"She's more attractive than I."

"No she isn't. She's bigger, and has wider shoulders ..."

Cho's voice lacked any sharpness. "That's a nice term, Harry - wider shoulders ... Very ..."

He interrupted her. "I mean exactly what I said - wider shoulders ... Yes, her breasts are a bit bigger, which is fine for her. Hers on your body would be too big."

"I don't think so, but don't stop assuring me."

"I think so ... And besides, figure is just one part. You know that Al wishes she had your face."

"No I didn't ... Does she really?"

"You know what I mean ... I think she has a wonderful face, but it will never win a public contest ... While you - you've inherited your mother's face."

"Mmmmmh ... Go ahead, Harry."

"I'm not going to drop the comb."

"You know ..." His chuckling made her stop. After a moment of silence, Cho started again, "Harry?"

"Hmm."

"Do you - desire her?"

His answer came after a second's thinking. "A moment ago, you told me that you desire her, only that you'd never ... Something like that, anyway. Well, I guess I feel the same ... During this flight, and afterwards - my feelings for her are definitely more than spiritual - there's a sensuality in them, and the knowledge of her flawless body isn't exactly cooling it, but ..." His smile was in his voice. "If we travel toward the clouds and the rain, then toward real ones, and she's an owl."

He continued to stroke. Was it the hissing from the comb, or a purring from Cho? Holding her hair in one hand, he bent forward, planted his lips on her neck. Undeniably, it was a purring.

Had been. "Stop that."

His lips traced the line along her spine.

"I said, stop it, Harry. Now."

"No." He traced back.

"What do you have in mind? Going to rape me?"

Considering her question, it was astonishing how still Cho kept lying. Harry said, "I'm not going to do anything against your will."

"Really? ... Then how come you don't stop if I say so?"

His lips were nuzzling her neck again, close to her left ear. "Because your body's telling me something totally different."

"Oh, does it? ... Must be a flaw."

His tongue caressed her earlobe. Next moment, his lips were back at her neck, his teeth gently biting her flesh. He heard her gasp, her breath accelerating. His mouth could feel her pulse beating.

His hands moved the swimsuit strings from the shoulders.

No protest, only a faster breathing, and some support from herself while he pulled the strings further to free her arms again. His lips moved from her shoulders to an upper arm, back to her body, down the flanks. Then his hands started the same route, only on both sides, shifting the suit farther down.

Her chest came slightly upward, making room for moving the thin fabric, room also for his hands.

He followed the invitation, stroking again from the shoulders downward, inward, feeling the soft firmness, her hardening, hearing another gasp. Feeling himself, too.

Taking both mounds into his hands, he pulled her gently upward. With Cho kneeling before him, he moved a bit forward, still cupping her, pressed her body against his own, his hardness against her back, his mouth at the side of her neck, struggling with the thick mane.

Her hands came around, finding his hips, stroking his thighs.

His hands let go, to stroke downward, to move the suit down her legs, passing the first knee lifted for an instant, then the other. Stroking upward, inward, he felt her trembling, his fingertips telling him she was ready.

He released her to move his own drawers down. She turned on her knees, looked at him, stretched her arms to reach his hips, to stroke his thighs.

He stretched, taking her with him, lying alongside her, one arm under her neck, the other caressing over her body, the flat belly, the tuft of hair, gently parting, his lips eager to touch and to suck, his eyes equally eager to look.

Her breath came panting, accompanied by soft sounds from deep inside when his fingers hit a spot, released it an instant later.

Her voice was insisting, pleading. "Come."

He had waited for this moment, through torturing weeks. Was it an attempt to relish it, or a tiny revenge, or his training, including an admonition from Tamiko for this particular situation ... "Not yet."

She moaned, a sound of desperation, powerless arms trying to grab him, to move him.

He blocked the first, shifted the other away, not finding resistance, his hand returning to her body, circling her flesh, pressing, releasing, parting.

The trembling in her body was growing, the ragged gasps coming quicker.

He lifted himself onto her, found her hands at him, guiding, found her wet core, then a resistance, tried to remember an advice ...

Almost a cry. "Push!"

He broke through, heard her cry, felt her tensing, constricting, held her, moved inside her, desperate to do it right, to overcome the pain, to guide her through this moment ...

She relaxed a bit, calming, the sounds from her mouth softer, sweeter, the sweetest he'd ever heard, wondering whether he had confused pain with something else, although not unsimilar.

His concern had slowed him down, cooled him a bit, enough to know this journey couldn't be finished with a few last steps. Her hands were on his back, trailed down, held him, pulling him, accelerating his step, about to break his control.

He paused for an instant, took her first arm, put it over her head, then the other, holding them.

The response came immediately, strongly, although not from her arms, rather from her hips, from her sharp intaking of breath, accelerating quickly.

It was enough to lose all control, to push the pace, thrusting hard, race toward the end, reach it.

Pausing for this instant, he felt her own wild movements. With his last strength, he held on, moved on until, seconds later, he felt her arching up.

They were lying face to face, looking at each other, slowly caressing with fingers, with eyes, with words.

"The thought of you and - er, Tamiko made me mad, while the thought of you doing it with her was so ... When you told me about Katie and Alicia - I could have killed them, while the thought that you declined the offer, because of me - waiting for ... If it hadn't been in the hall ... Anyway, your performance there saved me - although not ..." She giggled.

He grinned.

She saw it, peeked his nose with her finger, next moment changing to a soft touch along the line of his scar. "And then your performance with Kenzo - I knew exactly what I did, not coming into the hall, not to be seen by ... or heard, for that matter ... Fortunately, the others in the room made enough noises, and in the dark ... I had some trouble."

Listening to her, he felt himself growing again. His hand pushed her slightly, his fingers trailed down her body, stroking, testing. "I wouldn't call this a flaw, quite the contrary, because ... It raises another reaction."

"Really?" One of her hands was verifying, while the other tried to stop his own. "Then we might try a bit of cold water, or something nicer, but not ..."

He took her arms, shifted them upward, felt her responding immediately, dropping any thought of alternatives which included something cold, or would leave anyone present stay in the cold, or lie, for that matter.

\* \* \*

Several days later, a figure blocked Harry's path from the supper table - not quite, just enough so the intention was clear. This someone did not grab him, wanted to talk at a quiet place nonetheless.

They found this place in a corner of the Entrance Hall. After sitting down, the coal-black eyes of Rahewa Lightfoot stared at him, then looked at the floor. "Harry ... I have a question to ask."

"Then we'll sit for a while until you'll ask me."

She smiled, outperforming him by sitting for a while, though a short one. Then she said she'd be back in a moment, disappeared, returned with a Firebolt in her hand. "Someone sent me this, and I don't know who."

For a moment, Harry felt perplexed, once more retransmitted in time while examining the brand new Firebolt, slightly different from his own three years ago, otherwise still the same, still the top rank in racing broomstick technology of the sports category.

Then he had a fair guess, saw his thought confirmed when reading the registration label, which showed the number '*RHW LF11*'. This detail raised a warm rush of feeling toward Almyra in his mind.

Rahewa had watched him. "Has it been you, Harry?"

He smiled, shook his head. "No."

She said nothing, only her eyes told him she didn't believe.

His expression grew solemn. "I won't lie to you, Rahewa ... Not even in such a case - I'd just say nothing."

She blushed a bit, embarrassment in her face, then nodded.

Starting to grin, Harry said, "But I know who it was ... And I know why."

Did she look a bit disappointed, hearing the Firebolt came from someone else? What she said was, "Can you tell me why?"

"This someone came across money - quite a lot, actually ... It was a compensation for taking a deadly risk, and suffering pain ... She wanted to share with someone, and somehow, she found you."

A careful glance signaled Rahewa's question.

"No - not Cho."

With some surprise, Harry could see in Rahewa's face that there was no question left - with Cho excluded, the sponsor seemed identified. It made him aware - this girl was tracking his every step. He examined her face again, hoping it wasn't another Ginny syndrome, felt quite sure about that - maybe another Gabrielle syndrome.

The coal-black eyes stared at him again. For someone with less balance in mind and soul, they would be very disquieting. Rahewa asked, "Why me?"

"It's a bit complicated, what with houses and so ... She thinks she owes the money to me, although I was the one who sent her to face these risks, and - well, so it had to be a Gryffindor."

Rahewa nodded, looked away, however not quick enough to hide a dreamy state in her face.

No - this wasn't a Gabrielle syndrome either. For Gabrielle, Harry was the hero, the one to fight dragons and dark wizards. She would never dream of being sent by him toward death and horror.

## 10 - Dead Ends

Dumbledore asked Harry for a conversation in the Headmaster's office. After they had taken seats, including Fawkes, of course on Harry's shoulder, Dumbledore showed a thin smile. "Harry, Hogwarts has got a surprising offer - from a sponsor which never before had an interest in the school."

Harry thought for a moment, kept silent.

"Your comment on that is very short, Harry ... You don't even ask."

"I'm sorry, Professor - I was reacting like toward my *sensei*."

Dumbledore's smile warmed a bit. "I take it as a compliment ... Still, I wouldn't mind a normal conversation in English."

"Professor - my silence told you that I had no question, so I knew. ... Then you would ask me how much I know, and because I'm not going to lie to you, I had to say I know all about. Then, you would ask me what I can tell you, and I had to say nothing ... This is too impolite, and implies too much loss of face ... All I can do is keep silent."

"Hmm ..." Dumbledore seemed not overly delighted hearing these arguments. "Then I have two more questions," he said, "and I hope your answers are as convincing as your hypothetical one ... Would Hogwarts be compromised knowing more?"

Harry could answer that immediately. "No, Professor ... The chief of the Law Enforcement Squad would be compromised if he had to admit any knowledge - otherwise, there's no risk."

Dumbledore looked considerably happier than before. "Then there's no problem, because we're not going to tell him something he ... Well, the other question - I asked Mr. Kenzo first, only his answer was very polite while at the same time maddeningly unclear ..."

Dumbledore seemed the slightest bit embarrassed. "Harry - we'll have three such rooms, as you don't know ... How to assign them?"

"Well ..." Harry remembered well what had made him specify this number, only since then he'd found the time to wise up a bit. So he continued, "The number would - just by coincidence - match an arrangement with one room for teachers, one for boys, one for girls ... On the other side, first-time users need assistance for sure - you can hurt yourself without the proper guidance, and you have to get used to that heat ..."

He looked up. "This arrangement seems so obvious, Professor - I'd expect it settles by itself, without rules - while it doesn't cause problems if, for example, Ginny needs a kneading of her shoulders and I'm the only one around."

"Sounds reasonable ..." Dumbledore's eyes met his own. "Temptingly so."

Harry held the stare. "A loose convention would imply there are no locks, and the rooms are open to everybody - any time and any moment ... To me, this seems a good basis to recover there and - er, make room for other people."

Dumbledore's expression was blank. "You seem to have given it some thought - rather quickly after this surprising announcement ... I guess you're right, Harry."

He was indeed right - while not true, although he wasn't to blame for that. After a long and hard exercise with Kenzo, until late in the evening because their training ranked beyond all public levels, Harry went into the shower of the *tower* room, as it had been dubbed because the tower platform was easily accessible from there, offering a replacement for a garden with stones in it. Coming out, he saw a figure standing at the hot water tub.

A fleeting instant of *déjà vu* - kimono, long black hair, and something else in common. Otherwise, it was Cho. She smiled, bowed silently, after watching him walk over.

"You shouldn't do that."

"I shouldn't do what? ... Being here, or wearing a kimono?"

Harry kept silent. The water was too hot even for speaking, and a witches' robe represented only one of several alternatives to wearing a kimono. Cho's voice, still more her intonation, would have remind him of the other alternative any time, had it slipped his mind.

Her face, in contrast, looked perfectly innocent. "I thought, after your training you might appreciate a massage."

He entered the steam room, couldn't relax as completely as at other occasions.

Cho was waiting for him at the padded desk, started to knead his shoulders after he had stretched, face down. Her hands weren't as strong as others he remembered, also less experienced. Still, it felt good.

He listened to her breathing from the effort, then heard her command. "Turn."

"That's not a good idea."

"You hold no monopoly for bad ideas ... Turn."

He did.

Cho no longer looked innocent. She examined him. "Did this happen to you with - Tamiko?" She had stopped talking of "her" when, occasionally, the conversation touched upon Harry's time in Japan.

"Once ... After the first ... I had a bad bruise, and had to turn so she could handle it."

"I see a bad bruise right now ... What did she do?"

"Threatened me with a spell ... It solved the problem quickly."

"A spell? How cruel ... I think a potion's a more appropriate cure." Next moment, Cho was on the table, kneeling over his legs.

"Are you mad? ... What if ..."

"Yes I am - but I took precautions."

A potion she had, and a cauldron of the finest manufacturing, to solve the problem, although not immediately, quite the opposite, while it was good enough to choke any further protest.

He felt powerless, unable to resist, unable to muster any control. Looking into her face, he saw she knew, had expected as much, had intended this state, did everything to prevent him from regaining balance.

At least, what she did was cutting both ways.

He exploded, barely avoiding an outcry, in particular as her frantic movements didn't stop. She fell forward, her hair covering his chest, still moving, torturing him.

His hand found its way under the garment, found her, accelerated her. Seconds later, he felt her spasms rise, then fade, then merciful rest.

He used the shower again, mainly in respect of the rule that the water tubs were approached only after thorough cleaning. When he came out for the second time, Cho was gone.

He knew, he would never ask for the particular nature of her precaution, maybe also because there were few alternatives, if any. And of course, Cho would never mention it, nor anybody else.

\* \* \*

Fleur had started the advanced level of her dance lessons, and the first of these lessons answered a question Harry had been asking himself - that about Fleur's assistant in this course.

It was Gérard.

While Harry enjoyed the lessons he and Cho were attending together, Gérard's presence caused mixed feelings. There was no complaint about Gérard's qualification as a dancer, or his obedience when following Fleur's orders - no, it had to do with Harry's knowledge.

Harry's feelings were less mixed when he registered Gérard's glances toward the various students. In particular those toward Cho. And any remaining uncertainty in these feelings stopped at once when he registered Ginny's glances toward Gérard, and Gérard's response.

Ginny attended the course - sometimes with Ron, sometimes alone, for example when Janine found the time to join Ron here. Then, Ginny had to look for a partner from dance to dance, and of course the assistant had to balance out for such students.

After some lessons, Harry couldn't help noticing that Ginny tried to come alone.

Thinking it over, he decided to talk with her, met her outside. The weather didn't invite swimming, was however warm enough to walk, and sit close to the little graveyard.

Harry came to the point right away. "I watched you dance with Gérard ... Switching targets?"

"Well - not exactly ... Only, there's little progress with Kenzo - beyond a point, if you get my bearing."

"I get it quite well, and that's why I wanted to talk with you ... Ginny - seeing you with Gérard doesn't make me happy."

Her voice was cool. "Too bad, Harry."

"It's not because of Marie-Christine - at least not alone. I mean, I cannot control what he's doing, so ... Only, the thought of my sister adding to her misery has little appeal."

Ginny kept silent. Obviously, she didn't like his interfering, couldn't keep his argument out of her perspective either.

"But what's more important - Gérard isn't the right choice for a first-timer."

Ginny showed an ironic smile. "He didn't strike me as the unexperienced type."

Harry responded with a similar grin. "Definitely not, and I could tell you even his preferences ... No, the problem is somewhere else ... Something in Gérard will poison the memory of this, Ginny - something he'll do, or say, or not do ... All I know for sure is, you'd be better off with Grigorij."

Ginny didn't object. She wasn't blind herself, and she had a high opinion of his judgement. Only she had other feelings too, as Harry could watch at the next lesson.

He waited for the opportunity, the moment with Gérard and Ginny close together, and out of other people's earshot. When the moment came, he started, "Salu, Gérard ... How's Marie-Christine?"

"Good, I hope ... She'll be happy to hear you asked."

"Did she tell you how much I owe her? ... Cho too, by the way."

"Really? What did Marie-Christine do? ... Talk with Cho?"

Harry looked into the grinning face. He had found him enjoyable, a long time ago. "It had to do with Voldemort," he said. "... Anyway, my obligation is beyond most others ..."

"Ooooh, of course, the ..."

"... and compared to that, could be other things must be ignored if the need arises - like good manners, or respect toward the teacher and his opinions."

Gérard tried to hide his reaction with his words. "But 'arry - it would be just too ridiculous, and I don't even see a wand in your ..."

Harry stared into Gérard's eyes. "It would be very quick, I wouldn't need a wand, yours wouldn't help, and nobody would have the impression it was a joke, Gérard ... The least of all you."

Ginny caught him afterwards, fury in her face. "I take your advice, Harry - but that's all. I didn't ask you to interfere - especially not the way you did!"

Harry bowed.

Which took the wind out of Ginny's sails. "My patience is wearing thin ... You know what I mean - it's not about your performance this evening."

"Yes, I know."

Ginny's eyes were piercing, and something else. "Maybe I find a way to our *sensei* ... Otherwise - if you don't like my choice, Harry, you know you can prevent it any time - and fighting won't be required for that."

He swallowed. "If I saw a way ..."

"Yes - we all have our problems ... See you."

He knew his sister too well for pushing her remark aside. He had to figure out whether there was a chance, and he didn't lose time.

Kenzo was sitting opposite him, both of them in the lotus position.

"*Sensei* - a thought is bothering me for quite some time."

"Then it might be helpful to share it with others, Ha-ri."

Harry did the *zareii*, the bowing toward the *sensei* in this position. "I'm watching the progress of Ginny with great pleasure - naturally so, since she's as much as my sister."

"And also naturally because she has left most of the other students behind with her skill."

Harry bowed again. "She is very eager to learn from you, *sensei*."

"Your sister's determination is only matched by yours, Ha-ri."

"And like me, she's eager to be guided further, although not toward the same goals."

Kenzo kept silent.

"I support her in her determination ... I wouldn't know any *sensei*, or other mentor, better suited to the task."

Kenzo's face was motionless. If it showed anything, then the slightest trace of regret. "There are many people of gift and spirit here in Hog-wa-tse, so your words might be considered with those of Matsuo Shigura in mind, who warned me you may tend to a bit of flattery."

Harry smiled. "He can see through me ... Even so, I'm not alone with my opinion."

Kenzo bowed. "I'm honoured by the trust ... It gives me the obligation to teach her as careful as yourself, Ha-ri - to the possible extent within the boundaries of my obligation as a Hog-wa-tse teacher."

Harry kept silent.

"Certain extents are only possible in a dedicated environment, isolated from other students, and people - like your training in Japan, Ha-ri."

If any doubt had been left after Kenzo's previous words, this remark cleared them. Harry bowed. "You're right, *sensei* ... I was lucky to be so privileged."

Kenzo showed a faint smile. "The differences between right and true are always fascinating, Ha-ri ... although sometimes not as agreeable as we both may wish - or other people."

\* \* \*

Harry spent some time pondering whether he should tell Ginny about this conversation, and recommend holding out till next summer - the first opportunity for the alternative Kenzo had specified so clearly. Before he could find a decision, other issues moved this problem to the background of his mind.

The first sign was a short notice from Sirius, ordering him to meet in the Law Enforcement office soon, pretty soon.

He hadn't found the time yet to talk about his trip to London, whether with McGonagall or someone else, when Cho came with an issue of the *Daily Prophet* to him. There was tension in her face. "Look at that, Harry."

It was on the first page:

- **Explosion Takes Four Victims**

A mysterious accident took the life of four employees in the headquarters of Magical Tours, the prospering company which offers portkey travel and messaging services.

The four, among them Matthew Gallagher, managing director of the enterprise, were in Mr. Gallagher's office when an unknown object crashed through the windows, killing them at the spot and destroying the office. The object's nature is unknown so far, since it could not be found. Speculations rank from a flying monster to a large ball of frozen gas, melting from the impact and disappearing through the air.

The accident has a particularly bitter note to it. The three other victims, the regular tenants of the company's Hogsmeade office, had been invited to celebrate their winning in an internal contest, by selling more tickets than any other office.

Asked for comment, Belinda McGraw, spokeswoman of the Law Enforcement Squad, said, 'None so far. If it wasn't an accident, we have to follow four different tracks as these people had only the same employer in common.'

Harry looked at Cho. "She didn't even lie ... I've been ordered to meet Sirius - now it's clear for which reason."

"Yeah." Cho grimaced. "And Bel can burn that life insurance."

Harry talked with McGonagall to settle his trip, planned for early afternoon tomorrow. After classes, he discussed the issue with Ron. "You're the one with the astronomic numbers," he said. "How are the odds this has nothing to do with our own stunt?"

"So small that you might as well forget them ... This wasn't an accident."

"No."

Ron watched Harry's face. "Does it worry you?"

"Of course!" Seeing Ron's expression, Harry added, "No - I don't feel guilty, that's not my problem ... By accident, we touched something much more important than - " he checked, making sure Almyra wasn't around, "some owls. Killing owls - killing people, these are two different levels."

"Do you think the owl killing will start again?"

"Might be - but I don't think so ... It's been the company we caught - these four were just our contacts."

They looked at each other, only now realizing the full impact of this other common factor among the victims. Ron said, "I can't help thinking that's the signature of Voldemort."

"He's not the only one with a taste for revenge ... Cho has a few tales in store, about big companies and competition. She says, beyond a certain size, the term *legal* only indicates that some official paper is involved ... According to her, one of the Chinese *triads* might as well be the power in the background."

"Yeah ... But then, Cho is a bit prejudiced against Voldemort."

The joke was good for a grin, although a short one.

Belinda wasn't in her office. Harry knocked at the door toward Sirius' office, not receiving a reply. He knocked again, listened carefully whether some sound might recommend to come later, heard nothing. He opened the door.

Sirius was sitting at his desk, a glass in his hand. Before him on the table stood a bottle of whisky, almost empty.

Harry reached the desk. "What's with you? ... Where's Bel?"

Sirius didn't look up. "I'm saluting her ... She's dead."

"Wha ..." He stared at his godfather, terror filling his heart.

"They found her this morning ... In the Diagon Alley - dumped just in front of the Owl Emporium."

"Oh no ..." Harry's knees felt to weak to carry him. He fell into the chair before the desk.

"Oh yes ... Cheers."

"Sirius - please ... That's not a solution ..."

"There's no solution ... Wanna drink, Harry?"

"No - and you don't need another."

Sirius' speech was only slightly blurred, his stare clear and hard. "Don't get uppish, young man." His hand moved the glass with a generous fill of whisky to his mouth. Before the glass could reach its target, an invisible force pulled it from Sirius' fingers, sent it through the room, toward the wall where it crashed, sending splinters and splashes.

Sirius' reaction wasn't blurred at all, nor his thinking, or his bad mood. His gaze had been able to follow the glass before it exploded at the wall. He looked at Harry, showed no surprise not seeing a wand, was up and around the desk in no time.

Harry blocked the first blow, the second, dodged the third to reach Sirius, to be at him, to embrace him.

He felt how Sirius stopped, felt how his godfather started responding to his own hug.

After a moment, Sirius stepped back, turned, his hands on the desk. "Let's go to my place."

After a short chimney travel, they were sitting in a spacious room, now glasses in both hands, none of them holding whisky.

Sirius looked up. "Harry - next time, let me empty my glass ... Okay?"

"No ... Definitely not."

Sirius shook his head. "You don't understand ... In the next weeks, people will see me slide down the hill, losing control ... Eventually, they'll have no other choice than firing me. Until then, hopefully ..."

Harry stared at him. "Maybe in the next weeks ... Today, this wasn't a start of your new career."

"Maybe not - but it would have passed as such."

"And you need someone to be in touch."

Sirius nodded, saw Harry's face, shook his head. "You qualify for quite a lot, Harry, I'm the first to admit - but not as the anchor man for an undercover agent."

"Which makes me the perfect candidate."

"That's nonsense."

"No - it's Zen ... And besides, do you have someone else?"

Sirius thought, wasn't ready to shake his head, however unable to come up with a name.

"I'll train a bit with Snape."

Sirius tensed. "He'll know immediately, or when ..." After a moment's hesitation, he nodded. "Okay - Severus is reliable, and we might need him ... But nobody else, Harry ... Which means, I quote, no - bo - dy."

"One exception."

Sirius stared at Harry, saw his face, seemed to reconsider a memory, nodded reluctantly. "One."

"Okay - that works."

"Fine ... Now please say goodbye and let me start my career." Sirius looked at Harry, waiting for him to leave the house.

"Did you love her?"

His godfather's shoulders sagged a bit. "Don't know ... Maybe I did - maybe I still do ... What I'm sure about - I'm sick of watching how people kill those closest to me." He looked up. "Harry - I warn you, if you let them kill you, I'll come after you and ..." Sirius' hands were covering his face.

After a moment's hesitation, Harry walked over, sat beside Sirius, put an arm over his shoulder. "I'll sit here for a while, and listen to you telling me about Bel ... Afterwards, we'll fix some details of the planning, and a code ... Then I'll go."

Harry left Sirius' house hours later, saw him again some days afterwards, attending the funeral together with Cho, Ron, and Almyra - she hadn't known Belinda but she had shared a week's guard with Sirius.

\* \* \*

For Harry and for Cho, the following days were overshadowed by the memory of Belinda McGraw, terrific cop and challenging woman, dumped dead at the entrance to an owl store. It had an impact on their private encounters, added an element of sadness, deepening the emotion of being lucky, together, alive, added also an element of guilt at the thought of Sirius, sharpening the thrill in their young bodies and souls for which life went on, had only just begun.

The same shadow, even stronger, hung over the next event in Hogwarts. The portkey link with Durmstrang was operative.

At the evening of the same day, Dumbledore celebrated a short ceremony before supper, announcing the news and presenting two guests, a temporary and a permanent one. The permanent guest was Boris Stolichnov, Durmstrang's liaison officer in Hogwarts, the counterpart of Hogwarts' own in Durmstrang - their old friend Lee Jordan. Word had it that Dumbledore's first choice would have been Bob, only Bob hadn't been interested in a job so far away from Angelina.

The temporary guest of the evening was large, broad-shouldered, moustached, and known as Kristof Drilencu, ex-professor of Hogwarts, now Headmaster of Durmstrang.

After supper, before he could disappear, Harry was grabbed once more, in the common habit and for the common reason - to find a quiet place for talking. The one for the grabbing was Lupin, the quiet place Lupin's office, while the one for the talk was Drilencu.

"Mr. Potter," said the Bulgarian, "after discussing this issue with Remus, I'd like to ask you a favour."

Harry thought for a moment before answering. Drilencu's sentence could have been a simple politeness, or a nice joke. Only what he heard was a statement of someone toward whom Harry still felt an obligation, so he couldn't deny the plea, and this someone knew, had consulted Lupin to find out whether the request was reasonable, and was ready to accept the inevitable change of roles - of obligation - that would come with Harry's agreement.

All this would have been obvious with someone like Shigura or Kenzo. Looking into Drilencu's face, meeting his eyes, Harry saw it was, if not obvious, nonetheless true here as well.

Then what could it be? With details to be heard within the next moments, Harry knew it had to do with dark wizards, his experiences with them, his skill, maybe with unforgivable courses, maybe with a Golden Patronus or sibling wands. Some assistance in Durmstrang - the only possible answer.

He bowed. "Will it be French or English, Prof?"

Drilencu's eyes widened for an instant, his head spun around toward Lupin, a question in his face.

Lupin didn't grin. "No, Kristof - I didn't say a word."

Drilencu nodded, looked at Harry again, exhaled. "Please, Mr. Potter - don't do this with our students."

"I promise ... And please call me Harry - Prof."

Then Drilencu explained how weak a plant the confidence of forces against dark wizards still was in Durmstrang, and that he hoped for Harry's contribution in some evening seminars, as a speaker, as a guest to be interviewed, mainly as the living example of successful fights against the Dark Forces.

"Can I bring someone with me, Prof?"

Drilencu smiled. "I'll be delighted, Harry - and I won't be the only one, no question about that."

"Not necessarily always the same person."

The smile turned to a teasing grin. "Has been a long time since we talked about Veela and Vampires, hasn't it?"

About to protest, eager to resolve the misunderstanding, Harry stopped just in time - Drilencu's face told him the Durmstrang Headmaster hadn't got him wrong at all, this was just a return for Harry's bad habit in skipping the five unnecessary questions and answers, otherwise known as decent conversation.

Dumbledore also announced that the three schools would celebrate their union in balls, as expected. Hogwarts and Beauxbatons followed their tradition by covering Christmas and Easter, while Durmstrang had a natural date for its own ball - First of May, day of the workers, more exactly the evening before. This date fit ever so nicely as Easter would be early next year.

Now it was Monday, Harry sat in class, feeling edgy, listening to a droning voice, or trying to. For him, this was the wrong teacher in the wrong place. Social Ethics could have been a fascinating topic, only - Binns seemed just good for killing any enthusiasm in the students. Bitter regret filled Harry at the thought of having dropped Grubbly-Plank, while being stuck with this ghost ... Remembering a lesson about Giants was a painful memory how Social Ethics might have been with this witch as teacher.

It didn't improve his mood either that Professor Binns was more than fond of him, hinting every now and then there were two hearts in Harry's chest. To find an exit for his rage, he tried to give Binns hell in discussions, supported by Ron, whose perspective was pretty much the opposite of Binns's own.

The effect could only be called counter-productive. Binns was delighted of their diligence, while totally unable to transform this feedback into any tolerable method of teaching.

More from opposition than anything else, Harry raised his arm. "Professor, how do wizard and Muggles societies differ in criminal structures?"

"Oh, in many aspects, Mr. Potter ... Quite a lot, really."

How to strangle a ghost? The hands would not find any grip ... "Such as - Professor?"

"You already mentioned the keyword - structures. The wizarding world has a natural tendency to hide, put into a world which contains more Muggles than wizards. This is a genuine structure for a criminal organization ... On the other side, wizards are quite reluctant to accept global organizations, while Muggles just love them. This is also true for criminals ... But may we now return to our own topic, Mr. Potter?"

Ron asked, "What about money?"

"There's no difference. Money is a motive for Muggles criminals as well as for wizard criminals - same with a desire for power, vengeance, and other emotions. Now ..."

Harry asked, "And techniques?"

"There's an obvious difference, isn't it? A common Muggles tool is a gun, and a bullet can be traced back to the gun from which it was fired. How to do this with a Killing Curse? ... All you can do is to test a wand with a *Priori Incantatem* ... But now, please, Mr. Potter ..."

It was maddening. Had Binns simply been stupid and ignorant, the only task required would be to endure these classes. But no, he was full of knowledge, could even set associations - provided you found the right question, and the right time, and it wasn't too far away from Binn's own planning for this hour.

After classes, Harry went upstairs, saw Almyra, probably on her way to the Owlery, followed her.

"Hi, Al ... Mind my company here?"

"Er - no." She didn't look at him, was busy with Hedwig.

"How was your trip to London?"

Almyra had used the weekend for a shopping tour, an attempt of getting used to some money, as she'd said, and to give her global network ticket something to do. She had done it alone, after receiving declines from Cho and Harry, who currently found London not the most inviting place, who found the idea of a luxury suite in a hotel quite enticing in general, while with Almyra next door - alone in her room - not too appealing.

"Good," replied Almyra, to add after some seconds, "I found some nice things."

Her enthusiasm was incredible. "Yeah," said Harry, "It's a hard job, getting used to some money."

A smile appeared in Almyra's face, faded quickly.

"Mind a walk, Al?"

"Not now ... It's fine, here."

Was this a denial, or an invitation? Harry couldn't decide, but he could ask. "Shall I go?"

She shook her head.

Harry looked around, found a table, moved up in a single motion, sat there in the lotus position.

A moment of silence. Then Almyra sighed. "I met Sirius."

"Oh ... Was he shopping too?"

"No." After a quick glance toward him, Almyra explained, "I visited him."

"Nice house, isn't it?"

"Yes ... We talked."

Harry kept silent.

Almyra sent him another glance, looked away. "Can you do something else, other than sitting there? ... Talking, for example?"

"All right, then ... Was he surprised to see you?"

"No ... Yes, a bit."

"Did he drink much?"

"Not too much, no - only ..."

He waited a moment for her to finish, listening to the echo of her words in his mind, then asked, "When did you leave him?"

Almyra's hands, busy with Hedwig, stopped.

He waited.

"Next morning."

A sound escaped Harry's throat, hearing this after he and Cho had declined just because of the unbalanced grouping.

Almyra placed herself on the same table, her legs dangling, her hands under her thighs.

Harry had found the words to say. "For comfort, and to stop him drinking."

She glanced to him. "Yes ..." Then she issued some kind of half-giggle. "Maybe I wasn't completely unselfish. Sometimes ..."

So there had been no significant progress in this case either. Teachers and their codex, no matter what ...

Anticipating the path of Harry's thoughts, Almyra said, "We aren't much further yet, not in the project nor otherwise ... So I felt a kind of freedom, and ... Sirius and I, we've shared a horrible week, and seeing him there ... I thought, if I can help him overcome, some kind of kick start ..."

"Did it help?"

"I hope so." A quick grin. "Otherwise - yes."

Harry sighed. "I hope, too."

Another glance from Almyra, a glance that held, didn't end, didn't fade. Still looking at him, she said, "He told me not to come again."

"In its own, peculiar way, that sounds promising, doesn't it?"

"Harry?"

He turned to her, unprepared for her question. "You and Snape - what kind of training is this?"

He used his skill, earned in Japan and afterwards. "Advanced levels of Defence - things that don't fit in the regular classes."

Almyra was looking ahead. "When ... With someone you have shared a week in a forest, you can feel the difference between sorrow and desperation - or determination, or the lack of it ... or the lack of the lack."

"Of course," agreed Harry, his mind racing, searching for words, finding them. "... And then, you keep this knowledge to yourself, don't share it with anyone unless forced so, and accept the apparent and the seemingly apparent without asking."

Almyra glanced at him, hope in her eyes, saw his smile, creating a smile of relief in her own face, a deep exhaling. "Well, then - if I had known, I wouldn't ..." A quick grin, then serious again. "How was she, Harry?"

"Great ... Gorgeous, and a fighter. When thinking of her, I tell myself - some day, some day we'll have found the figures in the background, and then ... It won't change a bit, but it helps to handle the memory."

"Did he love her?"

"I asked him that ... He said he doesn't know, maybe, maybe still."

"What do you think?"

Harry looked at Almyra. "Aside from a lot of differences, Bel was the woman you might be some years from now, or might have been when joining the squad rather than science ... Now guess why he told you not to come again?"

\* \* \*

Cho wanted to visit Lleyrin - and Seselith. Harry felt somewhat reluctant to use this portkey link on call, and this schedule was really tight, now that sessions with Snape had added to assistant duties and his own schoolwork, in which the training with Kenzo formed a bottomless pit. On the other hand, he would find the opportunity to talk with Lleyrin about a mysterious issue, and most of all - what was the sense in pondering an idea Cho had in her mind?

This raised the question of presents.

Cho grinned maliciously. "Yours is obvious, Harry, won't you agree?"

"Yes, of course."

Cho looked puzzled. "I'm not quite sure whether we're talking about the same."

"Then maybe it isn't that obvious - might that be, as impossible as the thought ..." Harry ducked the blow.

Cho grinned very maliciously. "I'll make you suffer for that ... Anyway - as far as I can see, your present is a nice collection of stories."

He grinned at her, until her cheeks turned pink. "A nice *selection* of stories - agreed ... Otherwise, mine will be a *bokken*."

Cho grimaced. "Of course - leaving me there in the rain ... And what am I supposed to come with?"

"Yours has to be the one for Seselith, I think we agree on that ... Well, why not settling with the obvious?"

Cho snarled, "What - is - the - obvious, young Potter?"

"Why - a bouquet of juniper, of course."

She looked dumbstruck. "Of course - stupid me."

"Well - I wouldn't go that far ... maybe a bit single-minded, recently ..." This blow he had to take, but then, maybe he did so on purpose.

It was a strange feeling, wandering down the hill into the valley where they would be dwarfed by the residents any moment now. They had to ask for Lleyrin's address, earning directions and smiles - telling stories seemed very much a Giants' habit.

Seselith was delighted, beaming at the sight of Cho and Harry, beaming still more at the bouquet.

Before they could come any further, a big bundle was there, jumping, dancing, whincing, not letting go of Harry who had to cuddle it - Fang. The dog looked not the least bit neglected - still, his welcome couldn't have more excited after some months of exile.

Then, sitting at some boxes and cushions, Harry had the opportunity to examine Seselith and to collect data for the concept of *well proportioned* among Giant women.

Lleyrin inspected the *bokken*. "Once you brought me a Bulgarian shepherd's weapon as a present from Hermione Granger, and it turned out the winning element in the first part of a battle ... Now I see our weapon - in the proper size for you, after I've seen your own weapon in the second half of that battle ... Harry Potter, this is a pattern I have to think about for a while."

"That makes two of us, Lleyrin ... In the meantime, I'm busy learning to use it."

The Giant smiled. "In the meantime, Harry Potter, I hope you come with a bunch of stories to tell."

"Definitely, Lleyrin - as far as I'm allowed to tell." Harry glanced at his side where Cho was sitting.

Lleyrin smiled dryly. "No - I mean something new, for ears to hear what eyes can't see." Then, just to calm down a dog which wouldn't stop whining, he seized for Fang, moved him up, placed him to Harry's feet.

Harry spoke about super wands, and how to get them under control, about *aikido* and *kenjutsu*, and about The Burrow. Then he said, "I have something else to talk about - it's half of a story, the rest is a riddle."

Seselith smiled. "That sounds like a return for a Giants tale."

"Not on purpose, Seselith - and not as nice." Harry told the story of disappearing owls, of a stunt against harpies, a private conversation outside a demolished building, and of a mysterious accident with four victims and a less mysterious one with a dead cop.

Lleyrin had listened silently, motionless. "I think the first riddle is a simple one ... This accident reminds me strongly of Voldemort."

"Why, Lleyrin?"

"Because he cannot stand the thought of being successfully opposed - not the tiniest bit. As far as I can see, the death of these five people doesn't change anything ... What about owl mail now?"

Harry confirmed that owls did not disappear again.

"Yes, what I thought ... These five people died for vengeance ... It's half of a miracle that your two teachers, Snape and Lupin, are still alive - no doubt thanks to Hogwarts, and Albus Dumbledore, and you, Harry Potter - " Lleyrin smiled. "But then, they're in good company."

Harry was thoughtful. "I would agree, Lleyrin, only - what bothers me is that this company is so closely connected to Muggles, or Muggles technology, or methods ... Voldemort is famous for his detesting Muggles."

The Giant didn't shake his head, simply because this common example of human body language was considered insulting in this valley. Instead, he said, "Voldemort has used Dementors - with little success. He has used Giants, not scoring any better. Now he's giving Muggles a try ... Before you protest, Harry Potter - do you think his opinion of Dementors or Giants is any better than that of Muggles? ... And he has been tricked by Goblins."

Harry found no loophole in Lleyrin's arguments.

"Assuming you're right, Lleyrin - what's the purpose?"

"This is beyond my scope, Harry Potter ... Giants think in valleys, and for good reason - " Lleyrin smiled again, "sometimes in forests, at the most. A worldwide network is a sword of which I cannot detect the blade immediately."

"You have declined to accept any link here, Lleyrin."

"Yes, Harry Potter - because nobody could show me a benefit. On the other side, the disadvantages were quite obvious - tourists, for example."

Cho said, "I hope I didn't do anything wrong, when claiming this portable link."

"Oh no." Seselith's voice was very determined. "How else could you reach this house - after all, it's Harry's home as well." Which, of course, was a reminiscence of a Giant in Harry's heart.

"And what if other people use it, Seselith?"

The Giantess smiled sweetly. "Where's the problem, Cho Chang? ... Didn't you say it's portable?"

A moment later, Seselith hinted she could see still another story - in Cho's face.

After a short hesitation, Cho told the story of Marie-Christine's analysis and Harry's counter argument.

Seselith wasn't too impressed. "Fate and destiny are fine and well, but sometimes you can think around one corner too much, Cho Chang ... Keep the facts simple - Voldemort wanted to kill Harry in first place, and it's hard to believe he did so because he was waiting for the child of this child."

"Agreed, Seselith - but after it failed, he certainly adjusted his strategy."

"Certainly, Cho Chang - which means fate is only so much, and the rest is taking measures ... Sometimes, the riddle of fate can only be solved by grabbing someone near waters." At these words, she smiled at a Giant who called himself Lleyrin the Fist.

Even so, Cho found no loophole in this final argument.

\* \* \*

The new Gryffindor Quidditch team was complete. After talking with Viktor, Ron had asked a fifth-year by the name of Wynton Jeffries, receiving a happy grin as an answer.

They had dropped the idea of an election test. "There's a better way," Ron said, "which will avoid anyone thinking we're practicing nepotism, and it will cause less efforts ... We'll announce the names, and we'll offer a one-to-one contest for anyone who thinks he - or she - can beat the other candidate."

They made the announcement in the Gryffindor tower.

Nobody challenged Ron. Which didn't mean there was nobody thinking he might be a better Beater, only - replacing Ron in a team with Harry, the thought alone was an excuse for wetting your pants. Maybe this had to be rated as nepotism, but if so, then at least extreme enough to choke any protest.

Nobody challenged Ginny. A look at Katie and Alicia, when they asked around who wanted to give it a try, had been enough to asphyxiate any attempt.

Hearing Wynton's name, two other fifth-years had asked for a contest, looking sure about the outcome - Wynton moved so slowly, spoke slowly, had to be an awful mistake.

Wynton did the first run, between the goalposts while the three Chasers were running one attack after the other, for the test period of fifteen minutes.

The first candidate cancelled his vote without even trying. Yes, Wynton moved slowly, if you could believe your eyes, except somehow he caught the Quaffle if the shot offered any chance. He seemed to know what the Chaser would do, was there, stopping the Quaffle with his slow arms.

The second candidate did his turn - probably more for personal pride rather than a realistic hope, at least the results indicated so.

After this test, Katie walked to Harry, "Sometimes I dream ..."

He raised an eyebrow.

She grinned. "... a dream in which I have to do a penalty for us, and it's so tight, these ten points would make or break ... I hope Wynton will never be the goalie in my dream, because then it'll be a true nightmare."

Hearing about a first-year girl as the new Seeker, there had been six competitors. They had scheduled the contest for the next day, before supper.

Waiting in the Quidditch pit, Harry checked the time, then looked at Rahewa. "Was there any confusion about the time?"

She shook her head vigorously. "No, Harry."

"Then why ..." He watched her face. "Does it make sense to wait any longer?"

"No."

"What happened?"

No answer.

"Rahewa - please tell me exactly what you did."

"I spoke with all of them, that's why I know there is no misunderstanding about the time ... That's all."

"What did you say?"

"I went to them, and I asked if they were challenging me, and made sure they know the time ... Otherwise, I only said that we'll meet again up in the air."

He looked at her.

She looked back.

"And all the time, you were looking them in the eyes, right?"

She nodded, doing it with him.

"Well, I think that's the explanation ... I can imagine how this sentence was ringing in their ears." Harry chuckled. "Let's go."

With the team complete, Ron started scheduling training sessions immediately, reserving Quidditch pit time, and doing other tasks of a captain. But first, he had a more private issue to deal with. He came to Harry. "Listen, we have something to clarify."

Harry bowed, earning an angry look.

"It's about broomsticks."

"Why?" Harry couldn't follow. "It's no question that I cannot use the Steel Wing, not with the risk of touching someone in mid-air."

"Yeah, exactly ... You need a Firebolt."

Harry swore inwardly about his slow reaction. "There's nothing to be clarified. I'll get one from the Hogwarts pool."

"No you won't."

Harry had an idea. "Okay - under one condition."

Ron looked suspicious, very much so.

"We'll do an *aikido* match ... The winner can select what to do."

Ron looked triumphant. "We both know, I'm chanceless - and that's why you cannot offer such a dishonourable deal to me."

Beaten with his own weapon, by a clever chess player. Only, Harry was a Go player, used to tiny pieces and long-term strategies. "You're right, Ron ... But I remember something else - and now's the time to draw this card."

"Which card?"

"Remember before Christmas? When we had a longer conversation about a present, and shared prices, and our deal? ... I still have an ob on you - and now I'm claiming it."

Ron stared in disbelief. "You can't be serious - that's the most pervert usage of an ob I ever heard about."

Harry grinned diabolically. "No - it's Zen."

In the first training sessions, they realized how much work was lying ahead. Ron, otherwise a good captain, couldn't be called a good trainer, simply because he had to learn too much for himself. Harry and Ron had to find a way for synchronizing themselves, at least enough to come in calling distance to the twins' performance. Ron scored better in finding the optimal position. Harry, in contrast, showed more efficiency in the technique of beating and sending a

Bludger the worst course, or best from their own perspective. And they had different opinions - not the best approach for a Beater team in mid-air.

Wynton and Rahewa were unproblematic cases, only that it was Harry who had to train Rahewa, an agreeable task except for the time it took. She never came to ask for the next training, she simply waited in some stasis until Harry would come and say, "All right - light your feet."

With some reluctance, pressed by the lack of time, Harry suggested a combined training, with him and Ron attempting to shoot Bludgers toward Rahewa, or one of them as an attacking Beater and the other as a defending one.

The risk of injuries was obvious, but the first try proved already so successful that Ron dropped his concern. Surprisingly, or maybe not at all, playing opposite roles was a good training for Ron and Harry, deepened their mutual understanding. Rahewa, on the other side, had a clear preference for trainings in which Harry was *not* her defender.

Ginny improved too, however slowly. No - it wasn't correct to say she learned slowly. She could perform a triple attack together with Katie and Alicia, passing through the barriers Harry and Rahewa tried to establish, moving fluently, reacting instantly, to finish with a shot even Wynton could only watch helplessly. Then Ginny's eyes were shining, an expression of triumph in her face - to be replaced by sullenness the next moment. She was testy, unsteady in her performance, always good for an outburst of hot temper which found the worst possible target in Katie.

In short, Ginny was a problem. Ron recognized it, had a pretty clear impression why, spoke with Harry.

Harry spoke with Ginny.

Her answer was - well, honest. "It's nothing new to you, is it? ... Listen - up there, doing a run with the other two, scoring, or shooting to Alicia and seeing her trick Wynton, can you imagine what that's doing with me? I guess so ..."

"Then ..."

She stared at him. "I'm giving it four weeks more with Kenzo. Then ... then I'll ask Gérard, or using my network ticket for a weekend trip to London, or whatever ... I'm fed up, with my behaviour in the team as much as ..."

Harry pondered the idea to talk with Fleur, dropped it. He had all information required to judge by himself; Fleur couldn't tell him anything he didn't know already. And Ginny was serious, no question about that. She had set a deadline, and the clock was ticking.

\* \* \*

"You're mad. Downright mad. I ... I can't believe I heard what you just said - and I can't believe you said what I just heard. Not ..."

Harry kept silent.

"What's wrong with you? ... Isn't it enough that you've solved that problem for yourself? Do you have to walk around to get other people going? ... Not only that, no - just for good measure, you pick me? For ... for your own ..."

Harry stared in the angry face. "She isn't really, but you're right ... And that's one of the reasons why I can't do it by myself ... Although - don't think I didn't get an offer - more than once."

The face looked in disbelief.

"This is a case of emergency," explained Harry for the umpteenth time. "I'm asking you a favour!"

"Favour? ... Some favour."

"She's asking you a favour - through me, although she doesn't know ... My God, she's in a state that shouldn't be totally unknown to you - and in this state, you're accepting trustworthy help gladly."

A piercing glance hit him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry held the stare. "Ginny's threatening me with a trip to London. This particular remark gave me the idea ... Please, Sirius."

His godfather sat down. After a moment, he said, "I can't, Harry. The thought of meeting Arthur ... She's just too young."

"She's so young, she has to change clothes after every Quidditch training ... Do I express myself clearly enough?"

Sirius didn't answer, which was good as well.

"She's admiring you. She'd never say a word to me because you're my godfather. But there are enough similarities between you and Kenzo ... And she admired Bel."

The remark softened Sirius' expression.

"Look at it from another angle ... Assume you make yourself seen at some places - with her, that is. Wouldn't it be a quantum leap in your efforts to appear as a moral wreck, prone to the bottle and any temptation that lurks around the corner?"

Now Sirius was truly speechless.

Harry took it as an opportunity to outline more details. "I remember a conversation we had ... About an invitation to some party, and suddenly there's this girl at your side. Isn't that what you're waiting for? Then why not showing yourself with a girl at your side, young enough to get photographed for a nice blackmailing?"

"You ... you're insane. I could never ..."

"Are you trying to tell me all the stunts Bel performed were before your time as chief?"

"She was an experienced woman who knew what to expect!"

"True ... But you should see Ginny in *aikido*, or in the air. She's as determined as Bel was. Of course she's lacking experience - that's exactly why I'm here!"

"No."

"I didn't say you should hang around with her. Show yourself once - find someone to shoot a picture on which her face is hidden enough, while her age is clearly discernible - and then find a way to make this picture get lost ... My God, how come I have to tell you the tricks of the trade?"

Sirius glanced at him. "Severus seems to be a good teacher ... I'm glad you're spending at least some time with something other than ... Anyway - forget it, Harry ... Just forget it."

Harry didn't think so.

\* \* \*

The air was pretty cool for a walk along the lake, or sitting on the ground. However, Harry had no intention of having this conversation anywhere near or inside the buildings. Not this one.

Ginny looked at him. "Okay, we're sufficiently far away ... What's up?"

"I have to tell you something. It ..."

"Now that's a real surprise. Who'd have thought it?"

"You ... It consists of three parts. After the first part, you'll be ready to kill me."

He had her full attention.

"You shouldn't do that, because then you'd never hear the other two parts ... Can I start?"

"Maybe you should tie me first." The thought seemed appealing to her.

"Might be, or maybe after the third part ... So?"

The remark had the desired effect.

"Well, then ... Some weeks ago, I had a conversation with Kenzo. Very much *sub rosa*, still, very straight ... About you."

Ginny looked thunderstruck. "You did? ... That was very kind of you."

"Yes ... His message was clear - he'd like to do it any time, but never here in Hogwarts, under these conditions. He hinted a seminar like mine - far away."

Ginny's fury grew by fractions of a second. "You didn't tell me! You let me struggle on and on! You ..."

"I looked further!"

Was it the sharpness in his voice, or what he'd said? Anyway, Ginny shut up, waiting for his next words.

"I have a candidate ... He's still more than reluctant, actually he said I should forget it, but - well, I'm sure your arguments will be more convincing."

Ginny grinned, blushed, looked away. "That was nicely said." She cleared her throat. "Who ..."

"Sirius."

Her head came around. "You're joking!"

"No I'm not!" he snapped. "This isn't funny, and I can't remember a single laugh while talking with him."

Ginny looked hurt for an instant, then her face turned dark red. She looked away.

Harry touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry - didn't mean it. It's only because - but if he wasn't my godfather, and without Bel, he would have been a prime candidate long before ... Do you agree on that?"

Her nod came almost immediately, from a head that didn't turn.

"So it's just a feeling of indecency ... Well, before I see you in the hands of Gérard, I'm ready to live with that. Gérard is dangerously immature - in contrast to Sirius."

Ginny was silent for a moment, then asked, "Was this the second part?"

"Yes."

"And what's the third?"

"Before I start with that, I need your answer for the second."

What he heard was something like a cough. He stepped forward, took her shoulders, held her close. "Ginny - it's impossible what we're doing here, but we do it in the best intentions ... So it must be Zen ... Will you give it a try?"

He felt her nodding.

"Okay then ... Our conversation so far didn't exactly qualify for any public forum, no matter how limited, but - part number three isn't to be discussed with anyone but me. No exception - none."

Seeing Ginny's nod, Harry explained Sirius' goal, and what would be Ginny's role in this scheme.

She looked at him. "Do I need - er, special dresses?"

He laughed. "Heaven's sake, no! ... You have to look exactly what you are - a schoolgirl who shouldn't even know what she's doing there."

Ginny found her grin back. "Sorry - that's an impossible task."

\* \* \*

This conversation had been in the middle of the week. Harry let it follow by a shorter one with Ron, in which he advised not to schedule Quidditch training for Saturday afternoons.

Ron grinned, nodded, totally unaware what he was agreeing to.

For the next two days, as it turned out, Harry had to avoid meeting Ginny's glance, because invariably she started to turn red. After all, she was still quite young - considering deadlines, that was.

It earned him a few remarks. Ron's question was full of concern. "What's this, Harry - a fallback in time?"

"No, not at all - quite the opposite ... Come to think of it, maybe it is, only more than expected."

Harry's remark was clear as mud, supposedly so, however good enough to make Ron blush. "Did you ..."

"Maybe there's a solution. Let's hope and see - um, I mean, look away."

Ron laughed, seemed relieved, walked off, again totally unaware what he was agreeing to.

Cho's question was simple, open to all sides. "Harry, what did you do to that poor girl?"

His answer was less simple, not leaving open much, making Cho speechless for a moment. "Nothing - other than indicating someone who'd think differently about that."

Then, of course, there was Katie. "Harry, have you been chasing Chasers? ... If so, why not me too?"

He looked at her. "Can you be a bit more precise?"

"I'm talking about Ginny, as you know perfectly well. Seeing you, she looks as if ..."

He stared into her eyes. "As if we're sleeping together? ... We don't."

Now Katie turned red. "I'm sorry ... That was a stupid remark. Only ..."

"Forget it."

Maybe she didn't, or most likely so. At any rate, Katie didn't ask further about the *only* that had hung in the air, pushed off using embarrassment rather than logic.

Then it was Friday evening, and Ginny wasn't seen at the supper table.

Harry saw her again Monday at lunch, avoided looking at her, still by habit and more so than before.

During the Quidditch training at this evening, he was busy with Ron and Rahewa, not seeing much of Ginny, not watching on purpose, noticing nothing unusual, maybe a little lack of concentration.

After the training, Ginny was gone.

The next day, they met in a *kenjutsu* training, working together, still after the other *sennin* had left with Kenzo. However, this was no time to ask, not with Ginny's fierce attacks, demanding all of Harry's concentration, while her own faltered for a moment, resulting in a bad hit into her ribs.

She stopped. "Ouch, that hurts like hell ... Harry, can you do a little magic for me?"

"Sure." He made a step.

"Not here ... And I won't mind a bit of kneading. I feel like a piece of wood."

He looked at her. She hadn't done this before.

A quick grin. "Scared?"

"Well ... No longer."

"Right." She walked ahead.

Harry gave her time to shower, followed, to shower while Ginny sat in the hot water, to sit in the tub while she was in the steam room, to skip this, bursting through the cold tub and dressing until she returned to lay down at the table, still rosy all over from the heat.

He took the opportunity to test his skill in curing spells without a wand, satisfied with the result, then started to knead, shoulders, arms, legs.

"I met him Friday evening. He was mad as hell."

Harry continued kneading.

"He wanted to throw me out ... I said then I'd sit on the staircase."

Harry continued with Ginny's arms.

"He gave me a room. Wanted to lock me in ... I asked if this wasn't a bit ridiculous. He said he didn't think so ... Anyway, he locked himself in."

Kneading, Harry had an impression how she'd found out.

Ginny giggled. "Then, Saturday, he seemed a bit desperate. Your ears should have rung, as much as he was swearing at you."

Harry continued to listen and to knead.

"At some point, I asked him whether he was scared ... I guess I was trying to challenge him, only he just said yes ... Then I said I was too, a bit, although not of him, and how happy I was his drinking was just a cover, and how much I felt with him ... and that I was quite inexperienced in - er, undercover work, but ..."

Harry gasped. "Did you really use that term?"

"Well - without going into details too much, one word gave the other, and so ..."

"So you've found some convincing arguments."

Ginny giggled. "Erm - no, actually, it was him who found them."

Several weeks later, Harry received a message. In the few lines of unremarkable nonsense, only a single word was important.

*Sinker*

Somebody had contacted Sirius.

## 11 - Projects and Plannings

With an acute problem solved, Harry tried investing some more efforts and concentration in classes at Hogwarts - after all, he counted a student here, whose sense of honour required more attention than that of a mere guest with other things in mind.

Which only presented another case of right versus true - he *had* other things in mind.

It was no help, either, when Harry was stuck in classes he couldn't care less about - Herbology, for example. Why did he need to know about medicinal plants and how to harvest them? He was more likely to need the cure himself, or cause the need for it, than to be the one to create the cure.

Professor Sprout looked angry. "Mr. Potter, why don't you leave us alone if you cannot distinguish between a tiny cut in the bark and the blow of a sword?"

Harry bowed. "I'm sorry, Prof ... although, honestly, that's what I've been asking myself."

"I could understand if you were trying to carve a heart ... But that's more of a wood-cutting there."

Harry felt the pinkiness in his face, less from the grinning of the other students, or Parvati's snorting, more because Sprout was right. And disrespect toward a teacher qualified even less for improving his mood.

He spoke with McGonagall.

The Headmistress spoke with some colleagues - about a student whom they had met once in a remarkable O.W.L. exam. Then she informed Harry.

Professor Grubbly-Plank beamed. "The lost son is back ... I cannot offer a calf, Mr. Potter - actually, I'd like to ask you for a contribution, although a temporary one ... Our current topic is Centaurs."

Harry beamed back. "My pleasure, Prof ... It's not a real one, but at least we can talk, and everybody will understand because it's English, not Parseltongue."

Then the witch asked him for another favour.

"I'm sorry, Prof, but there's no way ... I could ask Firenze, only I know his answer, and just asking would be such a loss of face - please don't make me do it."

Grubbly-Plank, indeed as clever as Harry remembered her, knew a solution to that problem. She had him standing on the stage in the spector room, telling the stories of his encounters with this Centaur - just a tiny bit edited, while the other students watched the scenes in the large globe, smiling sympathetically at the picture of Cho with her arms in Firenze's mane. Yes, Harry had been able to filter out Cho's remark, while he simply found no way to change this picture, not without creating a bad caricature of two graceful creatures.

Even after the topic of Centaurs was finished, Care of Magical Creatures turned out the right thing to do. Grubbly-Plank announced new topics which, at first, seemed non-magical at all, until she asked if the students had ever heard of an Animagus. The broad grin in the witches' face turned slightly pink when meeting Harry's eyes.

Yes, Animagus level was the long-term target in Transfiguration, like Apparition in Charms. Altogether, classes more and more changed to project meetings, with goals that would, for the most part, be reached only toward the end of the seventh year.

This wasn't true for all projects, or all goals. Some of them seemed rather short, or rather permanent, depending on how to look at them. For example, there was this Potions seminar McGonagall offered - girls only, about contraceptive potions.

Hermione gave little more than a weak grin to this offer, after all, she had mastered these recipes long before, owing to private research. Her interest grew a bit when McGonagall announced information about latest developments, enough to join an evening seminar.

While not interested in the details, Harry found the topic worth a short conversation, asked Hermione about the newest developments.

"Well, they've developed a potion *after* ... Nice idea, basically, but I can't see an improvement yet."

"Why not? ... Seems quite practical to me."

Hermione looked at him with mix of know-it-better, mockery, and embarrassment. "All these potions," she said, "aren't the nicest cocktails you can think of ... Now, the regular type is a cup once a week ... Is this answer detailed enough?"

Yes it was, giving another example how easily the mind could drift off from topics in class to something totally different.

Harry struggled also with things in his mind he tried to shake off. For example, the thought of Sirius dealing with unknown people, known only for evil purposes and for a tendency to get rid of anyone causing trouble, or trying to.

Another thought he banished quickly whenever it occurred was that of the next year in Hogwarts. It would be his final one, then with him as a seventh-year who then no longer would find a reason for walking over to the Ravenclaw table. The thought was hard to stand - although, in - er, practical terms, the difference might not be as significant as expected, what with portkey links and network tickets ...

Even now, the thought of booking a room for a night in Hogsmeade had limited appeal for him and Cho. A luxury suite somewhere far away, with no known face around, yes, that picture had some thrill. And, at the other end of the scale, the image of a guest suite in Hogsmeade caused a tickling badly suited for public places. Just a sentence like, "I wish I had a wizard picture of, er - Flamel" seemed enough to raise some trouble breathing regularly.

With summer gone, they looked for alternatives. One alternative crossed their mind on a Saturday afternoon. After looking at each other, they met shortly afterwards in the storage room outside, mounted their Steel Wings, and jumped up.

The Giants' camp looked neglected, of course, however the huts seemed still intact, more or less. And the barns.

Coming toward Lleyrin's hut and barn, their natural choice, Harry sensed something. Instinctively, his arm signaled squad formation, then his hand reached for his wand.

Checking around, he tried to locate the origin of that feeling, concentrating on *haragei* rather than common senses like eyes. So it was Cho who heard it first, signaling him with a hand on her ear.

Then he could hear it too. The noise seemed to come from Hagrid's former hut.

They moved closer, still on their Steel Wings, carefully, slowly.

Close to the hut, Harry stopped, relaxed, grinned. Registering his signal, Cho closed in, heard it too, started to grin by herself. What they heard was music, and the singer had to be French.

Harry whispered. "We must notify them - except I don't know how, without scaring them to hell."

Cho nodded, thought, smiled. "I have an idea." She touched down, followed by Harry.

About ten yards from the hut, Cho draw her wand. Next moment, Harry could watch as something glittery shot through the air, exploded before the hut's window in a soft bang, presenting a rain of green and golden sparkles.

A second later, the music stopped.

No movement.

Cho tried it again. No reaction from inside.

Harry had an idea. It was a little difficult to steady his mind, feeling this hard temptation to laugh, but at the second try, it worked.

The Centaur circled around the hut, glanced through the window, came back. "There's nothing harmful, master."

Harry bowed, the Centaur did something similar, then disappeared.

Seconds later, the door came open, Ron in the huge frame, his voice still a bit shaky. "Good thinking, Harry ... Pity I couldn't appreciate the sight, but until I realized what it was, I almost wet my ..."

Harry grinned. "You got it all wrong, Ron - it wasn't yours where this should happen."

Cho was still laughing when another figure appeared in the door. Obviously, certain remarks were challenging French girls beyond embarrassment. Janine looked a bit pinkish. "Mind your own business, 'arry."

He bowed. "Will do ... Just for your information - Lleyrin's hut is a bit haunted, you might stay off."

Janine had regained her balance, and more. "You mean - translucent figures, moaning, cries in the night?"

Cho turned to Harry. "Let's go ... This hut's haunted even worse."

\* \* \*

Someone else encountered problems too, although of a different kind, and certainly more related to school issues. This someone was Hermione, and her trouble had to do with her graduate work dealing with werewolf cures.

At lunch, she spoke about her project, that she had done a lot of hard work with analysis, and that she had designed some alternative recipes - on parchment. Further progress required tests.

Ron asked, "How can you know it isn't poisonous? ... Imagine, your test candidate drinks that potion and next moment - arrrghh." Ron illustrated his meaning with two hands at his throat.

Hermione looked at him with disgust.

It took Ron a second to realize - it wasn't his lack of confidence in her recipes, his pantomime had raised the memory of Hagrid and his own brother. He flushed. "Sorry - I forgot."

Harry said, "At least - nobody can say you'd spare your family from your jokes, living or otherwise."

Ron's expression didn't improve. "Harry - that's some masterpiece of an excuse. I feel guiltier than before."

Hermione looked satisfied. "It's all good for you ... But to answer your question - I'm ready to drink any potion by myself first. That should guarantee nobody will die of it."

Ron had recovered, saw his chance for a return. "Really?"

Even Hermione had to grin, approving his score - after all, the implication could almost be counted as a compliment. By herself, that was.

Harry asked, "What would be the effect toward you?"

"Not much," explained Hermione, "since I'm no werewolf ... Might be it comes back quickly, otherwise ..."

Ron looked disgusted. "That's some table conversation - by all means."

Hermione saw her chance. "Sorry - I didn't know body fluids were such a touchy issue for you."

Harry saw his chance. "Touchy is the word."

Hermione had waited for this joyful atmosphere, looked at Harry. "I wonder if you'd be so kind to talk with Lupin ... As a test candidate, I mean."

Harry's expression showed sympathy without hope. "I can talk with him, only - I know the answer. It's, no thanks."

"Why?" Hermione looked expectant, innocent, quite scientific.

Harry smiled, holding her stare silently.

"Well," she said, "pretty much what I thought ... In this case, I have to look for werewolves somewhere else."

"And where might that be?"

"Everywhere ... I need them, it's as simple as that. The first step will be to ask Lupin if he knows someone else, but that's something I'll do by myself."

Harry felt relief hearing that. A moment later, he became aware that asking Lupin would have been the simpler task, because Hermione told him with a sweet smile, "While you, Harry, might do me another favour instead ... I can imagine someone who might know where to find a werewolf, and I think you can, too."

The name that came up in Harry's mind was Sirius Black, reason enough to look blank. "Maybe so, although right now, I seem a bit ..."

Hermione grinned as if hearing a good joke. "Then I'll help you ... Rita Skeeter."

Harry's reaction told her he'd thought of someone else. However, before she had a chance to follow this track, Hermione found herself in full battle with pros and cons regarding the *Daily Prophet* woman. Harry said, "You know her at least as well as I do - it has been you who held her in a glass for a while."

"Yeah, and that's the reason why I might as well forget the idea, if you won't help."

"But I don't see a way to hide that it's for you."

"That's not necessary ..." Seeing another blank look in Harry's face, Hermione felt the need for some more bluntness. "If Rita gets her pound of flesh, she'll do it no matter who's benefitting from it."

Feeling the trap closing around himself, Harry asked, "And what pound in particular did you have in mind?"

"Ooh - Harry, I would leave this completely to you."

Neither her voice nor her expression held the slightest trace of threat, or blackmail. Still, Harry wondered if he was the only one who saw it so visibly in Hermione's words.

He didn't want to know, while there was no question - Hermione deserved his help, even if not, she would insist, a prospect which struck Harry still worse than agreeing to her idea

immediately. And a talk with Rita Skeeter might yield another benefit - after carefully preparing himself for this conversation with the help of Snape.

He stared at her. "That gives me an ob on you - you know that, do you?"

Hermione nodded, smiled - seductively, there was no denying, surprising him considerably. "What a disquieting thought, Harry - being in your debt."

Ron, too, seemed speechless for an instant. Then he said, "Hey - you never look that way at me!"

Hermione produced a mock version of her former smile. "Maybe because I'm not in your debt ... Maybe the thought won't be as disquieting ..."

Harry was very careful not to raise any challenge with his next words - too well did he know her reaction to that. "Come to think of it," he said, "Viktor's been very helpful when selecting the new Quidditch team ... I might say, it's already balanced, Hermione."

"It's awful, Harry, how you mix up business between different people." Looking at him, there was a lot of fun in Hermione's eyes. It was fun, that - wasn't it?

Harry's first station on the way toward Rita Skeeter had the shape, size, and position of the Ravenclaw table, for more than one reason. He said, "Hermione's looking for werewolves, as test candidates for her newest brewing ... She asked me if I'd ask Lupin ..."

Almyra looked startled.

"... I said I could but I knew the answer already - no ..."

Almyra looked a bit better.

"... She took my word for it ..."

Almyra looked very relieved.

"... only to send me to Rita Skeeter for that."

Startled seemed the wrong word for Cho's expression. "Can't she do it by herself?"

"Certainly - only this time she was the one who knew the answer in advance."

Too intelligent for such a mistake, too sensible as well, Cho avoided challenging Harry's friendship with Hermione. Her target could be found in a slightly different direction. "And what are you going to trade?"

Harry looked blank. "Dunno ..." A small grin. "Maybe a travel report."

Hadn't been a good idea. "Travel to which place?? ... I warn you, young ..."

"Haiti."

"Huh?" Two astonished faces turned to Almyra.

"Haiti - to look for werewolves ... They're called *loup-garou* there, I think you'd find quite a few."

But of course, as glad as Hermione looked, hearing this information, she saw no direct connection to Harry's promise, took it as a balance for Lupin's predicted refusal.

So Harry went for his second station, although the topic of press contact didn't strike him as the first topic to be discussed.

Snape looked thoughtful. "So he has made contact ... Well, the difficult part is over, in which impatience is your worst enemy. Now comes the simple part in which you just have to stay alive."

Harry looked horrified.

Registering it, Snape looked apologetic. "Harry - you didn't come to hear pleasantries ... Although, who'd thought of a day when I was going to wish Sirius all the luck he'll need."

Harry wanted to know how to communicate now, in this phase.

"Don't start something like a two-way mailbox. As nicely as it works, there's just no excuse when caught in the act ... In addition, Harry - you'll never make a first-rate spy, no offense intended."

Harry could grin. "None taken, Prof ... It's right as well as true."

Snape looked bewildered for a moment. "Anyway - in your case, just do the obvious - visit him in his office. There's nothing to beat a stunt in full public."

"But ..."

"Of course, you can't discuss matters there ... While you express concern, and reproach him for his drinking, you exchange something written. A pity you're no smoker - an empty pack of cigarettes is a good method, although - if this room is under surveillance ... No, much simpler - you hug him, and in doing so, you shift a paper under his collar."

Snape smiled. "You might train that - but it must be someone of comparable size." It didn't look as if Snape was volunteering for the job of Harry's training partner.

Then Harry wanted to know how, or where, a real discussion could be performed.

"Hmm ... Difficult. Not in his house - you must expect the worst, meaning any regular place is compromised this way or the other."

Harry grimaced, thinking of someone else.

Luckily, Snape couldn't interpret this completely. "Well," he said, "that's how it's played ... You have to meet him at an irregular place, and it must be unsuspecting. And it must be so that you two aren't recorded travelling through links ... Having found such a place, you pass

him time and address. Then he'll do something totally normal, and by accident, he'll do something to get rid of his shadow - if there's any. This done, he'll come to that place."

Shadow. Moving the shadow ... Moving away from the shadow, shadowy places - suddenly, Harry had an idea. "Prof - for some other reason, I'll meet that press woman, Rita Skeeter ... I was wondering if it's worth a try to milk that source."

Now Snape looked horrified. "Bloody Baron - no, Harry! ... I won't say there's no press who could be trusted, but not with you at one end and her at the other."

"Yeah, I thought so, too."

"Hopefully - in the name of Sirius."

And of someone else. Harry left, thinking about whom to ask as a training partner for passing messages under the collar, before the lenses of some hidden camera.

Cho wasn't big enough, as Snape had hinted so clearly. Almyra? Bigger, yes, although ... Dumbledore was too big, and besides ... For an instant, Harry had a picture of himself and Ginny, dropped it quickly - why didn't he look for men to train with?

Because this issue was just too confidential. Ron, for example, a perfect candidate otherwise, would never stop asking. Viktor? Wouldn't ask, was too small. Only then, the obvious choice occurred to him.

Kenzo examined his face. "You're walking on paths, Ha-ri, where the mastering of *aikido* and *kenjutsu* may not be sufficient to finish the journey."

Harry bowed. "You're right, *sensei* ... While basically this is nothing new to me, I'm still in the need of new weapons. My experience is limited to open battles in which you can show your face as it appears."

"You'll find yourself wishing dearly you were in open battle." Kenzo smiled. "But we cannot always restrict ourselves to the disciplines in which we excel ... This is why it might be wise to devote some of your exercise time to exploring *getsumai no michi*."

"This term is new to me, *sensei*."

"You might translate it as *the moonlit path* or, less poetic, seeing in the dark. It's an attempt to see where there is no light, to watch where your view is obscured ... In a way, it means developing an inner eye."

Still feeling no grasp on this path, Harry asked, "Is this comparable to *haragei*, or a part of it?"

"Comparable yes ... Maybe it's an extension - *haragei* is a technique of orientation, to locate something, at best to qualify it ... Do you know what *radar* is, Ha-ri?"

"Not really, *sensei*."

"It's a Muggles technique - like a light of special nature, except there are no eyes to see this light reflected. Muggles use radar to detect the presence of things, for example aeroplanes ... By guessing from the given circumstances, they can have a good estimation of what they found - but if, for example, they see two echos where only one aeroplane should be, they don't know what is the other, and they don't know which is which ... So, *haragei* is your radar, *Hari* - and *getsumai no michi* will allow you to see and to distinguish ... At the end, that is - don't expect success within a few days."

"How is it trained, *sensei*?"

"By disabling your other senses, especially your eyes, so that you won't be tempted to use them instead." Kenzo smiled again. "But for today, let's keep to something as simple as passing a paper under a collar."

\* \* \*

Sirius' new secretary was an older witch, looking unfriendly, snarling a sullen question into the horn, receiving an unfriendly answer, waving Harry through, only to forget him immediately.

No doubt - a ministry battle-horse.

Sirius looked no longer proper and astute. His dress showed spots, his eyes too. "You, Harry? ..." Sirius' voice offerent hardly suppressed hostility. "That's exactly what I need to cap a glorious day."

"Capping's the term - days and bottles ..." Harry could only hope his performance would pass some listener's test. "Anyway, I didn't come to start a row with my first words ... Hullo, Sirius."

He walked over, hugged a Sirius who looked astonished, flashed a warning with his eyes, who stiffened for an instant when the paper slid into his shirt.

"Well - erm, hello, Harry - at least you're friendlier than expected, took me a bit by surprise - most people have less words for me these days." Sirius' hand touched his ear.

"Really - but I was trying not to comment on that."

"So then - has been nice to see you, Harry ... My compliments to Hogwarts, and the people there - " Sirius' hand wiped his eye, "but if that's all, then good ..."

"Wait a second ... You might be able to help me with an address - I'm looking for that press woman, what's-her-name ..."

"Rita Skeeter??" There was horror in Sirius' voice.

"Exactly - that's her."

"You - of all people? I would have thought she's the last person on earth you'd be interested ..."

"It's not for me - but come to think of it, you might be able to help us too ... We're looking for werewolves."

The horror in Sirius' expression faded a bit, was replaced by astonishment. He said, "It's new to me that Hogwarts is short of werewolves, Harry."

"It is - for this particular purpose."

"Whatever that means ... Anyway, if I know any other werewolf, I'm not aware of it ... Skeeter ... Skeeter, where did I store that - wait a second, Harry."

Sirius disappeared in a small store room, returned shortly afterwards, looking bewildered. "Where did I ... Aah - I think I know."

He reached into a drawer, looked at something, grabbed for a piece of parchment and a pen, wrote some lines.

"Here - that's where you might try your luck ... If not, you have to ask the *Daily Prophet* people."

Harry studied the parchment, listing an address he knew perfectly well by himself - and nothing else. Sirius was very careful.

After asking for directions he could have described similarly well by himself, Harry left the office, checked the time - his real meeting with Sirius would come later that day, provided the plan worked out.

Early afternoon seemed to be Rita's breakfast time. She opened the door, showing surprise only for a short moment, reminding Harry of someone tricky and watchful even without the knowledge of *aikido*. "Harry Potter - my old pal ... If that isn't a splendid start for a day - come in, have a cup of tea, let's do a little chat."

Harry accepted the tea, declined eggs and bacon, of which he saw a lot, studied her. Breakfast time wasn't Rita Skeeter's best, except for her style of conversation, which seemed ready any time. "How is Hogwarts," she asked, "being on its own again? ... You don't know, by any chance, where these dark wizards went, do you?"

The dark wizards, held prisoners in Hogwarts dungeons for a while, had been transported to an unknown destination, and the only public knowledge - identical with Harry's own - was that the new prison should be on some island. He answered, "No, Rita - and it's quite on purpose that I don't know."

She shrugged. "Might have been - with your close connections to the Law Enforcement Squad."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rita Skeeter grinned, swallowed a mouthful. "We're talking about Sirius Black - your godfather."

He had never revealed that to her, while he clearly remembered a scene in Dumbledore's office, and some trick questions from Rita Skeeter. "How do you know?"

"Can you spell the word *archive*, Harry? ... Hogwarts isn't the only place where people have to do their homework."

"Okay - but if he knows, he won't tell, and I won't ask ... Aside from ..."

"Yeah - he's seen better days, hasn't he? ... That case hit him at the wrong time and in the wrong place ..." The woman's eyes scanned his face. "Do you have an explanation for that, Harry?"

"I didn't come to discuss my godfather with you, Rita."

"Certainly not - but maybe, in the course of discussing your issue, we might come back to this one ... It's strange, somehow - a man who could stand twelve years in Azkaban is blown off the track from ... Anyway - what can I do for you, Harry?"

"We're looking for werewolves ... I hoped you might know one, or some."

The woman laughed. "Is Lupin feeling lonely?"

Harry grinned, quickly returning to normal when he saw the watchful glance in the woman's face. "If so, I don't think he's looking for this kind of company ... No, it's for some research work."

"Research - what in particular?"

Harry just smiled.

"Assume I know some - what can you offer, Harry?"

He felt her stare - in his face, on his body, raising the question whether Rita Skeeter might think of more trades than information. He said, "Rita - we can discuss the price once you have some names, and these people agree to some - er, support of research work."

"No way, young man - my part only covers names and addresses, that's all ... Whether they're ready to howl and bite is none of my business."

"Hmmm ... Maybe our alternatives are less expensive, after all."

Had been a hit. "Which alternatives?"

"We've got some contacts to Haiti ... It's said there are lots of werewolves."

"It's said, huh? ... Only it's far away, and you have to travel, and these portkey links are a story of their own, and ..."

"Story? ... What story?"

Had he said too much? Too late he became aware - interrupting her hadn't been the best idea.

Rita Skeeter watched him again, this time only his face. "What I have to say in public, and for free, can be read in the *Daily Prophet*, Harry ... Who wants to have more, must come up with a deal first."

"Save it ... We're using these links a lot, and they do the job. If there was something fishy with them, it would have been published, and Sirius would be the first to take measures."

The woman tried to look innocent, failed. All she could muster was a triumphant smile. "Who said there's something fishy with them, Harry?"

With a face trained better in such tasks, he replied, "Nobody - only you hinted a story, and what else could that be ... Anyway, I came because of werewolves - that's my only interest."

Rita Skeeter grew serious. "Sometimes, you have to gather information for quite some time, and you have to be careful about what to write, and with whom to talk ... Harry, there's one difference between the two of us." She looked at him. expectantly.

"One?"

A grin. "Others could be - er, balanced, at least temporarily ... The more important difference is this - I'll never underestimate your special habit of meeting weird people and encounter weird situations, while you, on the other side, underestimate my skill when it's about distinguishing between information for the pen and confessions for an open ear, not far away from a tight mouth."

He kept silent.

"Think it over, Harry ... In the meantime, I'll look around, and we may meet again somewhere - here, or in Hogwarts ..."

He nodded. "When in Hogwarts, Rita, make sure you're not confused with a bug - lately, it's no good place for bugs."

"See what I mean - you simply don't trust me."

"Funny, isn't it?"

"The last deal we had worked out okay - you got what you wanted, I got what I wanted."

"True - and it took place after the battle was fought, and the target was just Fudge."

Rita Skeeter escorted him to the door. "As I said, Harry - think it over ... You're a lot better in hiding than last time, but still no match for me. While together, we could be a hell of a team."

\* \* \*

With the Skeeter visit done, Harry had time to kill before heading for the meeting place. He would arrive earlier than Sirius, to make sure nobody could see them together or at the same time, but even taking this into account there was time to bide. So he visited shops in the Diagon Alley, looked around - Christmas always came quite suddenly, and then you stood there without an idea for a present.

The shopwindows offered nothing that caught his eye, at least not as a Christmas present. However, passing the Magical Menagerie, he had another idea - not for today, only to be prepared ...

Coming out, there were two items hidden in his large pockets - a leash and a leather collar, both of them sized for a large dog.

Then he headed for Gringotts.

The bank clerk could have been anywhere between fifty and three hundred, guessing from his face. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, please ... I'd like to pass this message to Mr. Modragh Morony." Harry offered the small, folded parchment.

"Of course, sir - please have a seat for a minute." The Goblin disappeared through a door, was back not long afterwards. "If you would follow me, please."

For the office of a managing director, the room Harry entered seemed pretty small - but then, Goblins certainly had different opinions about the paraphernalia for higher ranks.

Had this been a face he'd seen in Dumbledore's office? Probably not, although Harry didn't know. "Mr. Potter," said the Goblin, your visit is a honour ... And your note told me not more than than it's really you, with this signature."

Harry bowed. "Mr. Morony - I have a little problem, which might be related to a mutual bond, that's why I came to you, and to ask for some help which could be given in this building."

"We'd be glad to assist you, Mr. Potter ... What kind of help can we offer?"

"In about fifteen minutes," explained Harry, "another customer of Gringotts will come in. His name is Sirius Black. He will ask for an escort to his vault, Mr. Morony ... Now, if Mr. Black could be led to a room, rather than to his vault, and if I could wait for him in this room, and then talk with him - for the time it takes to visit a vault and handle things - I'd be very grateful."

Mr. Morony's face didn't move. "Of course, Mr. Potter - for a change, it's inside business, while otherwise it's another example of our mutual trust and confidence ... I'm very pleased for this chance to offer help so easily."

In the small, windowless room to which Mr. Morony personally had escorted him, Harry waited until the door opened again, presenting a Sirius who still needed a second to drop his suspicious look.

Then his godfather relaxed, sat down. "That was clever, Harry ... So we have ten minutes, fifteen at the most."

"Yes - and this is the most reliable place I know, short of Hogwarts."

"Right ... So - what's up?"

Good question that, while not funny. "Well, I wanted to hear how things are going - whether I can do something ..."

A mask closed over Sirius' face. "You've done your part, Harry ... Now it's going, and the ball's in my field. I'd prefer to keep it that way - your ideas are sometimes a bit - er, unusual, to say the least."

Harry couldn't resist. "Well - some people need a day's thinking to warm up to them."

Sirius blushed a bit, but Harry was the one who felt more embarrassed. "Sorry - what I meant was, at least these ideas are effective."

With a flat voice, Sirius replied, "I'm still trying to see where this remark scored better than the previous one."

Harry suppressed a grin. "What's happening now, Sirius?"

"It's a kind of probation period ... They take their time, there's no hurry - and you were more than right to be as careful as that. We're lucky, having Snape as your mentor."

Harry suppressed a comment that this had been his idea too, asked, "Do they blackmail you?"

"Harry - just don't ask for details, okay? ... If I think you need to know, I'll tell you."

Harry thought for a moment. "Assume we know who's in the background - could you drop this dance on the high wire?"

"What do you mean? ... And what do you know?"

Harry told Sirius about everybody's conclusion that Voldemort was the man in the shadow.

"Even if they're right - and the more I think about it, the more it feels true - why should I stop? ... There are people in the middle, and they're as guilty as Voldemort himself - they might lead me to him."

"To him?? ..." Harry stared at his godfather. "You're not trying to deal with him personally, are you?"

Sirius smiled dryly. "I'll try to call you in time, Harry."

Only now, Harry became aware what had driven him to this meeting. He had felt some hope that Sirius would step out, return to a life of a reputed chief of police.

Sirius saw it. "It's too late now ... We shook a tree, and now the nuts are coming down. Either you catch them, or they hit you ... Harry, if I stopped now, making clear this was a fraud - it would be more dangerous than carrying on."

Harry sighed. "You know more about that than I do."

"By the way - did you talk with Rita Skeeter?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"She was very interested in you ... Made a remark about portkey travel - 'story of its own,' that's what she said." He told Sirius about Rita Skeeter's offer.

Sirius looked angry. "That woman's poison, Harry - stay off!"

"And what if she really knows something?"

"Doesn't matter ... I didn't say she isn't up to her job, quite the opposite - but she isn't reliable. The moment things turn to her benefit, she'll blow it - and pity those who are at the wrong end at that time ... What's more, she's used to society scandals and ministry incompetence, or maybe corruption - she isn't aware what kind of people she's trying to catch."

"Then maybe we should warn her."

"No." Sirius' stare was hard. "Any such remark would only make her stick closer to you ... If she really has something, then she knows about five people killed - if that isn't warning enough, then I don't know."

There was a knock at the door.

A Goblin came in. "Sirs, Mr. Morony asked me to tell you - the time is over, and this here was left in your vault." He handed a small bag to Sirius, disappeared.

Sirius looked into the bag, seemed stupefied.

"What is it?"

"Money - at least hundred galleons, if not more."

Next second, Harry knew. "Of course - you've visited your vault ... That means - coming out, there must be money in your pockets. Imagine, some street robber came along and found you dry - this visit would look highly suspicious."

Sirius seemed impressed. "These Goblins don't take chances - a good feeling."

"Yes, indeed." Harry grinned. "And I bet - this money wasn't taken from *your* vault - not if I have any understanding of Goblins in general and Mr. Morony in particular."

\* \* \*

Back in Hogwarts, Harry started the training with Kenzo that was supposed to deepen his sense of *getsumai no michi*. A training which manifested itself quickly as cumbersome, balancing nicely with a slow progress.

They did the first exercises in large dungeons, totally dark, Harry in the middle of the room and the *sensei*, walking noiselessly, ordering Harry to locate him, to describe what he did, or how he held his arms.

At best, Harry's success could be rated as very limited - better than zero, while not much.

For his next attempt, Kenzo used a boat party on the lake, in the deepest mist. It worked a lot better, in particular since the noise, made by the sculls, could have come from any direction in this fog - as dense as in a steam room, only colder and unfriendlier.

Kenzo ordered Harry to scull in short circles until he had lost direction, and then to reorient himself, using what little sense he had developed so far.

Harry found the direction toward the school - easily, in a way, although he suspected his *haragei* did most of the work, sensing the presence of people not too far away. In contrast, he wasn't able to determine any other direction, had to find the school first and then, using his knowledge of the topography, to locate the places.

Still, Kenzo seemed satisfied, saw no reason to distinguish too much between *haragei* and *getsumai no michi* - and besides, the primary goal was anyway detecting and identifying people rather than something else.

Dense fog reaching down to the ground didn't occur very often. Looking for something better, or more often, Harry found a training method which made him leap forward in his development. Up in the air on a broomstick, the gravity as the only indicator of direction - that became his method of choice.

In Harry's first exercises on his Steel Wing, Kenzo accompanied him. Then Harry began doing it alone - jumping up, flying wild arcs until he could only guess where he was, sensing around, aiming toward a target and approaching it like a pilot using navigation instruments, to dive down and check whether he'd been right.

More and more, he was.

Once on such a trip, Cho gave him company. He could disappear in the fog, fly a circle, come back and pass her very close, inaudible until the last moment, scaring her to death. She couldn't see anything funny in such manoeuvres, decided to leave him on his own in this training.

Harry asked Nagini whether she was interested to come with him. Her answer made clear that, yes of course she would come with him if he said so, after all, he was her master, while at the same time she would never figure out the benefit of cold, misty air, not if she could as well lie on her preferred place - just in front of the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room.

During the next weeks, Harry could be found in the air almost every night. If the weather offered a clear sky, Ron collected his team and bullied the Gryffindors in the best tradition of Oliver Wood. When the fog prevented Quidditch training, it was Harry's chance to fly through a shapeless world of thin air, reminding him of dives in the lake. On these trips, he felt no loneliness at all - too clear were the contours of buildings and places in his mind.

Alone - he was the only one in the air, while not alone in the night. In fact, he had some remarkable encounters.

The first occurred in the Forbidden Forest. Harry was gliding through the mist, high over the tree tops, when he felt a presence more familiar than the others he could recognize down

there. Stretching out his inner eye, still not good for details though for shapes, he *saw* a Centaur with a light mane.

He dived down, came out of the mist close above ground, touched down, dismounted. "Good evening, Firenze."

"Not so good, Harry Potter ... The stars are obscured."

"What is a Centaur doing out at night when the stars cannot be watched?"

"Watching broomsticks ... and their riddlesome courses."

Was it a joke? Centaurs didn't grin. Harry asked, "Could you see me up there, Firenze?"

"That's a weird question, Harry Potter - how can you see something in the mist?"

"Well - erm, normally, you cannot, but up there, I could see you."

"Another strange remark - of course you could see me, the mist doesn't reach down to the ground."

Now Harry felt sure - Firenze was laughing at him, without moving his face. At a loss to find any other meaningful remark, he said, "Well, then ... Goodbye, Firenze."

Disappearing in the mist, Harry checked again, stressing his inner eye to the utmost extent. If he wasn't mistaken, the Centaur's face looked exactly in his direction.

The second encounter took place near the little graveyard. Coming across the lake, Harry had selected Hagrid's old hut as today's navigation target. Still up in the fog, he felt a presence not far away from the hut.

Someone visiting the graves - so late?

Coming closer, he realized that his *getsumai no michi* had developed farther than he knew - the figure was moving forward, retreating, standing, moving again ...

And then he knew what it meant, and who was exercising down there. He came out of the mist, saw the figure with the back to him, touched down.

A short gasp. The figure jumped, turning, feet again on the ground. For a split second, there'd been something glittery, then it was gone. Harry said, "Good evening, Rahewa."

"Harry."

The voice was still a bit shaky - however, considering the circumstances, most other people would be running in shrieking horror by now, as Harry realized - or frozen in shock. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't want to frighten you."

"You didn't." A defiant statement.

"Sorry again - what I meant was, I didn't want to surprise you - but calling from up there didn't seem a better solution."

A short grin. "No."

Harre glanced toward the graves. "For compensation, I owe you the story of Flitwick - how he surprised us quite a lot with his rapid-fire spells."

Rahewa seemed very interested in this story.

"But not here - it's too cold, and you're in the middle of your exercises."

In the sparse light, it was impossible to see whether her face looked darker than a moment before.

"How's your progress?" What he had seen were *aikido* exercises. Kenzo's classes were open for third-years and up - locked against first-years like Rahewa, who had found her own method of solving this problem.

"I don't know - I cannot judge myself."

"Please show me."

Undeniably, this was quite different from what she had in mind, however, refusing seemed still worse. Rahewa went through a sequence of basic steps and movements, obviously memorized from watching others in the training hall.

Harry saw great determination, natural talent, and the first signs of wrong timing or accentuation - signs that would deepen if not properly corrected by a *sensei*. And he saw something else - in her witches' robe, Rahewa was handicapped. He said, "You need proper clothes, Rahewa."

She stiffened. "They'll come when I'll join the class."

He recognized the signs - not from himself, more from a close friend, and some others, all of them pretty red-haired. Canadian immigrants of native origin - certainly not a place where to look for a lot of money. He asked, "Would you do me a favour, Rahewa?"

She looked suspiciously at him, found her thought confirmed in his face, shook her head.

Harry felt amazed, although not surprised. In years with Ron, he had learned how fine an instinct poor people could develop, and how difficult it was to help them in such matters.

But he himself had developed a repertoire of tricks. "Would it be okay from the same source where the Firebolt came from?"

Still some hesitation.

"I mean - I just could tell Almyra, but how would that look - carrying you screaming and stomping to Fleur, only to get your measures?"

For the first time, he heard Rahewa giggle.

"Now that this is settled - would you do me another favour?"

Still very suspicious, seemed Rahewa at a loss to see the direction of his thought. After a moment, she nodded.

"If the *sensei* comes to you - say, in the next days, will you listen to him, and do what he suggests?"

"Yes, Harry."

"Well, then ... See you." He jumped up into the mist. A last check showed him - Rahewa was still standing motionlessly, looking into the direction he had used to climb up, before turning the first arc.

Then, not too long before Christmas, he was flying the old patrol route, coming back from the former dragons' nests, passing the border of the Forbidden Forest, when he sensed two presences - strong and clear, more than vaguely familiar.

Only the shapes didn't form, or didn't fit.

He dived down, desperate to solve this riddle. His orientation was clear, he knew where to look when coming out of the mist - ahead, in some distance, for a moment he saw two shapes before they disappeared between the trees.

Two dogs - or wolves.

Harry took his time, thinking it over, decided finally to solve the last riddle in a direct conversation. Except - it wasn't simple at all to find a few minutes alone with Almyra. Not finding anything better, he went to the Ravenclaw table, and asked in the presence of Cho, "Al - mind a walk outside?"

Almyra looked at him, surprised, a bit anxious. "Sure."

Cho stood up. "Let's go."

"Erm - that's not what I had in mind."

Cho smiled nicely. "Doesn't matter - that's what *I* have in mind."

How to ... Yes of course! "Did it ever cross your mind that Christmas is pretty close?"

"Oh ... Actually, yes, indeed, now that you mentioned it ..."

"All right, then - see you in a while."

Outside, Almyra seemed a bit relaxed. "How can I help you to a surprise, Harry?"

"Well - to tell the truth, you did already, although I don't know if this has something to do with Christmas."

He heard a short sound - maybe a suppressed squeak.

"Some days ago, I was flying the old route ... Over there, I felt something, and came down looking because somehow it didn't fit ... And for a second, I saw two animals you don't see often here around."

"Really?"

"Yes, really ... Two - that took me quite by surprise, in particular because - I went up again, through the mist, to check the sky ... It was half moon, give or take a bit."

"So what?"

Harry smiled. "You're as bad a spy as I am - fall to the same trap like myself, some time ago, with Hermione."

"Which trap?"

Watching her face, he answered, "You didn't even ask which animals, Al."

Now the trap was reflected in her face.

"Well - I'm not Hermione ... I just wanted to tell you ... And now, before we get trapped by ourselves, let's talk about Christmas presents."

Almyra swallowed. "No - wait a second, Harry."

He did - about ten, actually, then Almyra said, "The real test is a week from now, but since you've seen us already, I think it's better to tell you ... Yes, of course it was Remus and me you saw ..."

Harry beamed. "So you've finished your fourth shape - and Lupin his first, or second, depending on how to count ... Super, Al!"

"Yes - but that's only part of the story ... Our goal goes further - at full moon, he will try to change into that shape on purpose - to prevent his turning to a werewolf."

"You mean ..."

"Yes - on purpose and under full control of his own will ... If it works, he'll be able to control it even without that potion. It's a step further, though a big one."

"Oh, yes."

"You see," said Almyra with growing excitement, "if it works, we can go public ... As much as we want, or don't want - it won't be an announcement before supper, but at least something we can talk about."

Harry grinned. "Yes, of course ... Well, I won't spoil the secret."

"No, certainly not - although you have to be careful with Cho."

"Yeah ... Besides, while on the subject of first names ..."

Almyra, in full human shape, growled, "You aren't curious at all, are you?"

"I wouldn't say so - Actually, I'd say I'm really curious - I mean, one secret more doesn't bulge much, does it?"

Almyra laughed. "Well - as this slip has certainly told you, we're a bit farther."

"A bit?"

"Erm - in Hogwarts, things are unchanged, if you get my bearing, Harry."

"But."

"Huh?" Almyra's astonishment was almost genuine.

"I don't need Nagini to feel a big *but*, Al ... According to what you said, such a sentence would go, 'But outside Hogwarts' - and so on, and so on."

"Isn't it a bit cold for that, Harry?"

Yes, it was a bit cold for that, as Harry knew perfectly well by himself. Only, he'd heard something in Almyra's voice which he had learned to recognize. Thinking about this riddle, he saw the answer. "Are you a dog or a wolf, Al?"

"A dog - but the difference isn't that big."

"A female, of course."

Almyra didn't answer, started to grin, started to blush.

"My knowledge of dogs is limited, but I know that much - even in such cold weather, there's a certain heat which is just irresistible, literally so - I mean for a male dog, or wolf."

Somewhat pleased, and a bit more embarrassed, Almyra murmured, "You know a lot, Harry - sometimes too much."

"Well - you know, my various trainings have to do with techniques to overcome barriers which cannot be broken by conventional methods ... Anyway - let's come back to our main issue."

"I thought we were."

He grinned. "Maybe so ... But before hurrying in again, we have to talk about presents - I'm a bad liar, but at least I've learned to work with one half of the truth."

## 12 - Matches and Rules

With the end of the year drawing closer, Harry kept looking forward to a sequence of events which, each of them by itself, could have qualified as a milestone in the Hogwarts year. In retrospect, he would realize there had been more events than planned, and that even the planned ones failed to meet his expectation.

The first item on his agenda was the Quidditch match Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff. This would be the first match of the season, also the first match for the new Gryffindor team. As it turned out, the match listed only second in order of events.

Some days earlier, Viktor invited all four Quidditch teams to a meeting in the Great Hall. During the previous weekend, Viktor had joined the *Quidditch Council*, a congregation under the auspices of the Department of Magical Games and Sports in the Ministry of Magic. What he brought back was new information affecting all teams and players.

For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, Harry and Cho attended the same meeting without sitting together. This evening's issue was Quidditch - in this regard, they counted as competitors, and at Harry's side sat Rahewa.

"There are quite some changes," began Viktor, "and among the most significant ones is the new emphasis on fair play."

"What's new with that?" asked Nigel Humphries, a Slytherin Beater. "We put emphasis on fair play as hard as a club on a Bludger - don't we?"

Viktor grinned. "Well - a club on a Bludger is no problem, while we all know a lot of other techniques to stop the other side from scoring."

"So what's new then?" called Bobby Gillinshaw, the Ravenclaw captain. "More penalties? ... Do they count differently?"

"Penalties are the same as before," replied Viktor, "they are given by the referee, after a foul bad enough to be punished ... What's new is first that there may be more penalties, because the referees are ordered to punish fouls quicker than before ... And then, there are the cards."

Some students, familiar with Muggles sports, already knew what Viktor was about to say, while Shorty Sloper, captain of the Hufflepuff team and called Shorty because he was by far the biggest of all Quidditch players, looked blank. "Cards? ... Do we play cards for a penalty?"

"No," said Viktor, "there's only one person playing cards, and that's the referee. And he won't play them for a penalty but afterwards - while not always."

Harry asked, "Same as in football?"

Viktor didn't know football.

"If the foul was particularly bad," explained Harry, "the referee shows the fouling player a *yellow card*. That's a warning ... And if the same player does it again, the second time it's the *red card*, which means he's ordered off the game."

Viktor nodded. "Yes - exactly that's the new rule."

The words raised an uproar in the round. Ron called, "What kind of nonsense is this - how can you play Quidditch with just one Beater, or no Seeker at all?"

Viktor let the shouting fade before answering all the questions. "If a team loses a Chaser or Beater through a red card," he said, "it will have a hard time to win - that's why the new rule will truly emphasize fair play ... If a Seeker or a Keeper is ordered off the game - actually, that's much less likely since these players do fouls considerably less often ..."

New protest, while eight of the twenty-eight students sat calmly, grinning, at least looking satisfied - initially nine, until Harry became aware that he no longer was suspected of playing consistently fair.

"... anyway, in this case, the team has to assign a Beater or a Chaser to the void position."

"That's ridiculous!" shouted Adrian Pucey, captain of the Slytherin team.

Viktor kept calm. "You should know - the full rule is that the sent-off player stays excluded for two more games. This is only feasible for professional teams, which can afford more than seven players - while for us here at Hogwarts, it doesn't work ... But the cards will be ready starting with the first match in our season."

Deirdre Redmond, Chaser of the Hufflepuff team and their only girl, couldn't agree. "Why can't we run this season with the old rules? ... Let's put the new ones at the beginning of the next year!"

"No." Viktor couldn't agree to that. "The leagues will play these rules starting as of January. Rather than changing rules in the middle of our game series, we'll establish them starting with the first game ... Same rules for everybody."

There was a minority which seemed happy with these rules. For Harry, more emphasis on fair play sounded like an improvement - but once more, he remembered that his perspective was somewhat outdated ... Beater in the heat of the fight - maybe he would think differently.

Terry Boot, Ravenclaw Beater, looked angry. "What else is new?"

Viktor grinned. "There have been many votes to change the scoring rules. One party said a Snitch should count two hundred rather than hundred-and-fifty ..."

Katie shot up. "What a stupid idea! ... Isn't it enough that it counts fifteen times as much as ..."

Viktor interrupted her. "Save it - there was another party who wanted to reduce it to hundred ..."

Cho shot up, glaring. "Don't tell me they came through with this crap!"

Viktor had fun. "Calm down, all of you ... The ratio of scores remains unchanged."

Harry was up. "The ratio - and what has changed?" Viktor's expression told him - on that council, something terrible had happened to the Quidditch rules.

"People realized - ten points for a Quaffle hit, and hundred-and-fifty points for a Snitch, that's nonsense ... One point for a Quaffle and fifteen for a Snitch do the same."

The tumult boiled worse than with the cards rule. Alicia yelled, "One bloody point? - One?? ... You get kicked, and shot, and then you score - all this for just one point?"

Ron called, "It's true - cutting a zero at the end doesn't change anything!"

"Yes it does!" Chris Curlington, Chaser in the Slytherin team, stood for many others when he shouted, "With the counting you're right - but it feels totally different."

Heated discussions broke out between groups of players, within teams, across teams, without clear frontiers recognizable in the Great Hall.

"LISTEN, FOLKS!"

Heads were turning to Viktor.

"Before you spend all your energy on this new rule which doesn't change a bit, except for the impressive numbers, hear me to the end."

"Oh no!" groaned Frank Shapiro, Hufflepuff Beater. "It gets still worse!"

Silence fell over the hall. Now people looked toward Viktor with great consternation.

"For a particular match," he said, "the counting is as explained - one per Quaffle, fifteen for the Snitch, and winner is the team with more points at the end ... But then it comes - in a tournament like ours, the winner gets three points per game won. And the winner of the tournament is the team with the most win points."

Miranda Pincus, the new Ravenclaw Keeper, looked flabbergasted. "What's the difference?"

Next second, twenty other students tried to show her examples in which there was quite a difference - with two games won barely versus one lost high, or vice versa, or with the same results only attached to different houses.

Then some team members realized that there were a few questions left open, while those with knowledge of Muggles sports could already predict the details.

"What if two teams have equally much?"

Viktor nodded. "Then the game points count as before - but only then."

"What if even this number is the same?"

"Then the direct competition determines the winner."

"What if a match ends with a draw?"

Viktor looked around. "Does anyone remember a game with a draw?"

"Sure." Ron, of course, and his answer came immediately. "Italy against Egypt in eighteenthundred and ninety-four - semifinals."

"Okay." Viktor's expression showed awe in the face of true determination. "Then both teams get one point."

"And what happened to the third point?"

"Nothing." Viktor shrugged. "It's given only to winners."

While the discussion in the hall started again, Harry saw Ron heading toward the exit, saw him return shortly afterwards, parchments and pen in hand. Watching further, he saw Ron flipping through the parchments, writing something down. A minute later, Ron stopped writing, looked around. "OY! LISTEN!"

He had their attention.

"I just calculated the last three tournaments here in Hogwarts with the new rules - three points for the winner ... I can tell you - the winner would have been the same in all three years."

"Never!" ... "Show me!"

Next moment, Ron was surrounded by his captain colleagues, who seemed less fluent with numbers, tables, and primary versus secondary point values. Then Isidor Goldsmith, Hufflepuff Chaser, wanted to see an example in which the old rules would have seen a different winner than the new ones.

"Okay," said Viktor, "assume in the first ..." He stopped. "Ron - please do it. With your example, nobody will be surprised if the Gryffindors are the winning team."

Cho grinned. "In your example, Viktor, everybody would be surprised if it came out any different."

Viktor looked self-conscious.

Ron called quickly, "A referee has to be unbiased only during the match - and Viktor is such a referee, as you all know."

Even Cho nodded, not bothering to stop her grin first.

"Now listen," called Ron. "Imagine Gryffindor beats Hufflepuff and Slytherin, but both of them with the smallest possible result - ten points more."

Protest from these two houses, more protest because Ron was still using the old scoring rules.

"Do you want an example, yes or no? ... Well then, shut up and listen ... Ravenclaw does the same, except both times pretty high - say, two hundred points in each match ... And then comes the match Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw."

Harry realized - Ron used this seasons's pairing in his example, only that the results still had to be achieved, hopefully better than in the example.

"With the old rules," continued Ron, "Gryffindor could as well stop immediately - it's simply unrealistic to win by three hundred and ninety points, against a team that has won two games already ... With the new rules, the winner of this match is the winner of the tournament - it's like the final in the cup."

After some more discussion, Viktor declared the official part finished, and suggested to go and win fair, rather than playing games on paper.

Cho came over from the Ravenclaw team, looked at Ron. "A nice example you had there - and so elegantly left open for the outcome."

"Of course." Ron stared back. "What's the sense in destroying someone's dreams? ... In the match, it'll be soon enough."

"How right you are." Cho turned to Harry. "What's your comment?"

"The winner takes it all - and I'm looking forward to a real cup final."

"Very diplomatic ... Don't tell me you'd feel sorry if we got smashed in our first match against Slytherin."

Harry obeyed.

Cho realized it, grinned. "Clever Potter ..." She turned to the youngest member in the Gryffindor team. "What do you think, Rahewa?"

The coal-black eyes looked at Cho, looked away. "It doesn't matter what I think."

"Even so - if it's no secret, I'd like to hear your comment."

The same eyes looked again, held their focus. "I think we'll meet again - up in the air."

\* \* \*

The first match of the season would be played the next day. In the evening, Ron gathered his team in the Gryffindor tower. A few other Gryffindors had to be sent off first - this meeting had to be members only.

"Okay," began Ron when the last grumbling outsider had found the way outside, "I'm not going to hold a pre-match speech as Oliver did - although I never heard it directly. It would be nonsense, with me a team member as young as Ginny, Rahewa, and Wynton." He grinned. "To be honest - I'm quite nervous, because this is my first game, and a lot of people will watch, and one of them will be Janine ... So this is just a time together in favour of the team spirit."

"Then where's the difference?" asked Katie. "Oliver did his speeches for exactly the same reason - he was as nervous as a virgin in the first ..."

Harry interrupted just in time. "Katie! ... There's no doubt you're cool and experienced and all, but could you adjust your language to the complete team?"

Katie giggled. "Sorry - but you see, I'm nervous too ... And it doesn't feel to me as if Rahewa's ears would burn much from hearing what I said."

Regarding the visible evidence, this was true - only Wynton's ears seemed to have suffered a bit.

Ron said, "While on the subject of losing something ..."

Harry shook his head in mock desperation, while Rahewa barely suppressed a giggle.

"... there's a bit of speech I'd like to say ... This isn't from nervousness, it's just a realistic view of our situation." At this moment, Ron looked cool, competent - a true Quidditch captain.

"We're the cup holder," he continued, "and that simply means, we cannot score better than the last time, although it was three years ago ... The best we can do is to reach the same result again - that's how it looks from the outside, and so far it's a bit unfair toward the rookies in the team, me included ... But look at it from the inside. There are just two of us who'll continue where they've stopped three years ago - for all others, including Harry, it's something totally new ... So, with this in mind, there's no reason to freeze in tension - we're going to play our first season together, and at the end, we'll see where we've placed ourselves."

Alicia smiled at him. "Let me tell you, Ron - you're doing a hell of a job as our captain ... Oliver never managed a speech as good as that."

Ron blushed. "That's of course flattery, but right now I don't mind."

Katie looked at Ginny. "Two Weasleys in the team - that's a good-luck charm no other team can offer ... I think you stepped in a big pair of shoes, Ginny, but I'm pretty sure - in a while they'll fit."

Ginny looked at her ankles. "I take your words metaphorically - there's no need for my feet to grow still bigger."

Harry studied Rahewa's face, a calm mask not showing any emotion. She sensed his gaze, shot a quick glance, looked away.

"When I was in your situation," he said, "I felt awful ... Had birds in the stomach, and that's why I couldn't eat breakfast at all and not much during lunch ... That's how it was six years ago."

Ginny did him the favour to prompt, "And today?"

"Today I'm an oldtimer in the team - and nothing has changed ... It's not because of the changed position - I'll be sick until the moment we're up in the air."

Alicia turned to Wynton. "So you're the only man without nerves in the team."

Wynton smiled, to be addressed as a *man*.

"What's your secret, Wynton?" Alicia seemed genuinely curious.

The fifth-year shrugged. "It's no secret ... You know, I try not to care about the match, the score, and all the other factors. All I see is that Quaffle which comes closer ... If it cannot be stopped - if it's simply impossible, I don't care much - after all, it's not my job to do miracles. Only if it could have been held but I failed - that's driving me nuts. In this sense, there isn't too much difference between a training and a match for me."

Ron had listened. "Sounds fascinating ... Tomorrow evening, I'll ask you whether you'd still say the same."

Wynton laughed. "Yeah - that thought crossed my mind, too."

\* \* \*

Harry's confession the evening before had been hardly an overstatement. The only difference - he knew he had to eat during breakfast, and he managed some amount. Glancing around, he saw - none of the other team members did much better.

In the afternoon, he used his time in the training hall for simple exercises - stretching, bending, slowly, carefully, performing a ritual of perfect movements. Then he sat down, crossed his legs for the lotus position, to sit and meditate.

Not too far away, Ginny did the same.

Then it was time.

Dressed in the scarlet robes of the Gryffindor house, they walked to the Quidditch pit, saw the Hufflepuff team ahead - yellow robes with black stripes, in the darkness creating the impression of body parts badly assembled together.

The stadium looked full. Students and teachers from Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang - and quite some parents, probably as a result of the portkey link station in Hogsmeade.

A well-known figure grinned at them. "All right, Gryffindor - make sure I'll have to talk about you most of the time!"

It was Lee Jordan, the commentator for the match - there had been nobody in Hogwarts who didn't feel it most appropriate to take the opportunity, with Lee as far apart as a step through the Durmstrang link. Lee's special mix of comments - about the game but also about players, particularly female ones, counted as a tradition to be kept.

Shorty Sloper, the Hufflepuff captain, grinned. "In case you haven't noticed, Lee - we also have a girl in our team. So if your remarks will concentrate too long at the other Chasers, I'll claim you prejudiced."

Lee Jordan looked at Deirdre Redmond while answering. "I'm not blind, Shorty - I noticed this particular improvement of your team immediately." Then his glance fell on Rahewa. "Although she has to compete against a majority of four, while I'm ready to admit - she's well equipped for this competition."

Shorty Sloper beamed, only his youngest Chaser seemed to swallow on the method how Lee was warming up for his own task.

Ron shook hands with his colleague. He looked dwarfed by Shorty's appearance, otherwise calm, a thin smile in his face.

Viktor had the Quaffle ready. "Three ... Two ... One ..." The shrill blow of his whistle broke the moment of silence in the wide round. The match was running.

Within seconds, Harry knew - Gryffindor had been caught off balance, and he himself was part of the problem. His orientation poor, felt he unable to catch the rhythm, his inner eye confusing him more than it helped.

Hufflepuff scored the first time before the game was a minute old.

Harry felt stunned, his teammates also - Hufflepuff scored again.

Harry had trouble synchronizing with Ron. They were fighting as two isolated Beaters - no match for Don Prentiss and Frank Shapiro in the Hufflepuff team, who seemed to have inherited the twins' role.

Lee's comments added to Harry's confusion. In previous matches, as a Seeker running above the Chasers and Beaters, these comments had been a second source of information - Harry's eyes scanning the air while his ears listened to the description of the playing below. Now, it took him a moment to learn that Lee's words came too late for his own role as a Beater.

"... Lewis is driving the Quaffle, holds it close to himself, but here comes Katie and - no, he's passed to Deirdre, and she has open course, except for Harry, and Harry is waiting, and now Ron has sent him a Bludger, and all he has to do is to hit it properly, then this Irish girl will take a bad ... here it comes, his club's ready - and ... Oh no, what's he doing? Deirdre's through, and Wynton's the last hope, only - score! Score for Hufflepuff - Deirdre's second point ... Hufflepuff leads five to zero!"

Harry felt burning anger, and shame, and frustration. The Bludger sent from Ron had come perfectly, he had hit it perfectly - to avoid Deirdre, more exactly, to send it so she could dodge without losing the Quaffle.

Sending a Bludger at such a short distance, right into the stomach of a player, a girl in particular - he had seen no way doing that.

Ron closed in on him, anger in the face. "Harry - what are you trying to do? Either you play Beater or you stop right away!! ... Got it?"

Harry nodded, his ears feeling as if glowing in the dark.

Katie wasn't angry, she was furious. "You bloody fool! ... Can't you keep your mind at Quidditch?" She was so mad, lacking concentration for a moment, that the Bludger sent by Frank Shapiro hit her at the left shoulder, from a very short distance.

With a cry of pain and fury, Katie crossed the short distance and threw her fist into Frank's face.

Harry heard the whistle, saw Viktor shoot upward, reaching Katie, showing her the yellow card.

Lee's voice was at the edge of skipping. "The first warning ever in Hogwarts, and it's taken by Katie ... As experienced as she is in this team, which still has to gain some game practice, she seems infected by the trouble of their teammates - Now she's furious, and while she looks definitely gorgeous in this state, it won't do her playing much good ... But here comes Isidor for the penalty, a cool mind if any, and that's the only way to master Wynton, the only one who's keeping his nerves in the Gryffindor team, provided he has ... No, there wasn't any chance, Isidor's done a masterpiece of penalty ... Hufflepuff leads six to zero against the cupholder ... Ladies and gentlemen, if we don't see a small miracle, the cup will find a new place pretty soon."

Ron called for a time-out.

Down at the ground, he looked from one to the other. "Okay, folks ... We've lost our first game, without ever getting the feet into the air ..."

"Huh?" Alicia stared at him in bewilderment.

"... now comes our second. The good news is, the others didn't get any win points so far - the bad news is, they're still six points in the lead. But aside from that - " Ron looked fierce, "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN - two minutes from now we'll be in a Quidditch match!"

He glared at Harry. "You'll shoot Bludgers - and you'll do it together with me ..."

He glared at three of the four girls. "... you'll hit Quaffles, for a change ..."

He stared at Wynton. "... you'll start thinking *every Quaffle* can be held ..."

He looked softer at the youngest team member. "... and if these jerks cannot manage - me included, that is - you're our last hope, Rahewa."

Another glare in the round. "Did I express myself clearly?"

Katie saluted. "Yessir, cap'n, sir!!"

It rose a memory in Harry - of a scene in the Entrance Hall, returning from a patrol with Cho, meeting Almyra there ... He giggled. Before Ron could react, he said, "Stand easy."

With Katie's foot stepping forward, Harry felt the tension fall off his mind, grinned. "All right, captain ... Losing my first game as a Beater was a great experience, which has formed my character a lot. Now it can't be any worse - let's go."

They were up again - a different team.

Hufflepuff had the first run. Lewis Finckley was driving the Quaffle, approaching a block formed by Alicia and Ginny. Harry saw Deirdre flying in parallel to Lewis, saw the pattern, knew what would happen, when Lewis would send the Quaffle, reached the next Bludger, stopped it only, positioned again behind the slowly moving black ball ...

Lewis' arm turned back.

Harry hit the Bludger, feeling the impact of his club, feeling the rightness of the spot he'd hit, feeling the truth in this pattern of bodies and balls, all of them at different speed.

The Quaffle sailed toward Deirdre, her arm was up ... Next instant, she fell sideways and rolled around her Firebolt - the only method to avoid Harry's Bludger.

Katie caught the Quaffle, pushed forward.

"... Gryffindor in possession, which so far hasn't meant anything, but now it seems Harry has found his style as a Beater - alternating between a mad dog with a Bludger when the other side's running, and a cavalier not leaving from the side of his lady with the Quaffle ... which now is Ginny, only here comes Isidor - oops, that was close, and now the air's free, except there come Don and Frank, waiting for them, playing ping-pong with a Bludger ..."

Suddenly, Harry's skill in balance, in *aikido*, in *kenjutsu* worked together with his inner eye. He saw the movements, the players on their Firebolts and the balls appeared like planets on predictable courses - funny, he'd never been that good in Astronomy, one of the reasons why he dropped it ... Frank and Don, Don and Frank, the Bludger now here, which meant by the time he'd be there it would be in Don's reach, and he himself in front of Ginny, and Frank's club was hissing through the air, only it was the shadow strategy, he'd known eons before, and now the Bludger came, met his own club, miraculously attracted with the proper spot, whooshed forward, aiming toward Shorty, quite a target, really, who tried to dodge it *and* be ready for the Quaffle, except that Ginny passed to Alicia whose arm was up, had the Quaffle, about to shoot with all force, suddenly losing all power, gently touching the red ball - which trundled between the Hufflepuff goalposts, just out of reach for Shorty with his long arms.

"... SCORE! SCORE! SCORE! ... Gryffindor has scored for the first time - Alicia has found the memory how to drive a Keeper mad ... Hufflepuff still leads six to one ... Well, it's a beginning."

The spell was broken.

The Gryffindors felt it, and the Hufflepuffs felt it, showing effect. Minutes later, the score was six to four.

The Hufflepuffs learned quickly. They learned it was no good sending a Bludger toward the attacking Gryffindor Chaser while that girl was escorted by Harry. These Bludgers never found their target, were sent another direction with a frightening accuracy and speed.

Ron had sensed it too. Whenever possible, he sent his Bludgers to Harry, rather than attacking a Hufflepuff player by himself. Ron wasn't up to this level of *kendo* in the air, while his

excellent overview and position play earned him the proper amount of black balls which, a moment later, turned to buzzing hornets with a nasty sting.

Then Ron collided with Deirdre while she was driving the Quaffle. With some good-will, one could say it was *not* on purpose, in particular since Ron, in the last instant, had brought his club out of the way.

This saved him from another yellow card. But of course it was a penalty.

"... Isidor has the Quaffle, clearly Hufflepuff's choice when it comes to penalties ... Now he's coming, not too fast, has all the time of the world, and now he's - no, a feint, and here - Wynton hasn't moved, takes the Quaffle like a Christmas present, and now he's bowing as if to say, thank you, Isidor ... The score remains at six to five for Hufflepuff."

Wynton's sneering gesture drove the Hufflepuffs wild.

They were pressing harder, playing faster, as if waking up from a trance. In addition, they had realized it was more advantageous to send Bludgers anywhere except close to a Gryffindor Beater.

Unfortunately for them, Wynton had taken Ron's remark literally.

For the next minutes, there was a constant power play toward the Gryffindor goal, Lee crying himself hoarse about the hundred percent chances smashed to zilch by Wynton's slow arms.

Another attack, held by Wynton. This time, his arms hadn't been slow at all.

Another attack, stopped in the middle by Katie intercepting the Quaffle, sending it toward Ginny who was running the counter at full force.

Harry stood too far behind to escort her. He was pushing as hard as possible, swearing at this slow Firebolt, why couldn't he use his Steel Wing - *that* would be acceleration ...

Ginny had left the Hufflepuff Chasers behind, only Don still in her way.

Harry saw the pattern, saw it coming, saw it happen. The Bludger, sent by Frank, reached Don, was hit in the exact angle, crossed the short distance to Ginny who was an instant too slow, or too big a target, hit her at the uppermost part of her forehead, bounced off.

Harry was hopelessly out of reach, though not helpless. Already diving, toward the level where his Firebolt would meet the course of a falling body, he felt the blackening in Ginny's presence, sent a fierce jolt of power and energy - "*STAY AWAKE!*" - felt it arrive, felt her respond, sent another wave, saw her body staggering, her hands gripping the broomstick, close to unconsciousness, with a last wave regaining a bit of balance, enough to hold, to inhale deeply, to shake her head, to issue a choked moaning, and touch down quickly, only to vomit on the ground.

Viktor's whistle made Harry aware of what he'd missed while supporting Ginny with waves from mind and soul.

Katie had reached Don, had planted her right fist on his eye, then her left on his nose, which now was bleeding heavily.

Katie ignored the red card held into her face, was shouting at Viktor. "Didn't you see what he did? Sending a Bludger toward her head at such short distance ... That's no Quidditch, that's murder ... Take that card away! You know what you can do with your card? You can use it to ..."

Ron reached her, suffocating the rest of the sentence. However, the final insult toward the referee wouldn't have made it any worse - Katie had seen the red card, her own words giving proof.

Ron argued with Viktor, to no avail.

"He didn't violate the rules," replied Viktor, "he's a Beater, and he used a Bludger - that's perfectly okay ... And even if not, Katie's not supposed to use her fists in his face ... No, and that's the end of this discussion ... No! One word more, and you'll see the yellow card - and five seconds later, you'll see the red!"

Harry had reached Ron, used his hand to save Ginny's brother from his first warning.

This done, he turned to Don, looking cold. "I apologize for Katie - such a cruel act of unfairness, while you kept so perfectly to the rules ... A true Hufflepuff - never a foul, Heaven forbid ..."

Don added another kind of red to the colours in his face, while Viktor eyed suspiciously toward Harry. However, Quidditch rules were very clear about what exactly was an insult, failed to notice them in polite words, somehow missing the point entirely ...

Shorty Sloper called for a time-out, to get Don's nose-bleeding under control.

Ron used the opportunity to set a new Gryffindor record - never before in a game had Oliver Wood made three speeches in, or before, the same match.

"Katie," he said, "I cannot blame you - I'm lucky you were closer than me ... For the others - no more fouls, no - more - fouls ... We cannot afford it - which doesn't mean you shouldn't be as nasty as you can get ... Rahewa, do me a favour - get that Snitch, and get it fast, because they'll slaughter us."

Then Ron turned to his sister. "Can you play, Ginny?"

"Don't ask me, because you won't like the answer." Ginny's hand touched the growing egg on her forehead, causing another moan.

Harry knelt before her. "Wait a second ... Your concussion is beyond my reach, but there's no need for this devil's horn." A moment later, the swelling started to fade.

"Thanks." Ginny glanced at him. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Yep ... I wasn't completely sure whether I'd have been there to catch you."

"It was like a bucket of cold water ... Still - thanks again."

Viktor's whistle signaled the end of the time-out.

In spite of their superior number, the Hufflepuffs seemed quite respectful, still feeling some guilt. And more than ever before, they did what they could to keep the Bludgers away from Harry. The effect created something like a game of Chasers against Chasers, and this was probably the best strategy, whether on purpose or by accident.

Harry changed from a Beater to a Chaser, except that he was chasing Bludgers, simultaneously scanning the air for a golden spot. There hadn't been any trace of the Snitch so far.

"... and poor Wynton is beaten again - Lewis scores for Hufflepuff ... Hufflepuff leads sixteen to five."

Harry saw Rahewa dive down, followed by Billy Chadwick, the Hufflepuff Seeker. Next moment, she bolted upward, driving a narrow arc. A feint, or the Snitch had disappeared again. Either way, Harry hadn't seen it.

"... Hufflepuff leads twenty to five ... With their next score, there'll be no doubt left about the outcome of this game in which the new rules have played such an important - What's that? The two Seekers side by side - there!! The Snitch - and that girl can accelerate faster, lightweight that she is - another example how *well proportioned* can have many meanings ..."

Eyes were looking upward, watching the race across the nightly sky.

Harry sensed another movement, pushed instinctively forward, reached Alicia, who had used the moment of disconcentration to catch the Quaffle, to run a last, desperate attack toward the Hufflepuff goal, to send the Quaffle toward Ginny who was speeding up, course free toward Shorty ...

The game would end when the Snitch touched ground ...

"... girl's in the lead by a half broomstick, and if the Snitch doesn't change course now, it's - but there, LOOK THERE, LOOK THERE, it's through - the Quaffle has passed Shorty, Ginny has scored for Gryffindor, and that point counts, that point counts, that's the point which makes the ... SHE'S GOT IT! SHE'S GOT IT! Rahewa's coming down, no she's crashing down, will never be able to - there she is! She's down, hammers the snitch into the ground, and the game is over! IT'S OVER - GRYFFINDOR'S DONE A MIRACLE - a second of watching too long, and Alicia's seen a chance where none has been, and has used it, and Gryffindor scores six to twenty, and Rahewa Lightfoot is the match winner, scoring fifteen, makes twenty-one to twenty for Gryffindor!"

Katie managed first in reaching Rahewa, took her, wheeled her around, held her, had to protect her a moment later when the other figures in the scarlet robes dropped from the sky to fall over this growing heap of bodies, cheering, yelling in triumph.

"Leave her alive! We'll need her again!"

Ron and Harry sobered up sufficiently to grab Rahewa, to put her on their shoulders, marching side by side through the Quidditch pit, one arm holding a leg, the other waving, fists up, followed, flanked, preceded by the other teammates, savouring the tumultuous concerto from the large round.

Coming back, they found Shorty Sloper blocking the path, to congratulate them. "My respects to a lucky team, Ron - and if it wasn't luck, we can blame only ourselves."

Next was Janine, storming across the pit, catching Ron. If not for his feeling of responsibility as a captain, she would have taken him off the team even without a red card.

Hermione came next. "Splendid, Harry - not in the beginning, but afterwards."

He grinned. "Yeah - although, next time I might come with my own Bludgers, or with another strategy."

Then he saw Cho and Almyra coming over.

Cho smiled. "Harry - I *know* you're famous for a bad start - there was no need to show me again." Then she used the trouble around to kiss him, to hug him, and to stir some thoughts other than Quidditch in Harry's whirling mind.

Almyra used the time to congratulate Rahewa, then came back, beaming. "You really have a way with a club and a Bludger, Harry - but something else has impressed me still more."

He knew what she was talking about, surprising him. "Did you feel it?"

"Not really - certainly not like Ginny. It was - I knew what was going on, and I saw how you started even before it happened ... For someone else, it could have looked a bit frightening."

He grinned. "Who cares about someone else?"

In a few minutes, the Gryffindors would celebrate their winning together with some guests, from other houses like Cho and Almyra, from another school like Janine, even with non-students like Viktor. But first, using a classroom to be alone, Ron gathered his team for a short summary.

"We've got our first three points," he said. "And we've learned some things today."

"Yes," said Harry. "we have a true Seeker ... We suspected it, and today we know."

The fire which had burned in the dark eyes down at the Quidditch pit gleamed up again.

Ron nodded. "And at the other end of the line, we have a flawless Keeper who can teach a Chaser crew the fear of God."

Wynton blushed. "Well ... I felt challenged."

They had to laugh at that.

Katie looked at Harry. "What happened to you after the break? ... Until then, it was a real mess, while afterwards, you taught them the fear of the Bludger ... The twins were respected a lot, but after a while, they really got scared to see you coming close to a Bludger."

"It came together - that's all ... To quote Cho, my problem is a bad start."

Ginny wasn't the only one not even trying to suppress a suggestive grin. "If that's the common pattern, at least we can hope this start counts for the entire tournament."

Harry felt pretty sure about that.

Ron said, "If the other teams try the same - I mean taking the Bludgers out of the game, we have to be prepared with a counter strategy."

"Not necessarily," replied Katie. "At the least, then it's a game of Chasers only - and with our crew complete, we are good enough to stand against any other." She grinned ruefully. "I've learned my lesson - it was very impressive to see the effect of the new rules."

"Okay," said Ron, "then there's only one point left on my list." He looked at his sister. "Red cards are just one way to diminish a team - suicide attacks are another."

Ginny protested. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"That's a comforting thought ... All right - anything else?"

"Yes," said Alicia. "Please don't take it personally, Ron, but - I wouldn't mind if the second match *does not* end as predicted in your example some days ago."

Ron smiled. "Me either ... We suffered from the new rules, but we also benefitted - you cannot get more than three points ... All we have to do is to win two more matches."

Harry laughed. "Ron - that's the first time you've sounded like Oliver."

They walked back to the Gryffindor tower, were welcomed with applause, from the other Gryffindors and from the guests.

Cho smiled archly. "Somebody had to get these three points - you took them, which I like better than the other way around, and you did it in the most economic way."

Harry smiled back. "No more competition ... This evening, you're just a guest to celebrate three points - and there's nothing wrong with them."

She had a look in her eyes. "Right - it's a magical number, we have to celebrate that somehow."

"That's why we're here, isn't it?"

"Well ..." This particular look grew stronger. "I wasn't necessarily thinking of this evening, and maybe in a more private round - " her eyes were sparkling, "and three was certainly not the number of people I had in mind."

\* \* \*

The next big event would be the Hogwarts Christmas Ball, the first in the program of the three united schools and also the milestone at the end of term - Christmas vacation started right after the ball evening. For Harry, this vacation would be a premiere - the first to be spent *at home* since he was in Hogwarts.

The organization of the Hogwarts ball lay in the hands of Fleur as the responsible teacher - a natural choice, as everybody agreed. For Fleur, so the common thinking went, it should be a piece of cake, what with her skill, and her experience, and considering how much every male in Hogwarts was pleased to do her a favour. Basically correct, sure, except ...

Fleur came to Harry, looking worried. "I have to ask you another favour, 'arry."

He bowed, not raising much relief in Fleur's face. She said, "You answer's a bit unclear, my friend - has this been a French bowing, an English bowing, or a Japanese bowing?"

The question caught him off balance. "I didn't decide in advance ... What are the differences?"

"If it's a French bowing, it means forget it, although very politely so ... If it's an English bowing, it means yes, since the clenched teeth are hidden while bowing."

Harry laughed. "And if it's a Japanese one?"

"Then it means I'm hearing you, and you better prepare yourself by thinking over your request in advance ... That's why I think it's been a Japanese one."

Smiling, Harry bowed again.

Fleur looked almost desperate. "Alors ... I'm trapped, and you have to help me out."

In Harry's face, astonishment made room for determination. "To whom do I have to teach manners?"

Now Fleur looked truly embarrassed. "If it were that simple ... As you know, the ball is open for fourth-years and up, due to the limited space. Even so - now with the Durmstrang people, it'll be tight," she could grin, "although there's nothing wrong with that."

"I know - about both, I mean."

"Fine ... Because pretty soon someone will come to you and ask you for a way to bend this rule, and now guess who that'll be?"

"Oh ..." Harry felt trapped.

Following the old principle that misery needs company, Fleur seemed quite satisfied, seeing his reaction. She said, "I told her, no way, but of course I know my younger sister, and how her mind is ticking ... So, 'arry, just have the kindness not to open a back door, okay? That's all I'm asking."

All? It was unbearably much.

Gabrielle stood before him. "You're my hero, 'arry ... You must find a way!"

"Gabrielle, I'm a hero of honour ... I cannot bend the rules for my own advantage, or yours, which is the same."

Gabrielle no longer stood before him. She was on him, touching him, his face, his shoulders, but otherwise in a way an eleven-year-old shouldn't know. After a moment, he felt dizziness ...

"Stop that! Now!"

"Pardon, 'arry ... It wasn't on purpose - er, I mean, not completely ..."

The quarter-Veela at his neck changed to a miserable-looking eleven-year-old, and somehow, the effect seemed worse than before. "Gabrielle," said Harry, "sit down and let me think."

She did - very quickly so.

Gabrielle wasn't allowed to join the ball, because she was a first-year, and the ball opened its doors only for fourth-years and up. This had to be a Zen riddle - finding the solution for the impossible.

Think again. Fact - the ball was open for fourth-years and older ... Fact - Gabrielle had to be at the ball - yes, take it as a fact, to speed up things ... Conclusion - Gabrielle had to be a fourth-year, which was utter nonsense.

Harry looked into her face. This was a mistake, because ...

No - hadn't been a mistake, because under the highest pressure, he found his best ideas. And now he saw the flaw in his facts collection, and remembered something he'd read some time ago, and ...

His gaze at her gained focus. "You want to dance, right?"

Stupid question, only without another hero around ... Gabrielle nodded.

She also confirmed, yes of course Chloe would be happy, only it had seemed too much to ask Harry for that, but if he saw a way, oooh, he was a true hero, up to his reputation, and she'd known in advance ...

Yes, she was ready to do her share.

Yes, she could follow someone's command, if that was reasonable.

She wasn't sure, but she would ask, and if the answer was no, she would find a way to alter it, felt quite sure about that.

Harry wasn't sure either, had little doubt in one case, little more in the other. "And no word to Fleur," he instructed Gabrielle, "unless I tell you otherwise ... Let me handle this."

A beaming. "But yes, 'arry ..." A hug, and a kiss, not caring who might watch, then Gabrielle hurried away.

Watched had, among others, Cho. She came over. "These Veela are full of tricks - doing it in full public ... Now really, Harry ..."

"I'll explain it to you later - just don't tell Fleur, okay?"

He was in a hurry, because - someone else had also watched, and he had seen an expression in a face, and this face belonged to someone who played an important role in his plot, a key role, to be precise. He met her outside. "Rahewa, can we have a walk?"

A nod. The dark eyes didn't come into his view.

"Let's follow the lakeside."

After a while, he stopped, pointed. "It was down there, two years ago ..."

Rahewa listened to his story of the second task in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. By the time he had finished, she could look at him, did so, not looking anywhere else.

"Now Gabrielle has a problem," he explained, "and since I'm her hero, she expects me to solve it ..."

Did these black eyes show some contempt?

"... and I have an idea. If it works, it's ... Well, let's see - Rahewa, you're a Cree, that's all I know. I don't know anything about Crees and other American Indians, only I've read ..."

Rahewa listened again, then nodded, yes, he was right.

Yes, of course she knew. Every ...

Yes, that would be like a dream come true. These weren't her words, only her eyes.

No, she had no obvious candidate.

Harry knew someone, found the idea enticing, because of the houses and so.

Rahewa smiled on that, suddenly resembling very much another eleven-year-old.

After talking with his candidate, finding blank terror first, reluctant attention then, hesitant agreement at the end, Harry made a visit to prepare for his own contribution.

Professor Sprout listened to his explanation, smiled. "You see, Mr. Potter - you never know what something's good for, even Herbology ... Although I have to admit, this isn't part of the regular program - after all, who might need something like that?"

Harry did, and the witch showed him how it was done.

Then he went to Fleur, told her that for some reason, after the first half hour into the ball, he would need about ten minutes.

Fleur looked expectant, realized that she would learn no more, not today, agreed. "It's even nicer so, 'arry - I can recite this ball's organization in my sleep, and now there's a surprise even for me ... I hope it's a nice one."

Harry smiled. "You bet."

For the last prerequisites, he had to ask Rahewa again, had to lend her a network ticket for portkey links, wanted to pay for the items, was rejected, wanted to pay at least for the others, only hitting solid rock, giving up on that.

Two days before the ball, Rahewa found him, guided him with beaming eyes to a box. He looked in, his nostrils widening at the fine smell. The items were brand new, soft, delicate, very genuine.

Officially in preparation for the booking of seats, he asked Ginny about her state of things.

She smiled. "Yes of course - two seats, please."

Harry wrote. "Two seats ... for Ginny and ..." He looked up, a question in his face.

She grinned. "Are these seats named, Harry?"

He shrugged. "Dunno ... Could be, couldn't it?"

"Never ... But to cover this burning gap in your knowledge - I've found a partner, nothing special, so-to-speak, actually quite common in a certain way ..."

Harry stared at her. "Awfully good to know that, really, because who cares about the details?"

"Well - I guess now I've put you on a totally wrong trap ... So, before you draw a face seeing him, and he wouldn't know why - it's Wynton."

"Really? ... That's a nice idea."

"Yes - I thought so, too ... And he thought the same."

Looking from Wynton's perspective, any other reaction would have taken Harry much by surprise. From Ginny's words, he could imagine the scene - Wynton in desperate search for - well, at least in search for a partner, and then this show-stopper of a girl coming along and asking him, maybe in the midst of a Quidditch discussion ... Harry remembered Katie's remark about a slow hand.

With all this settled, it was high time to get his own preparation finished. In contrast to the previous year, he could do it almost by himself, had to ask for Kenzo's help in just one detail. Done ... The ball could come.

### **13 - *Matches en Suite***

The day of the Hogwarts Christmas Ball started almost as a sibling of that in the year before. One difference - today the organization was Fleur's responsibility, however Fleur looked more than grateful when Harry and Ron came along to ask for their share of work.

With the movings and settings done, Harry had a last check with Rahewa, then went upstairs to get dressed. Prefect bathrooms still were restricted to Prefects like Ron, only this year, Harry knew something comparable, not in style but in quality.

He met Ron again in the dormitory, if only for a moment because Ron would do in Beauxbatons what Harry was going to do just downstairs - waiting at the entrance to a tower. Passing Ron, Harry got a nose-full of a strong scent. He sniffed. "Well, well - your own choice?"

Ron looked unruffled. "No - Janine's."

"Does it have a name?"

"Erm ... *Petit rêve*."

Small dream ... Harry grinned. "Wow - three jokes in one name!"

Ron looked suspicious. "You're teasing - there are only two."

Harry grinned broader. "Think again - or ask Janine."

"Will do ... See you downstairs." Reaching the door, Ron stopped, giggled. "You're right - but don't you worry."

A moment later, Harry finished dressing, grabbed the small box he had prepared the day before, walked down to the entrance of the Ravenclaw tower. Coming closer, he saw a familiar figure standing there, waiting too, looking the other way.

Reaching the figure, Harry said, "Hello, Prof."

Lupin wheeled around. "Harry! ... I wouldn't mind a bit more noise when coming from behind."

Harry suppressed the first remark that popped up in his mind. It would have been too impolite, talking about the differences between human ears and some others, bigger and with more fur. "Sorry," he said, "it wasn't on purpose ... Recently, I never know whether I should call from the distance."

Lupin looked expressionless. "Probably not."

Harry realized - again without purpose, this remark hadn't scored much better than the suppressed one. However, the embarrassing moment could be ended simply. He beamed. "To find you here, waiting like me - that's a super feeling, Prof."

"Thank you, Harry ... I feel the same, although I still have to get used to it."

"Well ... There are more islands than *Ja-pan* to get accustomed to new experiences."

It took Lupin a second to extrapolate from *Ja-pan* to *Ja-maica*, Almyra's origin, then he laughed. "Next summer we have to find someone to get that big mouth of yours under control."

Harry bowed. "At that time, the need might be negligible."

"I don't think so - this remark is the best proof." Lupin smiled. "Although I appreciate your opinion as much as your style of conversation."

Steps came down the staircase.

Someone had anticipated the scene, had shown the presence of mind to figure it out - with Cho coming down first, she and Harry would be out of the way a moment later.

Harry admired Cho's robe - red of course, Oriental as before, even stronger - depending on how Cho walked, a lot more leg was visible for a moment.

He kissed her, took her aside. "Please tell me that we're going to join a ball."

She beamed. "Why? ... Do you think this is a dream?"

"This too, yes ... But what I really thought was - seeing you in this dress, if not to say under this dress, I tend to forget there are people around."

She whispered. "Please don't ... Today I'm badly suited to remind you."

He swallowed. "We should change the subject ... Here, this may help." He offered the small box.

Expectantly, Cho tore the wrapping apart, examined the content. "It looks mysterious, and impressive ... and I cannot read Japanese."

What she held was a clip that could be fixed on a garment, holding three jet-black pieces of wood, tied with small rings to the clip. The middle piece was longer than the others. Kanji characters covered all three of them, carved into the wood and filled with a white material. Harry had designed the piece, selected the colors, with Cho's dress in mind.

He said, "That's what I thought - me either, actually ... Wait a second." He took the ornament, fixed it at her robe, suppressing the temptation to touch a bit more than necessary, in particular since, for a moment, Cho's breath came heavier. Then he extracted a small parchment. "Here - the original."

Cho opened it, read.

A staircase, empty  
The sound of steps, and then the  
Flaming red of love

She kissed him. "Thank you ... It's not exactly the help you promised, but I love it."

They wandered into the Great Hall. This year, there was no promenade like in the years before, first for space reasons and then because Fleur had "something better". So they had agreed on meeting just at the booked places - Harry and Cho, Ron and Janine, Marie-Christine and Gérard, Ginny and Wynton.

Hermione and Almyra, together with their partners, were found at the teachers' table. This was something new for Hermione, and according to the expression in her face, she appreciated it a lot while Almyra, who should be used to this environment, seemed still a bit uneasy.

Ron and Janine sat already there, waiting for them, as well as Marie-Christine and Gérard, who exchanged a polite smile with Harry.

A moment later, Ginny and Wynton arrived.

Harry did the honours. "... and this is Wynton Jeffries, Keeper in our Quidditch team, and a nightmare for Chasers."

Naturally, Wynton blushed.

Naturally, Gérard had a comment. "With the remarkable exception of Ginny - just for balance."

Ginny showed a cool smile. "Exactly - I gained quite some balance, recently."

Gérard took a moment, apparently to find a good reply. This done, he turned toward Harry, only what he saw in the eyes staring at him seemed reason to swallow his remark, and to let the bigger part of his drink follow.

Harry turned to Marie-Christine. "We're a bit old-fashioned here in Hogwarts - instead of pressing a silver ball, you have to walk to a bar."

Her answer came with a faint smile. "That's a good limitation, I could imagine."

Although Harry felt pretty sure the remark hadn't been addressed in his direction, he decided to play the target, smiled. "Probably ... But even if not, I learned my lesson."

Marie-Christine looked startled, confirming his thought. Then she laughed, not quite as joyful as it might have been. "Bien sur, 'arry - it's amazing how well lessons go with you."

Cho grinned. "Definitely."

The moment of tension faded in the laughter, only poor Wynton didn't know what was so funny about this remark, while he found no reason to think differently. And Gérard's face told anybody interested that for him, another thought was spoiling the fun.

Fleur stepped to the middle of the dance floor, the magiphone in her hand. "Ladies and gentlemen," she began, "we'll open this year's Christmas Ball with the ceremony that suits most - a dance, what else. However, for the first dance, I'd like to see a kind of - " she smiled, "representative collection."

The smile changed to a grin. "The representatives are all here - except they don't know yet about their contribution."

Harry had a dim feeling she had meant him too.

"I ask the couple to represent Hogwarts and Beauxbatons - Mr. Albus Dumbledore and Madame Olympe Maxime ... Please come to me."

The unlikely pair stood up, came to the parquet, waiting.

"The couple for Beauxbatons and Durmstrang - Monsieur Leonard Fleury and Madame Tinka Nikolova."

These two figures were unknown to Harry.

"For Durmstrang and Hogwarts - Monsieur Kristof Drilencu and Madame Sybill Trelawney."

Smiling at the memory of an O.W.L. exam, Harry watched them coming to the parquet.

Fleur beamed. "So far, we have linked the schools only with teachers. Now we have to find the link from the teachers to the students."

She looked around. "Mr. Remus Lupin and Miss Almyra Benedict."

Harry applauded wildly, seeing the tension in Almyra's face, still the only student among all the teachers at the dance floor.

"And for good measure - Mr. Viktor Krum and Miss Hermione Granger."

With some bafflement, Harry became aware that not all teachers held to a certain codex. But maybe this had to be treated as a question of older rights - in a way, Viktor had kept to another codex even after becoming teacher.

"Now coming to students only ..." called Fleur. "For Hogwarts and Beauxbatons, I ask Mr. Ron Weasley and Mademoiselle Janine Baillard."

Janine beamed, which was just good because she had to do it for both of them.

"For Beauxbatons and Durmstrang - no, the other way around, I ask Monsieur Grigorij Dimitriu and Mademoiselle Danielle Rabault."

So Grigorij had found a replacement, thought Harry. Good for him. And both Ginny and Wynton were applauding enthusiastically.

"For Durmstrang and Hogwarts, or vice versa, I ask Mr. Neville Longbottom and Mademoiselle Nadejda Karadiova."

Well, well - look there ... Against all odds, and with much relief, Harry noticed - the representatives were complete, and he himself still sitting. The music would start any second now.

Fleur looked around. "So much for the schools, the teachers, the students ... Now, what we still need in our collection are the races and cultures which are so strongly united with us ... Although you see only humans around, even this problem can be solved easily."

She turned. "The first two races were a simple case ... To represent Goblins, I ask Mr. Bill Weasley - to join me who stands for Veela." With a shining smile, she watched Bill reaching her, taking her arm.

"And that leaves two other races, and you might think it cannot be, because I'm talking about Giants and elves. But as impossible as it seems - we have the perfect couple for that ... After asking the elves for their representative, they unanimously designated the one who's more devoted to their creations than anyone else ..."

Harry heard Cho's low groan at his side.

"... although you'd never believe it, looking at her, because her name is Cho Chang ... And it just so happens, her partner can rightfully claim to be a true Giant - you may ask him if you don't believe - Mr. 'arry Potter!"

They met the others, were greeted with applause. Almyra's embarrassment quickly made room for a wide grin.

The music started, which was a mercy, and seconds later, all awkwardness fell off from Harry, gliding with Cho across the parquet, enjoying the space with these few couples turning round and round. With the next dance, it would be tighter than narrow.

So it was. He and Cho couldn't find the slightest chance for any of the more advanced figures they'd learned only recently. Holding her tightly, Harry smiled. "As skilled as the elves are - nobody can turn a cake into something as delicious as what I can feel here."

Cho looked pleased - mostly. "You have a tricky way to select your words, my charming Potter."

He laughed. "Lupin said the same - although with other words."

"Oh, did he? ... That's interesting."

Harry managed to keep his step. Had he said too much? Was his level of knowledge above Cho's own? Her face didn't reveal enough, especially now that she held it so close to him, hidden under the long black hair.

His next partner was Janine. With so many people around them, dancing could be hardly more than moving in place, which offered the opportunity for some conversation. Janine said, "It's funny how rarely we talk to each other, 'arry."

He laughed. "Yes ... Since I wouldn't know any other reason, I'd say it's Ron's fault."

Janine smiled. "You're right - while he has no trouble talking with you."

Listening to unspoken words, if only imagined ones, Harry replied, "There are exceptions to the rule - I think then he talks with Fleur."

"Does he?"

"With some reluctance - and not very often."

"And with his sister?"

Not quite sure whether he'd registered a change of subject, Harry said, "Well - I'd be surprised if the topics are the same."

Janine laughed. "That's what I heard ... So it must be you whom she's talking with."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the one who took some lessons, to quote Marie-Christine." Janine looked into his eyes. "I too would like to hear about your time in Japan - once we find the time for a longer conversation, and provided you could agree to that topic."

Harry nodded. "With some reluctance."

Then he danced with Marie-Christine, trying to ban the thought of Gérard who, at the same time, danced with Cho. This, of course, required avoiding the topic of Gérard in conversation as well. Since Voldemort didn't strike him as a better choice, he concentrated on dancing, feeling the presence of her body, remembering a scene at the lake, and the picture of Marie-Christine in her swimsuit.

She seemed to sense it, or the same memory was crossing her mind. At any rate, Marie-Christine looked at him with a mix of challenge, sadness, and pleasure in her face.

The music stopped. Fleur was on the stage, took the magiphone. "Ladies and gentlemen - what's going to follow will be a surprise for myself. All I can say is - Mr. Harry Potter can tell you more."

He was up, received the magiphone from her, remembering another stage with some conférencier in Beauxbatons. Except today it wasn't about himself, no need to be nervous, so why didn't his hands stop trembling ...

Thinking about his own part, the nervousness faded in an instant. "What I have to tell you," he began, "is just a short explanation - in a minute, you can watch and listen ... Hogwarts is a place where many cultures meet, in times of trouble and in times of joy. Today, you'll see something from a culture that's new to most of us. It's the culture of the First Nations of America - and what you'll see is - surprise - a dance, as this culture is famous for their dances ... Ladies and Gentleman, please give your attention to the *Grass Dance!*"

He stepped to the front of the stage, threw his wand, pointed. "*GRAMENALERE!*"

Where a second before parquet had stretched, a green-yellow rectangle of prairie grass appeared, short enough, dry enough - it had taken him some training until Rahewa's nod had signaled approval.

From behind the stage, six figures appeared, crossing the distance to the grass rectangle, taking positions. The music started - high-pitched voices singing, drums, a tambourine, a pipe.

Standing across, the three pairs started to move - Rahewa Lightfoot and Damon Harker, Gabrielle and Fabien, Chloe and a boy from which Harry knew just the name, Philippe, nothing else. They wore Cree clothes of soft, light-brown leather, the girls skirts and loose shirts, the boys trousers and - instead of a shirt - paintings, and leather rings with feathers around the upper arms.

The movements of the two French girls were a bit softer, a bit more glidingly, while Rahewa was setting sharper accents on her steps. The boys had a moment of embarrassment, however after a few seconds, they caught the rhythm as well, responded to a conversation performed with legs and bodies, across a distance of some feet.

Harry wondered if Gabrielle had used some Veela power during the training, didn't really want to know.

After five minutes, the performance came to its end, with one dancer after the other stopping, stepping out of the circle, moving behind the stage.

There had been a small fight about the final, started by Gabrielle, ended by Harry with the words, "If it's a Veela dance, you're the one. This is a Cree dance, so Rahewa will be the last."

Rahewa did her last steps, fell down. The light went out.

When it came back moments later, Rahewa was gone, the grass also, the parquet back in place.

Harry had the three girls to his right, the three boys to his left. They stood, bowed, stood, bowed, until the roaring applause faded. Then Harry raised the megaphone again. "Ladies and gentlemen, I think you'll agree with me that our six dancers are entitled to join us for a while. From Hogwarts, you've seen Rahewa Lightfoot and Damon Harker, from Beauxbatons ..."

Fleur was still busy starting the music again, met him and his group a moment later, beaming. "Oh, 'arry - it was wonderful!"

"Don't look at me ... First there was Gabrielle with her determination. Then there was Rahewa with her knowledge and the required items. And guess who's been in the middle? ... No, not me - Hermione, she's the one who gave me that book in which I read about the Grass Dance."

Following Fleur's glance, he introduced. "Fleur, meet Rahewa Lightfoot, grass dancer and the youngest female Seeker as long as this is recorded ... Rahewa, you have seen Fleur Delacour, but you don't know how much I owe her."

Fleur smiled at the girl. "If there was anything left, after what I owed 'arry for his task in the lake, today he has balanced out - and you're the one who made it possible, Rahewa."

The dark eyes lighted up, didn't know where to look, and the face, so much self-possessed through the performance, turned dark red.

Fleur watched it with some astonishment.

Harry took Rahewa's shoulder. "That's her - she was doing it with me all the time ... You just have to get used to Fleur."

Behind the stage, he told Damon and Rahewa that he would wait here until they'd changed into normal dresses, to take them to their table. Damon looked a bit scared. "Erm - Harry, please - um, don't wait for me. I'll just dress and then ..."

"You won't try to escape, Damon, would you?"

Young Damon looked trapped.

"You cannot do that ... If you think you cannot dance, then okay, you don't have to - although, just a minute ago you got a lot of applause for your dancing ... But there's Rahewa, and she's your lady of the evening - you cannot let her sit alone."

"Oh ..." Damon nodded. "I didn't look at it that way."

"That's why I told you ... Now get dressed like a wizard, Sitting Bull."

Of course, Rahewa had finished quicker than her cavalier, had obviously been ready to do without him, maybe in favour of some other, was nonetheless pleased when Damon, looking considerably relaxed with his regular clothes and with the promise of dancing as an optional thought, took her arm to follow Harry.

They reached the table, greeted by smiles and another applause. "Ron," said Harry, "do a little magic for two more seats - this particular combination, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, must not sit anywhere else."

Gérard grinned. "Ah, very good, 'arry - fresh supply, and a very promising one ... Although still a bit ..."

The sentence was abruptly stopped, never to finish, because Marie-Christine's right hand landed in Gérard's face, producing a loud smack and a flaming red imprint in a face gone pale.

Next second, Gérard's hand came up and returned the favour.

The second smack almost drowned in another noise - that of Harry's seat flying backward. He was up, arm on the table, his legs moving upward, forward, passing his body over the table, aiming toward Gérard.

In the last instant, he decided to hit him on chest and shoulders, rather than in the face. A broken nose seemed no improvement of the situation.

Gérard, still on his seat, sailed backward, fell down, still trying to register the force that had struck him.

Harry turned to Marie-Christine. "I'm sorry ..."

She was up. "There's nothing that *you* should be sorry about ... Would you please escort me to the gate, 'arry?" She looked at Cho, earning a nod.

Harry took Marie-Christine's arm, started to walk, feeling her burning rage, and embarrassment, about to say something, feeling another rage, blind, growing ...

He wheeled around, not reaching for a wand, rather taking the *kokyu suru*, the attack stance, stopping - in spite of the picture of Gérard, upright again, a pale distorted face, strangely familiar, wand in his arm, coming up ...

Because this wasn't the complete picture.

A cat was flying, black, slim, landing on Gérard's back, a claw at his neck, the other claw with a glittering talon, now at his throat - only it wasn't a cat, or a black panther, it was Rahewa, and the glittery talon was a knife, denting Gérard's flesh, creating a tiny spot of red.

And another detail. From the side came Ginny, stepping unlike any girl around, feet flat, legs slightly apart, one arm outstretched, the other up. She reached the uneven pair, looked at the young face which showed murder in the black eyes. "It's okay, Rahewa ... Leave him to me."

She stared at Gérard. "You're lucky to be alive - and I'm lucky for something else ... Go."

Rahewa landed on her feet, hardly causing a noise. Suddenly, the knife was gone. She stepped back.

At the same time, Cho was coming to Harry and Marie-Christine, reached them. "I'll escort her, Harry."

He nodded, moved to the table.

Gérard had a tissue in his hand, holding it toward the spot at his throat. "You're a true hero, Harry - need little girls to protect you."

"Yes, Gérard, that's one difference between us - or could you name a single girl that would do it for you?"

Gérard made a gesture as if spitting out.

Harry smiled. "Oh - I almost forgot ... Marie-Christine had no time asking me, but I'm sure it was on her mind." His right hand had only the way from his side to Gérard's face just in front of him, but it had the full drive from a body in hard training for months, and the full support of a mind close to red-glowing wrath.

It wasn't a smack. It was a sharp bang like a whip. Gérard barely avoided flying headlong again, stumbled to regain some balance, walked away without turning back.

Harry reached Rahewa. "I have to thank you - you've protected me ... For this, I'd like to ask you for a dance." He bowed toward Damon, who was still gaping, unable to express his agreement, of which Harry felt sure.

Rahewa's voice was small. "I cannot ... I feel sick."

"I know - that's the adrenaline, comes always after an attack ... But it's not unknown to you, is it?"

Rahewa shook her head, nodded, followed to the dance floor.

Dancing with girls smaller than himself was a feeling quite common to Harry, only at previous occasions it had been his role, showing nervousness. After a moment, however, Rahewa caught the rhythm, responding to the music.

"Say, Rahewa - do you have that knife always with you?"

The head in his view nodded.

"Well - can nobody say you won't know how to handle it ... and how far to go. So I think Ginny wasn't quite right - although he might indeed be lucky that you didn't want to go farther."

The face was pretty much hidden, even so, it seemed to lighten up from inwardly.

When the dance ended, Rahewa wanted to sit down. Harry guided her to the table, bowed, receiving another nod. Then he headed toward the Beauxbatons link - Cho hadn't returned yet to the table.

She wasn't downstairs either.

Maybe Cho had accompanied Marie-Christine to Beauxbatons, only Harry didn't think so. While he couldn't say whether this was a guess, a result of *haragei*, or simple speculation, some feeling told him to look outside in the park.

He found them on a bench - the only people in the park so early after the ball had started. Cho's arm held Marie-Christine, who was crying miserably, bitterly, unable to stop.

Harry sat down at the other side, added his arm to Cho's support. After a moment, when the crying slowed a bit, he said, "Come in, Marie-Christine - freezing to death won't improve your mood."

She sobbed. "Don't be so sure about that."

Cho looked alarmed.

Harry said, "It's a Zen riddle ... Alive, you can love him which makes you miserable - dead, you cannot love him any longer which makes you miserable too ... Am I right?"

Marie-Christine had listened. "And how is it solved?"

"Zen riddles cannot be solved. You can only laugh at them."

"Ha ha ..." She started crying again.

"Crying increases the impossible."

The scientist in Marie-Christine couldn't resist, had to giggle on that. Harry saw his chance. "Now come in ... He's gone."

"Did he say something else?"

"Yes."

"Won't you tell me?"

"No ... Anyway, we parted with a handshake."

Marie-Christine looked up, disbelief in her face. "Really?"

"Yes - although only my hand was involved ... I took the liberty to say it was in your name."

Cho looked satisfied, more so when Marie-Christine giggled first and then said, "This girl, 'arry ... Rahewa - she did what I should have done long before."

"Oh, I don't know - you're not as good as her with a knife ... And Gérard is dangerous."

"Dangerous? ... No, 'arry - whatever he is, certainly not that."

"Yes he is, Marie-Christine ... He cannot lose, and that's what makes him dangerous. He cannot play sports for that reason ... When confronted with a situation where he cannot win, he panicks - we could see that today."

"Hmm ..." Marie-Christine straightened. "I have the bad feeling you're right, 'arry - I'll think about that ... Anyway, now I'll go back to ..."

"No." Cho's voice sounded very determined.

"Wha ... Why not?" Marie-Christine looked at her in astonishment.

"Because you feel like hell warmed over ... And we owe you too much to let you alone in this state."

"But - I've no place here, and nothing to ..."

"Leave it to me." Cho stood up.

"And besides - I'm not going inside with this face, so ..."

"Leave it to Harry. I'll be back in a minute." Cho marched off.

Marie-Christine watched her entering the building, turned to Harry. "What's she doing? ... And what did she mean - leave it to you?"

"What she's doing - I might guess, but we'll hear it soon ... And now look at me." He put her face into his hands, murmured something, felt the swollen eyes return to normal, saw the reddening disappear.

Marie-Christine's voice had changed considerably. "Oh - pity, for a moment I thought this spell would go with a kiss."

"Come to think of it - I never tried it that way ... But it's never too late." He took her face again, kissed her, examined her. "You're right - it adds a smile."

"Where did you learn that, 'arry?"

"I think you know - in Japan."

"You're trying to tell me it was taught without a kiss? ... Never."

"Well - the combination's my own invention, based on sound advice from a famous French scientist ... Shigura taught me how to do magic without a wand, and Tamiko taught me how to cure bruises and swellings."

For an instant, Marie-Christine seemed to ponder a comment on the curing of swellings by Tamiko. To Harry's relief, she only grinned. "And the kissing?"

A voice from behind. "That was me."

Surprisingly, Cho looked triumphant. "It's settled - let's go." She held something in her hand.

Harry looked closer, gasped. "I can't believe it ... Where did you get that?"

Cho's eyes were shining. "From Fleur - she holds them for emergency cases, and this is an emergency, if any."

Marie-Christine tried to recognize the item, without success. "What is it?"

"A surprise," replied Harry. "C'mon."

Of course, Marie-Christine had to find a mirror first, returned with an expression of awe. "That's remarkable, 'arry - you could start a beauty salon any time."

Cho grinned. "Absolutely ... The only question left is - are all these girls around him customers or employees?"

When they arrived at the table, Ron had to perform a little more magic with seats - Gabrielle and Chloe had occupied the seats of Marie-Christine and Gérard. Harry looked at his dancers. "Where are your cavaliers?"

"Ooh ..." A dismissive gesture from Gabrielle. "We lost them, somehow."

Cho turned to Marie-Christine. "See what I mean?"

Damon, on the other side, didn't feel out of place - not with two more girls of the proper age. He was busy increasing his knowledge of French, and Gabrielle's and Chloe's knowledge of English. And somehow, he had managed to make Rahewa smile and laugh more often than Harry had ever seen. Maybe this had to do with his translations - Rahewa, coming from Canada, was perfectly bi-lingual.

Harry danced with Hermione, was interviewed about the exact details of what had happened at the table. Hermione, to her bitter regret, had only seen the final part with Harry's hand alone involved, and she said she was going to lure someone else into the spectator room, for a recording of the first part.

Then he danced with Almyra, and again he had to describe the scene. Almyra had seen more - for example Rahewa's contribution, except not in full detail. "Was she trying to strangle him, Harry?"

"Not exactly, no ... Well, if you couldn't see it, I hope the teachers couldn't see it either."

"Why - what did she do?"

"She showed him a knife - although he couldn't see it well, because it was on his throat."

Almyra gasped.

"At least," said Harry quickly, "she can handle it quite well - which is a relief, since I wouldn't know a teacher to improve that."

Almyra laughed. "You have some bodyguard, Harry."

"Yeah ... Gérard said something to that extent."

"Similar, huh ... I saw your answer - and I liked it."

Then he danced with Fleur, who said, "I'll need another assistant, 'arry - but I'm not going to blame you."

"Thanks ... What about Bill?"

"That would be super, but he's not close enough - even with linkports." Fleur smiled at Harry. "By the way - what kind of emergency was it exactly that Cho needed a guest room?"

He laughed. "You're just too single-minded, Fleur ... It's for Marie-Christine, it didn't feel appropriate to send her home alone."

Fleur's eyes were sparkling. "I'm not single-minded, 'arry - just open-minded, in contrast to some other people ... But then, maybe less people than I thought."

He shook his head. "Veela."

"I hope this was a compliment - if not, I'll give you Veela."

"Of course it was ... And Drilencu said Veela won't blackmail."

Then he danced with Gabrielle, who informed him that their formation was already booked for Beauxbatons, except maybe with the Sun Dance for a change. It struck him as a small surprise - after all, the ball in Beauxbatons had a similar limit, only with third-years as the minimum age.

The dance with Ginny completed Harry's list of *honneurs*. Katie and Alicia would come next, but first he wanted another round with Cho, and then with Marie-Christine. Smelling Cho's breath, he smiled. "British champagne seems better than its reputation."

"Certainly not - Beauxbatons was clever enough to help out."

Fleur announced *Ladie's choice*, and it was Katie who grabbed him. "C'mon, Harry - this is my only chance to get that close to you." Then she did as promised. Maybe it was an attempt to make him feel sorry for a missed opportunity, although he wasn't exactly sorry when the dance ended.

After some more dances, with Alicia, with Marie-Christine who seemed feeling better, and not as sober as earlier that evening, Fleur arrived to escort two girls home to Beauxbatons. Damon and Rahewa took this as their signal for saying good night.

Suddenly, Harry was alone with Cho and Marie-Christine. Ron and Janine were nowhere seen, and Ginny and Wynton had joined the group of Katie and Alicia. Marie-Christine looked up, less joyful than half an hour before. "I think it's time for me ... I had enough drinks - that's what I'd need, following Gérard's habit ..."

Cho stood up. "Then let's go."

They followed her up the staircase. To Harry's surprise, Cho didn't stop at the well-known guest suite. He asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Guess what - the way to that room ... Fleur said something ..."

Harry stepped forward, grabbed Cho's hand. "Lemme see that card ... Oh my God - yes, that's it!"

Marie-Christine asked, "Something wrong?"

He shook his head, took the card from Cho's hand. "Not at all ... Follow me." He opened the door, stepped aside, beaming. "Ladies ..."

Marie-Christine and Cho stepped in, looked around, seemed impressed. Behind them, Harry said, "Good evening, Nicodemus ... please meet Miss Thérooux and Miss Chang."

"Good evening, Mr. Potter ... At your service, myladies."

Marie-Christine just continued looking impressed, while Cho seemed speechless, if only for a moment. Then she asked, "How come you're so familiar here, Harry?"

"That's the room where I was hiding when Lupin was rescued." Sitting around the table, with drinks from the servant picture - no alcohol for any of them, he had to describe the time spent in this suite.

Marie-Christine said, "All the time alone here - a scary thought." She looked uneasy right now.

Cho cleared her throat. "Marie-Christine ... Would you like some company?"

An expression of hope, and anxiousness. "What do you mean?"

Cho looked at the table. "I don't like the idea of leaving you alone ... We owe you, and now you need company."

A choked giggle. "You mean ... If I ask one of you, no matter whom, you'd stay with me?"

Cho still looked at the table. "Yes."

Harry was staring at her, at Marie-Christine, at Cho again. His mouth felt a bit dry.

Marie-Christine looked at Cho, at him, at the table. "I cannot decide."

Harry had a feeling - in an instant, Cho would nominate him. The thought was disquieting enough to react quickly. "Well, then ... There's enough room for three."

Two quick glances, while no protest. Harry ordered pyjamas and other necessities from Nicodemus, then Marie-Christine disappeared in the bathroom.

Cho was looking at him. "Why did you say that?"

"Because I knew next second you'd nominate me."

She nodded. "I'm glad you ... I cannot think clearly."

He came to her, took her shoulders. It had been a mistake. He felt the heat emanate from her, felt her lean toward him, was at a loss to distinguish between common senses, empathy, *haragei* ...

Marie-Christine called - the bathroom was free.

Cho jumped up and disappeared through the door.

Sitting, waiting, Harry felt himself tremble, felt infected by Cho, ordered his mind to calm down, with limited success, maybe because his mind wasn't the proper address for the command.

Cho appeared in the door frame to offer a free bathroom. Seeing her in these pyjamas, delicate and first rate like the entire suite, wasn't a help either. Coming out of the bathroom, he found Cho at one side, Marie-Christine in the middle. It looked like a safety zone of questionable reliability.

He glided under the cover, switched off the light, realized it had only been days since full moon, reminding him of a test with a result still unknown to him, reminding him also of another day with a moon shining through a window.

He should close the curtains. Only he couldn't. And nobody else did it, or asked for it to be done.

The safety zone wasn't safe at all. The double bed certainly offered room enough for three, while not without touching each other. One more example of the difference between right and true ...

Harry tried to relax, couldn't. All his senses, most of all his new ones, told him - nobody in this room was sleepy, not to mention asleep. A sensual aura was growing by the second. Suddenly, Cho's voice. "Gérard is an idiot."

Marie-Christine. "Why?"

"Because he's not satisfied with your body ... Stupid of him."

Harry thought the same, tried to ban the thought, failed.

Marie-Christine. "Do you think so?"

Cho's voice, strangled. "Yes."

"And you, 'arry?"

He had trouble breathing regularly. "I'm trying to think something else - doesn't work."

Marie-Christine's arms reached to both sides. "Then show me."

A moment of breathless silence around her.

"I mean it ... It's something like ... and today I'm mad enough to make it come true, and with the right people - I can feel it ..."

Harry was still asking himself whether his ears were playing tricks when his eyes told him he'd heard right. Cho started to unbutton Marie-Christine's pyjamas.

"No - not yet ... First you have to undress."

Cho seemed unwilling to stop, murmured, "Is it that important in which sequence?"

"Yes it is - I want to see you ... And I want to see how - 'arry, you must do it for Cho, and then she for you."

This was certainly the most astonishing command Harry had ever heard in Hogwarts, while he couldn't remember anything less objectionable. Following orders felt simpler than figuring out whether this scene was reality ... And he had taken lessons for this task.

He rolled to the other side, took Cho's arms, took Cho, not feeling resistance, only some kind of trembling weakness. Kneeling, he moved behind her, pulled her up until she was kneeling with her back to him, both of them facing Marie-Christine who watched, her expression confirming that Harry was doing exactly what she'd hoped for.

Unbuttoning Cho's pyjamas ... A delicious task, carried out slowly, with all the time of the world, with all the diligence of a student who remembered the details well.

For a moment, Cho's hands tried to find him, to touch him. He pushed them off gently, folded her arms behind her head. She obeyed, slightly trembling, certainly not from any cold in this well-heated room, stiffening for an instant when his hands opened the pyjamas, when his palms took their time to pass over her skin, her swelling mounds which right now were lacking softness ...

A low moan from her.

He put her arms down, stripped the vest from her shoulders, took it down, caressing her again, hard breathing in his ears, its origin impossible to locate - Cho's, his own, Marie-Christine's ...

Inching closer, his hands reached the waistband of her pants, came around, moved inside, stroking, felt a soaking wetness. Cho's voice was a croaky whisper. "Undressing - that's what you're supposed to do ... Nothing else."

"I'm strictly following orders ... As well as I know how, and have learned."

"You learned for a different setup - don't forget ..."

Marie-Christine words were an order, her voice a plea. "No - he's doing fine ... extremely fine."

Harry did, feeling Cho's thighs tremble, supporting her, until the garment was down to her knees. He pushed her gently forward, then quickly freed her legs.

Cho turned, came up, wanted to start with his own buttons, was stopped by Marie-Christine who found the arrangement face to faces much more enthralling.

Kneeling before Marie-Christine, feeling Cho's body in his back, her hand on him, Harry was riding a storm of emotions - his own arousal only part of it, other waves, sensed, hitting him like blows.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, opened them again, looking at Marie-Christine. She was watching, eyes wide open, breathing deeply, an expression of deepest concentration in her face.

Cho's hands were pushing his own pants downward, freeing him, torturing him similarly to what he'd done to her shortly before.

Marie-Christine struggled the cover from her body, from her legs, leaning back again, drinking in the sight of him. Seeing her like that, the unmistakable signs of her state, was an almost painful sensation, hardening him still more, if that was possible.

They took their places again, lying down to both sides of Marie-Christine. Cho immediately resumed her previous task, only less quiet than before.

Harry kept motionless for a minute, trying to calm down, to find his breath again. It was extremely difficult - with the picture before his eyes, Cho who had uncovered two beautiful breasts, was hiding them now and again under a long black mane, and Marie-Christine whose head was jerked back, whose mouth was sending small sighs and gasps.

Hardly feeling calmer, he began with his own contribution to the undressing, aware that Cho had left the second piece completely to him. But first, his hands were busy to gain some familiarity with this new body, this soft skin, these legs that were somewhat longer, softer, less muscular than what he was used to.

Feeling more secure, although not calmer, he freed enough so Marie-Christine could lie down again, taking more time now, progressing inch by slow inch in exposing these wonderful legs, probing, testing, teasing, feeling a tremble grow in her body.

Coming down to the ankles, he felt her attempt to kick the garment off her legs, stopped her quickly, putting her legs together, pulling her knees slightly upward, hearing Marie-Christine's groaning protest.

He wrapped the piece tighter, tying her ankles. His hands went up her legs again. Reaching her knees, he took them and, with a sharp twist, opened them wide, stroking further upward.

The answer was a strong gasp, another, and another. He felt the tension in her grow rapidly. With his one arm keeping her legs apart, he found her core, streaming wet, circled it once, pressed it hard.

A small cry, followed by a wailing sound. Marie-Christine arched up, her body an arc from shoulders to tied legs.

Not letting go, he held her, stroking, pressing, until eventually the arc broke, her body falling back.

Cho looked up, her voice disappointed. "That was cruel ... It was just so nicely going ..."

Harry felt like laughing. "It wasn't my mistake ..."

Marie-Christine's voice came shaky, still breathlessly, but smiling. "He's right ... Don't blame him."

Whether she had heard or not, Cho's glance was reproachful. "Take your hands away ... You're spoiling all the fun." She moved down, freed Marie-Christine's ankles, knelt over her legs.

Marie-Christine's voice was comforting. "Give it a little break - or maybe change the ..."

"No way ... If it wasn't his mistake, it was yours. Now you have to live with the consequences." With these words, she put one knee between Marie-Christine's legs and pushed them apart.

Marie-Christine's arms came up, trying to stop her.

Cho glared at Harry. "Do something useful ... Hold her!"

Following orders, especially when given from this person, and in this tone ... He took Marie-Christine's arms, put them over her head, held them with one arm, his other free to explore these large half-globes which all the time had been occupied by someone else.

Marie-Christine looked at him, half of a question in her face, maybe to ask if Cho was serious, or whether he really could be so fierce toward her, doing exactly what Cho had said.

Next moment, the question was gone, replaced by disbelief, washed off by a grimace of pain and ecstasy, eyes closed, mouth opening, closing, a ragged breath, quickening again.

Harry's palm wandered over a landscape of unfamiliar dimensions, feeling softness, hardness, astonishing sizes. Even if it wasn't the size of his preference, there was nothing wrong with it, not now, not any other time, and anyone thinking so was beyond stupidity.

He no longer felt any resistance in Marie-Christine's arms. There was no resistance at all left in her, only a deep movement to master the sensations storming from different directions, and locations.

Harry's mouth found its way to these splendid hills, moving upward, reaching the top, his lips closing around it, sucking, releasing, gentle teeth stroking along. His ears took in the pattern of sounds from Marie-Christine, tried to associate it with his own caressing and with Cho's doing, failed since Marie-Christine could no longer respond to singular stimulations.

Cho moved to Marie-Christine's side, closed her legs again. This time the response could be clearly attached, only it was impossible to decide - was it a sigh of relief or protest?

Cho took one of Marie-Christine's arms, put it down, away from the trembling body, knelt over it.

Her head came down, her mouth at Marie-Christine's ear, whispering something.

Another gasp from Marie-Christine. Her free hand moved, covered Cho's wet mound, raised a sharp bending of Cho's body, and a choked groaning.

Cho's head was again at Marie-Christine's ear, whispering something new.

The response was a sharp intake of breath. Then Marie-Christine's legs opened again, wider, still wider.

Cho's voice. "C'mon, Harry ... She's waiting for you."

It was no invitation - in contrast to these legs and this tuft of wet hair. It was a command, no matter how strangled the voice.

He obeyed - moving carefully, slowly, with the rest of the little control he had. Gliding, he felt the change from coolness to heat, from soft swelling to gentle gripping. At the same time, his other senses were flooded with the reaction from two sources, Marie-Christine as much as Cho.

It broke any planning, crumpled any thought he still might have held. His hands found hold on a trembling body, then his hips were thrusting. He felt diving, diving, the timespan short before he was bursting, the bursting deep down, quieting, although not stopping, not for some more strokes until he felt Marie-Christine reaching the clouds and the rain, unfamiliar only in the details but not in the sensation that reached him - a double sensation, almost simultaneously, if he could trust his senses.

For a time, he kept motionless. Hands were stroking his back, difficult to distinguish.

He looked up into a smiling face, bent forward, kissed it. "You're wonderful." Then, as carefully as on the way before, he climbed out, down, fell on his back at her side.

Marie-Christine had found some breath. "We have to rearrange a bit here." She moved to the outside, pushed Cho in the middle, a Cho who had stopped trembling, looking calmer, who smiled to one side, to the other, receiving kisses from both. This done, Marie-Christine said, "You're a Chinese devil, you know that?"

An expression of deep pleasure. "No - that's totally new to me."

"Then it's time to express this clearly enough so you won't forget ... And I'm the one to teach you what's cruel and what's not." Marie-Christine came up, rolled over Cho, her lips coming down to two smaller breasts. "As groggy as I am - the thought that I'm doing here what Gérard is dreaming of ... That feeling is unbelievable."

Cho tried to hold her. "Even so - just wait a bit ... In case you haven't noticed ..."

Marie-Christine's head came up. "Oh, I have noticed, quite definitely so ... But as I said - a bit of your own medicine will make the lesson stick."

Cho tried to protest, to push her off.

Marie-Christine looked at Harry. "Same right for everyone - 'arry, you know what to do."

He knew, and he did, feeling sympathy while no mercy, feeling a new thrill while alternately watching Cho's face and Marie-Christine whose face was mostly hidden, busy to deliver a medicine which, by the second, seemed to taste sweeter, considering how Cho's body was responding.

After a little while, with his hands treating this body as carefully as the previous one, his look kept at Cho's face. For the first time, he could watch every second of her journey, himself no longer as relaxed as minutes before, still calm enough and with the proper amount of engagement to relish this fascinating experience, his mind vibrating with her own, receiving waves that were sharpening, quickening, heating up until the last wave came rolling, washing away clear thoughts, fading slowly.

Marie-Christine's face showed a smile of triumph. "That was my part of the medicine, and I'd say the taste was mutually satisfying ... Now it's 'arry's turn."

Cho looked shocked. "Are you crazy?"

"That might be ... Tonight it's not out of discussion."

"But ... That's too much - I cannot again ..."

"Ooh - you never know ... At least I see someone who can again."

Marie-Christine moved a bit away from Cho, took her ankles. "Sometimes it's tying, and sometimes it's the opposite." Next moment, she moved them wide apart, looked at Harry. "C'mon ... We're waiting for you."

It wasn't exactly true, or only halfways. Still, it felt awfully right, and he felt in perfect condition for a slow, leisurely walk toward another peak.

At first, there was something like embarrassment ... Strangely enough in this situation, although - when entering Marie-Christine under Cho's eyes, it had been an act of passion for the one and love for the other, while now, with both feelings coming together in the same target, there was an instant when Marie-Christine behind him felt like an outsider, watching, which was somehow nonsense because that was exactly what she did ... A Zen riddle, to be

solved only by gliding forward, inward, slowly, choking Cho's protest with his mouth, pausing, starting again, receiving first signs of response.

He felt Marie-Christine's hands on his buttocks, on his thighs. As sensational as it felt, these were dangerous ingredients in his pattern, and he told her so.

A soft murmur. "Well, then ..."

Next moment, he felt her fingers at both sides of his shaft, although it wasn't him to be addressed, as Cho's reaction clearly confirmed.

With this additional support, the journey went quicker than initially expected, which was only good because the side effects put him more off balance than planned. Contrary to what Cho had said, she reached the top in a softer way than before but successfully nevertheless.

When he laid at her side, Cho said, "I think I cannot move tomorrow ... But it was a remarkable lesson - " she turned to Marie-Christine, "from a French devil ... I'd never suspected that from you."

Marie-Christine smiled, not looking groggy any longer. "It's not my normal behaviour - but when you offered me company, I saw my chance to figure out how other people think of my body."

"Aha - and that's why you said you couldn't decide."

"I couldn't - honestly ... Either choice would have seemed so ... I cannot express it. Anyway, Harry found the solution."

Cho turned to Harry. "So it's your fault."

"It didn't feel wrong - not at all, really."

"Oh, didn't it?" Cho had a strange smile in her face. "Maybe that's because you're the only one who hasn't been lectured - while you had no pains helping in them." She came up, was over him, was on the other side. "Move into the middle - that's where the lessons take place."

"What's on your mind??"

"That's a pretty stupid question ... Move!"

He was pushed, obeyed, feeling pretty safe - due to some famous little difference, it seemed technically impossible to receive a lesson as Cho was obviously planning.

"All right ... Marie-Christine, hold his legs." Cho looked at him. "And don't dare to resist ... I know you're strong enough, you used it quite artfully a little while ago, but you'll be truly sorry if you try."

Marie-Christine took his legs, spreading them, knelt on top of one, holding the other. The feeling of her moisture on his calf sent a jolt through Harry's mind, surprisingly strong, after the recent events.

Cho grinned diabolically. "And now comes the Chinese version of this lesson ... You keep your hands quiet, and anything else too."

He grinned back. "Anything - that won't work, will it?"

"You'll stop grinning in a second - then you know what I mean."

She climbed on top of him, taking the Yin-Yang position, presenting a breathtaking view, as well as an overwhelming scent, very close to him - and yet beyond reach, while he himself laid exactly in the reach she had planned.

Within seconds, he lost any will, felt powerless, surrendering to the artful lesson of two women who had a remarkable way to keep him weak all over - except in the centre of their interest.

Cho moved to his side, still kneeling, looked at Marie-Christine. "I'm out of the game, and you're one behind ... You've started the game - well, now finish it."

The surprise in Marie-Christine's face made room for something else - a kind of ignorance for anything outside this room, this moment. She came forward, grabbed him and, ever so slowly, teasingly, painfully, mounted him.

Harry's body twisted, arching slightly upward.

Cho looked at him, menacing. "Don't you move!"

He couldn't even reply that it hadn't been on purpose, not while Marie-Christine was moving, cruelly slow.

Cho seemed to hesitate where to position herself. Then, she stayed where she was, where she could watch his face, Marie-Christine's face, alternating between both like he'd done earlier this night.

Marie-Christine moved up, slowly, slowly - came down with a rush.

Harry heard himself groan, and again, and again.

Marie-Christine paused. "You're right, 'arry - he cannot lose. He never allowed me to do that ... And it feels so - I can't express."

Oh yes, she could express it, when the pause was over, Marie-Christine no longer talking but moving, accelerating, sending him uphill and herself too, following him to the top still in this short moment afterwards when he felt nothing, totally numb inside her.

Cho was at his side, stroked his hair, looked at him with love in her eyes. "Now - was it that bad?"

He was too weak to laugh. "No."

"Good ... Because - you know, I just couldn't stand the thought of Tamiko as the only one to teach you this special kind of lessons."



## 14 - Times of Change

They were sitting in the Entrance Hall, waiting for the *Magical Tours* service car.. This car, a Muggles mini van, soon would take them to the Hogsmeade Linkport. Quite in contrast to the Hogwarts Express, this travelling method presented London as a target just a second away - a convincing argument for Harry and Cho, Ron and Ginny, Hermione and Almyra, sitting slightly apart, talking lowly.

Luggage stood everywhere. They all had delivered some parcels, received others, to be opened only tomorrow, at Christmas. Various animals sat on top of some luggage, like Hedwig and Pigwidgeon, or in a lap, like Crookshanks, or snugly under a coat, protected from the cold outside, like Nagini.

In a few minutes, Christmas vacation would start, sharply marked by a portkey travel, would separate them for ten days, split them into four groups, with the Weasley-Potter gang representing as many as the other three together.

Weasley-Potter - this was Harry's version of the term, while the others kept to the variation Potter-Weasley as created by Belinda McGraw, who had started the longest vacation ever a while ago.

Harry kept his voice low. "How was your conversation during breakfast?"

This breakfast had found Marie-Christine at the Ravenclaw table, looking worlds better than the evening before, while not quite as gorgeous as in the night. And Almyra had been curious, as far as Harry could tell from the Gryffindor table.

"Very interesting," replied Cho, "while not quite as informative as some people hoped ... Al was beating around the bush, didn't hear enough for her taste ... Then she pushed a bit harder." Cho grinned.

"And?"

"Oh - I said something about a moon which still had been quite full ... And asked her how it was at the teachers' table - with Lupin and so." A friendly smile looked at Harry, not completely reflected in two green eyes.

"And what did she say?"

"Even less than you ... But she stopped poking."

Harry chuckled.

"If we hadn't been so - so busy," said Cho, "I'd have squeezed you more, my little darling ..."

He smiled, feeling pleased.

"... but somehow we came totally off that topic ... Not that I feel reason to complain, no - the thought of ..."

"Stop it! ... Please."

Cho smiled archly. "Tsk, tsk ... Is this stressing somewhere?"

"Funny how this feels like blackmailing - and quite unintentionally so, of course, can be only my own fault that ..."

"Blackmailing?" An innocent face looked at him with astonishment, splitting into another grin when, an instant later, a soft hissing could be heard from under Harry's coat.

Harry sighed theatrically. "Well - to feed this greedy mind of yours ..."

"Oh - this morning it's my mind, for a change?"

"Hey - blackmail is a mutual agreement, remember?"

"Sorry - I forgot."

Another hissing, hardly revealing news to Harry. He said, "So - I'm not giving you second-source information, only first-hand material ..."

"I'm not that picky, mind you."

"I know - but I am, and someone else too ... Anyway, some days ago, I saw wolves around."

"Wolves??"

"Yup ... Two of them, and it wasn't full moon."

A beaming appeared in Cho's face. "Wow - super." She thought for a moment, then tried her luck. "And - otherwise?"

"For all I know, there hasn't been a quantum leap yet here in Hogwarts ..."

"Quantum leap - that's cute."

"Stop wisecracking, and listen more carefully ... Not here in Hogwarts, the school around which you can see wolves ... maybe male, maybe female, maybe - does the nickel drop?"

Cho suppressed a gasp. Right now, gaining the attention of the others around seemed quite counter-productive. Then she nodded. "That fits ... Clever girl, by all means."

Harry nodded agreement.

"While on the subject ..." Cho looked at him with polite interest. "What are your plans for these ten days?"

"Nothing particular ..." This wasn't quite true, since he already had tried finding an approach toward Sirius, only he wasn't going to discuss this here, no matter how low the voice - and Nagini wouldn't hiss about his own remarks.

"No - visits outside London?"

He bent closer to Cho's ear. "If I'm going to do visits outside London, I'll do them with you ... Which doesn't necessarily mean I'm planning them at all."

Cho looked satisfied, and thoughtful. "It's all a bit fresh, isn't it? ... I don't think it will develop to a habit ..."

"Certainly not."

She looked at the floor. "It was unique ... Like a ball once a year."

Harry glanced at her, saw something in her face. "A ball once a year isn't unique."

"No, it isn't." Cho shrugged. "I don't know ... We'll see." Then she grinned again. "Although ... the next ball is Easter."

"What I hope most is that we'll see her there with someone else ... And that'll end any speculation."

"Yes ... Anyway, coming back to visits - what about those inside London?"

"Hmm ... What about yours?"

"Well ..." Cho looked apologetically. "An afternoon tea isn't exactly what I'm looking for ... An evening is somehow worse - like a promise not fulfilled ... And other models are unrealistic, for this reason or the other."

"I know what you mean - although Ma Weasley already hinted that this could be settled."

"Really?" Cho stared at him. "That comes unexpected - from her."

Remembering a conversation, Harry grinned. "Did you ever count her children?"

Cho looked indignant. "Would you ever talk that way about your own parents?"

An interesting question. "I simply don't know," he answered. "But I was almost quoting her -" he grinned, "while it's certainly wrong to imply anything toward other people with less children ..."

Cho gasped.

"... like mine, for example."

"Sometimes you're impossible."

"Sometimes, impossible things happen."

"Oh yeah ... It's astounding how realistic such impossibilities can feel."

The service car from *Magical Tours*, which arrived at this moment, saved Harry from an answer. For him, the term *Magical Tours* alone was enough to stop any leisurely thought, come to full alert, and activate all his senses.

But of course, nothing happened - they said and hugged and kissed goodbye, and minutes later, Harry stood in London with Ron and Ginny.

To celebrate the opportunity, they took a Muggles cab, were stuck in a traffic jam two streets away from London Linkport. After thirty minutes, they paid the driver, left, flagged down the Knight Bus, reached The Burrow after some minutes in which the only possible jam seemed that of the breath in their throats.

\* \* \*

Despite this being the first day in The Burrow, Harry went to bed early. He suffered from a slight deficiency of sleep. In addition, he could foresee the risk of a longer conversation late in the evening with Ginny - this would come anyway, no doubt, however then with more distance from another evening about which Ginny invariably would ask some questions.

Some time during the night, he awoke - maybe from his senses, maybe from Nagini, certainly not from sleeplessness. A comforting voice whispered, "It's me - go back to sleep" - Ma Weasley.

He did, barely a second later.

He woke again next morning, pretty early for a vacation day. This had little to do with going to bed early - once more, the reason looked like a Weasley, what else in this house, female as well, only younger, her voice less comforting, with more temperament - Ginny, in pyjamas, somewhat tight for a nightdress.

"Get up, Harry," she caroled. "It's Christmas ... Presents."

Harry grunted something.

"Well ... Either you come out, or I'll come in."

Drowsy as he still felt - for a split second, this sounded like an excellent idea. Then he fully registered what Ginny had said, and it wiped off his drowsiness quite efficiently. "Okay, okay ... Would you please get lost, so I can come out?"

Ginny grinned. "Problems, Harry? ... Somehow I think you'd turn and sleep again the moment I'd close the door behind me."

He hadn't grown up with sisters - or brothers, for that matter - and therefore had no experience how it was to deliver them a bit of teachful spanking, although right now he felt tempted, looking at her.

Except there were two problems - three, to be precise. For starters, Harry had to come out of the bed for that. The second problem was exactly the reason for his reluctance toward this idea. And, worse, he wasn't completely sure what would happen. He wasn't totally convinced he'd find resistance, and while these thin pyjamas seemed suited well for the opportunity, at second thoughts, it seemed suited awfully badly.

And, looking from a totally different perspective - Ginny knew a bit too much *aikido* to let it happen ... Assuming she didn't want it happen.

At least, the moment had been sufficient to solve one problem. Harry drove his legs out, realized it was safe to get up, did so.

Still grinning, Ginny turned and walked toward the door, with a slight provocation in her movements, quite artfully so, although the sight of her back was provocation enough, basically speaking.

Only then, Harry took notice of a totally new and unknown piece of furniture - a very comfortable-looking chair, perfectly suited for leisurely reading. So this had been the reason for the visit during the night, which had caused Nagini striking alarm.

He inspected the present with deep pleasure. For someone else, the chair might have looked totally out of place, so close to his battered desk, or maybe the desk would be rated out of place - while for him, this collection created a perfect match, each piece with a precious history.

Right now, however, it was impossible to test the chair - the seat full with boxes, including those Harry had brought from Hogwarts, with the order to open them only today. The day before, he had stored them on his desk, only the nightly visitor had placed them together with others in one large pile.

He started with the new ones, first opening those which he suspected coming from the Weasley parents, in addition to the chair. He was right, finding various clothes, including pyjamas and underwear, in a style that he couldn't help thinking Ma Weasley had consulted her daughter. But then, you never knew.

The pyjamas were finest quality - stirring the memory of some other models, seen only recently. To his surprise, and slight disappointment, he found no sweater.

The evening before, Harry had placed his own presents for the Weasley parents somewhere downstairs, hopefully in places so they'd been found by now. For Arthur Weasley - funny how you could address someone as *sir* while talking but not in your thoughts - he'd found an organizer similar to Ron's from the past year, only the latest model, with some more bells and whistles. Magical functions in perfect harmony with Muggle items, for example a flat pocket computer with a tiny keyboard, good as a calculator and as an address book. Like several other pieces in his collection of presents for other people, this organizer was of Japanese origin, purchased with the help of Kenzo and from a mail order service. Harry would not be surprised finding Arthur Weasley playing for hours with this piece of Muggles technology which didn't even represent state of the art.

For Ma Weasley, he had found something really cute, and he was looking forward to her comment. A bonsai tree, pretty small, but with a remarkable implementation of magic. About once in a fortnight, the tree grew a fruit, to be plucked in time to make room for the next. The fruit had the size of a walnut, its flesh useful as an aromatic spice for soups, or tureens, depending on the personal taste. But the hidden clou was the stone in the fruit.

When opening the stone carefully, Ma Weasley would find a pearl - not quite like in an oyster, however shining equally warm and with a very special colouring. It was only a question of time until Ma Weasley could start designing strings of pearls, to be put together by a crafted jeweller.

The bonsai tree hadn't come cheap, not at all, by far the most expensive of this year's presents. But nobody knew about that, and Harry could hardly remember another pile of galleons invested so well.

He opened another box. What came out was a kind of knapsack, with some casing for insulation. He felt bewildered, didn't know what to think of it, until he found the small card.

- *Dear Harry,  
Happy Christmas to you. This thing is basically good for anything to carry around, but what I had in mind was Nagini - for walks in the cold. I hope she fits in.  
Ron*

"We'll know in a second," he murmured. "C'mon, Nagini - let's see whether we have to put you on a diet."

The knapsack turned out roomy enough for the snake, in particular since Nagini insisted on keeping her head out, or only protected by the cover flap, so Harry could hear what she said, and she could come out, should the need arrive.

Harry shouldered the knapsack, headed for Ron's room, found Ron busy with his own pile. "Look here," he said, "fits perfectly ... Thank you - or to say it with her own words, 'He really has an eye for the details, amazingly practical for a wizard'."

Ron looked proud. "From her, that judgement holds better than many others."

Harry grinned. "Do I have to feel addressed?"

"Of course not ... especially not after your own set of practical advice, given not so long ago."

They smiled at each other. "By the way," said Ron, his hand holding a spector cassette, "That's great - an absolute hit ... You cannot imagine how this is for me ..."

Harry was beaming. "Maybe I can, and maybe that's what gave me the idea."

"Yeah ... Thank you, Harry - I'm burning to talk with Grubbly-Plank, for an appointment ..."

"Why waiting so long? ... Ever heard of the reader service in the National Library?"

Harry's present for Ron was a spector recording - their Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, a copy of the cutting which had been done in a teamwork of Grubbly-Plank, for the cutting technique, and Madam Hooch, for the selection of the best camera in a scene.

Ginny passed by, meanwhile in clothes, saw Harry in pyjamas and with knapsack. "I'd dress a bit more before climbing a mountain," she said.

Only Ron's presence prevented Harry from retorting that some mountains could be climbed with even less than pyjamas. Although, maybe his expression had told Ginny enough, and again it was Ron's presence which made her look a bit startled.

Ron's thoughts were still at a specter, to be reached first thing next working day. He asked, "Can you put it in yourself? ... I mean, can you control the action or do you rely on someone's help who doesn't know when to slow down?"

In a second, Harry would burst. "We'll talk later," he gasped, hurried back into his room - if Ron could hear him laughing from there, he would attach it to some present.

The next box looked very much like a book. Had to be Hermione's - correct in both assumptions. *Zen - the Kamasutra of the Brain* ... Sounded interesting, if only he knew what the Kamasutra was. Well - he would ask her, or maybe the National Library knew more about that.

Harry's own present for Hermione was another item from that mail order service, something of which he didn't know whether the effect contributed to magic or to Muggles technology. A twirling-stick with a colouring ring - depending on the temperature in the potion to be twirled, the colours changed from deep blue to light white. Harry would never count as a master in Potions, however this much he knew - temperature was a crucial factor.

A small parcel, soft - Dobby's, as he remembered, who had received socks with luminiscent stripes from Harry. Opening it, he expected socks in return. But what came out looked much better, something he'd wished long before - a face mask, holes for the eyes and the mouth, precious on a broomstick up in the cold air of a winter day.

No doubt, somebody had talked with Dobby. The thought made Harry smile.

Thinking of small figures in Hogwarts, he had to smile again. There was another figure, not really small, except sometimes her eyes seemed as big in her face as Dobby's. Harry had found a way to deliver a present without revealing the origin, something he had inherited years ago, and now was the proper time to pass it further, and Rahewa the proper destination - the Marauder's Map. The map's services had been precious, but with his new senses, he didn't need them any longer, while for her it would be a treasure.

He wondered if she would guess where it came from. The explanation he had attached showed the writing of Ron's writer pen. But even so, or maybe just for this reason, Harry felt little doubt that Rahewa would figure out.

An envelope with a card inside. He opened the card, read.

- *Dear Harry,  
Happy Christmas to you. Due to some technical problem, I was not able to have your present ready in time. But it is waiting for you, not far away from The Burrow, in the Diagon Alley, in a shop that should be known to you - Quality Quidditch Supplies.  
Almyra  
P.S. Your name is enough, probably you don't need even that.*

She was crazy - definitely so, lacked any feeling for decency, quite typical for people with too much money. Without even thinking Harry knew what it was, only could be, after he had told the story of his deal with Ron about the Firebolt.

He had ten days to find out what to say, before meeting Almyra again. And then he would find out how she liked his own present - a small cylinder attached to a thin chain, looking very

much like the capsules found around the neck of dogs. Only, this capsule was silver rather than brass, containing a white powder rather than an address or phone number. Harry's card explained how to handle it and why to be careful - the Giant's dope from Lleyrin, left over from the Battle of Hogwarts, was nothing to fool around with.

By now, three small boxes were left. Two of them looked a bit more familiar, so the third had to be from here, most likely from Ginny. Harry started unwrapping the box, started to grin after a moment, took the flask out.

*Centouros*, said the engraving on the tiny bottle.

He studied it from all sides, then sprayed a bit at his throat. He was still sniffing when the door turned open and Ginny came in. Seeing her face, and registering the exact moment, he asked, "Have you been listening?"

He didn't get an answer to his question, was pretty sure nonetheless - after all, the hissing of the sprayer was not to be confused with Nagini talking. And her own question, a bit anxious, gave confirmation enough. "Do you like it?"

"It's something totally new, but so far, it smells - er, quite promising ... How did you select - by the name or by the scent?"

"Both, actually ... When I saw this name - and then tested the fragrance ..."

"It will be quite a surprise ... Thank you." He bent forward, kissed her. Sensing her reaction, he stopped quickly, stepped back, said, "Time for breakfast, huh? ... Except for one question - do you like mine?"

His present for Ginny was a small hand-bag. To the outside, it looked elegant, otherwise perfectly normal, while inside it had a partition that could be found only when knowing what to do, and this partition seemed to offer the same room again. Only the weight could indicate that there was more than met the eye.

"Oh yes - it's great ... Thank you."

Ginny made no efforts to leave the room. Watched by her, Harry started to unwrap the next box. After a few seconds, a wide grin was spreading his face. When his hand came up, presenting another flask, Ginny gasped. An instant later, her expression changed to deep disappointment. "Oh, dammit."

This sample showed a Kanji character and the imprint *Samurai*. There was also a small card, to be read later - right now didn't strike Harry as the best time.

Ginny sighed. "Well - it had been such a nice idea."

"Why?" He grinned. "Yours has some competition - after all, that's nothing new, is it? ... But I won't drop it, that's for sure. Imagine - after using hers once or twice, the next time I come with yours ... It will drive her crazy."

Ginny looked at him with a mix of hope and disbelief. "Really?"

"Yes, really ... And if she complains, I'll say, it's something new, and for once, I won't have a bad start."

Ginny giggled, looked at the last box, giggled again. "Harry - open that thing, please ... I have a feeling."

He did. When his hand came up this time, they both started to giggle, to laugh, almost rolling over, loud enough so Ron came in to see what was so funny.

In the box had been a card from Fleur, together with a small flask, showing the title *Clair de Hune* - the light of Mars.

\* \* \*

Christmas at The Burrow was wonderful ...Hanging around lazily, eating, talking, playing with some presents, although there was quite a collection which still had to wait. A Firebolt, for example, or two alternative perfumes, or a spector cassette. Even so, they found enough to do, and the anticipation was a good feeling by itself.

Arthur Weasley did exactly what Harry had expected, sitting at a table and playing with his new toys, among them Harry's organizer. Ma Weasley had gasped when Harry showed her how to pluck the fruit from the bonsai tree, how to free the stone, how to open it carefully, uncovering the pearl inside.

She had also looked pleased when he thanked for his presents, still more so when he confessed that the absence of a certain item had come quite unexpected, and Ma Weasley had promised to add it in time - an ordinary sweater, hand-knitted, something money couldn't buy. It wouldn't take her long since Harry was the only one holding this tradition precious.

The twins came to visit in the afternoon, brought - surprise, surprise - an impressive sweets collection, got excited when hearing about Ron's spector cassette. Harry's present for them, a guest book for the shop which addressed the customers with wisecracks of the slightly offensive kind, had caused quite some delight, although Ron outperformed him easily with the promise to lend the cassette for a few days.

Ma Weasley found some remarks about sons taking their time to present candidates for future daughters-in-law. The twins grinned, referring to a hard time with a new shop, referring to an order of priority in which presentability to parents ranked less high than from the perspective of the parents themselves.

They liked their mother too much to give an obvious reply. They had come to visit - in contrast to Percy who seemed too busy, either with work in the Ministry, or with his obligations toward the Clearwater family, claiming that one could be found only at one place at a time, and Penelope had insisted.

The son with the most promising state regarding daughters-in-law came the next day, together with his candidate, in time for lunch, to stay until early evening, not reluctant at all to discuss matters such as weddings, and households, and alike. In fact, these topics were on Bill's agenda, for example in a conversation with Harry.

But first, Christmas issues had to be discussed. Fleur asked Harry how he liked her present, said she had hoped he would wear it on her arrival. So he went upstairs, followed by Fleur who couldn't figure out why Ginny was laughing madly, who didn't look disappointed at all, seeing the collection of three flasks. She sniffed at them, beamed. "Your women have a fine taste, 'arry - although that's nothing new, after all."

"Fleur! ... I dearly hope you'll give such remarks only if nobody else is around."

"I took care, didn't I?" Fleur looked at the collection. "Could easily have been more - four, for example."

Harry preferred not to reply on that.

Fleur looked at him, smiling thoughtfully. "It amazes me anew each time, 'arry - to see you embarrassed talking about it, while ..."

He interrupted her. "Yes, it's amazing - more than that. And now let's change the subject."

Thank God, she did, mentioned his own present and how much she was looking forward to using it. Like the previous year, several people had joined for that, and it gave another example how magic and Muggles technology could be mixed to astonishing combinations. In this case, to a set which included a tiny magiphone, to be fixed on a robe, and four small speakers in the shape of balls. These speakers could be placed somewhere, but they could also float in the air, and they could be addressed separately. When used during a dance lesson, for example, Fleur could send different commands to four corners of the room, or to four different couples, depending on how she used it.

Also, Fleur gave a report how delighted a certain eleven-year-old had been, finding a delicate kimono in dark blue with a silvery pattern, matching perfectly a long mane of silvery hair, and that Gabrielle was walking around mostly in this garment since yesterday.

With her measures gained in the course of preparing for the ball, it had been easy play for Harry, ordering the proper size with this mail order service.

Then they walked downstairs to meet Bill again. Bill had a few serious questions toward Harry. "Some time soon," he began, "I'm going to claim my request ... And before doing so, I wanted to talk with you."

"I know what you mean, but you're dealing with Goblins much longer than I, and much more often."

"Yeah, sure ... But even so, most of the time it's ordinary business. I read that book about Goblin requests ..."

"Oh, that ..." Harry nodded sympathetically. "Yes, I read it too."

Bill looked thoughtful. "A bit scary, isn't it?"

"A bit? ..." Harry snorted. "This story about the wizard and his mountain castle - it gave me the creeps for quite a while."

"I can imagine." Bill seemed having his own creeps right now. "But you've found a remarkable solution - to say the least. While my own ... I'm trying to find the proper form - you can't imagine how many versions I've tried already."

Harry felt surprised. "But isn't it quite simple, in a way?"

"Simple??"

"Yes - you have a Classified one, and you want to marry Fleur and found a household. Isn't this the perfect match?"

Fleur thought the same.

Bill was more reluctant. "Yes, of course - in a way ... Only, it looks so selfish, especially compared to yours."

Harry shook his head. "I think you look at it from the wrong perspective. When I claimed mine, it felt totally selfish to me. Only afterwards I realized - for the right purpose and with the right challenge included, there's nothing wrong with being selfish."

Bill groaned. "Then please tell me how to combine purpose and challenge when all I have in mind is something as selfish as a house, or money, or I don't know what."

Harry felt wise, and experienced, and very grateful it wasn't his request. "Listen - it's a Classified, which means everybody expects you to be selfish, right?"

Fleur nodded, quite some time before Bill did.

"Then all we need is the proper formulation and a bit of challenge - I mean, sure, every word's counting a lot in this letter."

"Really?" Bill's voice would have qualified him as a Weasley even without the red hair. "It's good of you to tell me, I wouldn't have guessed by myself ..."

Harry giggled, joined by Fleur.

"Bill," said Harry, "maybe you should ask Fleur to trance you a bit when writing that letter."

Bill didn't answer, only Fleur started to giggle more seriously.

When Harry looked astonished, Fleur said, "Guess what, 'arry ... We tried already. Only - each time, we lost all interest in writing letters."

After a moment, the flush in Bill's face could as well have come from the roaring laughter he'd joined, seconds after Harry and Fleur. And suddenly, still chuckling, Harry saw it. "I know what you have to do ... It's not even my own idea - it's Fleur's."

Bill looked blank. Fleur looked simultaneously pleased and blank.

"You want a house and some money. Everybody knows that - which means, anything else would be a surprise. Right?"

Bill and Fleur nodded.

"Wrong."

Bill and Fleur looked uncomprehending.

"You want to integrate a human and a Veela in a place of happiness, using a Goblin request to make it possible, so that your children can be raised in the respect of different races and cultures."

Fleur was on him, hugged him, kissed him on the cheeks. "You're a genius, 'arry!"

"Why me? It was your own idea - at the ball, remember?"

Fleur nodded. "But yes ... It has been a very creative event, hasn't it? Funny how you need someone in addition to see the obvious."

Bill didn't understand completely, about which Harry was glad, didn't care either, was excited to write a letter right now, at least a version to fix the idea, while the fine-tuning might come later. Then he looked up, beaming. "Harry, I owe you."

"No you don't ... It's impossible for someone called Weasley ... Still more for a Weasley who's going to marry Fleur."

As pleased as she was, Fleur had to ask, "Is it possible to raise the impossible, 'arry?"

"Oh yes - you may ask Marie-Christine ... Well, come to think of it, you may not."

\* \* \*

Next day, with the shops open again, Harry and Ron went downtown. Their first stop was the National Library where they spent two hours, first to get their spector cabin settled, then to watch a Quidditch game.

They both knew every minute of the game, still - somehow, it was among the most thrilling presentations they had ever seen. When it ended with the picture of them both, Rahewa on their shoulders, Ron looked up, his eyes shining. "Whew ... By the way, these two could make a living with that stuff."

"Grubbly-Plank and Hooch?"

"Yes."

"They did an excellent job, that's true ... But how many people would buy such cassettes?"

Ron kept his point. "This thing has future ... Currently, only few people could afford a spector. But in a while ... There's more than just Quidditch to be recorded."

"Well - until then, they have a living as Hogwarts teachers ... And while on the subject - I'd like to pass by on the Quidditch supplies."

Almyra's present was still unknown to Ron, with the effect that he showed no interest, wanted to start over the cassette for a replay. They agreed to meet again in The Burrow.

Quidditch Quality Supplies was full. There seemed to be quite a few customers who had received cards at Christmas, rather than the real thing. Harry had to wait some time, for him no problem at all, not on this vacation day, in this shop which, even for someone used to a Steel Wing, never lost its fascination.

The young clerk asked him, "Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, please ... I've got a message something's waiting here for me - my name is Harry Potter."

"Oh ..." A quick glance at his forehead. "Of course, Mr. Potter - just a moment, please."

The young man returned with a bundle of exact the size Harry had expected. So his assumption was true. "Sir," said the clerk, "if you would please express our apologies to the lady once more ... She was quite upset, understandably so, after all, at this time of the year ... But you see, they just couldn't finish it in time, although it's only been a few days - anyway, here we are, sir, and that's your new Firebolt Two, with compliments from our house."

"Firebolt Two??"

"Yes, sir!" There was pride in the young man's voice, kept loud enough so bystanders could listen - selling a top-of-the-rank broomstick was an event even on such a day. "This is the latest version - and that's why it took a few days more. The Firebolt in general is ..."

Harry wasn't interested in this part. "I've been using a Firebolt for three years."

"Really, sir? ... Then you must be one of the first customers - the model is not older than that."

Harry confirmed yes, he was.

"Now the Firebolt Two, sir, surpasses the base model quite a bit. It has ..."

As well trained as the clerk seemed, Harry felt no patience to hear the twenty minutes version of that sermon. He asked, "Is it faster?"

"A bit, yes, sir, although that wasn't the main goal in the new development. Practice shows that the maximum speed is rarely the determining factor in make or break, while ..."

"Practice? What practice ..." Harry realized in which style he was talking with this young man. It might be exactly what the clerk expected from his customers; still, for someone with ethics trained in Japan, it was unforgivable. He bowed. "I'm sorry. I've interrupted you several times ... But, you see, I'm really not a beginner on a broomstick, and for me a Firebolt ranks in the middle class - okay, upper end of the middle class."

His apology had produced a pleased smile in the young man's face. His last words, in contrast, raised disbelief. "Middle class?? ... Excuse me, sir, but the Firebolt is top of the pop in racing broomsticks."

"That's true ... Which doesn't mean there isn't something else, still faster."

Suddenly, the young man's smile got excited. "I've heard something ... Sir, if we could talk for a moment in an inside room, maybe a cup of tea - you're the first I met who seems to know more."

Were Steel Wings a secret? Not really, or no longer - only the channel through which they had arrived. Harry followed into a small room, accepted a cup of tea.

"Sir - I've heard about some prototypes, and that these models had an impact on the development for the Firebolt Two. It's just rumours, these people are sparse with such background information."

"Oh yes, they are ... Let's see - where has the new model really been improved?"

The sales sermon was gone. "Acceleration, sir ... They really kick you in the - er, back, if you pardon the expression."

"Can they still brake instantly from full speed?"

Now the young man looked very interested. "You really know details sir - no doubt ... Yes, and this was the limiting factor for the speed, except that we're not supposed to tell this, that is, not to a normal customer."

"Yes, I can imagine why." Harry hesitated, then said, "Well - to put it simple, I own one of these prototypes you were talking about."

There was awe in the young man's face. "Please, sir ..."

"They're called Steel Wing Mark Two ..." Harry explained the more public features of this combat broomstick, concentrating on speed, acceleration, safety belt, leaving out features irrelevant for Quidditch.

"Is there a way to find them, sir?"

"I don't know - honestly. We got ours through a confidential channel, and we never figured out details from the other end."

The young man was ready to believe this immediately. "I wish I could have a look at them, see them in action ..."

From expert to expert, so-to-speak, Harry offered, "Tell you what - after the Christmas break, if you find the time to visit Hogwarts, it won't be a problem."

"Oh, that would be very kind of you, sir."

Seeing the hope in the eyes, Harry added, "But I have to tell you in advance - these broomsticks are personally branded - nobody but me can fly mine, for example."

The young man looked stupefied.

"Well - erm, please keep it to yourself, but the reason is - these are no sports devices, and because they kick when touching another body, you cannot use them in Quidditch."

"But ..." The young man was at a loss.

"Well, the truth is - these are combat broomsticks."

Suddenly, the young man remembered stories about a Battle of Hogwarts, about Harry Potter playing a role in them, and about dark wizards and other unpleasant details. In short - he was pulling back as fast as he could.

Harry smiled. "My invitation stands ... Anyway, it was an interesting conversation - you're the first I met who'd heard anything about them."

"I'm a fanatic with broomsticks ... Thank you for this fascinating information, sir. Maybe I'll find an opportunity to visit you - although, in a way, it seems ridiculous, somehow all broomsticks look the same, wouldn't you say so, sir?"

Harry shook his head. "Not after you've seen a Steel Wing, no."

\* \* \*

Before returning to The Burrow, Harry decided to visit the *Magical Tours* office. The new year would start in a few days, and according to what he remembered, their network tickets had to be refreshed, or prolonged, or whatever.

The office had no information about these tickets, saw no possibility to activate them for the next year. The lady suggested a visit in the headquarters for this purpose.

It came as a surprise, but somehow, it wasn't really. Harry decided to think it over, maybe to discuss the issue with Ron. At least, he didn't feel like visiting this building while his hands had to hold a large bundle with a Firebolt Two.

This bundle took Ron and Ginny quite by surprise. Ron seemed still more pleased than Harry - small wonder in a way, since he no longer felt guilty when using Harry's old one, without sharing Harry's guilt at the thought of such an expensive present. And looking at it from the perspective of a Quidditch team captain, Almyra's present seemed the best Ron could imagine.

Harry described the scene in the *Magical Tours* office, asked the other two for their tickets, so he could run an attempt for all three the next day. Ron looked thoughtful, however saw no reason to stay off, and no reason to discuss details while Ginny was listening.

Ginny brought her ticket late in the evening, without leaving Harry's room immediately afterwards. Harry felt no astonishment, he had awaited this conversation, although not as an opportunity.

"Did you try Cho's perfume, Harry?"

"Samurai? ... No, not yet."

"What would she think hearing you've tried mine and Fleur's, but not hers?"

"Dunno ... I mean, I can imagine, but I didn't plan to wear them every day - only for special occasions."

Ginny shook her head. "This stuff is ageing, Harry. So, unless you have a special occasion every other day, you should consider a regular usage ... By the way, how are you planning to use the three?"

"Uhm - maybe by association ... For example - Fleur's when dancing, yours at festivities ..."

"And Cho's?" Ginny had a sparkling in her eyes.

"Oh - we'll find something."

As old as the joke was, they both had to laugh at that, and Ginny saw the opportunity to start the main topic on her agenda. "Wouldn't this lead to obvious conflicts, Harry?"

He couldn't follow immediately.

"Well - according to these categories, you would have used mine for the Christmas Ball, right?" Ginny watched how the nickel dropped, waited for an answer.

Which was short. "Could happen, yes."

"Did it?"

"How could it? I've got these perfumes only yesterday!"

Ginny looked impatient. "You know what I mean."

"Yes."

"To which question?"

"To both."

Ginny drew a grimace. "Dammit ... How do you people manage?? ... When trying to find a place in Hogwarts - say, am I too stupid to see the obvious?"

Harry chuckled. "No ... It was more by accident than by anything else. I mean, it's not a regular option - and it started with Gérard's bad manners."

"It's clear as mud ... Could you be a *bit* more informative, Harry?"

"Well ..." Harry searched for a clear course between the Scylla of rejecting Ginny's demand and the Charybdis of revealing too much. "Marie-Christine was in such a bad mood," he said, "that Cho didn't want her to go home in that state - she looked a bit, well, not exactly suicidal, but ... Anyway, Cho got a key for a guest suite from Fleur."

"That thing with a salon and six rooms?"

"Erm - no, another one ... Only one room, aside from the salon, I mean ... I knew it already - I hid there during the story with Lupin."

"You knew it ... Shouldn't surprise me, because you know ..." Ginny stopped abruptly, seemed to have found a gap in some calculation, looked at Harry. "Did you leave Marie-Christine in the salon, or was it the other way around?"

"That's none of your business."

To nobody's surprise among the small number of people around, this argument didn't help much. Ginny insisted.

Harry refused.

She moved quickly to his desk, took the *Samurai* flask, sprayed him. "Tell me - or I'm going to spray you from head to toe."

The scent was heavy. For a moment, both sniffed. Then Ginny came closer, very close. "Now?"

When in doubt, keep to the truth. "Marie-Christine was scared to be alone. Then Cho offered her company ... She should pick her choice."

"And?"

"She couldn't decide."

"Well, that hadn't been my problem," explained Ginny. "And then?"

"Then I said there was room for the three of us."

Ginny stared at him. There was no disbelief, only expectation, and something like hunger. "And there was."

Harry exhaled. "Yes."

"And who was in the middle?"

He hesitated a moment too long.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

"No - not exactly ... It changed a bit."

"Changed a bit ..." Ginny's breath came ragged, maybe from rage. "Because poor Marie-Christine felt suicidal ... Did she feel suicidal afterwards?"

This he could answer easily. "No."

"I guessed as much ..." Ginny thought for a moment, and just when Harry hoped the topic was over, she asked, "What I can't get straight - how does Cho fit in this - er, scenario? If your description was halfways correct, she was the driving force more than anyone else."

"Ginny - it's a bit more complicated than it seems ... Both Cho and I owe Marie-Christine a lot, for something with Voldemort - don't ask me what it is, but we owe her ... And in that room, when Marie-Christine wanted to have proof that she has a desirable body, contrary to what that fool Gérard thinks ... It was something unique."

"Unique? ... I think it was more of a triple."

Something in his face told her the remark had hit more truth than expected. She came again closer. "Harry, I'm suicidal too."

"No, you're not ... You have no reason."

This new chair was roomy, enough so she could climb up, kneeling over his legs. "Okay, maybe I'm not ... But I need some company."

"You know my answer. It's no."

Her mouth was on his ear. "You cannot leave me in this state."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot change it."

"Yes, you can ... Stroke me, Harry - please ... I don't want to do it myself - not today."

He tried to shake his head.

"Please - only this time ... It was stupid of me to squeeze you, but now it's too late ... I'll never ask you again, Harry, I swear."

"Ginny ..."

Her voice was pleading, close to tears. "I mean it ... The thought is torturing me for quite some time. I know - we'll never do it really, but I'm sure - if you do it now, I can check it off, and think of something else ... Please ..."

She sounded desperate, touching a nerve beyond passion, or the lack of it. "If you'll ever ask again ..."

"I won't ... I swear." She started to tremble before his hand had found its way under her skirt, inside thin panties, parting soft, wet lips. The ragged breath changed to choked gasps, a strangled groan, then he felt her already twisting, accelerating.

Almost to her peak, his soft caressing changed to a hard pressing. She arched forward against his hand, against his body, suppressing a louder groan, holding for a few seconds, before he felt her body relax.

A trembling sigh in his ear. "Thank you ... That was a rescue at the last instant ... Harry, from now on I'll love you as a brother - nothing else."

He felt no surprise about the message underneath. "And if not, you'll keep it to yourself."

Her head jerked back, she was staring into his face. "You know too damned much ... Well, maybe it's not that complicated ... Anyway - yes, this chapter's is closed."

A moment later, she could grin. "Which doesn't exclude private conversations, does it?"

"Up to a point."

Ginny grinned deeper. "Talking about points ... I hope we didn't switch roles - a moment ago."

"Don't worry - it's not that bad."

"Hey - that's not exactly a compliment."

"Now give it a rest, will you? ... I said it's not that bad, I didn't say it left me totally untouched - quite the ... But I'm not in that bad shape you've been - not after this end of terms."

Satisfied with this answer too, Ginny said good night and left the room.

## **15 - Amateurs and Profis**

Next morning, while at a late breakfast, Harry had mail - from an owl that looked a bit sullen, seemed to be in a hurry to get paid before returning to its sleeping bar as quickly as possible.

When opening the letter, Harry knew why - the flight had been short, compared to others, the owl sent the same morning, from a house he had seen once and would see again in a few days.

The Chang family asked for the honour of his visit - for a dinner party to celebrate the last evening of the old year, and the arrival of the new year. The letter also informed him that Western or Oriental Muggles clothes would be appropriate and that a limousine would pick him up in time. The message ended by expressing the hope he would come with Nagini. An answer was expected only in the unfortunate case of his decline.

Well, Harry wasn't going to decline, so much for sure.

Ron looked envious. Ma Weasley complained that she would have to wait still longer before seeing Cho in The Burrow. Ginny looked quite relaxed, asked Harry which clothes he would wear - kimono - and, without the others around, which perfume he would use.

She had much fun with her question, even if it wasn't answered.

Early afternoon, Harry travelled to the *Magical Tours* headquarters. He didn't know what to expect, had pondered the thought of taking Nagini with him, had finally dropped the idea.

The reception lady sent him to Public Relations.

These tickets were not recorded in their files. They asked him where, or how, or when he had received them. His answer was good enough to send him to the new Managing Director, a Mr. Boonhill.

Mr. Boonhill looked at the tickets, then at Harry. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but Magical Tours has no obligation to prolongate these tickets. They will be valid until the middle of next year, since these are one-year tickets, but that will be the end of them."

"Mr. Gallagher said something else."

"The late Mr. Gallagher may have seen reasons which had nothing to do with Magical Tours, Mr. Potter, and I don't want to know about these reasons ... At any rate - since I don't see a way to fulfill this request, it has been nice to talk with ..."

"You have a nice building here, Mr. Boonhill."

"I beg your pardon?"

Less the tickets themselves made Harry feel a growing rage, made his voice hard and threatening - it was the memory of Belinda McGraw and a life insure that hadn't provided any protection. He snarled, "It's pretty new, isn't it? ... Most of it, I mean - there was a large-scale renovation, if I remember correctly."

Mr. Boonhill looked cold. "Mr. Potter, maybe you are confusing something ... Anyway, if you'll excuse me - my assistant will escort you outside." The Managing Director pressed a button. The door opened, and a man came in.

The man looked at Harry, and Harry looked at the man, and it was the jump artist from London Linkport, and everything happened very fast.

In his first steps, the man walked perfectly normal, except that Harry received red alert messages from his *haragei*. He kept motionless until the man was in the proper distance, was already falling down and to the side when the jump kick came, was out of reach, was up, had his wand in his hand when the man, about to start his second attack, stopped.

There was little doubt - this man knew a bit more about *aikido* than Harry himself, which meant there would be just one successful attack, which meant this was no time for playing around. Part of Harry's training with Kenzo had dealt with the mental state that enabled him to use his skill and his power - without exception, excluding nothing, not even the Killing Curse.

His wand was pointing motionless. "If you want to live, sit down - slowly."

The man looked into his eyes, saw something, recognized it, seemed to nod. He sat down where Harry had been sitting a moment ago, his back to Harry.

"Mr. Boonhill," said Harry, "I wouldn't be surprised to hear you've changed your mind about these tickets."

"Why should I? There's no reason - and I'd prefer if you'd perform your gymnastics somewhere else, Mr. Potter."

"Not bad ..." Harry felt indeed somewhat baffled, hearing this answer. Then a thought struck him. "You may want to discuss this with your assistant, Mr. Boonhill - after all, this building is just too nice ..."

Some messages seemed to flow between Mr. Boonhill and his assistant, although no words were spoken. Then the manager said, "Well, all right, Mr. Potter - at second thought, I guess we should honour the agreement you had with the late Mr. Gallagher, still without knowing, and not wanting to know, I hope you understand what I mean."

"Absolutely, Mr. Boonhill ..." His eyes at the sitting man rather than at his conversation partner, Harry said, "There are six of these tickets altogether. I'd suggest - they will be ready within the next ten days in the Hogsmeade office, so we don't need to hang around here, in this nice building with all these large glass panes, and I can leave you to your business ... Can we agree on that?"

A quick glance told him that another unspoken conversation was taking place. Then Mr. Boonhill said, "Yes, Mr. Potter - an excellent suggestion. They'll be ready a week from now."

"Very good, Mr. Boonhill ... Have a nice day, and don't bother - I'll find the exit alone, without having an accident, and maybe we can save this ceremony the next year ... Good afternoon."

Outside the room, Harry waited a moment, his *haragei* and his *getsumai no michi* fully active. But there was nothing - he had interpreted the communication inside correctly, they wouldn't try another attack in this building, not while he was expecting it.

Having reached the outside without registering anything unusual, he walked for a while before flagging down the Knight Bus. Mostly to have some time for thinking, also to let his adrenaline level calm down to normal. What he would like most was talking with Sirius - only there was no way, not until Sirius would contact him. And discussing the accident with Ron would invariably result in a suggestion to talk with Sirius.

At the end, Harry decided to report some reluctance, and a bit of blackmailing from his side, about a nice building and such. This version had the beauty of being perfectly true - well, just leaving out his second encounter with the jump artist, an encounter which, somehow, had been more remarkable than the first.

Not because of the attack. No - one more movement, and the man would have been the target of Harry's second Killing Curse. But he had seen it, known it, and the movement never came.

\* \* \*

Harry was dressing in his room for the dinner party - Japanese, of course, and literally every garment new - when, after a short knock which didn't await an answer, more exactly ignored it, the door opened and Ginny came in.

He stared at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Calm down." Her expression was neutral, maybe like that of a surgeon, more or less. "There's a lesson missing in your collection, and I'm here to show you."

He looked dumbfounded.

Ginny took the *Samurai* flask. "You don't know yet how to perfume yourself properly ... It's like with jewelry - too little is nonsense, too much is awful."

"Oh ... I never would have guessed."

She smiled. "That's why I'm here."

He had to undress his shirt again, watched in astonishment the amount Ginny used, only there was no doubt - his senses as well as Nagini's silence told him she was serious, wanted him making the best impression.

The only complaint came from Nagini. She asked her master whether he knew about the delicate olfactory system of snakes.

"All right, okay ..." Harry took the bag from Ron. "Here, jump in - and keep your tongue inside, so it won't be that bad."

The limousine arrived - empty, so-to-speak, which of course was true only for the back compartment.

The Chang parents had the decency to wait inside. It was Cho who opened the door, wearing a kimono, not quite as breathtaking as the one at the ball evening, red nevertheless. And she was wearing his wooden brooch. She sniffed at him, beamed, and greeted him for a moment.

Then she sniffed again. "Perfect - wouldn't you say so?"

He smiled, for this moment as well for a future one when Cho would sniff another scent. "Yes ... How did you like yours?"

His present for Cho was a hand mirror. While the mirror itself just looked exquisite - a frame of black wood, surrounding a perfectly polished surface of plated steel rather than glass - the special attribute was the mirror's habit to issue comments. From a small selection of different styles, Harry had chosen the slightly intimate one. Well, maybe not so slightly.

Cho grinned. "You and your presents."

"Why? ... What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing, basically ... Only that my mother was trying the mirror the other day, before I could recognize its exact nature to the full extent ..."

"Oh no ..."

"Relax - she had much fun with it."

"Erm ... You said presents - plural."

Cho touched the brooch. "This one here ... I forgot to tell you - my father can read Japanese."

Before Harry could ask for Mr. Chang's comment, Cho pushed him farther inside, and next moment he could have asked directly. When he offered today's single flower to Mrs. Chang - an orchid, almost white, with a slight tinting toward red, the closest thing to a cherry blossom he'd found - she said smiling, "It's beautiful ... Your presents are something to look forward to, Harry."

When he bowed, she added, almost inaudibly, "... or listen."

Coming up again, it could have been a trick his ears were playing. Mrs. Chang's face didn't reveal anything unusual.

Then the Changs' attention fell onto Nagini. They were a little surprised, had expected him to arrive with the snake around his body, probably as a result of Cho's description.

"Well," explained Harry, "she's been complaining a bit."

"Because of the cold?" It was Mr. Chang's question.

"Erm - no, certainly not in the car ... It's Cho's present - the perfume."

For the first time, Harry heard an open, cheerful laughter from both Changs. Only Cho muttered, "Ignorant serpent."

Still chuckling, Mr. Chang looked at his daughter. "No, she isn't ignorant at all - that's exactly her problem."

Mrs. Chang admired the brilliant pattern on Nagini's skin, then looked at Harry with a slight self-consciousness. "Harry - would you please ..."

"Oh - yes of course. I always forget." He turned to Nagini. "So - how is it to travel in that bag?"

"Very nice, master. It's a bit unusual - so totally relaxed. It's like swimming in warm water."

"And what's your impression of the Changs?"

"I like them. Normally, people in this country are a bit frightened when looking at me. There's no such feeling in them. And I like them for their feelings toward you."

Harry would have preferred giving a summary translation, only this felt so impolite, and Mrs. Chang was looking so expectantly. Slightly blushing, he translated by quoting Nagini word for word.

Mrs. Chang looked delighted. "Now I can fully understand your remark, Harry ... You're right, it could be very embarrassing with Nagini around - except that's not our problem, as she has so nicely confirmed."

Mr. Chang seemed thoughtful. "She's a very powerful companion, Harry ... It's remarkable how your worst enemy appears as the source of your greatest gifts."

His wife protested. "In first place, there was Harry himself, and his character."

Mr. Chang presented one of these perfect bows, with the tiniest movement.

Harry said, "That's something I owe to my parents ... And looking at sources, there are still other parents ranking higher."

This time, the slight bow was directed toward him, and Harry felt reminded of moments when receiving approval from Shigura. Next moment, however, even Cho's beaming was washed off his mind by a cold shock. Harry was the first guest ...

... and Mr. Chang explained why, and what he had in mind. "All other guests of today are Muggles, Harry. They don't know about wizards - with one little twist in this definition, and I hope you'll do me the favour ... I have announced you as an amateur magician who will entertain us after dinner."

Harry gazed into the faint smile. "You mean - something like those people on a stage?"

"Yes - except there is no stage, and I dearly hope your animations will differ from the standard repertoire."

Harry swallowed. "Probably, sir - since I don't know anything about standard repertoires."

Mr. Chang smiled broader. "That's just fine, Harry - so you won't be tempted to copy ... Oh, before I forget - Nagini is of course part of your special hobby."

Harry felt wedged between a rock and a hard place. Mr. Chang had caught him neatly - after all, wasn't a wizard good to play a magician, any time and without preparation?

A moment later, Cho had the opportunity to look sympathetically at him. "That's my father - a challenge on legs."

"Comes as a real surprise, since there's nobody around who's inherited that from him."

Cho's smile turned flippant. "Encouraging you is just a waste of time ... I'm looking forward to this presentation, my young magician."

The guests arrived, standing and talking for a while with glasses in their hands, before they gathered around a large table. All the while, Harry's mind kept working overtime - settling to the thought of the presentation ahead, trying to find innocent conversation.

Yes, he attended the same school as Cho, that's where they had met.

Something in the ministry - er, Internal Affairs. He didn't know exactly what his father was doing.

Yes, this scar was part of his role. The technique used for fixing it was a bit complicated, so he'd done it in advance.

No, he wasn't truly Japanese. Just a part of his role, and with reference to their hosts.

No, he couldn't read Japanese, recommended to ask Cho herself what the characters on her brooch meant.

Even as unfamiliar as he felt to Muggles habits at dinner parties, this question seemed quite impertinent. During the dinner, Harry watched the man who had asked with more attention than toward others, using eyes, ears, and *haragei*. What he received in general was a mix of joy, curiosity, excitement, also boredom, while the echo from this man seemed strangely blank.

The lady to his left, roughly the same age as the Changs, tried to interview him about Hogwarts. He answered carefully, only when he sensed the direction into which her questions aimed, he was busy to find a few stop marks.

No, Hogwarts was not widely known, didn't care about that.

As far as he could judge, mostly for immigrants. They seemed to find considerably less prejudice than at other schools.

Mixed education? Since he didn't know any other, he couldn't confirm if this was worlds better, especially for the higher classes, ha ha.

No, they were totally separated, and with different passwords for the doors.

If he ever tried to break a password? Why should he?

Social events? Well, of course, for example together with other schools ... In France, for example.

Yes, French people were quite entertaining ... Open-minded? In which sense?

Oh - certainly ... Alcohol, for example. Difficult to handle for someone as little experienced as him.

The lady stated he didn't look that unexperienced, what with his special hobby and so. And offstage ...

At this point, Cho assured her yes, Harry could handle his fans well, especially since it was her job to keep them at bay, behind the stage as well as in more public places, although still of private nature.

This stop mark took effect.

Then it was time for his performance.

He started with elementary spells, the simplest of them a rapid movement with his wand, producing a short rainbow of sparkling stars. Another one was not quite as simple - shooting fireworks with the wand was basically second-years' work, while the same trick in an artfully decorated salon required more skill, in order not to burn holes into the furniture.

The guests responded with ah's and oh's, only that man seemed to have just fun.

Harry asked Cho to him, made her levitate, and escorted her back to her place. The applause was polite - obviously, and quite by accident, he had imitated a common Muggles trick.

Then he called his table neighbour to him, asked her which hair colour she always had wanted to try but never dared.

The woman, currently dark blonde, wasn't afraid taking on the challenge. "Well, young man, I'd like to see how I'll look when I'm old and grey."

Feeling sure it wasn't meant literally, Harry produced a perfect silver, like a Veela mane cut short.

The guests closest to them gasped, then applauded. The woman seemed desperate to find a mirror. Cho was quickest - arriving with her hand mirror. When the woman studied herself, breathless silence in the room, everybody could hear it. "Well, well - certainly nothing to push off the bedside."

Even from those few people, the laughter was deafening, in particular since nearly everyone was convinced the comment had been Harry's own, given through another trick.

Anyway - the woman looked very pleased.

For his next trick, Harry prepared by sending a line of candles into the air, after asking Cho to switch off the light. Then he conjured his Golden Patronus.

The Centaur moved gracefully through the spacious room, returned to him. "There's no harm, master - at least no immediate one."

With a bow from both sides, the Centaur faded. Harry made the candles disappear, the light went on again. Watching the faces, he saw admiration, and awe - and something like fright, in the face of that man. Enough for him to start his mind working, particularly so after this strange remark from the Centaur.

He grabbed Nagini, took her around his body. With his eyes toward the guests, he asked her, "Nagini - look at that man in the corner, the one with the light-brown hair ... There's something special with that guy."

Hearing him, the other guests looked surprised, appreciating, expectant - with one remarkable exception. The man's face showed deep horror.

"Special, master? He's a wizard, that's all ... Not a pleasurable mind, only that's nothing special."

Harry announced that his snake was a lie detector, and that he would like to interview a volunteer who was supposed to embed some lies in his answers. When the guests hesitated a moment, he added, smiling, "I'll not ask delicate questions, just simple things."

Another woman came forward, sat down. Harry could sense a mix of excitement and anxiousness. First, he asked for the name and the address. Both were given properly.

Then he asked for the phone number. Nagini hissed at the answer. Harry said, "That wasn't true, Mrs. Thompson ... Maybe it's a problem with numbers. Let's see ... What's your birth date - first the day?"

Nagini kept silent.

"And the month?"

Still no hissing.

"No, it's not symptomatic with numbers ... Let's try something else - what's your personal taste in sweets?"

Giggling, the woman confessed to fall regularly for licorice, not earning a remark from Nagini.

Asked about drinks, the woman claimed a preference for champagne.

"Well, Mrs. Thompson - whatever it is, certainly not champagne ... Since I don't know other questions, without getting too intimate - thank you for your cooperation." Harry bowed.

According to the woman's expression, she seemed relieved and disappointed at the same time, not being interviewed further.

Harry looked around. "Now - whoever thinks this was planned in advance may come forward and give it a try."

A man stepped forward, apparently convinced to catch him quickly. Pretty soon, he looked a bit scared, although not as bad as the other man.

Coming to the end, Harry walked around, conjuring up a flower for every woman while emptying the men's glasses with the tip of his wand, "for balance", as he stated.

The final applause suffered a bit from some breathlessness among the guests.

Soon afterwards, the clock told them - time to welcome the new year. Like the others, Harry did so with champagne. Unlike the others, he was kissed by Cho.

Someone asked him about his good intentions for this new year, raising a chuckle in Harry's mind. How would that man have looked, hearing the answer, "To kill Voldemort"?

After some more glasses, the other guests left, the first couple giving the signal for the rest of them. Harry wanted to leave too - more precisely, he didn't want to be around until the last dog was hung, didn't want to ask for the limousine directly, after all, it wasn't his own, wasn't a cab either.

His glances earned him a clear wink to stay still for a while, from Cho as well as from Mrs. Chang.

Mr. Chang returned from his goodbye to the last guests, save one. He smiled. "Harry, your performance has won me great face ... I hope I can deal with this obligation in a very Zen-like style - " he smiled more, "which of course means inviting you again, doing it at another occasion."

Harry bowed. "I feel privileged, Mr. Chang - even more as not all of your guests could appreciate the presentation equally pleased."

Mr. Chang demonstrated the fine art of silent questions.

"I hope I understand it right, and this was a little test, since I have no intention to contradict you, sir, but - one of your guests was undeniably a wizard."

All smile faded from Mr. Chang's face.

Harry's eyes widened - also undeniably, this was shocking news to his host.

Mrs. Chang's voice. "Which one, Harry?"

He looked at her, looked back to Mr. Chang. "I'm deeply sorry, sir - I thought you knew, and wanted me to find out ... It was the one sitting over there - I don't remember his name, the one with the sandy hair ..."

"Millar ... Graham Millar."

"Yes, I think so ... He drank only a sip of champagne, was very careful with drinks."

Mr. Chang nodded, his face stony. "Of course you're sure, Harry." It was one of these questions without a question mark at the end - not quite as elegant as other samples Harry had heard from Cho's father, understandably so, in this awkward situation.

"Yes, sir ... I had a feeling from the beginning, from my - er, *haragei*, because he felt like hidden under a cloak. And then - when I spoke with Nagini for the first time, he couldn't control his surprise for a short instant, while I was prepared, used it as a test ... Well, and then of course I asked Nagini, and she confirmed it beyond any doubt."

Mr. Chang exhaled. "Yes ... Please excuse me for a moment." He left the room.

Cho watched him leave, turned to her mother. "Uh-oh."

Mrs. Chang looked at Harry. "A cuckoo's egg - if you'll pardon the expression, Harry ... And you've found it."

Cho's face was shining. "He and his snake."

A thought struck Harry, a very disquieting one. "Mrs. Chang - please forgive my curiosity, but I have a reason for my question ... How long is this man a - um, business partner, or guest in this house?"

"Less than a year ... It was building up slowly." Mrs. Chang looked at Harry, waiting for his explanation.

Harry looked at Cho, at her mother. "As weird as it sounds - I'd have liked hearing of a longer period, or something about confidential business ... Either of them would confirm that my thought is ..."

Cho was at him. "Harry - what is it? ... In plain English."

His eyes met hers. "You, I'm afraid."

What followed was a very Chinese ceremony, although a highly unusual one. Mrs. Chang was up, bowed to Harry, excused herself, left the room after a wink to her daughter, with Harry suddenly alone in this splendid room.

However, his mind couldn't find the calm state for admiring the decoration. His mind was busy with an evil planning, and with an attempt to come up with a counter strike. No defense, he'd learned, was good unless combined with a cutting in return.

Mrs. Chang came back, trailed by her daughter. There was a fire glowing in Mrs. Chang's eyes. "Harry - the gods were merciful, sending you to us, and our daughter."

He bowed. "I think so too, Mrs. Chang - for quite some time."

She smiled. "Chinese tradition meets an English wizard with Japanese skill - this requires a French tradition." And then she planted a light kiss at his left cheek, another at his right, watched by her daughter who looked delighted, and very much in love with the two of them, still more when she saw him blush.

Mrs. Chang left the room again, leaving him alone with Cho, thereby breaking traditions even more than a moment before, or when she had left him sitting alone in the room.

She came back with her husband. Mr. Chang asked, "Assuming you're right, Harry - what would be your next step?"

He had prepared for this question in the last minutes. "Sir, I'd think the blow is parried, and according to my *sensei*, this should be the moment of a counter blow ... Only I cannot think of any, and just the thought of Cho used as a bait is enough to make me ..."

Cho's eyes were a bit glaring. "Oh - all of a sudden?"

He held the stare. "No - not all of a sudden."

Mr. Chang said, "We have time to think it over, and to do a very careful planning ... thanks to you, Harry."

Harry bowed. "I'm also the one to blame in the beginning, sir."

Only Mr. Chang's eyes smiled when he answered, "What's the sense in blaming *karma*?"

Then Harry made some movements as if ready to leave, and Mr. Chang went out to get things prepared. He came back, walked to Harry, bowed, astonishingly deep. "I'm awfully sorry - please excuse this deep embarrassment ... My chauffeur has celebrated New Year too much ... He's - er, not operative, so-to-speak ..."

Harry shot up, bowed back. "This isn't a problem at all, sir - I'll use the Knight Bus, it'll be here in no time."

"No, Harry - I cannot tolerate this ... Please accept our guest room for the night - tomorrow, it will work, and it gives us the pleasure of your company for breakfast."

Harry bowed. "Yes, sir."

Guest room was an understatement - suite was more appropriate, connected to the main part of the house by a corridor with walls of glass, offering a view to the last fireworks over the city.

Harry was lying under the blanket, still wide awake, reminded of another suite with a double bed and luxury equipment, when he heard a faint noise from the door.

Cho came closer.

What he could see in the light from outside was some kind of night kimono, very appealing, apparently quite thin, more than inviting to touch it, open it ...

Except that he felt frozen.

He saw her smile. "Scared, Harry?" A hand stroked his hair, then reached under the blanket.

"Cho - not here ... Please ..."

"Why not? ... You've been challenged all evening, and now - isn't this the ultimate challenge?"

Indeed - under this roof, and him unable to drop the thought that any moment the door might open again.

Cho saw her prey at risk. "Sorry ... To ease your mind - er, to fill it with another thrill, I have to tell you a bit about Chinese ethics, although I'm surprised you didn't find out by yourself - it's not that different from Japanese ones."

"Is it? ... Maybe I'm a bit preoccupied right now."

"Yes, my knight, and to turn your preoccupation the right direction, let me explain ... You've uncovered this wizard mole, and it should be clear to you that this was a great loss of face to my father."

Harry found his mental balance. "I wasn't aware, because ... Yes, you're right."

"So even if this doesn't establish an ob, which doesn't mean it doesn't - erm, my skill of expression seems to suffer, somehow ... anyway, he had to find something to express this, or acknowledge it with you acknowledging too - at something else ... Still with me?"

Considering her hand, she was more with him. "Yes."

"So he came with this story about his chauffeur ... You didn't believe a word, did you?"

"Well, erm ..."

Cho laughed. "Harry, my father doesn't employ a chauffeur who isn't ready to drive a guest back home ... He's cold-sober, this is just a fake loss of face." Her smile deepened. "But, just by coincidence, the effect is that you have to stay here ... You might think this fake story was the only thing he could find at such a short notice, but think twice ... He's very skilled in such manoeuvres."

Harry had no doubt, but ... "You think your own father ..."

"Not as blunt as that, it's more - and still some kind of challenge, naturally so ... But don't forget - in Chinese culture, daughters are just something to trade with ... He's Western enough to treat me differently, and nice enough to remember this Chinese habit just in time."

Thinking it over, Harry knew - every word was true, although maybe not right. "And your mother?"

Cho was under the blanket, shifting him toward a colder stripe, although not too far away, just enough to leave room for hands between two bodies.

"Ooh - we don't discuss such matters in clear words, but - after all, I'm her daughter ... and guess who gave me this little nothing as a Christmas present?"

It was slightly more than nothing, and Harry had found the mood to diminish the difference between almost nothing and truly nothing.

After a moment, he pushed the blanket aside, in favour of more space and - more importantly - a better view of this magnificent unwrapping.

Although the room wasn't too warm yet, Cho didn't object. So the truly nothing was heating better than the combination of almost nothing plus blanket. Even so, this could hardly be rated as a Zen riddle, and maybe the unwrapping had to do with it.

\* \* \*

When Harry came to the breakfast table next morning, he found only Cho and her mother. Cho greeted him lightly, Mrs. Chang greeted him warmly, Mr. Chang was nowhere seen - an elegant manoeuvre, as Harry had to admit.

Even so, it could have been an embarrassing situation - if not for the fact that he, after coming to rest the night before, had used a relaxed and fully operative mind to think something over. He turned to Cho. "Where's your father?"

Cho looked surprised about the question. Before she could answer, Mrs. Chang said, "He excuses himself, Harry - probably it has to do with what you've uncovered last night."

Harry admired the message under the message in this answer - nonetheless, his mind was set on something more important. "I've thought about it, Mrs. Chang ... There's something I'd like to discuss with him. If not today, then I hope we can find another time soon."

Mrs. Chang looked at him, examining his face. Cho looked at him, trying to figure out what was on his mind. Mrs. Chang walked out.

Harry was about to finish his breakfast when Mr. Chang came in. Wherever he had been, he had found a shortcut back into this room. "Good morning, Harry."

"Good morning, sir ... I'm glad we have this opportunity to talk, because there is something I know but don't understand, and I believe you can show me where I miss the point."

"With wizards? ... That would be interesting, Harry - I'm a Muggle and a merchant."

"Exactly, sir ... It has to do with trade and business."

He saw the understanding come up in Cho's face, while her father asked, "Which business, Harry?"

"It's about *Magical Tours*, sir." Harry told the story of his 'accident' in London Linkport, the agreement with the port manager, the disappearing owls, and the flight of the two owls and the two Steel Wings.

At this point, Mr. Chang, who had listened silently before, interrupted him. "You have a very special way to recommend yourself as a son-in-law, Harry."

Harry bowed. "To be honest, sir - I'd never dreamed of telling you these details, only - I realized that you must know before it makes sense to ask you the questions I have."

"It's a fascinating story - please continue."

Harry described the scene at the *Magical Tours* headquarters, keeping a bit vague about the life insurance Belinda McGraw had fabricated.

Mr. Chang smiled thinly. "And since then, owl mail is as reliable as before."

"Yes, sir ... Even after the accident that followed. It was an accident in their headquarters, and it killed this Gallagher and the three clerks from the Hogsmeade office - exactly those people who'd been in contact with us."

The smile was gone from Mr. Chang's face. "And - this police woman?"

"Was found dead a day later - at the entrance to an owl shop."

Mr. Chang was silent for a moment. "I appreciate this information, Harry - it leaves no doubt about the seriousness of the other side, and their intentions ... Now what are your questions?"

"Sir - what is so attractive at *Magical Tours* to make it an instrument in Voldemort's planning?"

Mr. Chang nodded as if confirming a thought that had crossed his mind before, took his time before answering. "On the surface," he said eventually, "there's an obvious goal, a very simple one, the same as for any other enterprise - to make profit, that means to make money. And I take it this company is making a lot of money."

"Probably ... They seem quite busy, and the amount of portkey mail is growing."

"They found a method to speed up their business growth, and then you found out, and stopped it - but even so, the growth is considerable ... People still remember that there was a time when owls didn't arrive - which shows you how efficient this strategy is even after you've stopped the direct manipulation."

"Sir, just between these four walls - if I saw any reason, or benefit, I wouldn't mind travelling around and blowing linkports to pieces - only, I just can't see what's wrong with these services."

Mr. Chang grinned. "Then maybe I shouldn't continue explaining to you, Harry - after all, who wants a criminal in the family?"

Harry blushed. "I'm sorry, sir - what I meant was I cannot see how it would bring us a step further toward Voldemort."

"Even after you have your answer, I don't think it would help much when running around as a kind of linkport bomber - although I've little doubt you'd be up to the task."

Harry blushed again.

"Coming to Voldemort ... His ultimate goal is to rule the world - the wizarding world. Would you agree to that, Harry?"

"Definitely, sir."

"He tried brute force - and failed. He tried terror and open field battle - and failed again. The idea of him running for a political leader is ridiculous - aside from the fact that he could be leader in just one country ... So he makes his new attempt in business and trade."

It sounded logical - still, Harry couldn't see the picture yet. He asked, "But how can he hope to rule the world with that, sir?"

"What does it mean, ruling the world? ... It cannot mean someone who's dictating everybody's daily life. It can only mean gaining a key position, a position from which you can push your own ideas through, typically by threatening to strangle an essential nerve if people do not agree with your ideas."

"And *Magical Tours* could be such a nerve?"

"Not yet, but this is a long-term strategy ... When looking into the Muggles world, Harry, you see several key industries. If any of them would be in the hands of just one person, or company, they could dictate their prices and conditions at leisure ... This is nothing new, and countries have developed protection mechanisms, for example, laws against monopolies, or at least against the misuse of monopolies ... By and large, these laws work, although sometimes it takes years until people realize that someone is trying the old game again. And now look at the wizarding world."

Harry tried to see his world from a new perspective.

"Basically," said Mr. Chang, "this world is split into many small societies, using techniques which are very magical but, often enough, very inefficient - compared to modern standards ... I hope you forgive me this blunt statement, Harry."

"You're totally right, sir - Ron would agree even more."

"So, basically, this world is badly suited for someone who wants to hold its throat in a tight grip - the best Voldemort could achieve was a tight grip at the throat of Great Britain - forgive me again, but that's not exactly an impressive position, compared to a worldwide view ... To score better, first he has to establish global structures - and now look at your *Magical Tours* again."

It wasn't *his*, while otherwise, Harry felt thunderstruck.

"This company is growing faster than the wizard societies can follow with their laws. At some point, they'll realize that they've made themselves dependent on these key services - travel, communication, and that they have to follow orders."

"But only up to a point."

"Certainly - if the company would turn the screw too tight, in the long run it would lose its position. But within a certain range, which isn't that small, they can do what they want, ask what they want ... For someone with acute megalomania like Voldemort, this is a dream come true."

It was Harry's turn to think for a while.

Mr. Chang asked, "Does this explanation answer your question, Harry?"

"Yes, sir - I'm thankful for that ... I'd never have found out by myself."

"And what are your conclusions?"

Harry grinned. "You're totally right, sir - running around and blowing up linkports is no solution at all ... Otherwise, the situation is the same - finding Voldemort and stopping him. Then, if *Magical Tours* has come to like the taste of power - that's not *my* crusade."

"This might change in the future."

"Could be, sir ... Although, for me, this sounds more like a task for Ron."

\* \* \*

Ron and Ginny were still at breakfast when Harry returned to The Burrow, after having used the time in the limousine to think about trade business in the wizarding world. Ron grinned. "It was a long dinner party, wasn't it?"

"No, not really ... People left not too long after midnight."

"People, huh? ... With a notable exception, of course."

"Well - maybe not of course, but - they offered me the guest room ... Except - it was more of a suite than a room."

Ginny looked admiring, and envious.

Ron said, "Guest room - what a pity."

In contrast to her brother, Ginny didn't believe for a second there was any reason for pitying Harry. She asked, "And where was this guest suite?"

"Oh - it's part of the house ... Although a separate one."

Only now, it dawned on Ron. He looked incredulous. "Don't tell me ..."

"Won't do."

Ginny started to giggle.

Ron still looked incredulous. "You're making this up ... I can't imagine - the Changs would let you ... No, they're not that different from the Baillards - or our parents, for that matter."

In a way, Harry had more important things to discuss. So he said, "Listen ... First, I'm not making up anything. Second, I hope you know that Janine could stay overnight here any time - provided you'd get used to the fact that people in the other rooms ..."

"Here?? ... What makes you think so?"

"I don't think so, I know ... Ma Weasley was quite clear in this regard."

"Bloody Baron ..." Ron looked thunderstruck, and admiring, at Harry.

Harry turned to Ginny. "It might be slightly different with daughters, but then, we didn't intensify this topic ... Anyway, something happened, and that's why I had to stay overnight, and that's why we have to discuss something."

"We?" Ron glanced toward his sister.

Harry had found this decision already in the limousine. "We ... Only I'd prefer my room for that."

What followed was a little charade in which Harry informed Ginny about all details of the encounters with *Magical Tours*, after he had found a moment alone with her to indicate that the topic Sirius was off limits.

Ginny listened, did what she could to look astonished at the proper times. She wasn't too convincing, however, Ron didn't notice while waiting impatiently for the part new to him.

"Yesterday evening," said Harry, "all other guests were announced as Muggles. Only - one of them was a wizard, and Mr. Chang didn't know."

"Wow!"

"Yes ... This was of course much loss of face for him - toward me, I mean, so he had to do something that would be the *official* loss of face ... What he came up with was a story his driver was drunk and couldn't drive me home ... So much for the background. Now ..."

Ginny asked, "This face mechanism - was it clear to you all the time while it happened?"

"Not at the first moment, no. Cho had to explain it to me."

"Oh, did she? When?"

Harry looked at his grinning sister. "Save it - there's something more important. This wizard was probably planted with Cho as the target."

"Cho??" Almost unison, from Ron and Ginny.

Harry inhaled deeply. "There's something you don't know ... It was Marie-Christine who uncovered it, and if any proof was missing, I think this wizard gave it."

Ginny looked suddenly very attentive.

Harry explained Voldemort's plot as predicted by Marie-Christine, and why Cho's role was even more essential than his own.

"Oh my God - what a horrible thought!" Ginny stared at him with deep concern. "Now I can ..." she interrupted herself, unnoticed by Ron who was still struggling with the news.

"That's just for the background ... Oh, before I forget ..." Harry added the missing details of his second visit in the *Magical Tours* headquarters, about the jump artist and his performance.

Ron said, "You should contact Sirius - even if ..."

"Later - first we have to do something else ... During breakfast, I asked Mr. Chang for an explanation why *Magical Tours* could be so attractive for Voldemort ..." Harry summarized Mr. Chang's interpretation. This time, Ron was most attentive, smiling at the end when Harry described the prospect of Ron's own crusade.

"Now you're up-to-date," finished Harry. "And now to my idea. We have to find out more about *Magical Tours*."

Ron nodded. "Sure ... And how?"

Harry looked at him, at Ginny, grinned. "As Hermione tells us twice a week - you just don't see the obvious."

Ginny looked expressionless. "Except sometimes."

"Huh?" Ron looked at his sister, ignored her remark. "So what's the obvious?"

"You - or maybe we all - have a brother who runs the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

"Oh no!" Ron looked disgusted.

"Oh yes!"

"Then tell me how to do that! ... He'll never cooperate, contrary to what his office is supposed to do. And he would ask thousand questions ..."

"I hoped you'd come up with an idea ... After all, he's your brother much longer than mine - thank God for middle to large favours."

Ginny laughed. A moment later, her eyes were shining. "I have an idea."

Two faces looked hopefully at her.

"I think we can agree that, without a little blackmailing, we could stop right away ..."

They agreed, no question about that.

"... and I might have something. It's a few years old, but with Percy, it still might work ... It has to do with Penelope."

Ron and Harry stared at each other, more astonished than ever.

Ginny grinned. "It's totally harmless, in particular compared to ... Anyway, for him it would be so embarrassing - I think I can make him jump."

Ron looked interested. "What is it?"

Ginny shook her head. "I promised never to tell - that's exactly the base of the blackmail ... And besides, for you two, it's pretty much boring."

Ron turned to Harry, grinning. "Such high praise from a younger sister."

Harry's grin was a little thin.

They discussed details, for this attack which had to take place the next day, the first working day after New Year and also the last day of vacation. It was Ron who found the nice rounding-up of their strategy. "Blackmail alone is too insecure ... I think we should try a combo - first bribing, then blackmailing."

"Bribing? How?"

"Oh - pretty simple ... We come into his office, to deliver our presents to him. Then ..."

"Presents?" Ginny stared. "Do you have a present for Percy??"

"No, of course not! Not me, not you, not Harry ... And he has none for us - but until we meet him, we'll have something - some nice crap. And then, when he's really embarrassed because he has nothing for us, we ask him, and then comes Ginny with slight hints of whatever ..."

Poor Pompous Percy was perplexed, paralyzed, palpitated by the pandaeonium of two and a half brothers and sisters, palavering in alternate roles whenever he tried to settle back to reality.

Ron. "Now - can we have a look into these files?"

"No - that's impossible! First it ..."

Ginny. "How's Penelope?"

"Penelope??"

Harry. "Please, Percy - you're the only one who can solve this riddle."

For a split second, Percy looked pleased.

Ginny. "I haven't seen her for quite a while ... Has she changed since that time?"

"Which time?"

Ginny smiled. "You know what I mean."

Percy looked alarmed.

Ron. "If you could tell your secretary to show us the files while talking with Ginny ..."

Ginny. "Why - it's a nice story, don't you think so, Percy?"

He didn't. He called his secretary, and suddenly they had access to the files - officially with Ron as a messenger from Arthur, while Harry was with him to make sure nobody else would interrupt.

Without the secretary, they would have been lost. The witch only needed a keyword - *Magical Tours* - to look not surprised at all, to open the cabinet, to have the files ready with one grip. Obviously, someone else had asked for them not long ago, and it would have been interesting to know who it was. Only this question seemed too dangerous, and maybe it had been Sirius.

*Magical Tours*, as they learned, was a company owned by a company, owned by another company. This was the deepest level to which ownership had to be recorded in the Ministry files.

*Amalgamated Entertainments* was the sole owner, a company located in Nassau, Bahamas. This mother company, in turn, was owned by two major stockholders. The first of them *Amalgamated Enterprises*, also residing in Nassau, Bahamas, and the other *East-West Funds and Trust Bank*, to be found in Hongkong.

Storming the next post office, Harry sent a short message to the Chang house, announcing new information and the hope Mr. Chang might find the time for a few minutes in London Linkport.

He waited in the cafeteria - alone, his luggage including Nagini left with Ron and Ginny. Mr. Chang arrived together with his daughter, was left alone with Harry after Cho had delivered a welcome kiss.

"Sir," said Harry, "I've got information about the company owners ... It doesn't tell me anything, but you might know more about them."

"Could be, Harry ... Who's in the background?"

"Direct and sole owner is *Amalgamated Entertainments*, which in turn is owned by *Amalgamated Enterprises* and the *East-West Funds and Trust Bank*. The companies reside in Nassau, Bahamas, while the bank ..."

"I know them." Mr. Chang smiled thinly. "Well - that's exactly what we should have expected ... In terms of business, Harry, there are two swamps like no others - Hongkong and the Bahamas, or maybe the other way around ... Anyway - leave this track to me, if there's anything to learn, I'll find it."

"Certainly, sir." Harry hesitated. "Some news about Mr. Millar?"

The scarce smile faded. "He isn't around since yesterday ... Which is very wise of him."

"Maybe not, sir ... Voldemort has a nasty way to handle losers."

"That's what I heard, Harry ... Still - the alternative would be to expose himself to the other end. From this perspective, Voldemort might be preferable."

It didn't look as if he was joking, this Mr. Chang, who was Cho's father and the other end of Mr. Millar's death trap.



## 16 - Getting Serious

In the Hogsmeade Linkport, they had to wait some minutes before the service car would arrive to take them back to Hogwarts. Looking for a quiet spot, Harry grabbed Almyra, who didn't resist, while Cho followed without being grabbed. Looking into Almyra's beaming face, Harry said, "You're crazy."

Shaking her head, Almyra almost giggled.

"Oh yes, you are ... If I had seen a way ..."

"But there was none - I made sure of that."

"A propos," remembered Harry, "I was asked to express their apologies once more ... We had a talk, this young man and I - maybe he comes to visit us here."

Cho was grinning madly. "A young *man*?? ... Harry, what's that supposed to mean?"

He shook his head impatiently, was about to explain the background with Steel Wings and Firebolts Two when suddenly realizing a remarkable lack of questions from Cho. He eyed her suspiciously. "Funny you don't ask."

"Funny you complain about that. Normally, it's the other way around."

"Cho, my darling ..."

Both girls started to giggle.

"... would you please tell me what kind of present you've got from Al?"

Both girls started to laugh, giving the obvious answer. Harry looked at Almyra. "Definitely insane."

"Quite the opposite ..." Almyra sobered up sufficiently to explain, "Imagine it would have been yours only, or hers only ... But I promise you - now it's over, future presents will be less spectacular - no, I mean less pricey, since your present is a nice example how to be spectacular with small things."

Harry hugged her. "Thank you ... While I had to wait for it, and still more after I got it - I felt as happy as a little kid."

Almyra's expression changed from beaming to teasing. "Why - do you know another style?"

Cho giggled, making Almyra blush. Cho saw her chance. "Maybe he should have said, happy as a young dog - but then, maybe he should have not ... What do you think, Al?"

Almyra blushed deeper, looked reproachfully at Harry.

Cho inched closer to her friend, put her arm around Almyra's shoulders. "He didn't tell me much, said he wasn't supposed to quote someone, so I was limited to an - er, eyewitness report

... Even so, I was happy to hear it, and I'm looking forward to squeeze you more privately," she looked challenging at Harry, "without some sneaking ears around."

Almyra muttered, "Isn't there a bit of privacy?"

"Sure," confirmed Cho joyfully, "we'd never hunt wolves - would we, Harry?"

"Never."

Almyra had to laugh.

Harry asked, "By the way - any recent progress in the project?"

Almyra looked disappointed. "No ... Didn't work ... I wish I knew what went wrong."

Cho glanced from one to the other, bowed twice, rapidly. "Little Chinese asks for details, please."

There was satisfaction in Harry's voice. "No ... It's just for balance - you can squeeze her privately, but I can discuss with her in public."

Cho glared at him. "Wait ... You'll suffer for that - I promise you."

He bowed teasingly. "That's okay, because - for this particular task, you're somehow seriously limited."

This time, it was Almyra who giggled, and Cho who blushed.

\* \* \*

Classes in Hogwarts claimed their rightful attention starting with the first day after the Christmas break. The topics appeared quite advanced, and the project nature of the lessons, which had already developed in the previous two months, was increasing. Also, most of the topics had a smell of dark magic, in particular since they did not necessarily provide a defence, quite the opposite.

In Potions, Professor McGonagall started with the Polyjuice potion, plus something like an antidote. It ended the effect of the Polyjuice potion immediately, also prevented it becoming effective for several days. Basically, however, this counted as a test potion for authorities - if someone refused to drink, then probably because this someone was pretending to be another person.

For Hermione, the Polyjuice potion was old stuff, while the antidote was not. Even so, she scrutinized all details of the recipe again, always in search for common factors, side effects, similarities - after all, form-shaping potions were the essence of her graduate work.

In a compound project, Madam Hooch in Charms started the topic of memory charms, while Snape in Defence against the Dark Arts started the opposite - defending against them, more exactly, detecting them and reversing their effect.

A memory charm, as Harry learned, did not really erase the memory of some events. This was impossible with a spell - it could be done by a surgeon, or with some potions, however in both cases with disastrous effects toward the brain, since neither the scalpel nor the drug could be restricted to the memory of a specific event, or timespan in life.

What the memory charm did was a twin effect. First, the specific memory was locked - more specifically, bypassed. Which meant - the person, about to touch the memory, almost reflexively bypassed it like a traumatic experience. The second effect provided a kind of replacement memory. Without that, the bypassing would be very confusing for the person itself, and easily detectable for an experienced interviewer.

In trances, the bypass did not work. So trances offered one of the techniques for detecting memory charms. The same was actually true for Muggles - only for them, it didn't mean much. When a Muggle, under a trance, revealed the true memory of something heard or seen which afterwards had been hidden by Arthur Weasley's people with a memory charm, every doctor or scientist would assume some side effect - the person's mind was having fun with some fantasy story. And the more plausible the story seemed - in terms of motives and actions, that was, the stronger grew their conviction that the person's mind had invented the plot. After all, some things simply didn't happen.

Undoing a memory charm wasn't too complicated. The tricky task came first - detecting them. Even under a trance, anyway not a working alternative for Harry, such an artificial memory could be detected only when asking for specific details, or maybe by accident. At least, there was no spell which - magically - could deactivate all memory charms nesting in someone's mind.

Then an idea occurred to Harry. Was Nagini a means to detect memory charms? He discussed the matter with Madam Hooch, also with Snape.

A first, simple test turned out negative. Ron had volunteered for a charm which suggested that roasted pork had been served rather than cooked fish. However, Ron liked roasted pork a lot, while he could easily imagine a life without cooked fish.

A second test could start only after some reluctance from Ron's side, and only after convincing him beyond any doubt that it was possible to reverse memory charms without leaving remnants of the fake memory. Then, he agreed to a charm which implanted the memory that the Quidditch match against the Hufflepuffs had been lost by sixteen points.

This time, Nagini felt something. She didn't report a lie, only a serious unpleasantness and some confusion.

The latter came as no surprise. When Harry asked Ron about the Quidditch match, his friend answered with an expression of utter disbelief, "Don't you remember this disaster, Harry?"

The results could only be rated as unreliable. All they confirmed for sure reminded of the old wisdom - any test was good only when leaving the test object unchanged. And for a memory charm, this was something of an impossibility, without offering a trace of Zen.

In Transfiguration, the efforts concentrated more and more toward the Animagus spell, and Harry felt confronted with the question what kind of animal might be his choice. He thought it over - once, twice, found a serious problem in his thinking.

He asked Lupin for a private conversation.

With the cups in their hands, Lupin said, "All right ... What's your problem, Harry?"

"I was thinking about which animal to chose ... For the Animagus, I mean."

"For what else?" Lupin looked expectant. "And what have you found?"

"Erm ... Prof ... To be honest ..." For once, it was Harry who felt confronted with a friendly, questioning silence from a member of the Western culture. Eventually, he said, "I think ... my choice is none at all."

At least, Lupin didn't look disappointed. Maybe it wasn't such a surprise for him, after all.

"I certainly would like to be an Animagus," explained Harry. "... And the thought of my father has crossed my mind quite often, recently ... But it feels to me like an attempt to dance at one wedding too much."

"And which are the weddings you're going to join?"

"Looking from the current perspective, the most important skills are *haragei* and *getsumai no michi*, based on things like *aikido* and *kenjutsu* - and altogether they're based on Zen ... What will come soon is Apparition in all regards, including the techniques of pursuing someone through Apparition jumps - normally, this is just a theoretical addendum here in Hogwarts while for me, this will be the start and the end of the whole thing."

"What about Defence?"

"Concerning Unforgivable Curses, there isn't much that's missing - if anything ..."

Lupin nodded.

"... while this pursuing technique is taught there, for all I know. Well, there will be one or the other spell in addition, but ..."

"And your extra lessons."

Harry looked at Lupin's expressionless face, trying to find an answer that was better than his silence.

Lupin saved him the effort. "I guess I have an idea, Harry ... Severus isn't exactly an old friend, but somehow, that's the keyword which fails to get off my mind."

Lupin didn't sound as if the topic was closed, in particular since he failed to continue by talking about something else. Quite naturally so - after all, he and Sirius were very close friends. And basically, Harry was ready to reveal a bit - if he could find a way within the boundaries of his promise toward Sirius.

And less basically, he would be interested in discussing something else, about new friends, or maybe younger ones ... This association brought him the idea. "I remember how Al asked me a similar question."

This particular twist took Lupin by surprise - off balance, so-to-speak. He even omitted to protest that he hadn't asked a question at all, but then, they both knew he had.

"I told her to accept the apparent and the seemingly apparent without asking ... But maybe I'm not telling you anything new."

Now it was Lupin who didn't answer.

"By the way ... I'm sorry to hear your project doesn't proceed as planned."

Lupin grinned faintly. "I'll be glad if you've finished school, Harry ... Then this damned teacher-student relationship is out of the way, and I can speak more frankly than now."

It was out before Harry could stop himself. "Yeah, sure, but ours is not the most urgent problem."

Lupin stared at him. "I think we should end this conversation, Harry."

Harry blushed. "Prof - if this sounded impertinent, I apologize - that wasn't my intention. But you must know - Al and I, we feel like brother and sister to each other, for some reason ..."

"That's great for you - but even brothers and sisters don't share everything!"

"Oh, we don't - only the important things."

Lupin looked in a mix of helplessness and desperation.

"You see, Prof - with Cho and me at the other side, Al alone is somewhat unbalanced, isn't she? ... And it's not exactly objections what she finds when this - er, topic comes up."

"I know, Harry, and - believe me, this knowledge has played an important role ... Anyway, things will be a lot easier at the end of this year."

"Well - it's a question of perspective, isn't it?"

Lupin looked surprised, then smiled sympathetically. "Sorry - I forgot ... Yes, of course you're right."

"Prof ... A thought was crossing my mind - about your project, I mean ... If a wolf doesn't work, maybe another animal would."

It took Lupin a second to follow this turn, or backstep, in the conversation, but then he no longer refused to discuss the matter. "What did you have in mind, Harry?"

"Well - maybe a wolf and a werewolf are just too close. I was wondering if a dog might be the solution."

"You won't be surprised to hear that this idea came up already before - " Lupin smiled, "in heads more devoted to that project ... Only - the difference seems so small, both shapes are nearly identical ..."

For an instant, both Harry and Lupin tried to keep their faces steady, managed - almost.

"... so we couldn't see the benefit. You know, a new shape is a bit more than homework for a rainy weekend."

Harry felt grateful for the opportunity to grin about an innocent joke. "Yeah, sure, but - I've learned, it's the intention that matters, as you know perfectly well since you're one of the teachers who told me again and again ... Now - a wolf's intention is to be wild, while a dog's intention is to be a human's companion ... That's what I was thinking about."

Lupin's eyes widened. "You're right ... It could be just another case of not seeing the obvious ... It might be crap, but this approach sounds better than all ideas we had so far."

Harry beamed. "I'm definitely not a Transfiguration expert, but maybe that's exactly what was missing in the project planning ... This mistake sounds quite familiar."

Lupin grinned. "According to this logic, you and Ron should discuss Quidditch tactics with Miss Delacour."

Now Harry's eyes widened. "Hey - you're totally right, Prof ... An outsider - a bloody amateur, not preoccupied at all."

"It was planned as a joke - but it backfired ... Maybe I should visit a course in project planning."

Harry grinned. "That's risky, Prof."

"Why?"

"Well - the best teacher for that is Hermione, there's no doubt ... But I think you know how you would have to pay in exchange for the fine art of brainstorming and project management, don't you?"

Lupin laughed. "Yes, I know ... Basically, I don't object playing the test object - only that I cannot run both test series simultaneously ... Imagine her potion works - we've invested too much in our own project to stop now."

"Well, then - you may tell her that ... Hermione can wait, and she has still more than a year."

Lupin nodded. "I'll think about it ... Now, coming back to your own topic, what are you planning to do? ... Would you drop Transfiguration, in favour of more time for ..."

"Heavens, no! ... Aside from anything else, I've got my lesson."

"Your lesson?"

"Yes - about faculties and teachers. For a time, I had dropped Care, because this was what could be dropped immediately. It was a mistake - Grubbly-Plank is too good to be ignored ... What I'm trying to say - in the worst case, I'll pester you to teach me Social Ethics - if you get my bearing."

Lupin laughed. "Thank you for the flowers ... Anyway - I don't disagree with your conclusion, Harry. Maybe you just put it in some kind of hold - if things change, or if you change your mind, you can increase the investment any time."

"Yes - that sounds reasonable."

"Just for my own curiosity - would you know which animal?"

"Well, for something handy and practical, I think a dog would be my choice too ... There's no better compromise between power, flexibility, and unsuspecting embedding in a crowd of humans."

"And what if this constraint won't play a role?" Lupin smiled. "What will be your second shape, Harry?"

"A dragon ... And I think I'd try it first."

Lupin showed little surprise. "It would have been my guess - that or a Centaur ... You should know, the Transfiguration literature counts both of them as impossible - but so what, some time ago the Golden Patronus was considered a myth."

\* \* \*

The first dance lesson in the new year provided an interesting experience. Harry was almost late, for some reason - maybe on purpose, met Cho in the dance room, with the other students already around.

In the first moments, nothing happened because Cho was distracted by Fleur's announcement.

"Mesdames et messieurs," called Fleur, "I want to introduce Monsieur Jean-Francois Dutronc, member of the Beauxbatons Dance Formation - unfortunately only till the end of this year, and my partner in this course - he's just too good to call him *assistant*."

The young man bowed, receiving the applause. For a dancer, he looked astonishingly sturdy and square-built, seemingly small - until compared with Fleur, making clear he was just broader.

The music for the first dance started, and only now Cho became aware. She sniffed, failed a step. "What's this?"

"Cha-cha-cha - what else?"

Definitely not an improvement of her mood. "You know exactly what I mean!"

"Oh ... It's called *Clair de Lune*."

"Right now, I'd like to make this light shine in your left eye ... Where does it come from??"

"A shop, I'd guess ... Didn't look like a special bottling."

Cho failed another step. "You ... you ..."

"Oh - you mean how *I* got it? ... It's a Christmas present."

She was boiling - at least, she did it in the proper rhythm. "Would - you - please - tell - me - from - whom?"

"Sure - from Fleur."

It kicked some wind off her sails. But only some. "And why didn't you use mine?"

"I was told these perfumes are ageing - so I have to balance along, isn't that so?"

The word *balance* seemed to worsen things. "You've been told - by whom? ... Fleur?"

"No, it was Ginny."

"Can't she mind her own business?"

"She did, actually ... Hers is called *Centauros*."

Cho was about to jump and dance in a different rhythm when suddenly a small ball was floating around them, and Fleur's voice, with some amusement, chirped, "Shall I tune the music down or up?"

This reprimand was good to cancel the issue for a while, until they had a break, and after they were given the opportunity to drop any thought Jean-Francois had earned his membership through anything other than dancing skill. Sitting in a quiet corner, Cho glared at Harry. "Listen, you piece of charme - if you're together with me, you'll wear mine, okay?"

"Hey - these are presents from ..."

"Not my problem ... With me, you better smell of *Samurai*."

"And when shall I smell of the others?"

"When you're ..." Cho stopped, giggled. "Well, I have to admit, there's a serious flaw in my logic - " she glared again, "there better be a serious flaw, if you get my bearing ..."

"Loud and clear." A moment later, he couldn't resist. "Ginny was so disappointed when she saw yours ... Then I said, I'll wear it by association - Fleur's for dancing, hers for festivities ..."

"And mine?"

"I said we'd find something."

Cho grinned.

"But Ginny pointed out some obvious conflicts that may arise."

Cho understood immediately, grinning broader. "Arise, huh? ... Good thinking of that sister of yours."

"Yes." It came a bit flat.

Cho had recognized it. "All right - use hers next time ... It's no good idea to categorize them ... And I'm awfully glad you're tending to older women."

"I'm not *tending* - and it's more than that."

Cho looked softer. "Same with me ... Lucky me." Then, registering his sharp look toward her, she said quietly, "So you've found out - after all this time."

"I thought ... Doesn't matter - anyway, we have a clear agreement ... And with a little luck, it'll fade."

Cho didn't answer, stopped just in time before shaking her head, rose to follow Fleur's announcement, concentrating on the next dance and on her own luck.

\* \* \*

The second week in the new year had passed already when Harry received a card from Sirius. Harry's grin, after reading the first words, faded quickly.

- *Dear Harry,  
this card may come a little late, but nevertheless - I wish you  
a happy new year and success in Hogwarts. May your project make  
progress, and may you receive the sympathy from your friends that's  
needed for feeling good.  
Your godfather  
Sirius*

As nice and innocent as the card looked for anyone not knowing better, it had all ingredients to make Harry's neck hair rise - because it included three messages underneath, or one message with three parts.

*Project* was the first code word. Sirius asked for a meeting with Harry, and this meeting would certainly take longer than ten minutes.

*Sympathy* was the second code word. Without revealing details, it announced a request for help, and the meeting would tell Harry more about the exact nature of the help Sirius needed.

And - as important as the other two, there was the third message, a warning. *Feeling good* meant quite the opposite, Sirius told Harry that he was under the tightest form of surveillance, so Harry's approach had to be good enough to get rid of these 'feelings'.

On the other side, it could have been worse. The code word *quite recently* was missing, which meant the meeting request wasn't extremely urgent, giving Harry time enough for a careful planning.

He and Sirius had established this code long before, as well as the technique to signal details toward Sirius without contacting him directly. The first thing Harry did was to write a response card.

- *Dear Sirius,  
thank you for your card. It's not too late, after all,  
the new year has only just begun. It's only a little  
cold, I wish I could be in Egypt like Bill.  
Don't drink too much  
Harry*

He felt no wish being in Egypt, this was just the only meaningful word in the message. During the next days, Sirius would scan the advertisements in the *Daily Prophet* for something in which the *Egypt Circle* was notified about a meeting on a certain day, at a certain time, in a certain place.

The natural next step would have been to figure out a strategy how to get rid of the shadows behind Sirius, in order to have one or two hours alone. But this step was already done - Harry had honed a plan during the past weeks, more exactly, since the time he had learned about some progress in another project.

The plan had its pros and cons. Definitely to the pro side belonged its beauty - no doubt, the meeting would be very private. The drawback was, Harry needed the help of two other people, and this would expose them to some risk - limited, though clearly more than nothing.

He contacted these two people, asked them to meet in Almyra's interview room.

Almyra had no objections, quite naturally so - she was one of the two. The other was Ginny.

Harry made his introduction quick and short. "I've got a message from Sirius. He asks for a longer meeting."

The two girls looked at him, then, with some consternation, at each other - wondering why the other was involved, surprised not be the only one who knew more than the public version.

The moment was somewhat tickling, and certainly in the wrong direction. Except Harry had no choice. He said, "Sirius is under tight surveillance, and the first task is to shake off the shadows ... For that, I need your help."

The number of questions they had was probably growing by the second, however, for starters, both Almyra and Ginny nodded.

"Before you agree - are you fully aware what it means? ... This kind of hide and seek isn't harmless."

Ginny was biting her lips. Almyra said, "Yes - I know."

Harry looked at his sister. "Ginny?"

"How - dangerous is it, Harry?"

"The plan is good - only the other side doesn't ask twice ... But I'll never be far away."

Ginny nodded. "Okay."

"Now ... Next Saturday afternoon, you, Ginny, will meet Sirius in a hotel in London - not exactly luxury class, but no dirty rathole either ..."

Something like utter astonishment appeared in Almyra's face, while Ginny's ears were slightly colouring.

"... and when coming to him, you'll be in the company of a large dog."

Almyra's face changed to grinning admiration.

"Shortly after you've met him in his room, you'll leave the hotel again for an hour or two, then you'll come back - of course always together with a dog ... Well, that's the plan from the outside."

Ginny, lacking some knowledge, still looked uncertain.

"Now from the inside," said Harry, "and with some more details ... Ginny, you will arrive at the hotel with a large dog - except this dog will of course be Almyra ..."

Ginny's head jerked around, looking toward Almyra who nodded, grinning.

"... and she'll wear a flaming red necktie - it's common these days to have them around dogs, especially in fancy hotels, or not so fancy ... Anyway, this will make sure nobody recognizes fine differences between the dog led inside and the one led outside, which of course is Sirius ... From that hotel, you'll walk to another one, where a room is booked under the name Dursley ... There, we'll talk ... Then you'll walk back to the previous hotel, visit Sirius again, to come out a few minutes later, looking as angry and upset as you can master ... Once outside the hotel, you simply travel back to Hogwarts."

Almyra asked, "And I'll stay in that room?"

"Basically yes ... You'll not respond to any knocking at the door, or phone call, or whatever ... If it looks as if things get out of hand, or if they'll try to break in - I mean, it's very unlikely, but just in case ... Before someone can see you, you have to disappear through the window."

"As a falcon."

Harry nodded. "Exactly." Toward Ginny, he added, "Something else ... When arriving the first time, you'll come with a bag - about the size you'd need to stay in a hotel for a day. When leaving the hotel for the first time, you go without that bag ... When coming back and leaving it again, a few minutes later, you take it with you ... Any comments?"

Almyra brought it to the point. "Better not."

Harry looked impatient. "Do you see any flaws?"

"No - provided the other side buys the story that ..."

He interrupted her. "They will ... Can you manage these two hours?"

Almyra nodded absent-mindedly, still thoughtful about her previous question.

Toward Harry, Ginny asked, "And you? ... Where are you?"

"When you go in for the first time, and until you come out and walk away, I'll be at the other side of the street - probably in a tree, but in any case under my Invisibility Cloak ... I'll check if someone's following you. Probably, I'll join you a minute later or so."

"And what if someone's following me - us, I mean?"

"This someone will encounter a falling stone, or something similar - that is, for all he knows afterwards ... But that's very unlikely."

"And after the meeting?"

"Same as before. I'll leave the other hotel a minute before you ... I'll be across the street."

They discussed more details, for example the travelling between Hogwarts and London. Harry admonished the girls to travel at different times, in order not to be seen together.

"And you?" asked Almyra.

"I'm not using the portkey link at that weekend ... I don't know whether they're recording it - at any rate, for all they know, I won't be in London next weekend."

"Then how will you travel?"

"Like in the good old days - with a broomstick, except it will be a very fast one ... I always wondered how it is to travel several hundred miles - Viktor did it twice, and now's my opportunity to find out."

"But - it's deep winter."

"Didn't I tell you what I've got from Dobby? ... A face mask - don't worry, I won't freeze to stone."

When all details were settled, Ginny left the room first - pretty quickly, apparently anxious not to be asked any question aside. Harry wasn't quite as lucky, because Almyra signaled him to stay a moment longer. "Harry," she said, "I'm not very happy with the thought of Ginny involved in that stunt."

"Don't you trust her?"

Almyra looked angry. "That's not the point! ... She's too young for that - especially for such a scenario ... A hotel - booked for some hours, really!"

"Okay, it doesn't look nice ... But I had no better idea - none that wouldn't compromise Sirius."

"Wouldn't compromise??"

"From the perspective of the other side, I mean."

Almyra couldn't decide whether she was not believing or not wanting to believe.

Harry came to a quick decision. "Al - Sirius' life is at stake, and for me that's reason enough to make things very clear ... You and Ginny, you both know about Sirius. You both are involved in this stunt. You both share another common factor ... For all I know, although Sirius refused to tell me details, he's blackmailed with photos of him and Ginny."

Almyra was speechless, then furious. "How could he?"

"Don't blame him ... It was my own idea, and it was very hard to convince him."

"You??"

Harry nodded.

"For Sirius' plot, you ... How did you convince her?"

His grin was a bit weak. "You track it down the wrong direction ... There was - erm, a certain problem, and Ginny didn't know how to solve it - in contrast to you, if you know what I mean ... Then I suggested him to her - that was the easy part. Well, and as part of my argument toward him, I suggested using it as an opportunity to get blackmailed."

Almyra stared at him. "I wonder whether I can trust my ears, Harry."

"Well - it's somewhat unconventional, okay ... Quite in contrast to the ordinary habits of the other people around ..."

She grinned. "Okay, okay ... So you could convince him, huh?"

"Actually, no ... But at the end, it worked."

Almyra laughed. "Small wonder ... And little by little, I get a feeling that this has been some kind of desperate measures."

"You bet."

"Well, there are sisters and sisters ..." Then another thought struck Almyra. "Does she know about me?"

"Certainly not from my side," assured Harry, "probably not from Sirius ... But when this stunt is over, she may know. Imagine - she comes to Sirius with a dog, and next moment, this dog changes to you ... His face will be very interesting to watch."

Almyra chuckled. "And then? ... How will she react?"

"Toward you? ... Oh, more positively than anything else, I guess - you know, common factors unite."

"Do they? ... In this case, maybe yes."

Only after a moment, Harry realized which common factor between Ginny and someone else was badly suited to unite, was doing quite the opposite.

\* \* \*

Next afternoon, he cancelled his training with Kenzo, because this offered the biggest amount of time he could win, and because Kenzo wouldn't discuss it with other teachers - or Headmistresses. Then he travelled to London.

Two hotels in the proper distance, one of them with an entrance that could be watched from the other side without being run over - pedestrians hardly took care of people under Invisibility Cloaks. Then he walked to the *Daily Prophet* office.

The advertisement he ordered addressed all members of the Egypt Circle, announced a meeting in the *Starlight* hotel, next Saturday at five o'clock, and reminded the members to book their own rooms.

In the hall, he took his time to read today's issue, checking the news as well as the organization of advertisements in pages. His glance fell on a box, looking like an advertisement, except it was on the news page, and with a black border around.

- *This newspaper and its editors are mourning for Rita Skeeter, long-term freelance writer and the author of many articles and series about events and scandals in the wizard community. Rita Skeeter died, at the age of forty-eight, in a car accident. Police are still investigating as this was a hit-and-run case.*

Good old Rita - dead, no doubt killed while trying to uncover one scandal too much, or with the wrong people involved.

Harry had a bitter taste in his mouth when travelling back to Hogwarts, and a cold stare toward all *Magical Tours* orderlies he met on his way. If anything had been needed to alert him sufficiently for the coming task, this news would have done the job.

He hoped this ad went unnoticed in Hogwarts - at least for the next days, at least by Hermione. He wasn't in the mood to discuss the event, decided not to inform Almyra or Ginny. Sirius certainly knew, maybe the issue would come up in their meeting.

Friday evening, when he prepared for his journey through the night, calming down Cho took longer than anything else.

"It's about Sirius," he explained. "I'll meet him, and it's a bit complicated to do it unnoticed ... I'll be back tomorrow, some time during the night."

"Funny that Al's doing a trip to London at the same weekend, isn't it?"

He kissed her. "No - it's not. I'll tell you ..."

"What's she supposed to do??"

"Walk around a little bit - except on four legs, that should tell you enough ..."

It told Cho enough to look still more concerned.

"Please - it's carefully planned, and we'll be very watchful."

She hugged him. "I wish I could come with you - which doesn't mean I won't be more scared than Al probably is."

He grinned. "But you have no Invisibility Cloak, and otherwise there's only room for four-legged animals."

"Tricky Potter - that was very close to breaking a promise."

At least, after this hidden reference to her old nickname *China Duck*, Cho looked better than a moment before. This, in turn, made Harry feel better when jumping into the air, on his Steel Wing, under Dobby's face mask, under his Invisibility Cloak, with Ron's knapsack on his back, containing clothes and other utensils rather than Nagini.

*Getsumai no michi* on a larger scale - a fascinating experience. However, on this journey he used it was more as a training, rather than for necessity - the lights from the towns down below provided enough navigation points, after Harry had memorized the map for quite a while. And he was grateful for every piece of clothing he'd donned, most of all for the new gloves he had bought and for Dobby's face mask. Together with the head shield from the Steel Wing package, he felt protected well enough while thundering through the night.

Already close to midnight, he arrived at the *Regent*, the second hotel in which he had booked a room for himself - under the name Weasley, after all, Harry Potter was taking too much attention.

He slept as long as possible without losing the option of a breakfast. Still six hours to kill, and walking through the streets was out of discussion. In good foresight, Harry had prepared himself with Hermione's present, the book about Zen.

What he learned first - the *Kamasutra* seemed an interesting literature, although the remarks remained a bit unclear, though probably more inviting than this book. Not exactly a flop, however, pretty soon Harry came to the conclusion his own understanding of Zen ranked already beyond that of the author. And the few *koans* quoted in the book were all known to him.

He dropped the book, spent the next hour in careful exercises of *aikido* movements, with the emphasis on stretching and flexing, and the next thirty minutes in a meditation. Then it was time to find something to eat on the street, and to position himself across the entrance of the *Starlight* hotel.

Sitting low in a tree, he watched the coming and going across the street, for almost an hour before he saw Sirius arrive. This hour didn't feel boring at all - surprising how you could entertain yourself with bets about the next guest, and the next time the door would open, only it was cold, and the tree not the most comfortable place to sit.

When Sirius had disappeared through the door, Harry tried to locate the shadows, found them quickly - not because they were somehow remarkable, not at all, seemed to melt into the street scene, but his *haragei* could identify them easily, with this significant discrepancy between

their movements and the feelings he received. One of them kept outside, the other stepped in, probably to wait in the hotel lounge.

Then he saw Ginny coming up the street.

The outside shadow showed no remarkable emotion when she entered the door.

Ten minutes later, Ginny reappeared in the door. For Harry, the differences between the two dogs looked obvious, but for all he sensed, he was alone with this feeling. The necktie did its job - a result of Snapes lessons. "To hide something," Snape had said, "you have to make it outstanding, so that everybody cannot help recognizing it. This trick is ages old, and still it works always."

The second shadow came out of the hotel, talked with his mate on the street. Harry tensed. If one of them would follow Ginny, things would get complicated.

The two exchanged a few sentences, than the first one went back inside. Obviously, the bag had done its duty - they expected Ginny back sooner or later. Well, they shouldn't be disappointed.

Harry reached the *Regent* together with Ginny - visibly, gesturing her to ignore him. At the reception, he waited until she had received her key before asking for his own. Moments later, he was in her room.

Sirius looked angry. "Did you have to get her involved? ... And Al too?"

"How would you've done it?"

"Well - since I have no good answer, I shouldn't complain ... Did someone follow?"

"No ... There are two - they discussed it for a moment, then settled back to their positions."

Sirius nodded. "It's just standard routine ... With two, they cannot split for such a case. If they'd suspect anything, there had been four at the minimum." He smiled appreciatively. "It's a good plan, Harry."

"That's what I thought ... Okay, what's up?"

"Before I start - have you heard something from Rita Skeeter?"

The expression in Sirius' face left no doubt - he knew, had chosen his words with respect to Ginny, who didn't know, and who still had to perform the second part of her role.

Harry answered, "Nothing from her personally, no."

Sirius nodded, understanding as well. Then he started to talk, and for the next hour, Harry was mostly listening, and Ginny all the time, while Sirius revealed the current state, the result of his undercover role and his plan for the events to come.

After the other side had come to the conclusion Sirius was hooked sufficiently, they had asked for one favour, then for another, then for a bigger one - pretty boring stuff, except of course

for the criminals involved, at least nothing of interest for Harry and no trace whatsoever toward *Magical Tours*.

And now, with the hook neatly fixed, they had asked for a very big favour. To be correct, it was no longer a favour, and they hadn't asked. They wanted access to the wizard prison.

Harry felt electrified. "Did you ask them why?"

"I played the ball as low as possible. So first I asked, 'Do you want to put people in or out?' The answer was, 'It's none of your business.' And I said I wouldn't care too much this way or the other, only that the techniques are different."

"Did they buy it?"

"Sure - for the procedure it's true, and for my interest - they know I'm only interested in the murderer of Bel, which of course has nothing to do with themselves, as they're never tiring to tell me - *their* approach is to run it like with me ... Anyway, what they want is to get people out."

If there was any proof needed that Voldemort could be found somewhere in the background, this request did it. The only possible explanation - Voldemort tried to fulfill his part in the trust bond with his Death-Eaters. Recognizing this kind of trustworthiness didn't make him a bit more sympathetic - more likely, it was easier this way than to find another bunch of wizards with an equal combination of evil will and magic skill.

The only public knowledge about the wizard prison, the replacement for Azkaban, was that it existed. Rumour had it the prison could be found on an island, as had been the case with Azkaban. Now Harry learned more.

The prison was maintained entirely by Goblins. It could only be reached through a portkey link, except this link remained non-operative most of the time. To activate it, first the Goblins had to be contacted. An unauthorized attempt would most likely end in a closed room with no exit - all links to and from the prison were one-way links, and to proceed from one to the other, a visitor had to pass checks. And of course, like in Hogwarts, apparition was not possible there.

Harry asked, "Is it an island, Sirius?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know ... This is the most secure prison we ever had, and maybe ever will have. Look into history - try to find a traitor under the Goblins! You may find one, but only between different groups - against wizards, they stand united ... We were lucky to settle this contract."

"Then what will happen if this action fails - if some prisoners escape?"

"What I'm telling you now is something I didn't tell the other side, Harry ... The port to the prison leads to a station in-between. As long as any link is active between that station and the outside world, links between the station and the real prison are disabled. And before they'll be activated, you have to wait, and to expose yourself to a thorough check ... Maybe you have to strip naked, I don't know ... At least - they'll never come closer than to that station, and our own forces have to wait there."

"When? ... And how long?"

Sirius grinned. "I could fix them to a known date ... I said the only possibility is ten days from now, when one of the prisoners is due for release ... More or less, it's even true - and that's why we don't have to wait days or weeks until they feel like giving it a try."

And then Sirius came to the specific help he needed. Someone had to tell the Goblins, if possible yesterday, and make sure they were warned, and would wait with a troop of well-trained warriors.

"I cannot even visit Gringotts," explained Sirius. "My - er, friends trust me in a normal way - normal for them which means they don't trust me at all but they don't expect treachery. But if I'd contact Goblins - they have a simple reflex, if it could be that you have betrayed them then you have, and if not, it's your own fault."

"What about other forces?"

"Good question - what can you offer?"

Yes - what could Harry offer? According to Sirius' description, everything would take place in rooms, maybe underground - definitely not a battleground where the remaining members of the Flying Squad could help. And the idea to confront people like Katie and Alicia with criminals in an infight at closest range - he didn't have to think twice in order to know the answer.

On the other hand - they had to gather at least some people. It was a question of honour as much as trust - if the Goblins saw a group of wizards, ready to stand against the intruders, at the risk to be killed, they wouldn't mind if their own troops were twice as much, or a tenfold, or whatever. It was the intention that counted, and this intention had to be presented in the shape of some wizard warriors.

Harry looked at Sirius. "What about Law Enforcement people?"

"No way ... There are only few I would trust, and right now, none of them is trusting me - for obvious reasons. In addition - any attempt to contact them would invariably be noticed by some of the others." Sirius' expression hardened. "Harry, if this thing's over - believe me, there'll be a big clean-up."

"Provided you're still in the office."

Sirius had a short and bitter laugh. "Yes ... But if I manage to come out alive from this story, holding the position will be easy play in comparison ... The Goblins will be at my side, that's an argument very hard to beat."

"All right ... I'll talk with Dumbledore - if it works out, I see about half a dozen people we can get together."

"But not Al."

"No - not Al, and not Cho either. Regarding students, I only think of Ron - and of myself, of course."

"Ron? ... Harry, please don't take offence, but ..."

Harry interrupted his godfather with a grin. "Relax - his job is coordination, and he's good in that."

Sirius looked relieved, while Ginny showed a mix of pride and worry.

"For the fighting," said Harry, "... I hope I can get Lupin, Snape, Kenzo, and Viktor."

"Kenzo?"

"My *sensei* ... I don't know how good he is with a wand, but he's quite artful without a wand."

Sirius nodded. "Now listen ... We won't have another opportunity to talk, and this is crucial ... These wizards have to be placed so that they can jump back quickly. There'll be some people waiting at the gate, I mean they won't come in - and I want to catch them too ... So, if it'll take longer, the fighting in the station has to be done mostly by the Goblins ... About five minutes after the entry, the return link must be activated, so we can jump through and get those waiting outside."

"That sounds highly dangerous."

"Oh, really?" Sirius grinned thinly. "Well - the first person jumping through will be that prisoner. If they see him, they expect another prisoner next - it's only natural ... And this moment of surprise must be enough."

"Then Kenzo should be the next - he's fast, and I mean *fast*."

Sirius nodded. "Why not? ... After me, of course."

"Sirius - that's no time for pride."

"You don't understand, Harry ... No matter what it looks to the outside, I'm still chief of police, actually the only cop in the story - and this is a police action ... But calm down, I'll jump through and then aside."

Harry could laugh. "Okay ... If there's something new, can you signal through ads in the *Daily Prophet*?"

"Probably not ... During the last week, they'll watch me in the shithouse - sorry, Ginny, but I mean it."

After another pass for dates and times, they were done. Harry hugged his godfather. "Watch your back - don't blow it in the last minute." About to leave, he turned again. "How's your drinking?"

Sirius grinned. "No need to worry - those people don't like employees who drink too much."

Out in the street, Harry kept ahead of Ginny and her dog, saw them disappear through the entrance of the *Starlight* hotel, felt something like satisfaction in the shadows, saw Ginny with the *same* dog appear minutes afterwards, looking truly upset. If Harry wasn't much mistaken,

Sirius had helped her performance by sending her a good one into the face - one cheek looked considerably redder than the other.

The shadows saw it too, felt no reason to follow, or to get excited. For all they knew, what had looked like a night watch would end pretty soon.

In fair distance from the two hotels, Harry approached Ginny - without un hiding from under the cloak. "Ginny - it's me."

She jumped a bit.

"I've thought it over ... I'll stay here in London to talk with the Goblins tomorrow. There's a two hour's opening of Gringott's Sunday morning ... That means, I'll arrive at some time in the afternoon. Please tell Cho ... Okay?"

"What can I tell her?"

"If you're sure nobody is listening but you, she, and Al - everything ... Otherwise, nothing."

"Okay ... How is flying in this weather?"

"Cold - otherwise it's an experience ... See you."

\* \* \*

Another night in the *Regent*. Spent with sleeping as early as possible, after a supper good to forget quickly, and after some thinking, lying awake in the bed. Then it was Sunday morning, nine o'clock, Harry had checked out from the hotel, had walked with his luggage, and Gringotts was open.

These clerks looked all very similar, even to Harry. Maybe the uniform did it. One of them asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, please. I'd like to talk with Mr. Morony."

"I'm awfully sorry, sir - Mr. Morony will be in the office again tomorrow. This is just our Sunday service."

"Hmm ... I apologize for my stubbornness, but there's something in my files which may indicate the reason for my asking - my name is Harry Potter."

The clerk had a feeling for hidden messages, or this was common among all Goblins, or the name Harry Potter had done the trick. He said, "Would you please come inside, Mr. Potter - it will take a moment, and I'll see what we can do."

Harry sat in one of these small rooms - according to his knowledge, it could as well have been that of the chairman of the board.

Ten minutes later, the door opened again, and another Goblin came in, showing another ageless face, lacking all insignia of rank. But as Harry had learned - this was a good sign.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," said the Goblin. "I'm glad to meet you after all this time ... My name is Dogan Defreak."

A nice little test. Harry passed it easily. "Mr. Defreak - I'm very grateful to meet you here, and today ... Technical services is indeed the proper keyword for my visit, except it has nothing to do with open-air services, more with inside services - very inside, sir, I may say."

"In which scope, Mr. Potter?"

"It's about a business in which I wasn't involved so far - except at the beginning, since the open-air services were contributing quite a lot to deliver the customers for the inside services ... Do I express myself clearly, Mr. Defreak?"

Could Goblins smile? Hard to guess. This one said, "I was able to follow you, Mr. Potter - not about all details, but I see the outline."

"I may have information about new customers, Mr. Defreak - although they may come as a surprise, while we may have reason to return the surprise ... Could be these customers are - er, I'm not fluent in bank terminology, but I think the term is high risk - or unreliable, I'm not sure."

"And what you recommend is to check them, Mr. Potter?"

"Well - yes, in a way, in particular since I've heard about a location which is excellently suited for checks ... It might need quite some help, and since this information is pretty new, I had no opportunity yet to look for help from our side, but this afternoon I'll check around."

Mr. Defreak savoured Harry's explanations for a moment. Then he asked, "These customers, Mr. Potter - who recommended us as the place where to look for that business?"

"Someone who took time and efforts to contact them, since they were quite reluctant to go public ... It's Sirius Black, chief of the Law Enforcement Squad and also my godfather."

Mr. Defreak thought again. "Mr. Potter, what you've told me so far makes clear this could be a very interesting business ... I have to contact some other people, and these people will probably have more questions, about details ... It will take me a day, maybe two - how urgent is this business?"

"These - er, clients expect to settle contracts nine days from now."

"Very good - so it's time enough to get all papers ready, and anything else that may help in the negotiations ... Mr. Potter, how can we contact you?"

"As this is highly confidential, I have reason not to show my face around here in London ... I remember a meeting in Hogwarts, that's why I hope the same meeting room is no inconvenience for your people, Mr. Defreak."

The Goblin's face produced two more creases. "Not at all, Mr. Potter - as you certainly know, Goblins appreciate such omens very much."

"Yes - numbers and rooms, isn't it? ... I'll inform the owner of this room, Mr. Defreak, and until then, we'll certainly know how we can contribute to this business from our side."

Yes, Goblins could smile. "Excellent, Mr. Potter ... It is always a pleasure to do business with you, whether by mail or in a direct conversation."

"Thank you ... I feel lucky to have met you, Mr. Defreak - after all, this particular branch of business is somewhat of a specialty, I could imagine."

"Yes, indeed - quite so, by all means, Mr. Potter."

"A last question, Mr. Defreak - I'd like to leave unnoticed, more upward than to the side ... If you could show me a place ..." Harry pointed to his Steel Wing, revealed a bit of a very fine cloak.

"Certainly, Mr. Potter - if you would follow me, please ... By the way, a very interesting broomstick, by the look of it ..."

Travelling back didn't turn out as nice as Harry's journey in the night. The daylight didn't help, offered considerably less bearing than city lights in the dark, and most of the time, it was raining. When arriving at Hogwarts, Harry felt like an ice sculpture.

So it was only natural that the first thing he had in mind was a shower, a hot water tub, and a steam room. However, in the Great Hall, he found people sitting at the remnants of a late lunch, among them Cho and Almyra.

Lunch - five minutes out of the shower, he would be hungry as a wolf, while the lunch would be gone. Eating now, he would start sneezing within a few hours.

He went to Cho. "You're the closest thing to a house elf around - please do me a favour, ask them for an extra late extra lunch ... I'll be back in twenty minutes."

He hurried away before Cho could start complaining about confusions between house elves, servants, and other personal relationships.

When returning from the recreation room, he was indeed hungry - Almyra might know how it felt for a wolf, at least he was as hungry as a young male human could be, and very expectant to see if Cho had done what he had asked her.

Cho and Almyra were still sitting there - no plates. Cho stared at him. "Come closer, young man, gimme a welcome that's worth the name, then bow and say, please."

He did.

She smiled. "Now turn and look what's there."

A plate, full to the extent, steaming.

"See - a magic word does miracles."

Nobody else was within earshot. Between bites, Harry reported his actions since yesterday afternoon.

Cho looked thoughtful. "I really would like to know whether I should be relieved or disappointed, not to be part of your planning ... What if Voldemort is one of them - shouldn't we fight him together?"

Harry shook his head. "Not in the literal sense ... And besides, I don't think he'll be around - this is a job for hired hands."

Almyra asked, "And why not me - or the squad members, except on their feet rather than on a Steel Wing?"

"That's no Battle of Hogwarts, they're not attacked, they're not involved - why should they help stop some criminals from storming a wizard prison?"

A good argument. He heard it again some time later, in Dumbledore's office and from the office's rightful owner.

"Hogwarts," explained the Headmaster, "has nothing to do with this plot, Harry. I'm not going to gather all teachers, or a selected number, to ask them for help ... I can understand your concern, I agree with you that some wizards should be involved, and of course I'll offer my office when the Goblins arrive - but otherwise, you're on your own."

Harry stared in consternation.

Dumbledore smiled. "What I'm not going to do either is to stop you - from talking with certain people, from jumping through portkey links in a few days ... Neither you nor anybody else - and I wouldn't be surprised if, about nine days from now, some teachers would be absent ... Although I dearly hope they'll be back the next day."

It wasn't exactly what Harry had expected, but Dumbledore was of course right. Only, it meant a lot of talking - always the same story.

He talked with Ron first - with him, the story fell shorter than for others.

"If I'm not supposed to fight," asked Ron, "then what exactly do you expect me to do?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe what you did during the Battle of Hogwarts ... At least, it's no mistake to get in touch with Goblins - they have a long memory, and they'll remember who was with them to defeat these people. Imagine - you want to go into politics later, and for all I know, it pays off well to be close with Goblins."

"But isn't it the other way around? I mean - isn't this a wizard problem, only we need their help to solve it?"

"Yes and no ... Sure, it's wizards who'll try to break in and release some prisoners, and the prisoners are wizards too - but the Goblins have a contract to guard the prison, and you know how seriously they take any kind of contract, whether business or bonds of honour."

"Yeah ..." Ron grinned. "I'm with you, Harry - and it doesn't even give me an ob on you."

"Of course it does."

Ron shook his head. "I'm doing it for someone else, except she's dead already."

Next on Harry's list stood Viktor. To shorten the procedure, Harry talked with Viktor and Hermione together.

Viktor's answer was simple and short. "Yes, Harry."

Hermione looked worried, naturally. "You could get killed."

Viktor smiled. "And you could die from a heart attack."

Harry said, "While on the subject - Hermione, did you read the *Daily Prophet* recently?"

"Only headlines ... Why?"

"There was an obituary - Rita Skeeter died in a car accident, and it was a hit-and-run."

"You mean, she was after this story?"

"That's what I think. When I met her, she had some hints in that direction."

Hermione looked more worried. "That's just the encouragement I need."

Viktor put his arm around her shoulder. "Harry is right, to tell it now - we have to be sure about whom we're dealing with ... And calm down, Bulgarians die at the age of hundred-and-five, in bed, while trying to do it a last time ..."

At least, Hermione no longer looked worried - with all that embarrassment in her face, there was just no room left.

When Harry came to Lupin, he found himself awaited with a smile. "In the short version," said his friend and teacher, "yes ... And now let's do it in the long version."

"How ..."

Lupin's smile turned to a grin. "Save it - it's a stupid question, isn't it?"

In a way it was, and Harry had only to add the details of his conversation with Dogan Defreak.

Kenzo was next, and the first of the two cases which felt more complicated than Ron, Viktor, or Lupin. After asking for a conversation, Harry reported all details of the story. Before he could come any further, Kenzo said, "I would feel privileged to participate in this action, Harry."

Harry bowed. "Thank you, *sensei* ... I'm deeply obligated for your help."

Kenzo smiled. "Not as much as you think, Harry ... First, I'm your *sensei* who wants to see his *sennin* in a real combat ... In addition, this is an opportunity to break the last barrier."

It gave Harry an opportunity to show his own skill in the art of silent questions.

"I'm still an outsider here, Harry ... It has nothing to do with prejudices, or any kind of hostility - only, not so long ago, all other teachers fought together in the Battle of Hogwarts. This forms a strong bond ... And now, this plan - I know that officially it has nothing to do with Hogwarts, only that all wizards come from here, except for your godfather, of course. It will form a smaller bond, and this time I'll be inside."

This done, there was only one person left in Harry's list.

Snape showed a thin smile. "I would have been very disappointed - if not to say angry, if you hadn't asked, Harry ... Yes, of course I'll come."

"Thank you, Prof ..."

Snape waited a moment, then said, "I still see a question in your face."

"Yes, Prof ... To be honest - you've been the last on my list, because ... well, although you knew more about it than the others, was it more difficult for me to ask you ..."

"As if I didn't know." Snape looked amused.

"Yes, somehow it's stupid, but ..."

"Remember what I said, Harry? ... We won't be buddies, so it's only natural ... But I'm still waiting for your question."

"Erm - I was wondering how it is for you - together with the others ..."

"You mean Sirius and Remus? ... Well, it won't surprise you to hear that, somewhere, there are still mixed feelings - not unlike your own, coming to me. Old habits die hard ... On the other side, the thought to be excluded would be unbearable - it's like a challenge, and I'm probably the only one who can fully appreciate what Sirius did ..."

Snape chuckled. "You see, Harry - this is really an opportunity for me, because - afterwards, I'd say Sirius and I are quids. That means - if I ever again feel like it, I can hit him on the nose."

## **17 - In the Pit**

The meeting with the Goblins, held in Dumbledore's office, took place two days later. In the first part, the Headmaster and Harry were the only wizards present, while Harry reported the details of what Sirius had told him.

His audience, aside from Dumbledore, consisted of two Goblins. One was Dogan Defreak, who introduced the other Goblin as Urion the Unexpected - commander of the Goblin Task Force, something like an equivalent to the Law Enforcement Squad.

Hearing the name, Harry felt tempted to grin, kept his face steady, though only almost.

Urion saw it, said, "This name is a kind of compromise, Mr. Potter ... Other people have other names for me - if they're polite, they call me Urion the Unorthodox, and if not, it's Urion the Undesirable."

Harry felt the need for some carefulness in his answer - he just couldn't figure out yet when Goblins were joking, or if they did at all. He said, "I'm not too familiar with Goblin habits regarding names, sir ... Although, from a Giant's perspective, it would sound like a serious insult."

"Oh, I don't mind ..." Urion looked at Harry without revealing more in his face. "You should hear my men - they have fun giving me still quite other names. My rule is simple - if they're up to the task, they can call me what they want. As a rule of courtesy, it has to start with a 'U'."

If Harry could trust his senses, still unexperienced toward non-humans, this Urion was teasing him with the full truth. Anyway, the Task commander sounded exactly like the kind of Goblin you'd feel grateful having at your side while awaiting a handful of evil wizards. Harry asked, "Then how should I address you, sir? ... Mr. Urion?"

"Just Urion ..." the Goblin smiled, "... with the addendum of your choice in your mind. For all I've heard, you're up to the task, Mr. Potter."

"In this case, er - Urion, for good balance, please call me Harry."

When Harry had finished his report, there was a short break in which he collected the other five wizards of his own task force. After all people had been introduced to each other, Urion explained his plan. He did so without ever asking for comments, alternatives, or something as absurd as a better idea, giving a first example how he had earned his collection of nicknames.

The Hogwarts team would reach the Middle Station - this was the official name for the location between the prison and the outside - through the portkey link used by the Goblins. This access path was not publicly available and totally independent from the official link through which the intruders would come. Until then, Goblin technicians would establish a link from Hogwarts to the Goblin residence with the gate to Middle Station. This link would be operative at the morning of this day, eight o'clock straight, for ten minutes.

The prisoner's release was scheduled for ten o'clock. From eight till ten, Urion expected the wizards to make themselves familiar with the environment, to find their positions, and to learn where to expect himself and his men - once the moment had come.

Ron's job was crucial. He should watch the scene and - at the proper moment - give the signal that activated the backjump gate. The wizards would pass through, doing outside whatever they had in mind - none of Urion's business, as he made clear.

Snape asked, "What will happen to the intruders, Urion?"

"The question is only relevant for those who'll surrender immediately - because the others will be dead."

Snape nodded, unflinchingly.

"All this will take place in Goblin territory - which means they'll fall under the Goblin jurisdiction." For Urion, the question seemed answered.

Harry said, "Mr. Black may have some questions he'd like to ask them."

Urion nodded. "No problem. He should write a list of all questions he has, we'll ask them in our own interrogations and return a protocol."

A protocol - certainly an edited one, restricted to the desired answers - as much as given - while leaving out other answers, as well as any other utterance or sound issued during the interrogation.

When the meeting was over and Harry headed downstairs together with his friend, Ron looked uneasy. "An hour ago," he said, "my job was that of a stand-by in case of emergency. And now - if I'm not careful, I'll blow half of the planning."

Harry almost giggled. "If you're not careful, you could be killed ... Otherwise, isn't it the same old story?"

Ron couldn't find any similarity whatever.

"Well - basically, you're moving figures, something you should be familiar with ... especially now, as a Quidditch captain."

Ron's laugh showed more than a bit nervousness. "Yeah - even if they complain, right?"

"Do some meditation," replied Harry. "Think it through, settle to the task, imagine the scenario ... That's what I'll do."

Ron nodded. A moment later, another thought crossed his mind. "This Urion - his kind of humour is a very special one, don't you think so?"

Harry told his friend about Urion's remarks regarding his nicknames. Hearing that, Ron didn't grin. "Urion the Unsettling - that's my choice."

"Quite the contrary - I feel much better now than before the meeting."

"What do you think will happen to the - er, survivors?"

"I don't know - but I guess the question is somehow irrelevant, because we won't see them again."

\* \* \*

During the days that followed, Harry took pains to read each issue of the *Daily Prophet* very carefully, especially in the advertisements section. He didn't really expect a message to be found there, didn't find any, in his opinion a sign more reassuring than the other way around.

As he didn't expect any other message either, it came as a real surprise when, some days after the meeting, a majestic owl swerved down to the breakfast table, presenting a large capsule.

After reading the first words, Harry stopped - this letter was too long for being read now and here. However, even these few words gave him a strange feeling, kept his mind busy until he found the time to read from the first to the last line.

Because this was a post-mortem.

*Dear Harry,*

*when you receive this letter, I will be dead and gone, because only in this case my lawyer is authorized to send it to you. At that time, it will be the most updated version since I will make sure to add significant results as soon as I have found them.*

*It might be that I died from a heart attack, but this is very unlikely. Even so, please be very suspicious whether it really was a natural cause which made my lawyer do his duty.*

*The reason for this letter is that I have taken a bite that might turn out a little too big to swallow. I realized this after I had started my investigations, and after it was too late to stop, if only for my personal pride. Nobody is going to frighten off Rita Skeeter - not as long as she is alive, that has always been my motto.*

*Of course, as soon as I detected what kind of hornet's nest I had stepped into, I was looking for some help. But where to find that? For a normal citizen, the police might have been the place to go. Only, either things were as they looked, then Sirius Black was definitely the wrong person to ask - or things were as I suspected, then Sirius Black was still more the wrong person to contact.*

*Our last conversation told me enough to know that you are involved in the plot. I don't know how deep, but if I had to guess, I would say as deep as can be. You did not contact me again, which for me was proof enough.*

*The following is a list of remarks, statements, and conclusions I found. Use them as well as you can, Harry, be it alone or with your godfather. If there is anyone around who could make the other side feel sorry about whatever they did to me, or will do to me, it is you and your friends. Maybe it is vanity to ask for revenge from the grave, but I was always prone to vanity, then why should I change now? So, please, Harry, give them hell.*

*But of course, I dearly hope you will never read this, and the following items will be found in my articles for the Daily Prophet.*

*Rita Skeeter*

### **Magical Tours**

*The mail service of this company has grown in size, and share of the complete mail market, after a period in which many owls did not arrive at their destinations. Today, owls are reliable as before. The period ended when a bomb attack hit the Magical Tours headquarters. This was soon before another accident killed four of their employees, including three clerks from the Hogsmeade office.*

*Harry, is there anything new to you? I guess you know why the owls stopped disappearing.*

### **Background**

*Magical Tours is owned by Amalgamated Entertainments, located in Nassau, Bahamas. Amalgamated Entertainments is owned by Amalgamated Enterprises, also there, and by East-West Funds and Trust Bank from Hongkong.*

*Scanning details about these companies is like digging in drift-sand.*

*The only facts I found are these:*

- The WWN is owned also by Amalgamated Enterprises, except for a small amount of shares in other hands*
- Our dear Minister of Magic is member of the WWN board of control*
- The head of the Department of Magical Transportation is also a member*
- Two judges in the Council of Magical Law are also members*

*I found no chance to check the other company's Board of Control.*

### **Belinda McGraw**

*It is strange how little efforts the police took to investigate this murder. At the time of her death, this woman was dealing with a case of a drunken husband who had beaten his wife, hardly something to be killed for. At least that is what the police said. On the other hand, when trying to reconstruct her last hours and days, I found some visits with the tax authorities. Tax fraud would sound more promising, especially when combining this with another source who told me that Wesley Warrington, the head of the Transportation Department, has some trouble with his tax declaration.*

*But the place where she was found seems significant - an owl shop.*

*When talking with her lawyer, I got some reaction when mentioning the name Gallagher, the former managing director of Magical Tours, who was killed in that accident. When talking with Mrs. Gallagher, and mentioning the name Belinda McGraw, our conversation came to a sudden and unexpected end.*

*I tried my luck with some bugging around, at the lawyer and at Mrs. Gallagher, but nothing.*

### **Wesley Warrington**

*This guy seems the most promising track to follow. His department, Transportation, fits so nicely with Magical Tours. Tax fraud might be the hook where to start, except that the tax authorities are always so reluctant at telling you anything. Let's give it a try.*

This was the last note Harry found in the collection. He wondered to which degree it could be rated as an indicator - quite a lot would depend on the accuracy in Rita Skeeter's updating of her own notes, and sending them to her lawyer. What Harry had seen in her apartment, during his visit, seemed hardly suited to qualify her as an orderly person - on the other side, Harry

was the first to agree that cleaning up and following promising tracks were totally different issues.

At any rate, Sirius would know better what to do. Using Ron's writer pen, Harry made three copies of the letter, not leaving out a single word.

For the first copy, he had Cho's father in mind. Using his own hand, he added a short comment from his side to this pile. After lunch, he walked the steps he knew better than any other - those from the Gryffindor table to the Ravenclaw table.

Watching his arrival, Cho turned to Almyra. "Sit straight - there's a VIP coming to visit us."

Almyra did as ordered. The effect looked quite interesting, as this stance emphasized a prominent part of her body. Harry grinned. "Normally, guards present guns - but you beat them easily, Al."

After a second, Almyra understood, at once falling back to a more leisurely position.

Cho had been quicker; but then, she had the advantage to see it more from Harry's angle. She eyed him from below. "Nobody would believe that this has been a polite, shy young student."

"Well - I, for my part, have developed further ..."

This one had been close, only that Harry, knowing what he was going to say, had been forewarned. Cho's fist struck empty air.

"I've got serious business!" he complained. "Can I sit down without risk to life and limb?"

"Don't tell me that's an argument for you staying off!"

The joke was so bad, raising a grimace in Almyra's face, that Harry felt little doubt - these days of waiting for the encounter in Middle Station stressed Cho's nerves at least as much as his own, probably more. He went around, sat down at Cho's side, planted a kiss on her mouth. "You know what I've promised, and you know I keep my promises, do you?"

She sighed. "Yes, that's what I'm telling myself all the time."

Remembering another scene, Harry grinned. "I mean, I'm not a Bulgarian, but even so ..."

Of course, neither Cho nor Almyra understood what he was talking about. Harry checked around, whispered, "This is an insider joke, all right?"

At this point, Cho would have promised everything, as long as Harry was going to talk. So he told them the scene with Viktor and Hermione, earning laughter and a better mood than moments before. Using the momentum, he said, "Well, then ... I've got a letter - this is a copy I made. I think you two should read it, and then," he looked at Cho, "I'd like to send this copy to your father. There are a few details he should know."

Two heads were bending over the parchment - for a short moment. Then, almost simultaneously, two faces came up, looking at Harry in consternation, eyes widening.

Only then, he realized - Rita Skeeter's death had been unknown to Cho and Almyra until this moment. "Oh, sh... I'm sorry, I forgot that I hadn't told you about it."

Cho inhaled deeply. "Harry - please prepare yourself better than that for this encounter."

He quoted the obituary in the *Daily Prophet*, almost literally.

Cho did a short calculation with dates before reading further. Then she looked up. "What are you going to do with that?"

"A copy for your father, another one for Sirius, another one for Dumbledore ... That's all so far - I wouldn't know where to start with this information."

Almyra stood up, took the parchments. "Something to do for Hedwig - and even with the Changs as destination. I'll tell her to make a good impression."

Harry grinned. "Tell her to sit straight."

Almyra's fist came totally unexpected, hitting him just under the collarbone.

"Ouch - why do you hit me?? These were Cho's words, not mine."

"Sure, but she addressed me, not Hedwig."

It reminded him of the old wisdom - don't joke about owls with Almyra around.

The Headmaster read his copy carefully, then looked up. "Poor Rita - she deserved better ... At any rate, Harry - don't let your cool judgement suffer from this plea out of the grave. It's so typical Rita - dramatic till the end, and pity those who stand in the way."

"No, Professor." Harry smiled, more sadly than joyfully. "But I'd like to know what you think of these WWN board members."

The WWN was the *Wizarding Wireless Network* - the main radio station of the wizarding world.

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "The fact alone doesn't tell you anything, Harry - more often than not, a board of control is just a collection of nice jobs, for good money and nothing to do, other than getting rid of some salmon and champagne twice a year ... Only in conjunction with other facts, this might have a meaning. For example, if one of them would put in his political weight in favour of some law to the benefit of *Magical Tours* ..."

Harry was reminded of his conversation with Mr. Chang.

"... then you could see a pattern worth following. The WWN," grinned Dumbledore, "isn't exactly famous for an unbiased journalism or a balanced information service - you shouldn't hold your breath while waiting for a critical commentary from them ... Quite in contrast to the *Daily Prophet* which is always ready to destroy a political career."

A thought struck Harry. "Then maybe I should send a copy to the *Daily Prophet* people."

The Headmaster thought it over. "Yes, that's a good idea - provided it's properly timed, and provided it's sent to the right person ..." He nodded. "Harry - leave it to me - I know someone, and I'll contact him as soon as this story is over and you'll be back from Middle Station ... Even if there's nothing behind it, this will be good ammunition to help Sirius."

Harry didn't understand.

"As soon as he goes public with this story, some people will ask for his head - politically speaking. Then it will be very helpful to launch another press campaign - even if it's just smoke."

Of course - people would remember the old saying that if there's smoke, somewhere there must be fire. And Harry wondered if indeed there was fire somewhere. Rita Skeeter had written down only facts - not the feelings of an experienced journalist, hunting down a track, guided by a nose good enough for sniffing a scandal in a bed of roses.

\* \* \*

It could have been a normal school day in Hogwarts. Awakening almost at the usual time, fight for a shower as usual, other students walking around - couldn't these sleepwalkers watch their step? Ron tense, Seamus grumpy, Dean late, then Harry was done in his dormitory, went down for breakfast.

The Great Hall looked perfectly normal, not even the teachers were sitting other than usual. The ordinary scene felt helpful, for example when trying to eat something.

Harry chewed slowly, turned to Ron who wasn't touching any food. "In two hours, you'll be detected by your groaning stomach."

"I cannot eat."

Hermione was fixing sandwiches like a machine. She looked up. "These are for Viktor - you should do the same for yourself, Ron."

Ron obeyed, although looking with disgust at the slices he was preparing.

None of the other students around took notice. Early morning on a Wednesday - Harry wondered if anyone would have noticed him in a Goblin battle dress. He had decided to go without Nagini, had found no scenario in which his snake would be of help. This was about fighting, not about scanning around, certainly not about interrogating prisoners. But even with Nagini around his body, nobody would have asked a question.

Hermione finished her work, stood up to take her parcel to Viktor. It seemed quite large, could this tiny Bulgarian really eat that many sandwiches in such a short time?

Harry marched to the Ravenclaw table, looked at Cho, at Almyra. "You okay?"

Cho had tension in her face. "And you?"

"I'm better off - I don't have to sit around here, biting my nails."

"I'm not biting my nails!"

"No," confirmed Almyra, "she's using her hair for that ... Pity, mine's too short for this purpose."

"Bite hers, too."

Cho could giggle. "That would be a spectacular view."

Harry bent closer to kiss her, and to whisper, "Only in classes."

Cho gasped a bit, and Almyra had something she might try figuring out, rather than torturing herself with pictures of a fighting scene in some place called Middle Station. Harry walked to the staircase - the Goblins had installed the gate upstairs, at the tower platform.

Five minutes until eight o'clock. Six people waiting, then five of them staring in disbelief as Viktor unwrapped the first sandwich, ate it with perfect calmness.

Lupin looked admiring. "I wish I could do that."

Viktor offered the parcel. "Want some?"

Lupin's head was shaking.

Eight o'clock. The gate gave no sign, no sound. Ron made a step. "Let's see ..." Next instant, he was gone.

Viktor was closest, disappeared through the gate. Lupin came next, then it was Harry's turn.

A windowless room, dimly lit. A half circle of Goblin warriors, crossbows ready, about twenty feet apart. A gesture sent Harry to a corner where Ron, Viktor, and Lupin stood waiting. He joined them, watched the Goblins while Snape and Kenzo arrived. This Urion didn't take chances, none at all.

Urion came over. "That's it?"

Ron answered. "Yes."

"Then we'll switch off the gate. Wait here."

A minute later, the Task commander was back. "I'll show you the location." He marched ahead without waiting for an answer.

Middle Station looked like an abandoned mine, and Urion confirmed it was. All rooms, halls, and corridors they saw were inside, daylight only from holes high above, otherwise lamps or torches. It could have been anywhere on earth, maybe with the exception of extremely hot or cold zones. Maybe an island, maybe in the middle of Asia or Africa - from what they could see, it was impossible to judge.

Ron's guess was Africa. The mine had yielded some metal, certainly not coal - the environment too clean for that. And if metal, the most likely candidate for a Goblin mine was

of course gold, and for this reason, Ron believed they were somewhere in Africa - most of today's gold mines could be found there.

It didn't play a role. Important was only the topology between the room where the intruders would appear, along a hall with two traffic lanes, separated by a low barrier, to the room with the gate that connected to the real prison - when activated, that was, which definitely would not happen today.

The two-lane hall showed many holes in the walls, exits to other rooms, or entrances to tunnels into the mountain. One of them, very close to the first gate, offered a short-cut to the room in which the prisoner would wait, and from there to the exit gate.

This short-cut was new, existed only since yesterday, would be closed again tomorrow. It enabled the wizard crew to guard the end of the trail and then, after the Goblins had taken care of the intruders, to reach the exit gate quickly in order to jump out, hopefully surprising those waiting outside.

Urion placed his men in the two-lane hall, hidden behind the barrier, with additional warriors in every exit toward other rooms. It was a perfect match of weapons and battleground, as Harry recognized - in a narrow room, these crossbows would be more of a burden than a help, while in this spacious hall, across a distance of thirty feet or more, they were the weapons of choice. Short of a wand, of course, or maybe not even that. If the wand wasn't ready to point and shoot, you had no chance against a crossbow already in aiming position.

Harry inspected one of these darts. They showed little resemblance to an arrow, looked more like a miniature harpy, thick and heavy. And these crossbows were twin models, which of course required using the triggers in the proper sequence. Well, none of these Goblins looked as if they would confuse them in the heat of the fight.

Scanning the location again, Harry tried to imagine how the intruders would behave. This traffic hall looked perfectly normal, not at all like a trap - only that every military leader with the smallest sense of tactics would automatically stretch his men in a long line, simply by reflex.

And suddenly Harry knew that Sirius would have no chance for jumping back in first position, or if so, only because the fight was already over. Sirius would be in front of the line, or in second position, at any rate closely surrounded by some others. No matter how much they trusted him, this would be an automatic precaution.

Harry reached Ron. "I'll be at the other end, where Urion's going to stop them. Don't wait for me if I'm not back in time."

"Why? ... What's on your mind?"

"Sirius will be in front, or almost - the others will make sure of that. And I'm here to protect him."

"That's what I like - last minute changes!"

Kenzo had listened, turned to Ron. "Ha-ri is right ... And besides - only the first three people in the backjump gate are relevant - the others will be too late, this way or the other."

Harry marched to the Goblins commander, told him about his decision.

Urion's face didn't move. "You keep hidden until you see my men get up, Harry."

Urion didn't ask if this was clear, didn't promise anything in case Harry wasn't following the order. It seemed a very efficient way to give a command - provided you had such a face and such a reputation. He didn't even wait to see Harry's nod.

Nine-forty. Still a bit more than a quarter of an hour.

Ten o'clock. Silence around.

Hidden behind the balustrade, the closest Goblin in his view, Harry heard noises from the other end. Then steps - this hall carried each sound.

Voices. One of them could have been Sirius', Harry wasn't sure.

More steps, coming closer. Only steps, no words.

For him, the closest steps sounded as if someone was only feet away, would bend over the balustrade any moment now ... He saw the Goblin in his view get up, head, arms, crossbow appearing simultaneously.

"DON'T MOVE!"

The command came from all sides. Only Urion's voice, however sent through a magiphone, coming out of loudspeakers along the hall.

With his first glance, Harry saw a line of figures, thirty feet from one to the next, about fifteen altogether.

Some of them found the presence of mind to freeze in mid-step. The others, whether from surprise or in an attempt to react, made a last movement. They died within the next second, without any exception.

Sirius was on top, as expected. Immediately behind him stood another man who hadn't moved in this first instant, who moved now, his arm around Sirius' throat, stepping backward, toward the closest hole, using Sirius as cover ...

The jumping artist.

The two figures had almost reached the hole. Sirius made an attempt - not to free himself, only to bend down, to expose the man behind him to some shot, or spell.

The movement never finished, however it was probably this manoeuver which saved Sirius from worse. Harry saw the jump artist move, saw his godfather collapse, then the other man disappeared in the hole, a split second before some darts hit the stone at this spot, bouncing off with a nasty twang.

Harry reached Sirius' motionless body first. What he sensed was good enough to exhale deeply - Sirius alive, and unless the other man had used some potion, he would be okay in a while. While a potion seemed very unlikely - not from this jump artist.

Urion arrived, made his own test with a long finger touching for Sirius' pulse, nodded. "He's alive."

Harry checked around, saw half a dozen survivors, each of them faced by two or more Goblins. He turned to Urion. "What about the one who escaped?"

"Escaped? ... These tunnels are a maze, Harry. Maybe he'll find his way back - and then, we'll await him here in this hall."

"You're not going to pursue him, Urion?"

"No ... It's a death trap."

"Not for me." Harry started to walk toward the tunnel entrance.

"Harry!" Urion came to him. "He has all advantages on his side. He'll kill you."

Harry shook his head. "I have *haragei*, and I have *getsumai no michi* ... The darkness is an advantage for me."

"Whatever it is you're talking about - what if the other has the same?"

"That's impossible, Urion - in this case, he would have sensed your men in the first second, and this fight would have turned out differently."

Discussions with Urion were pretty short. "We'll wait for you until tomorrow evening, Harry. If you didn't come out until then, I'd say you'll stay inside."

Harry walked into the tunnel, his new senses fully activated. When the last light from outside had faded, it felt even simpler. His eyes saw nothing, his *getsumai no michi* provided a clear image of the structure around him, and his *haragei* sensed ahead, scanning for a sign of the jump artist.

The first three hundred yards went straight into the mountain, sloping deeper. Dry ground, Harry could walk almost noiselessly, although he had no doubt that anyone waiting could hear him well.

He reached a crossing, took his time to sense around. It was no clear echo what he felt, just a feeling the tunnel to the right would be more promising than the others - if promising was the right term.

The ground was level now. The tunnel went as straight as the first - these miners apparently had an aversion against curves, used crossings and side tunnels instead.

At the next crossing, Harry sensed again, felt no echo. He waited a minute, still not getting any bearing from his *haragei*.

What now?

A moment later, he had an idea. If these tunnels were as straight as he expected ...

With his eyes closed, he sent the first ball of firework into the tunnel ahead, using the full power of his magic, focused through his wand. The ball shot off like from a cannon, burst into sparkles far away. Seen through *getsumai no michi*, it was quite unspectacular.

The second ball shot into the right tunnel, raising a sharp, clear twist in his *haragai*.

Harry walked forward, slowly, carefully. Reaching the next crossing, he could sense his opponent through the leftside tunnel.

He entered the tunnel, taking his time for every step. The other man's echo didn't fade, was gradually growing stronger. So the man was waiting for him - probably somewhere at the next crossing.

After some more steps, Harry's *getsumai no michi* revealed the position where the tunnel opened into the crossing, a bit wider than the previous ones, about fifty yards ahead.

He stopped.

The jump artist would wait around the corner. He would wait until Harry came out of the tunnel, reached the opening, and then he would attack. As simple as that, and as efficient. Here, deep down in the mountain, in these narrow tunnels, *aikido* ranked at least on a par with magic, probably better.

For the attack itself, that was. Not for ...

Harry stepped forward, not even trying to avoid noises. It was impossible anyway.

Yards before the opening, eyes closed, he sent his surprise, another ball of fireworks, slower but bigger, he himself accelerating, flying through the exit, into the bursting rainbow, touching ground, rolling around - there was no ground, only under the lower part of his body, another rolling, away from the hole, away from the something that came flying through the air, landing on the spot where his torso had been a split second before, only this spot was empty now, offered no ground either, no hold for the feet ...

The man's legs disappeared in the hole, then the lower part of his body - then it stopped, the arms outstretched, clasping a dent in the ground, holding only just ...

Harry could feel how the man relaxed a bit. Apparently, his feet had found some kind of hold in this hole - maybe an air shaft for deeper levels, certainly not wide enough for a transportation cabin, however too wide for climbing in a mountain climber's style.

"Would you lend me a hand? ... It's a bit difficult to come out here."

Could the man see him? Most unlikely, but at least, he could sense him somehow. Maybe *haragei* too, enough for close distances. Harry could sense no desperation in his opponent, only a strong awareness - reason enough to be extremely careful.

"There's no hurry," he said. "You've caught yourself."

"It feels a bit unsecure. My stand is pretty small, and no hard rock."

"This may speed up your answers, since I have a few questions ... Tell me something about Belinda McGraw."

"Who's that?"

Was this a genuine question? An attempt to gain time? Except the man had no time - if his description had been true. "The police woman."

"Oh - her ... What do you want to know?"

"Who killed her?"

"Some of us."

Not even an attempt to deny. Well, maybe it didn't make sense here, in this situation, only that this behaviour would have suited better with the man safely on the ground and Harry in the hole ...

"And you've been one of them?"

"Sure."

"How was it done?"

"What crazy question is this? ... We surprised her and did her off, quick and clean ... Or would you like to hear that we tortured her first, or raped her, or what?"

The words sounded angrier than what Harry could feel - a pretense of hurt pride from a professional killer, and at the same time a well-calculated attempt to unsettle him, maybe to bring him within reach of these skilled arms ...

"Why?"

"Guess what! ... We had orders, that's why."

"From whom?"

"As if the name would tell you anything ... Help me out, then I'll guide you to the house."

Yeah, certainly. "Tell me about Rita Skeeter."

"Who's that?"

"The *Daily Prophet* woman."

"Never heard of ... How was she killed?"

"In a car accident."

"Then it should look like an accident. Not my job - because my cases leave no question about whether this ..."

Nothing in Harry's *haragei* had given him a warning of this sudden attack in mid-sentence, probably because this jump-artist had mastered *jaho*, the art of hiding intentions ... The attack would have been successful, if not for Harry's own *getsumai no michi*, which presented the scene toward him like illuminated by a weak moon, colourless but with clear contours - of arms tensing, of a body coming up, reaching the edge of the air shaft, about to roll sideways ...

"STUPEFY!"

The body lost all tension, slumped back. Without any attempt to grab for something, the hands shifted over the ground, followed the arms that were pushed upward from the edge, followed the body down, down, down ...

Harry felt a sharp twist in his mind, then emptiness.

Seconds later, a faint sound reached his ears.

He sat motionless for a while, until his breath had steadied to a calm and regular rhythm. Then his mind reconstructed every step he'd made to this opening, every turn, remembered distances, slopes, every detail.

This done, he sensed around. Which had been the tunnel of his arrival?

He wasn't sure.

Again, he went through his memory of the short fight, his jump out of the tunnel into the opening. He felt ready to exclude one of the four tunnels, the three others seemed equally good candidates.

He took the first.

When he thought that now a crossing should appear, there was none. Walking still further, he found a road fork. Definitely the wrong tunnel.

Back to the opening, taking the next tunnel to the right.

About hundred yards into this one, he found an opening to a side room, was ready to swear this opening hadn't been there on his way inside.

Back to the opening, taking the next tunnel to the right, walking slowly, to get the same feeling of time as before.

He reached a crossing, about the proper distance. If his reconstruction was correct, the tunnel to the right was leading outside.

Another crossing, after some time in which he had lost any memory how long he had walked while searching for the man.

If he was on the right track, here he had to turn left. And if not - he would find back to the opening.

Next crossing, left again.

The ground was no longer level, sloped upward considerably. Harry walked faster, feeling confident. Then he saw a tiny dot of light, growing quickly. Just in time, he became aware of what to expect in the two-lane hall. Reaching the exit, he called, "It's me - Harry."

Even so, three crossbows were aiming at him when he came out. A Goblin motioned him to step aside, checked into the tunnel, and only then, when it was clear that Harry wasn't followed by someone else, that he wasn't under some Imperius curse, the crossbows went down.

Along the hall, Harry could see Goblin warriors, waiting around holes. Next moment, Urion came over. "Did you find him, Harry?"

"Yes, Urion ... He's dead - went down an air shaft."

"And what makes you sure he won't come up again?"

"*Haragei* ... I could feel the moment when he - died."

A satisfied Goblin didn't look much different from an angry one, or maybe this was Urion's specialty. "Good ... So we're done here." And suddenly, although not losing his friendliness, the Task Force commander had just one interest - to get Harry and Ron, who waited at the exit gate, out of this Goblin territory.

Ron was looking bad enough to make Harry's heart fail a beat. "What's wrong?" Harry asked. "How's Sirius?"

Ron's answer came in a croaky voice, like from a mouth too dry for speaking properly. "Cchh's okay ... Am I glad to see you again, Harry - the last ten minutes, I was trying to figure out how ..."

Only now, Harry realized that he had spent more than an hour in this maze of tunnels. He shook his head. "And for a moment, I thought ... Stop worrying - I'm alive, and the other one's dead."

Ron wanted to know more, except that Urion had a way of standing around, making clear that if they had nothing to do, they might find another place for that.

Harry asked, "What's waiting at the other side?"

"Good question."

"Didn't you agree on something that one of them will come back to inform you how it went?"

Ron shot an angry glance in the direction of the Goblin. "Basically yes, except that it didn't work - they stopped the entry link."

Urion seemed unable to show a teasing expression, while his voice didn't suffer from such a shortcoming. "Shall I jump out first?"

Harry bowed. "It was a pleasure working with you, Urion the Unforgettable ... Have a good time." In the last instant before jumping through, he saw an appreciating smile. After all, this Goblin *had* a mimikry, lacked only some interest in using it most of the time.

Coming out, Harry found himself in another windowless room, except this time with painted walls, light, obviously inside a normal building. From one corner was Kenzo's wand pointing at him, from another that of Snape.

"It's okay - he's dead." Harry stepped forward, an instant before being overrun by Ron who was coming through.

Kenzo and Snape came up, reached him, almost synchronously. "How?"

"He fell down an air shaft, in an attempt to catch me ... He was stupefied when he fell." Toward Kenzo, Harry added, "He had mastered *jaho, sensei* ... It was *getsumai no michi* that saved me."

Snape examined him. "Do you feel all right, Harry?"

"I wasn't - oh ..." Only now, Harry understood the question. "Yes, Prof - he was one of those who murdered Belinda McGraw." He described the scene in the opening. Then it was his turn to ask questions. "Where are we?"

"High security section in a ministry building." It was Snape who answered, while pressing a button.

A guard appeared, eyed through the steel bars, looking sullen. "Wait here - I have to ask Mr. Black."

The man turned, hadn't made the first step yet when a faint click could be heard and then, a split second later, the door banged against the wall.

As furious as Harry felt - it hadn't been him. He looked at Snape, only Snape was looking back in astonishment. Harry turned to Kenzo. "You??"

The *sensei* smiled. "Shigura was also *my sensei*, Ha-ri."

They passed the guard, who seemed to shrink in place, an expression of horror in his face, not making any attempt to stop them. Two staircases upward, Harry found his orientation, marched ahead toward Sirius' office.

The two-legged dragon in the anteroom found no time to stop them, or to ask any question, in particular since the door to Sirius' office stood open, showing two figures, at some time known under the names Padfoot and Moony.

Sirius looked up, presenting an expression not unlike the one Harry had seen in Ron's face. Next moment, he felt grabbed by his shoulders, shaken, pushed, hugged, all at the same time.

"Harry, you damned fool - what do you think, going in there? ... You could ..."

Harry hugged back. "But I'm not ... What about you?"

Sirius touched his neck. "That guy had more in mind - I'm lucky he didn't find the time ... Where is he now?"

"Somewhere deep in a mine - very deep, I'd say ... But first, we had a conversation." Harry gave another summary of the scene in the mine.

Sirius kept silent still a moment after Harry had finished. Then he looked around. "I owe one of you more than the other ..."

Snape grinned. "Then it's a spiral, Sirius."

"Huh? ... Yes, it is, and for you, Severus, it doesn't end yet because I need you this afternoon - you and Harry ... For the others - you'll hear from me, but for now I'd say get back to Hogwarts and tell the others it's over."

Harry turned to Ron. "Tell Cho I'm fine ... And send the original of Rita's letter here to Sirius' office, please - you'll find it in my drawer, but don't use portkey mail ... And please talk with Dumbledore and tell him he may pull his strings with the *Daily Prophet*."

"When can we expect you back, Harry?"

"Dunno ... I guess it'll be late - probably not before tomorrow morning."

"Okay - see you." Ron left.

Then Sirius told Harry and Snape what he had in mind. He would hold an Enforcement Squad meeting at three o'clock, with as many squad members as he could gather, to announce the news, to present his contact person and his anchor man as proof, and "to provide a fait accompli," as he said. According to his words, Sirius seemed fully aware that his political head was even more at risk than his real one in the two-lane hall.

Until then, as he suggested, Harry and Snape could hardly do better than getting lost, preferably into a fancy restaurant, which could only imply something *not* close to the ministry.

Sirius tried to pass a money bag to Harry, only Snape was quicker. "That's my only opportunity to treat a Potter - and to ask him some questions."

Lunching with Snape, who knew exactly where to find a quiet place with first-rate food - this experience struck Harry as unique as the first half of this day.

Before Snape could start with his own questions, Harry asked about the events in the exit gate. As he learned, the scene there had been quite unremarkable - from Snape's perspective. When Snape came through, after Kenzo and Lupin, he found two figures slumped down, his

colleagues over them, and the released prisoner who didn't know what to think, looking reasonably scared.

Then it was Snape's turn. "Harry - I have just three simple questions ... What is *haragei*? ... What is *getsumai no michi*? ... How did Kenzo open this door?"

Harry chuckled, stopped quickly because he didn't want to appear impolite toward a combat companion, and started to explain. Needless to say, Snape had many more questions. They had reached dessert when Snape asked, "Could you have opened that door - without using your wand, I mean?"

"Yes - except not as cool-minded as Kenzo ... My *sensei* in Japan made me do it - I was furious enough so it worked."

Harry felt relieved when Snape didn't ask what had made him so furious. Instead, the teacher seemed more interested in the topic of magic without a wand, asked Harry whether he had trained this more.

"Not systematically ... You know, it's something like using the stairs if there's an elevator. But I know I can do it - and that's the essential point. It's just a question of belief."

"So if I believe strongly enough, I can do it by myself?"

"Yes ..." Harry thought a moment, then said, "This *strongly enough* - somehow it sounds wrong, Prof. I mean, for the first time, you have to be pushed hard to overcome your doubts. This kind of belief isn't strong or weak - it's just belief."

"Would it work for Unforgivable Curses too?"

"I didn't try them yet." Looking around, Harry grinned. "Shall I?"

"Erm - let's wait till we're back in Hogwarts - after all, we have to hold the school's reputation in public."

Snape was silent for a moment before he came up with his last question. "Harry - you used the stupefying spell for this man in the mine, right?"

"Yes ... Why?"

"Well - I was wondering if you would use the Killing Curse."

Harry shook his head. "Certainly not - I wasn't finished yet with my questions when the attack came - only he went down too fast." Seeing Snape's expression, he recognized the question's full extent. "Oh - you mean ... Well, I met this man in an office in the *Magical Tours* headquarters, and at that time, he'd been one movement short of hearing it from me - only the movement didn't come."

"So he believed you."

"Yes ... I said something like, 'If you want to live, sit down,' and he did."

Snape nodded. "That answers my question, Harry."

They still had an hour to kill, agreed to split now and to meet again in Sirius' office. Harry used the time for a leisurely walk through shops. Passing Flourish and Blotts, he remembered something, went inside.

An elderly witch offered her help.

"Yes, ma'am ... Do you have a book called Kamasutra?"

He couldn't decipher the glance she gave him, before disappearing in some room, coming back shortly afterwards with an ordinary-looking book, quite thick. "This is the standard edition," she explained. "There is also a collector's edition, with gold print and illustrations, only we don't have it in store."

"Well - I think I'll try this one. I mean, there's no need for gold print, and if I won't manage without the illustrations, I'll come back to order the other one."

"Er - yes, sir, probably so."

On his way back to the ministry, Harry was wondering what kind of esoteric art this book might present. That witch really had shown a strange expression.

The hall was filled with more than hundred people - mostly men, a few women. Sirius moved behind the speaker's desk, grabbed the magiphone. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "members of the Law Enforcement Squad - this morning, a police action ended successfully which was started a few months ago, more exactly the day our late colleague Belinda McGraw was found dead ... During these months, I took over the role of an undercover agent, to get in touch with the other side."

Stunned silence in the hall.

"I did so without informing anyone else in the squad. My anchor man was Professor Severus Snape, teacher at Hogwarts ... Professor Snape and I know each other since our days as Hogwarts students ... And the contact man between me and Professor Snape was Mr. Potter, student in Hogwarts and known to me since birth."

Watching the audience, Harry saw heads turning toward him and Snape, then back to Sirius. Even after these few words, he could recognize very different emotions in the hall - just by looking into their faces, without even using *haragei*.

"The action ended this morning, when a group of sixteen assailants, under my guidance, broke into the connection to the wizard prison, planning to liberate some prisoners, or maybe all of them. They were expected by united forces of Goblins and wizards ... Six of them survived. These six are going to face Goblin jurisdiction."

A tumult broke out, with shouts of excitement or anger, with heated discussions along the rows.

Sirius stood calmly, waiting until the uproar had settled. Then he explained the background of the story - up to some point, staying vague about some critical details. He also listed the

*favours* he had done to the other side while trying to gain their confidence, raising some additional protests.

"I'm fully aware," Sirius called, "that I have violated certain rules in the course of this action. For this, I'll stand an inquiry in due time ... And of course, it's not by coincidence that I was busy damaging my reputation as a respectable citizen - even if this reputation's been a pretty short one then."

Some squad members laughed, looking happy - obviously those Sirius would have listed as reliable, while others showed an expression like hunted animals.

"No matter what people think of me - we've found the murderer of Belinda McGraw, and we have a witness for the confession."

Another tumult, shouts of bravo and hooray. Someone called, "Where's the murderer now?"

Sirius looked grim. "Maybe in Heaven, although I have my doubts."

It could have been frightening, seeing satisfaction and joy about a killed person in these faces. However, Harry didn't feel much different, certainly not the sadness he had felt after the Battle of Hogwarts.

"In the course of this action," continued Sirius, "I came to learn about certain squad members and their involvement with the wrong side of the street. Unfortunately, I have proof that these colleagues are *not* running an undercover stunt - quite the opposite. Their number is a bit high for my taste ... I've split them into two groups - minor cases and severe cases. The minor cases will find a letter in their box, with an invitation to an inquiry. From the others, I want to see their badges here on this table, within the next five minutes! ... I'm talking about the following squad members - Argyll - Amerill - Denbroke ..." Sirius listed twelve names, then looked up, staring into the audience.

Someone stood up, shouted, "You cannot do that!"

"So?" Sirius stared back. "I'm squad chief, and I can."

"This you've been the longest time!"

"Maybe so, but still I am ... Therefore, *Mister* Lampart, you've heard my order."

Harry counted ten squad members, coming forward to deliver a badge, or to hammer it down on the desk. The faces reminded him of the session after the Battle of Hogwarts, when interrogating the dark wizards.

Sirius was up again. "I'm going to deliver written reports about these twelve cases, although it'll take me a day or so to have them finished - but you can believe me, I know what I'm doing, and I know why I'm doing it here, in full public ... And now, for the next thirty minutes, you have the opportunity to interview my own witnesses - in the style of a press conference, which means you may not get every answer you want to hear."

The first questions dealt with the events of this morning. People wanted to know which other wizards were involved, only Snape kept vague, referring to *friends* who preferred not to

appear in public. Then, of course, the questions concentrated on the man who supposedly had murdered Belinda McGraw, alone or together with others.

Sirius glanced at Harry. "Give them a summary - if it's okay for you."

Harry nodded, looking into the audience. "This man - even now, I don't know his name. I call him the *jump artist* because he's - was very skilled in combat without weapons. I met him twice before this day - both times, he tried to attack me ..."

Someone called, "Wasn't he good enough, or are you some kind of super wizard?"

Harry ignored the question. "Today, he could run into a tunnel - all this took place in an old mine. The Goblins wanted to wait him out, but I went after him ... Well, I found him, and talked with him, and he admitted that he was one of those who killed Belinda McGraw, after getting an order from some bosses. When I asked him for another case, he said that wasn't his work ..."

Someone asked, "Which other case?"

It was Sirius who answered. "No comment ... Go ahead, Harry."

"And at that moment, he tried another attack - that's why I couldn't ask more, because all this took place at an air shaft, and he fell down and was dead."

"Fell down? ... By accident, huh?"

"Yes," replied Harry. "I wasn't finished with my questions, only he made it impossible to do anything else."

Another squad member stood up. "Mr. Potter, can you tell me which legal authority gave you the right to be there and to kill a man?"

Sounds of protest in the audience.

Sirius tried to answer, but Harry stopped him. "What I can tell you is that all this took place in Goblin territory, and that the Goblins had no objections seeing me there ... The contracts between the Goblins and myself are of private nature."

"Then maybe you have invented all this - nice story, a man without a name, and ..."

The remark drowned in a storm of protest and indignation. Nonetheless, it gave a first example of what might lie ahead for Sirius in the next days.

When the hall was halfway quiet again, the questions turned to the months before. The same squad member came up again. "Mr. Black, how come you didn't use other squad members to help you?"

"Very simple," replied Sirius, "I felt better with these people." He pointed at Snape and Harry.

"Professor Snape, can you explain to us why Mr. Black selected you - a teacher - as his anchor man?"

Snape smiled politely. "Yes."

After a moment of expectant silence, laughter could be heard. But the man didn't give up. "Professor Snape, do you have any qualification for this role?"

Snape's expression didn't change. "Yes."

"Would you please tell us what kind of qualification this is, and when or where you gained it?"

"No."

The man turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, would you please tell us why Mr. Black selected you, a student, as his contact man?"

"Sure - I know him, and I know Professor Snape, so I was the natural choice."

Other members shouted to drop it - wasn't it obvious that there won't be a more informative answer? And next moment, another man had the attention of the audience. "Mr. Potter, your name is well known in the context of Lord Voldemort - and now you appear again in this story where some people try to get dark wizards out of the prison ... That's hardly a coincidence, is it?"

Harry glanced at Sirius, saw him nod, and said, "No, sir, it's not ... There's no evidence, so your guess is as good as mine, but you're right - I believe Voldemort can be found somewhere in the background ... By the way, he's no lord - not by blood, not by title, and certainly not by character."

His last remark caused quite an applause, and Sirius took the opportunity to end the interview.

With the meeting done, Snape had only one interest - returning to Hogwarts as soon as possible. He said goodbye and left, dismissing Sirius' offer to escort him outside.

Harry followed his godfather to Sirius' office. Now that the official part was over, they would have an opportunity for discussing the events more privately, in particular the details in Rita Skeeter's letter. When passing the ante-room, the secretary looked at Sirius and said, "You have a visitor, Mr. Black ... She's waiting in your office."

Sirius stared at her. "Did it ever cross your mind that there may be confidential papers lying around?"

The woman looked indignant. "There's no room here for people to wait ... And she seemed to know you."

Within the woman's earshot, and purposeful so, Harry said to Sirius, "You need a new reputation, a new secretary, and a new guard for the prison gate - that guy was so convincing ..." He stopped, seeing which *she* was waiting inside ... Cho.

She smiled, stood up, bowed. "Chinese mail is evel so fast - lettet fol you, sil." Then she reached into a large bag and produced a thin pile of sheets - Rita Skeeter's letter.

Sirius smiled back, lost his smile quickly while reading the letter. In the meantime, Cho was busy assuring Harry how glad she was to see him, see him alive and well, and to be here. She invested a bit more than words for that.

Sirius looked up. "Harry, this letter ..."

Harry stopped him, gesturing through the room as well as toward his ears.

"No, it's okay - I had a team here to clean up this room ... When did you get this letter?"

Harry explained how it had arrived, and what he had done since then, giving copies to Mr. Chang and Dumbledore. He also described what the Headmaster had in mind with his contact to the *Daily Prophet*.

Sirius nodded. "Good idea ... Well, Harry - what I still need from you is a written and signed statement about what happened in the mine ... After that, you're done with police work and can concentrate on your schoolwork."

"And this letter?"

"I'll keep you informed, but otherwise - you're welcome in the squad, I mean after having finished Hogwarts."

Harry didn't like this answer, quite in contrast to Cho.

Sirius shook his head. "It's police work, and you're not authorized for that - remember the question? ... For example, talking with Rita Skeeter's lawyer is a natural first step, but if there's anything to be learned, then certainly not for a private person - even if it's the one to whom this letter was sent." Thinking for a moment, Sirius added, "Today it's too late for this statement - the office machinery is gone ..."

Harry asked, "And tomorrow?"

Sirius looked at him, looked at Cho, smiled. "I would offer a guest room, only my house hasn't been debugged yet ..."

Cho looked disappointed.

"... so I don't think that's an option to be considered ... Well - I think you should return to Hogwarts. After all, that's where students belong in the middle of the week."

"And the statement?"

"I'll send someone to Hogwarts, one of the next days ... Let's agree on a keyword - if the person that comes doesn't have it, it's someone else trying to milk you."

"And what?"

"Ah - *daisy chain*."

Storing the keyword in his memory, Harry saw again the line of assailants in the two-lane hall, a picture in sharp contrast to Cho's grin right in front of him.

They said goodbye to Sirius, who could hardly await scanning some archives - "it's amazing, Harry, what you can find in this building after hours, when other people are gone." Out in street, Harry looked at Cho. "I hate the idea of returning to Hogwarts *now*, except I have no better idea ... Maybe we should eat something first."

Cho smiled. "Didn't you run an O.W.L. about Transportation? ... Hasn't been a serious one, if the Linkport is the only thing that crosses your mind."

"It wasn't serious, that's for sure, but even a flying carpet won't look attractive in this weather."

Cho smiled broader. "You still have to learn a lot, young Potter."

He followed her, wasn't any wiser when they reached King's Cross Station. Looking around, he asked, "What's on your mind - the Hogwarts Express?"

"Certainly not, you dummy ... Ever heard of the night train London - Glasgow? And Glasgow has a Linkport too, which will bring us to Hogsmeade - some time in the morning."

Also because this train included a dining car, Harry found this an excellent idea - until he stood in the compartment, looking with disappointment at the two narrow bedsteads, arranged vertically to one side of the compartment.

Cho's voice behind him asked. "What's your choice, Harry - above or below?"

"Huh?" He turned, not believing his ears.

Cho's face showed no expression. "I asked where you want to lie - above or below?"

Harry felt thunderstruck. "Erm - above."

A sparkling appeared in Cho's eyes. "That's fine with me - and I think we'll use the lower bedstead."

## 18 - Hunting Season

Concentrating on his schoolwork - this had been Sirius' advice to Harry. Well, easier said than done, because in the days and weeks that followed Harry was trying to keep track of a political battle. The battlegrounds included the Ministry, the press, probably also public discussions. The nominal question looked complicated enough - was a chief of police allowed to do what Sirius had done? Underneath, however, different wings in the political scene tried to use this scandal to their own advantage.

Harry did something Professor Binns had recommended quite often, and his Headmistress occasionally - he became a regular reader of newspapers and magazines. He subscribed the *Daily Prophet* and *Magical Times*, the two newspapers which represented the opposite positions in the fight. The *Daily Prophet* took Sirius' side - not by coincidence, as Harry knew perfectly well, while the *Magical Times*, as the voice of the conservative wing, ferociously demanded the dismissal of this *intolerable* chief of police.

In addition, Harry subscribed *Spellweek*, a magazine of politics and society, for itself claiming a *neutral journalism*, - something which simply didn't exist as Harry became aware, with the recent events, known to him in most details, as an informative example.

It took a few days before the public fight started in earnest. Until then, Harry met several visitors, while not all of them had to do with the *Police Scandal*, as it was dubbed soon afterwards in the *Magical Times*.

The first two visitors arrived the day after the fight in Middle Station, however not together. Mr. Spinbottle, a tiny old wizard, looking very much like Professor Binns though only to the outside, introduced himself as Sirius' lawyer, formerly Rita Skeeter's lawyer, and temporarily Harry's lawyer too. Mr. Spinbottle confirmed his first two roles by giving the proper password - Daisy Chain - and by quoting the first line from Rita Skeeter's letter.

"Mr. Spinbottle," asked Harry, "why do I need a lawyer?"

"You'll get another visitor soon, Mr. Potter - actually, I expect him any minute. It's an attorney from the Ministry - I recommended Mr. Black to let this man do this interrogation because he belongs to the other side - I mean Mr. Black's opponents in the Ministry," the lawyer added after seeing the bewildered face of Harry, who had misunderstood the term *other side*.

"I wasn't aware that I'm subject to a police inquiry."

"You're not, Mr. Potter - but while giving your statement, it would be in the best interests of my client to do it under my guidance."

When Mr. Donovan, the attorney, arrived half an hour later, he didn't look pleased seeing Mr. Spinbottle, not surprised either. They were sitting in Almyra's interview room, and Harry learned a new technique of interview.

Mr. Donovan asked a question.

Harry looked at Mr. Spinbottle.

Mr. Spinbottle nodded, and Harry answered to his best knowledge.

Or Mr. Spinbottle advised him to answer the question to a limited degree, and Harry did so.

Or Mr. Spinbottle answered by himself, stating that this question was irrelevant in the context of the inquiry, and Harry kept silent.

Mr. Donovan had quite some arguments why his questions were indeed related to the issue, had some short rows with Mr. Spinbottle, while Harry kept watching and listening. The attorney also had a few tricks in store how to trigger angry remarks that would reveal a bit more, only they didn't catch.

For example, he wanted to know how an ordinary Hogwarts student was able to walk into that mine and find a man in a maze of tunnels. Harry mentioned advanced techniques of intra-sensory reception, referring to his teacher Mr. Kenzo for further details.

Mr. Donovan expressed the opinion that this was bullshit, and mentioned alternative methods - a pre-arranged setup to kill that man because he knew too much, dark magic since everybody knew that Harry Potter had learned just too much from Voldemort.

Harry listened politely. "I'd say your arguments are contradicting each other, Mr. Donovan."

"I don't see why."

"Well - first I'm an ordinary Hogwarts student, and now I'm the public version of Voldemort ... Somehow it doesn't fit, does it?"

Mr. Spinbottle looked satisfied, while Mr. Donovan dropped the issue in favour of questions about the months before. "Mr. Potter," he asked, "how often did you meet Mr. Black since the day Belinda McGraw was found dead?"

"Twice, without counting yesterday. No - three times, the first meeting was in two parts, first in his office and then the real meeting."

"Where was it?"

Mr. Spinbottle intercepted.

Mr. Donovan insisted.

Harry saw no problem. "It was in the Gringotts' building - with some help from the Goblins."

Mr. Donovan made a sour face, hearing about Goblins. "And the second meeting?"

"Was in a hotel - the *Regent*."

"Mr. Black claims to have been under permanent surveillance - how did you shake off his shadows?"

Harry was quicker than Mr. Spinbottle. "I used a trick."

"Oh, really? ... And which one?"

"I may want to use it again, that's why I'd prefer to keep the details to myself."

Mr. Donovan looked contemptuously. "I think it was no trick at all, Mr. Potter - the shadows were involved, after Mr. Black had won them to his side, or the other way around, and the only trick was to meet when the proper persons had the surveillance shift - only that all traces of this scheme disappeared quite nicely in Middle Station."

Harry kept silent.

"I'd like to hear your comment on this theory, Mr. Potter."

"No you wouldn't - it's too impolite."

After some more unsuccessful probing, Mr. Donovan let Harry sign his statement and left.

Mr. Spinbottle smiled. "Very good, Mr. Potter, you could've done it almost alone ... Now please excuse my hurry, for I want to see Mr. Donovan's face *after* the official part - and if he's angry enough, he may spill a remark or two."

The next visitors arrived a day later, this time together because they worked together. If Harry had seen right, sitting after lunch at the Gryffindor table, they had come down from the staircase to Dumbledore's office, or maybe from the guest suite. A man and a woman, both young, somewhere between twenty and thirty, approached him. "Mr. Potter?" It was the woman who asked.

"Yes?"

"My name is Deborah Beckett, and this is my partner Paul Sillitoe ... We would like to give you a message from Mr. Black."

And quite obviously, the woman wouldn't like to give the message here in public. So Harry asked them to follow. Passing the Ravenclaw table, he asked them to wait a second, went to Almyra, asked for permission to use her room.

Almyra nodded, while Cho was examining the two visitors, her face not quite neutral - however, she kept silent, with them so close by, and this was exactly what Harry had intended.

While climbing the stairs, the young man asked, "Has this been Miss Benedict?"

"We'll reach that room in a second," replied Harry, "then we can talk."

After sitting down, the young woman said, "The message is short, Mr. Potter, although we hope our conversation will take a bit longer ... Mr. Black asked us to tell you - Daisy Chain. Mr. Sillitoe and I work for the *Daily Prophet*, and we'd like to ask you some questions."

Harry looked into two faces, registering friendliness, curiosity, and quite some professionalism. "Excuse me," he said, "I'll be back in a moment." When he returned, Nagini was around his body.

While talking with Nagini, Harry continued watching the two faces. What he saw was astonishment though no disgust, and what he heard from Nagini satisfied him enough to continue - better, to start with his part in the conversation. "I hope it wasn't too impolite," he said, "but I had to check your - er, credentials."

"Oh - and how did you do it, Mr. Potter?"

"I asked the snake - her name's Nagini."

"Hmm ... What did she say?"

Harry smiled. "She said it's true what you said, Mrs. Beckett, and that you and your partner are trustworthy."

For a short moment, something like fright ran through the woman's face, then she had gathered herself again. "Well - in this case, I hope we can drop a bit formality ... May I call you Harry? I'm Deborah, and this is Paul."

The two journalists seemed a trained team, with well defined roles - for example, when interviewing men, even as young as Harry, it was Deborah who spoke - smiling, using her charm as well as other pleasant attributes.

Harry smiled back, at the thought of another interview that would invariably follow - with Cho. Aloud, he said, "That's fine with me, Deborah - Paul ... By the way, Nagini cannot read thoughts - only intentions, or emotions. And she'll inform me if you're telling a lie."

Deborah swallowed, however managed to keep her smile. "Thank you for the warning, Harry - although we didn't intend to lie to you."

Hearing Nagini's comment, Harry grinned. "That wasn't completely true - but it's okay, this isn't my first interview with journalists ... Nagini is very picky with the truth."

The young man spoke. "We don't lie on purpose, Harry."

Harry laughed. "No - it goes with the job, I know. Until recently, Rita Skeeter was my contact to the press."

This contact, especially Harry's last conversation with her, represented one of the topics in their questions. Deborah and Paul outlined what Sirius had told them already - maybe they had planned to do so, while for Harry it looked more as if Nagini had impressed them quite a lot, and they had quickly changed their tactics, another sign of some experience in the job, and a style slightly different from that of the late Rita Skeeter.

Listening to the outline, Harry realized that Sirius had told them all details of the story, from the disappearing owls to the fight in Middle Section. It surprised him a bit. "Sirius is trusting you a lot - or is he just desperate?"

Deborah smiled. "Both ... Mr. Dumbledore contacted our boss, our boss informed us, and we visited Sirius - with another keyword."

Harry wondered if Deborah was dropping formality by habit, or only with selected people. But another question was more urgent. "What keyword was it?"

A quick glance to Nagini. "Hippogriff."

Harry grinned. "Okay - then I know why Sirius didn't hold back anything."

No matter how different in style - Deborah's expression made clear that she had sensed another story, and that she would jump for it at the first opportunity. However, other things were more important now, and Harry answered many questions, until it was time for the training with his *sensei*.

"I'm sorry, but in a few minutes I have a lesson with Mr. Kenzo ... How shall we continue?"

Deborah was interested to watch, and probably also to interview another person involved in the story, while Paul wanted to use the time for a trip to Hogsmeade and the *Magical Tours* office there.

Harry informed Kenzo, who had no objections, then he concentrated on his exercises.

After the lessons, he used the recreation room, changed clothes, and returned into the Great Hall. He found Deborah still sitting there - alone.

He walked over - partly from politeness, partly from curiosity, partly also because it was much more pleasant to talk with her than with Rita Skeeter, and for more than one reason. "Where's Paul?"

"Back to London ... I'm going to follow soon - but I had a few more questions - " she smiled, "if you're ready to answer them without your snake."

Harry laughed. "Sure - I'm not totally helpless without her."

"Sirius said something in that direction - although that's not what I had in mind ... Harry - what does Hippogriff mean in this context?"

Thinking about the question, Harry used his own senses, in particular his *haragei*, to scan for motivations. What he felt was not too detailed, however seemed somehow familiar. He asked, "You want to have some background about Sirius?"

"Yes - that's what I hoped for."

Aside from *haragei*, there was an excellent method for gathering information. It was called direct question, and sometimes it worked. "For the articles?"

"What else?"

And sometimes it didn't, or not immediately. "I could imagine another reason - in particular since the important facts about him can certainly be found in the archive."

Deborah watched Harry's face. "And if there's another reason?"

"Then I would answer your questions - as much as required to ask him the rest personally."

She smiled. "That's fair ... What is he for you, Harry?"

He shrugged. "He was a friend of my parents, and now he's mine ... He escaped from Azkaban to save my life ... He was living off rats for the same reason - does this give you a picture?"

"Yes, I think so ... What kind of man is he?"

"He survived more than most people could stand, without losing his spirit. To quote himself - he's fed up losing the people closest to him, so right now he might have developed an aversion to let somebody come closer - although I hope this will change."

"Well ..." Deborah looked thoughtful. "That's indeed an information you won't find in the archive ... Now that he's finished this undercover task successfully, what do you think will be his next task - to look for the people behind the plot?"

"Up to some point, yes - naturally so, as the chief of police."

"And why not further?"

"Because for all we know, the one in the background is Voldemort - and that's my job."

\* \* \*

As expected, later the same day Harry had to stand another interview - by Cho, about these two people, in particular about that woman with whom he had "talked so nicely," sitting in the hall. Harry answered by telling the truth, which always seemed a good idea, and by leaving out remarks about personal interests, which also seemed reasonable in this uncertain, or maybe premature, state of things.

Saturday afternoon, he had still another visitor - the broomstick fanatic from Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry called Ron, admonished his visitor not to talk about Firebolts Two - still a secret with respect to the next Quidditch match against the Slytherins - then they went outside to run a few tests - a race contest, for example.

Harry was sitting on his Steel Wing, Ron on the original Firebolt, and the young man - Ernest Galbraith his name - on Harry's Firebolt Two. Counting "Three - two - one - off," they pushed as hard as they could.

Ron fell behind immediately, not surprisingly so, as the original Firebolt's acceleration could not cope with that of his successor, not to mention the Steel Wing. The young man almost could follow Harry - until the Firebolt Two had reached its maximum speed, then Harry zoomed away easily.

Harry and Mr. Galbraith did a second test, in which Harry tried to leave the Firebolt Two behind immediately. It was possible - theoretically, since the Steel Wing offered enough resources, only that Harry could not activate the full power without losing control.

Finally, they ran a test with the two Firebolts. Ron accelerated to full speed, with Mr. Galbraith keeping pace, and Harry following to see what was happening. At Ron's signal, Mr. Galbraith accelerated to his own maximum speed, slowly getting away from Ron.

The speed advantage offered by the Firebolt Two was not remarkable. Only in combination with its acceleration, this new broomstick could outperform its predecessor significantly. They did one last test - hundred yards apart, Ron in front and Mr. Galbraith behind, they pushed simultaneously at Harry's signal. Within seconds, Mr. Galbraith had reached Ron's position, surpassed him, and sped out of reach.

Flying to Hogsmeade, they delivered Mr. Galbraith at the Linkport. Of course, before returning to Hogwarts, they had to make a stop in the *Three Broomsticks* - probably, this name would never again match as well as now, and a butterbeer seemed the right medicine after a few races through cold air.

Ron said, "I was trying to find a better Bludger strategy for the next game, only I'm no wiser than before."

"Maybe the Slytherins won't try the technique of the Hufflepuffs."

"Oh, yes, they will ... It worked too well."

"But the Firebolt Two will help in that regard. Those people are right - the acceleration is much more important than the final speed ..."

"Yeah, okay ..." Ron looked dissatisfied. "Even so - I'm sure there's a counter strategy, only I'm too blind to see it ... Maybe I should ask Viktor, except to me it feels like cheating."

At this moment, Harry remembered a conversation. "I know whom to ask, and it's definitely not cheating - Fleur!"

"Huh?" Ron stared in disbelief. "Harry - Fleur knows about Quidditch as much as Nagini about dancing - no offense intended ..."

Harry laughed. "We might be surprised - by Nagini, I mean ..." He told Ron about the conversation with Lupin.

"Hmm ... Could be - maybe she really can see something we miss to notice because we're too close, and all we have to do is to translate her suggestions into Quidditch manoeuvres ..."

A moment later, Ron seemed very interested in hearing what Fleur had to say - by coincidence around the time his glass was empty. He urged Harry to finish his own, so they could return to Hogwarts.

They were lucky - Fleur would leave an hour from now, had decided to clean up her desk until then, a task she felt more than ready to drop in favour of a conversation with her two oldest dance students.

"Quiddi'ch?? ... Me?" Fleur laughed. "That's a good joke - why not just Parseltongue, then at least it's two against one, and I'm with the majority."

"That's exactly what we're looking for," assured Harry, "a bloody amateur ..."

"Oh - thank you."

"... who can think."

Fleur smiled. "All right - I feel addressed ... So what's the problem for which I might have a solution?"

Ron explained how the other team would keep the Bludgers away from them, simply because they were too good, in particular Harry with his frightening accuracy in shooting.

Fleur asked, "What is the effect?"

"Basically, it's like Quidditch without Bludgers, only the Chasers and the Quaffle - and the Snitch, of course ... It's not too bad because our Chaser team is good - but our Beater team is better than the others, and this advantage is lost."

"Hmm ..." Fleur smiled. "I have a tendency to compare everything with the things I understand best, and one of those is dancing. Now, in dancing terms, it sounds as if you're dancing with a partner, and you could do all kinds of turns and figures, except your partner is trying to keep both of you to the basic steps ... Does that sound right?"

Both Ron and Harry agreed yes, it was exactly like that.

"Then what can you do? ... You could dance with another partner."

No, they couldn't - for the running match, people would be very surprised to hear the Gryffindors weren't ready to play against the Slytherins.

"You can force your partner to do it - in dancing, it would look bad because the partner doesn't know these figures, but if I understand right, that's just what you want - to look better than the other side."

It was true - but how to force them?

"Well - in dancing, the first question would be about the guiding, I mean who's the man and who's the woman."

Harry was already translating Quidditch into dancing. "You could say the side with the Quaffle is the man - that's the team which is guiding in that moment, while the others can only react."

Ron said, "As long as we have the Quaffle, it's not so bad ... Harry is guarding the girl with the Quaffle ..."

Fleur was grinning.

Ron looked confused. "Well, all our Chasers are girls, so what's so funny?"

Fleur assured it wasn't funny.

"... anyway, in this phase, we don't care too much if they play gobstones with the Bludgers - only when it comes the other way around, then we need Bludgers to stop them."

Fleur asked Ron to describe these manoeuvres in more detail, listened while Ron explained a standard attack and a standard defense.

"Well," she said when Ron had finished, "from this perspective, all I can see is that you have to become even better, like in a dance where you have mastered the steps themselves, while your body motion is still not elegant enough ... What I mean is, if 'arry doesn't keep guard until the girl scores, but starts hunting for a Bludger a moment before, it should be possible to get that ball before the others are coming with their own attack, isn't that so? ... It's a kind of fine-tuning, but I don't see anything else."

Ron saw what she meant, however he had expected more.

Fleur was grinning again. "As I said before - I tend to compare with the things I know best. So, if dancing isn't the proper comparison, let's try the other one ..."

There was little doubt what Fleur meant.

"Keeping Bludgers away from you - that's like a person refusing to be your lover, right?"

Was it? Ron and Harry weren't sure, while Fleur was. "Yes of course. In this case, you must make yourself more attractive, more interesting - more promising, that's how you have to look."

It sounded familiar enough, but what did it have to do with Bludgers?

"My God, translate it back to Quiddi'ch! ... If the others keep the Bludgers away because 'arry is too good, he must put in some failures - enough to make it look promising to bring them back into the game."

Ron looked disbelieving. "Are you serious?"

Fleur nodded. "Let's say 'arry can send every Bludger the right way ... Then, as long as it's not urgent, he sends them the wrong way - not exactly to the other Beater, but he doesn't hit an opponent. Only when it's important, he hits right ... You invest something, because it's harder for your Chasers to score, but you earn more since it's still harder for the others to score."

Ron asked, "But won't the others realize quickly that these are fake failures?"

It was Harry who answered. "No - all they'll see is that I miss every so often, reason enough for them to give it a try. I mean - maybe, at some point, they realize that I never miss when it counts, but it will take time, at least till the end of the year."

Fleur laughed. "It's a classical trick - there's this young man, famous for sleeping with a girl the first evening. And now there's this girl, and she simply refuses being invited to dinner ... What can he do? He invites some other girl he's not interested, makes sure the message goes round it was only dinner ... He does the same with a second girl, a third - until his real target sees a chance to come out un - er, unharmed, so-to-speak ..."

Ron listened in fascination. "Fleur, this comparison doesn't fit ... If the girl won't be interested, somewhere deep inside, she would never accept the invitation."

"Of course not ... But look at your opponents, I mean the other Beaters - isn't it the same with them? All they want is to send Bludgers toward your teammates ... Like that girl - it doesn't object being laid - not at all, only it mustn't look so obvious."

Ron looked at Harry. "All right, you've got the message ... Leave the previous girl early enough to hunt another one, and while doing so, look as innocent as you can."

Harry nodded. "Okay ... I'm glad this is about Quidditch."

Fleur grinned. "Glad?"

"Sure - in Quidditch, Cho is competition, so she won't hear about this conversation ... Imagine - Ron tells her yes, we went to Fleur, and she explained Harry how to leave soon enough to hunt for another girl ..."

Ron laughed. "A Bludger would look friendly in comparison."

\* \* \*

The battle in the press kept on, and things didn't look good for Sirius. Harry recognized how the *Daily Prophet* tried to open another front, with articles about Wesley Warrington and his tax problems, however, this newspaper stood pretty much alone with its thesis that this was a scandal, more important than anything else.

Part of the reason was the lack of hard evidence. Mr. Warrington denied any trouble with the authorities, and the Tax Department did not comment at all, which could be interpreted either way as they never commented in public.

Then Harry read about Sirius being investigated by a committee. The *Daily Prophet* expressed the hope this would end all rumours, while the *Magical Times* stated that Mr. Black's dismissal could only be a question of time.

And all the while, Harry found nothing about *Magical Tours* in the press.

Some days later, he had an opportunity to ask - Deborah Beckett came for another visit, for another interview, suggesting to do it in Hogsmeade during a lunch that wasn't surrounded by ears growing bigger with every word spoken.

Harry found the idea great - not that the food would taste better in the *Three Broomsticks*, but right now, talking was more important.

"There's no way," explained Deborah. "We have no hard evidence - if we'd start a campaign against them, we'd be sued next morning."

"And what about the owls? ... And what about this jump artist?"

"Do you have proof that they killed a single owl? - No ... Knowing is one thing, proving it is something else. And this man - you saw him in an office, and he seemed to be an assistant of

that manager, so what? ... This manager would be deeply shocked, hearing his assistant was a criminal, would be very glad to be informed about that ..."

"But the *Daily Prophet* started campaigns with less than that in the past - why not now?"

"We have another problem," replied Deborah, "and that's more important than facts and proofs ... Magical Tours is popular - people won't like hearing that they're fishing in muddy waters. That's why we have to wait until there's something that cannot be discussed away."

She looked sympathetic. "We - that is Paul and I, we didn't forget, Harry - and we'll follow any track that looks promising, or only interesting ... But we work for a newspaper that makes a living from being sold - nobody cares about Warrington, so we can pester him with nothing, while Magical Tours is everybody's darling ..."

"Not everybody's!"

Deborah smiled. "Okay - with a few notable exceptions. Of course they're dirty - you know it, I know it, Sirius knows it ..."

Sirius was the other keyword Harry was interested in - and for all he could sense, Deborah too. He asked, "How is it going with Sirius?"

Deborah's face went expressionless. "You mean his chances to keep his job?"

"Um - yes, that too."

She stared at him. "And what else?"

When in doubt, use the truth, even if it wasn't right. "Well - things outside his job ... Private life, for example."

"And what makes you think that's a topic to be discussed here, between you and me?"

Harry felt his cheeks go pinkish, although it wasn't embarrassment - more from a kind of unbalanced intimacy, and the only way he saw was to balance out the difference. "If you won't discuss it, we won't ... But you should know - the moment the topic Sirius came up, I received a message through my *haragei* - and since we're sitting here alone ..."

Deborah's cheeks didn't look much different. "What did the message tell you?"

"It's not like a statement - but it was enough that I won't be surprised if you'd ask some more questions about him."

"And you would answer them?"

"Maybe not, depending on what it is, but - er, I'd consider them very positively."

"Well, then ..." She looked up, looked down again. "Pretty bad - in both aspects. Unless there's a small miracle, he'll be suspended soon ... And otherwise - it's like hitting a wall."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Deborah looked at him. "Harry - you said you'd answer questions, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then ... How was she?"

He didn't need to ask about whom Deborah was talking. "A bit older than you ... Good-looking, very challenging - she had fun teasing me, or Ron ... And she was a cop, a tough one."

Deborah played with her fork, probably the best way to handle that food. "Did he love her?"

"I asked him that myself. He said maybe."

"And what do you think?"

Harry remembered the conversation with Fleur, about methods to appear more promising, only that - for all he knew - here the opposite problem was waiting for a solution. "As I said the last time - I think he's scared to let someone come too close to him - and it's no help either if this someone is digging in an area where another journalist got killed."

Deborah had a short laugh. "You mean my chances would be better as a cute little kitchen woman?"

Harry had to smile. "No - not really ... I wish I could go and find Voldemort and make an end to him, because then Sirius would know that he may have a chance for a normal life."

Deborah nodded slowly. "That puts things into proportion."

Harry didn't understand.

She smiled. "I was sitting here, couldn't believe I'm discussing my - er, love life with you - a seventeen-year-old ... Until I heard you saying that, and knew every word is true, and then I knew it's perfectly okay, there's no one else better suited ..."

"Except Sirius himself."

"Yeah ..." She sighed, then grinned. "Maybe, for a change, we should discuss your own love life."

Harry twisted. "I don't think that's a good idea ... Cho will squeeze me about this lunch, but so far, I can say I didn't do anything wrong."

Deborah laughed. "Isn't it obvious that I'm no competition for her?"

"No ... I'm not going around spilling other people's secrets, so Cho doesn't know that we discuss Sirius outside the professional scope ..."

Deborah looked appreciative.

"... and as long as this is the case, it's not obvious at all."

"I feel flattered ... So, in case of emergency, you're allowed to tell her."

"Thank you, but I think I can handle it without that ... Although it crossed my mind whether I should tell someone else."

"Someone else??"

"Yes - Sirius."

Deborah gasped. "For Heaven's sake, Harry - that's not what I had in mind. If I cannot deliver the message myself ..."

He shook his head. "If my assumption is right, he's got the message already - that's exactly the problem."

\* \* \*

Two days later, both the *Daily Prophet* and the *Magical Times* brought it as headline - Sirius Black, head of the Law Enforcement Squad, had been suspended from his duties, as a consequence of the running investigation about his recent activities.

The same afternoon, Harry travelled to London, using his global network ticket. He hadn't been sure whether Sirius was still living in that house which belonged to the job. He found him there, learning that Sirius still had his job, and thus the house - but of course only during this formal phase, which probably wouldn't take long.

"How long?"

"Politicians don't do things in a hurry ... Two weeks, maybe three."

"And then?"

"Then I'll need another house ... And another job."

Harry saw a chance. "That's all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"No, I don't think so."

Sirius looked uncomprehending. "What else do I need then?"

"Some new - er, acquaintance."

Sirius looked angry, to say the least. "Oh, yes, of course ... And you'll provide it, right? Because that's quite a habit of yours."

Somehow this was unfair, and Sirius looked embarrassed enough, having spilled his anger toward Harry - except ... "Maybe it is, by accident."

Sirius' embarrassment was gone. He eyed his godson suspiciously. "What's that supposed to mean? ... Harry, who is it this time? Another case of emergency?"

Harry giggled. "No, I don't think so ... Anyway, I guess you know already."

It was a full-scale hit - Sirius' face giving proof. "Harry," he growled, "do me a favour, okay? ... Mind your own business."

"That's what I'm doing, only that somehow you're involved - or maybe the other way around."

Sirius stared at him. "Did I really get it wrong? ... What the heck are you talking about, Harry?"

"I'm talking about Deborah Beckett ..."

Sirius nodded vigorously. "I thought as much - and that's why I said ..."

"I heard you! ... And I was going to explain why it's my business too - will you listen?"

Sirius turned his eyes toward the ceiling. "Why not? ... I've got all the time of the world - no office work ... Go ahead."

"Okay ... I didn't have to say the name, you knew already, weren't surprised at all ..."

Sirius snapped, "You won't believe it, Harry, but I don't need you to realize that a woman's interested in me ... Except I'm not interested in her - as simple as that."

Maybe it was true, only ... "Would you repeat this when Nagini's around?"

Sirius gaped at him.

"Okay, that's answer enough ... I know what it is, and you know it too."

"No I don't, but I'm sure you'll tell me."

"You're scared, that's all."

Sirius tried to laugh, failed. "Scared - of this woman?"

Harry shook his head. "Not of her ... Remember what you said to me after Belinda's death?"

Sirius didn't know what he meant.

"About the people closest to you ... If I knew where to find Voldemort, I'd go and fight with him right away - he's a threat for you more than for anyone else."

It wiped off Sirius' anger. "C'mon, Harry ... Maybe you're right, but it would be a stupid idea to confront him now, only because you think it might solve a problem for me."

"I've got more reasons, but it doesn't matter - as long as I don't know where he is ... Anyway, there's no sense in living a life in suspense until that time."

Sirius chuckled. "Why not? ... After all, I'm suspended."

"You know what I mean!"

"Yes I know, and I'll think about it ... But first, I want this thing settled - this way or the other."

\* \* \*

Harry returned to Hogwarts in low spirits, trying desperately to come up with an idea for a small miracle - failing that, a big one. Sirius losing his job - it was a depressing thought, a personal insult, and most of all, it ended any chance of finding Rita Skeeter's murderer. Harry felt a limited obligation toward her, and a considerably stronger belief the trail could lead to Voldemort.

This downcast mood kept on until the next morning, when something started that electrified him, sent a thrill through his mind because - for the first time since his last encounter with Voldemort, he saw the faintest outline of a strategy, should he ever meet him again.

The reason was Apparition.

Madam Hooch, the Charms teacher, led the Gryffindors along the lake until they reached a plain between trees, about two hundred yards long, well outside the zone that rendered Apparition impossible.

For starters, she apparated from one end to the other, and back again. Then she made some jump-apparating - steps of twenty yards, one after the other in rapid succession, finally reaching the end of the area.

It looked very funny, and the other students laughed how Madam Hooch was stepwise shrinking to the horizon.

Not so Harry - since her first Apparition this morning, his mind was whirling in excitement.

The moment before Madam Hooch made her apparition jump, Harry felt a clear echo in his *haragei*. Assuming it wasn't specific to her, he would be forewarned if someone was attempting to disappear through Apparition. And he knew immediately - if there was a way to extend this knowledge to some action, Voldemort would not escape him again.

His excitement grew even stronger when he felt something else while Madam Hooch was doing her sequence of fun jumps. The feeling seemed strangely familiar, torturing him because - at first - he was unable to identify it.

Then the witch zoomed back toward the students, raising even more entertainment among the others. And almost with her last jump, Harry remembered. This feeling was - somewhere, somehow - similar to what he felt in the void, tranced by Almyra, sent out to talk with Nagini.

Madam Hooch found herself surrounded by the other students, who asked her to do another jump sequence. "No," she said, "this was just to give you something to laugh, and to raise your spirit for our next exercises - it will be stressful enough until you'll reach this point."

Harry stepped forward. "Prof - please, could you do another single jump to the end?"

The teacher looked expectant. "Yes, Mr. Potter - but why?"

"When you jump - I can sense something ... I want to check again."

"Okay - why not?" Madam Hooch turned, looked toward the trees at the end of the plain. Harry sat down quickly. If he was right ...

He felt the signal, very short, rapidly increasing ... In the last split second, he did what he had done in the void - he *followed*.

Madam Hooch stood before him, was about to turn ...

"Prof?"

She jumped again, only this time with her body. "Mr. Potter?? ... Where are you?"

"I'm here, Prof - can't you see me?"

"No - dammit, what are you doing - how did you come here? ... Where are you?"

"I followed you, Prof - but I think it was only my spirit that could follow, while my body is probably still at the other end."

"Well - your spirit has brought your voice, because I hear you loud and clear ..." She looked suspicious, "that is, if it's your voice I hear - after all, you might as well talk in my mind."

"I don't know, Prof ... We can find out later - first I'd like to know whether I can follow back."

"And what if not?"

An interesting question - it could have been frightening, only Harry had travelled through the void too often to be scared. "You're right," he said, "maybe first I should try returning alone."

*Not being there* - the thought was enough. For a fleeting instant, Harry felt like pulled from ropes of rubber, then his spirit had found back into his body.

Ron was bending over him. "Harry - are you all right?"

"I'm okay - I just followed to the other end."

"Oh, really? ... Only you forgot your body, but one cannot think of everything, right?"

At this moment, Madam Hooch reappeared, came closer. "How did it work, Mr. Potter?"

"I came back alone, Prof ... All I had to do was to wish myself back."

She giggled. "That's good to hear ... And now, please stop scaring me like hell, and do one step after the other like a good student ..." However, after she had recovered, Madam Hooch

was at least as expectant as Harry himself to see whether he could follow through multiple jumps.

He could - all he had to do was concentrating as in the first pursuit, to orient himself in *following*.

The funniest moment came when she returned to the place where his body was waiting - pursuing Madam Hooch, Harry saw himself sitting on the ground, motionlessly, glassy eyes, staring into nowhere. As close as his spirit was then, it linked with his body only when he *let go*.

There was an interesting difference to his visits of Nagini - or maybe, it was no difference at all. Harry's vision kept hooked to the person he was following - if Madam Hooch walked a few steps, she stayed in his view, while he felt as if turned on a disk, probably an imaginary feeling because the mind refused to believe that the perspective could change without turning a body, or at least a neck.

Back in the school, Harry could hardly wait until he found an opportunity to talk with Snape - pursuing a wizard through Apparitions was a technique taught in Defence against the Dark Arts.

"If your mind can follow, Harry ... okay, your spirit, then the most difficult part is done. The rest may still be hard work, but then it's only a question of time." Snape grinned. "Apparition pursuit is a rare art ... But somehow, it doesn't surprise me at all, hearing you have it built in, because - it fits so nicely with all the rest."

Defence would start with this topic soon. Only - Harry couldn't wait. He scanned the list of all people in his mind who might be ready to walk with him through the cold air outside, jumping around in Apparitions. He found one candidate - Viktor.

Before he could ask, Ron stopped him cold. "We need all the time for Quidditch training - the match against the Slytherins isn't far away, and you know that we have to fine-tune our technique, don't you?"

Ron had fun. "Remember what Fleur said - first you have to learn to leave the girls ... If you can handle that, you may learn how to follow them - although, Harry, what's the sense if your spirit is all that's around?"

\* \* \*

The prospect of Harry's unexpected ability felt so promising that even the news in the *Daily Prophet* could not damage his mood. Sitting at the breakfast table, Harry read an article which seemed to seal Sirius' fate as an ex-chief of police. If this newspaper admitted that a dismissal was likely, then - so much Harry knew about press and politics - it was as good as decided, only that politicians always needed a few weeks before going public.

An owl came down to their table.

For a moment, Harry felt sure it brought mail for him - until the owl landed in front of Ron at Harry's left side.

Ron, in contrast, hadn't the foggiest who might write to him. Harry and Hermione watched his face while reading. It changed from anxious expectation to surprise, to joyful expectation, to joy, to pleasure, to a radiant beaming. Ron looked up, eyes shining.

Hermione could wait no longer. "Ron - what is it??"

He offered the letter. "Here - read yourself." While Hermione started reading, Ron turned to Harry. "I need your help."

"What for? ... To get your face straight again?"

"No - for a Goblin Request ... A Personal."

"Wow - super, Ron! ... For Middle Station?"

Ron nodded, and a moment later, Harry had the opportunity to read the letter by himself.

Dear sir,  
following an order of the Goblin Council of Administration,  
I have the great pleasure to inform you about an award,  
given for your services toward the Goblin community in the  
location known as Middle Station.  
The award is a Goblin Request of the Personal category.  
You may claim it any time and toward any Gringotts residence.  
Please allow me to express my congratulations, as well as  
my respect for your courageous performance.  
The respective document has been deposited in your vault,  
with a copy in the Gringotts Archive. We expect your claim  
in due time.  
Yours sincerely,  
Modragh Morony

Hermione asked, "Harry, what's the range of a Personal?"

"When I spoke with McGonagall, her example was a four week's vacation trip to any luxury resort in the world."

Hermione turned to Ron. "Do you know already what to ask for?"

"I'm not sure - but I have an idea."

"That's fast ... Did you expect something like that?"

"No, not at all ..." Suddenly, Ron realized an astonishing discrepancy, looked at Harry. "Say - why didn't you get something similar? We were there together, and if *courageous performance* is the criterion, then at least you should get the same, if not more."

Smiling, Harry shook his head. "No, Ron ... It would be insulting."

"Insulting?? ... Honestly, I don't feel insulted - not the least bit."

"Of course not - why should you? ... But there's a bond between the Goblins and me, which has been sealed with a Privileged - sending me a Personal now would mean the bond no longer exists, or at least they won't expect me to honour it ... No, they did right."

Ron looked disappointed. "And that's why you don't get anything?"

About to laugh, Harry stopped. An idea had crossed his mind - for something that might turn out much more precious than a nice present like a Personal request, and still in the sense of his bond.

Ron had watched his face. "What is it?"

"I have an idea - maybe they can help Sirius ... And that's something I can ask within the ethics of this bond."

Hermione looked hopeful. "You're right - and this is probably his last chance."

Ron glanced at his letter, then at Harry. "Maybe I should ask - based on this request."

"No - this is supposed to be an expensive present, and you should use it for this purpose ... But don't you worry, I'll ask them, and I'm entitled for it - Sirius is so deeply involved in the fight against Voldemort ... My God, why didn't I think of it before?"

Hermione knew. "Because it's too obvious."

It wasn't that obvious, and Harry was unsure if the Goblins could do anything. He had to wait till after lunch, used the time to decide what to write, and to whom. According to his feeling, Urion should be the right person, only he didn't know where to reach the Goblin with the many names. Then he realized - he could send the letter to a known address and still refer to the Task commander.

And so he wrote.

Dear Mr. Morony,  
I don't know whether you or Urion is the proper address for my plea, so please decide yourself whether to inform Urion.  
Sirius Black, the chief of the Law Enforcement Squad, who brought the information about the prison attack, is under pressure and will most likely lose his position. If you, the Goblins, know any method how to help him, and use this method, I would be very grateful.  
Sirius is my godfather. He is affected by Voldemort's doings more than most other people. This effect is the reason why I think I can ask for this help, based on the bond between the Goblins and me.  
I believe that he is the best chief of police we can have and that he should be kept where he is.  
Thank you for your efforts, even if there is no chance

Then he went to Ron's office, looking for a mail capsule. What he found first was Ron, dictating a letter into the writer pen, or at least parts of a letter that seemed quite difficult.

Ron stopped, apparently relieved. "Harry, you're the one I was looking for ... I need your help - for a letter to the Goblins."

"That's a coincidence - I just wrote my own."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure." Harry offered the parchment to Ron, who nodded enthusiastically after reading. "Yes, that's good. If they know something, I think they'll do it."

"And you? Do you know what you're going to ask for?"

Ron looked embarrassed. "Erm - yes - er, please don't take offense, but, er, you know, that's what I really want."

Astonished, Harry glanced at his friend. "Maybe it helps if you tell me what it is."

Ron inhaled deeply, then he found the courage to confess. "A Firebolt Two."

Harry grinned, started to laugh, stopped, seeing Ron's face. "No - I'm not offended - not at all, I mean, I would have the same wish - but maybe not for a Personal."

"Why not?" Now Ron was anxious. "Is it too much?"

"Certainly not ... It might be too little - but why don't you buy a Firebolt Two with your own money, and use this request to the full extent?"

Obviously, Ron had done this calculation by himself. "Without the request, I'd never done it - it would have looked so, so ... you know what I mean. And now - if you say it's too little ... What if I simply ask for money?"

Harry made a face. "It's possible, only it doesn't look good ... They expect you to ask for a present, not for money."

"Yes, that's what I thought, too ... But if I buy the Firebolt with my own money, I'm dry ..." Ron grinned wryly. "I've been dry too long - I'm not going to reach this state again ... But I want this Firebolt, and I want it fast."

Harry smiled. "You mean, yesterday would be soon enough?"

Ron took him serious. "Exactly - in a few days, we have the match against the Slytherins, and I want to make sure we'll win - that's why I need it now ... Harry, I don't care too much about four weeks vacation - sure, it would be great, Janine and I under palms ..."

"Or cedars ..."

"Yes, whatever ... But there's time for that in the future, while the Quidditch cup's running now."

Harry remembered Oliver Wood. "Does this happen to all Quidditch captains?"

"You mean this craziness?" Ron giggled. "Could be ... Only I was crazy already before I got the job."

"Well, then ..."

In spite of his craziness, Ron was still reluctant. "But you said it's too little."

"Yeah, a bit ... It's no serious problem, only ..." Harry stopped, started to grin.

Ron saw it. "You've found something - what is it??"

"It's the old story - the obvious that's too close to see it."

"Harry!!" Ron looked desperate.

"This is the second request that falls into the Weasley family, right? ... I mean, not counting mine because it was before ..."

Ron nodded eagerly, at this moment giving a damn for delicacies such as inherited brothers and the times before.

"... then put it at this hook - don't ask for a Firebolt Two, ask for the proper help to the Weasley family to win this tournament."

"Huh?" Next instant, Ron saw it too, a wide grin spreading his face as well. "Of course - there's nothing that says I should be the only one benefitting ... Harry, you're the best request expert I know."

"Big deal ... How many experts do you know?"

Ron grinned excitedly. "Only one, but that's enough ... I can't await to see this broomstick - and I can't await to see Ginny's face if the owls come down ..." Anxious again, he glanced at Harry. "What do you think - will they be fast enough?"

"You can make sure by yourself - write them that the next match is two weeks from now, and that it's crucial."

They had to wait until supper, knowing that Hedwig would not start earlier. Then Harry and Ron walked together to the Ravenclaw table. After greeting Cho, Harry looked at Almyra. "Ron and I, we have thought carefully about a serious problem, and we've found the solution."

Examining the two faces, Almyra looked suspicious. "You're up to no good - I can see it."

"No - it's really a long-standing problem, but our united genius was able to develop this revolutionary concept."

Cho didn't know any more than Almyra, only her own curiosity was growing faster. "Then tell us!"

"Erm - sure, but you have to hold Al - she might be a bit jumpy."

Cho stood up, put her hands on Almyra's shoulders. "Okay - now spit it out!"

"Well - it has to do with mail, and owls. You know, with one letter, which means one capsule and just one leg, the poor owl's always so unbalanced ..."

Cho's hands were pressing harder at Almyra's shoulders, and for good reason.

"... but now we've found out how we can make the owl sit straight - er, fly straight ..."

Cho's arms were about to fail - Almyra was coming up.

"... the answer is *two letters!*"

Harry and Ron quickly put their capsules at the table, were running away, giggling madly, while Almyra stopped after a few steps, shook her head, laughing, taking the capsules to go upstairs and to send a well-balanced Hedwig toward Gringotts.

\* \* \*

The next days showed a highly unusual pattern, for Harry as much as for Ron. Breakfast would be the first highlight - Harry studying the *Daily Prophet* for any development in the *Black Scandal*, as the press had finally decided to name the affair, while Ron was sitting, chewing, looking mostly upward to watch incoming owls.

After sharing a common disappointment, for their individual reasons, they joined classes, which provided another highlight only for Harry, and only if it was Charms with Madam Hooch or Defence with Snape. Harry deepened his expertise in Apparition pursuit - still restricted to his spirit, however with a routine that worked better every day.

In the evening then, Ron would chase his team through the air. Of course, the other Gryffindors realized immediately that Harry's Firebolt, as ordinary as it looked, was something special, and Ron admonished them to keep their mouths shut until it was too late for the Slytherins.

Ginny asked her brother why he was looking so stressed when the conversation in the team came to Firebolts Two.

It was Katie who answered. "Because he'd like to have one for himself - and it's driving him crazy that the model wasn't available some months earlier ... Because then Rahewa's would have been another Firebolt Two."

Harry wanted to know what Rahewa herself was thinking.

"It came at the right time - so that I could train, and catch the Snitch against the Hufflepuffs."

Harry recognized a certain similarity between Rahewa's style of answers and that of Urion the Urbane. If they had a point, they made a point, period.

Then came the morning of the mornings. Opening the *Daily Prophet*, the headline was hitting Harry's eyes.

- **Dramatic Change in Black Scandal**

Sirius Black, the suspended head of the Law Enforcement Squad, who is waiting for his dismissal, has found help from an unexpected source. The Goblins, which are running the wizard prison according to a contract, have sent an open letter to the Ministry as well as to all newspapers - a letter with all the qualities of a time bomb.

In short, the Goblins demand that Sirius Black remains Squad commander. In the long version, they state that his dismissal would violate the contract between the wizarding world and the Goblins, because punishing the man who uncovered the plan for the liberation of the prisoners would be considered as the most severe insult. And this, as they state, would cancel the contract immediately - with the effect that all dark wizards had to be kept somewhere else.

This contract, so crucial for our community, was the first masterpiece Sirius Black has created, working for this office. Since there is no alternative, and because none of the political heavyweights wants to be confronted with a problem to which there is no other solution, you should expect Mr. Black back in his office within the next days.

See inside for the complete text of the Goblins letter.

"Yipee!!"

Faces were turning to him - such an untidy excitement early in the morning. Harry passed the newspaper to Hermione - she hadn't been quicker than Ron, she was only less tolerable when waiting.

"Sirius is saved! The Goblins helped."

"How?? What did they do?" Ron was hanging over the table, trying to read the newspaper upside down.

A moment later, Hermione was done, and Ron could read. He was still reading when a sound in the air made Harry look up.

Owls were coming down - four toward Ron, four more toward Ginny, delivering two long parcels of a familiar size and shape.

"Yipee!!"

The shout had been Ron's, while Ginny looked stupefied at her own box, didn't know what to think of it, knew even less when it was opened, showing the glittery polish of a Firebolt Two. She came over, looked at Ron who was still busy reading a letter, looked at Harry. "I got a ..."

"Psst - other people are listening!"

Right now, Ginny couldn't care less. "And Ron too ... Can you tell me where they - I mean, who's responsible for that?"

"No."

Ginny didn't believe him - small wonder, with Harry's face grinning from ear to ear. He said, "Ask your brother - your real one, I mean." Then he took the newspaper, eager to show Cho and Almyra the good news.

From the Ravenclaw table, while Cho and Almyra were reading together, Harry could watch two Weasleys, one hanging around the neck of the other, but only for a moment before Ginny hurried back to study her own present, and to read the letter again.

Heading for the classroom, Harry turned to his friend. "Okay - one problem is settled ... Now you only have to find the proper words to explain it to Janine."

"To explain what?"

"That you dropped a four week's vacation for two persons in favour of a stupid broomstick."

Ron shook his head, beaming. "There's no problem at all."

"You mean she'll understand, and not complain?"

"Why complain? ... You were so busy with the news about Sirius that you missed the finer details. The Firebolts weren't all - they came together with an invitation to the next Quidditch Council - one week in Hawaii, first-class hotel - everything, you name it."

"For two people?"

Ron looked happy. "Not quite - one for each Firebolt ... Only Ginny had the decency to give hers to me - for good balance, as she said."

Preoccupied with his new toy, Ron didn't object when Harry cancelled today's Quidditch training for himself, to be used for another trip to London.

Sirius was at home, opened the door. "Harry - that's not a real surprise, I had the feeling I might see you today." Inside, Sirius asked, "Did you pull some strings?"

"I wrote a letter to Urion."

Sirius looked embarrassed. "Thank you, Harry ... I don't know how ..."

Harry interrupted him. "Save it - tell the Goblins."

"Yeah, sure ... But you don't understand. What I was trying to say ..." Sirius hesitated again.

"Is there still another problem?"

"Er - not really. Only that I should celebrate with you, but I'm sorry - we have to delay that. To be honest, Harry, I'm in a bit of a hurry - you've found a bad time to visit me."

Harry examined his godfather, started to grin. "Are you invited?"

"No, not exactly."

"Did you invite someone?"

Sirius nodded.

"Here, or in a restaurant?"

Sirius regained some balance. "Harry, don't take it personally, but - please get lost."

Laughing, Harry hugged him. "All right - see you ..." At the door, he turned. "If anything can beat the news of this morning, it's this ... Say hello from me."

Sirius tried to look innocent. "To whom?"

Only, Harry had already closed the door. From Giants and from some Japanese people, he had learned - there was no sense at all in answering stupid questions.

## 19 - Encounters

In the time left until the match against the Slytherins, Ron pushed his team through a last series of training sessions. He did so almost as mercilessly as Oliver Wood had done, with one significant difference - only in the evening, not at the crack of dawn, and this was enough to earn him more praise than complaints from his teammates.

In these first days of March, the weather presented itself unfriendly, alternatively offering cold rain and not so cold rain, once even snow. Buzzing at high speed through a haze of snow had a hypnotizing effect - if you had to use your eyes for this task. When using *getsumai no michi* instead, as Harry did, there was no difference at all.

The three Firebolts Two in the team created a significant impact on their tactics, most of all Ginny's. Within her basic role as a Chaser, Ginny received the special job of a *Hunter*. When the other team held the Quaffle, it would be her task to intercept, coming from behind, while Katie and Alicia were supposed to block the path as well as possible. Conversely, when they were running an attack together, Ginny had to stay behind Katie and Alicia - until, suddenly and surprisingly, she would push forward at full force, taking over the Quaffle and using the Firebolt's superior acceleration, this way slipping through the barriers formed by the other team.

As Harry and Ron learned quickly - from a Quidditch perspective, Ron's decision had been the only one possible. Since the moment Ron could cope with Harry's sprints, their synchronization ran worlds better than before. They felt sure to beat the other Beaters, were nonetheless busy to train the strategy suggested by Fleur.

Ron had explained the strategy to the girls, and of course he had done so by quoting Fleur as much as himself - with the result that Harry would be teased a lot by the three Chasers. Katie, for example. Guarded by him, flying at high speed with the Quaffle toward the goalposts, she called, "Harry - it was wonderful, but now you've got to leave."

Alicia, supposed to catch the Quaffle, failed miserably, hardly able to hold her broomstick while twisting in a bad fit of giggles.

Ginny seemed less amused.

At least Ginny could smile when it was Alicia's turn, flying with the Quaffle and then, close to the goal, squeaking with a high-pitched voice, "Gerroff me - gerroff me!"

Her own version, short and simple - "Get lost!"

When training with Rahewa, Harry used the superior speed to force the girl into all kinds of abrupt manoeuvres - lightweight movability versus heavyweight speed. Rahewa would not be handicapped in the coming match, only Harry was already thinking ahead - when playing against the Ravenclaws, Rahewa would face a real Firebolt Two, driven by a Cho who mustered hardly more weight.

Which didn't mean Harry would call that weight insignificant, not at all, actually, except this had little to do with Quidditch ...

After their training sessions, the Gryffindors used the recreation rooms to warm up again, feeling blessed to have them at hand and - this late in the evening - for themselves. Three rooms for seven people would, basically, suggest simple math - Katie and Alicia in the first, Ginny and Rahewa in the second, Harry, Ron, and Wynton in the third. Only that Katie had a tendency to vote for a different math. At the beginning, for example, she insisted to get first-hand guidance how to deal with this hot water, which from her perspective could only be given by Harry.

He did - it was simpler than starting an awkward discussion why Ginny would be equally suited to the task. And surely enough - as soon as Katie sat in the hot water tub for the first time in her life, she had other trouble than playing teasing games.

Some days later, when Katie again suggested a different mix, it was Ginny who broke the game. She grabbed Wynton, said, "All right - we're in the first room," and disappeared with him through the door, a speechless Katie staring after her.

Only Rahewa's face didn't move while listening to Katie's remarks. She wasn't even embarrassed when, one evening, Harry was called by Ginny because Rahewa had been hit badly by a Bludger, came over to cure it away.

Nonetheless, there was something on her mind, and it had to do with him. Harry could feel it, but he couldn't ask - not because he didn't know which words to use, only he knew there would be no answer.

So it was Rahewa herself who found the courage to ask, two days before the match. They were sitting in the Gryffindor tower, nobody else close. Out of the blue, Rahewa asked, "Ron has got the Firebolts for him and Ginny from a Goblin Request, right?"

Harry nodded - within the team, Ron had seen no reason to make a secret of the origin.

"Did you get a Request too?"

"No, only Ron."

"Why not you?"

Harry explained his bond with the Goblins, and why a Personal Request for him would have been much worse than none. Rahewa understood immediately. Still, she asked, "So it has nothing to do with what Ron did, or what you did?"

"No, certainly not ... Without the Privileged from last year, I'm sure they would have given me the same."

Rahewa looked up. "Maybe more?"

"No, I don't think so ... You know, a Request is not like a grading in school - aside from that, Ron's task was crucial enough."

Rahewa kept silent for a moment, then she said, "If I catch the snitch day after tomorrow ..."

When the sentence didn't finish, Harry felt a slight challenge to know what Rahewa meant, and to answer directly. Except he felt a stronger impulse to challenge back, and so he asked, "Then what?"

"Can I ask you something then?"

"Maybe you can ask right now."

"Yes, but ... It feels right only then."

"You mean - as a present?"

Rahewa nodded.

Of course Harry knew what she wanted to hear, saw no longer reason for playing dumb. "Don't you know already what happened in Middle Station?"

"Yes, but ..." She looked at him, not showing any surprise that he knew what she wanted. "I'd like so much to hear it from you."

A story how he had killed a man - maybe not by intention, although this might have been the case a moment later ... The heart's desire of a girl who had attacked a man twice her weight, almost twice her age, to protect him.

Harry nodded. "It's a deal - you catch the snitch, and I'll tell you every detail."

\* \* \*

The Ravenclaws had played the Slytherins with Cho still using a normal Firebolt from the Hogwarts pool, and they had slaughtered them twenty-six to four. Harry had of course seen the match, had drawn his own conclusions. Since then, however, things had changed - for example in some players' equipment.

For this reason, it would be informative discussing matters with someone from the Ravenclaw team, although maybe difficult, especially with the candidate Harry had in mind. But then, he saw more reasons - in the evening before the match, your mind tended to rotate endlessly around the same thought, which did no good, and besides ... So he invited Cho and Almyra in the Gryffindor tower.

Seeing the two girls, Ron stared at Harry with reproach in his face. "Are you mad? ... She's competition!"

Before Harry could answer, Rahewa wheeled around toward Ron and hissed, "She's Harry's guest!" sending a look from two burning eyes which made Ron shut up, still more surprised than a moment before.

Nonetheless, Cho had heard his remark. She smiled at Ginny. "Belinda was right - even after Percy, your father didn't stop improving."

Katie and Almyra could hardly calm down, while poor Ron was sitting there with burning cheeks. Sure, Weasleys came with a sharp tongue as a natural gift, but Ron, more used to

Janine's style of controversial discussions, had entered the ring not fully prepared for the Chang class.

Toward the girls, more exactly toward the smaller of them, Harry said, "We hoped you would tell us a bit about the Slytherin team."

Cho looked at him. "Oh - do I have to sing and dance for my invitation?"

"That may come afterwards. But first let's talk about Quidditch."

Almyra started to chuckle, couldn't stop, receiving an angry glance from Cho who replied, "Oh, c'mon - your team is good enough, generally speaking ..." She looked pointedly at Ron. "I don't see any chance - er, risk that the Slytherins can beat you."

Ron had recovered. "Right now, you might as well support us. Whatever happens - it's only the match between our two teams which will decide about the placement."

Cho smiled at him. "My dear Gryffindor captain, you have to improve also in math ... If you lose that match, we can lose against you and still win the cup - simply by scoring higher, which isn't too complicated, considering your first result ..."

Ron looked as if stung by a bee.

"... while if you win, we have to beat you in any case - not that I'm worried about that, mind you ..."

Harry put in. "Tell us something about Paul Larmer." Paul Larmer was the Slytherin Seeker.

"Okay ... Frankly, he wasn't up to the task in our match." Cho looked at Rahewa. "He may have improved since December, but even so ... He's just no natural, as simple as that."

Rahewa listened attentively, her expression unchanging.

Harry asked, "A second Draco?"

Cho grinned. "Paul is nice, but maybe that's the only difference ... They had a real loss with Bob leaving Hogwarts. And Paul's much heavier than Rahewa - so there's a speed advantage -" she grinned broader, "in *that* match."

Harry said quickly, "And *that* match's the only one we are discussing right now."

Cho smiled. "Okay, okay."

Alicia asked, "And their Chasers?"

"Hmm ... You've seen them - I wonder if I can tell you more. The Quaffle score alone was eleven to five, but they had a bad start - I won't say our Chasers were that much better." Cho wrinkled her nose. "To be honest - I think the Gryffindor Chasers are still the best, and our only way to beat you is - oops, we should discuss only the next game."

After her compliment, nobody objected to this small glitch.

Ginny said, "The Slytherins are the only team without a girl ... Does it mean anything?"

Cho grinned. "I guess it means a lot, while for the match - I don't know. Most of their Chasers and Beaters never played against so many girls - it may give you a head start." She laughed. "But once you've scored twice, they'll have lost any reluctance to hit you as hard as they can."

Ron asked, "And their Beaters?"

As a first answer, Cho gave him another special look, a reminder that Ron didn't really deserve an answer, while she in her borderless mercy was putting politeness over revenge. This settled, she said, "Adrian's good ... You're lucky we have the new rules - he knows quite a number of nasty tricks."

Harry remembered the last game against the Slytherins - a fight in which scoring with the Quaffle occurred as a random side effect more than anything else. However, at that time, terms between the houses had been different.

"Nigel is new," continued Cho, "but he's a real artist. In terms of accuracy, I'd say he comes closest to Harry."

Suddenly, most Gryffindor members had a funny expression in their face, as if barely avoiding a laugh. Cho saw it - fortunately, she took it for something else, something she preferred not to comment upon.

Katie asked, "What do you think of Simon?" Simon Ryerson was the Slytherin Keeper.

Cho shrugged. "Don't ask me ... The others said he was one of the reasons why we could lead five-zero so quickly, but ..." She glanced at Wynton. "You've seen him - what do you think?"

Wynton looked apologetical. "I've been concentrating more on their Chasers - the other Keeper isn't *my* problem ... Otherwise, I agree. A score that could have been held can drive you so mad for a few minutes - then you really look bad."

For the rest of the evening, the conversation turned to other topics, with just the effect Harry had hoped for - nobody in the team, he himself in first place, was biting nails, or hairs, at the thought of tomorrow's match.

And Ron had taken a lesson about the right time for remarks, as he showed the next day, giving his pre-match speech. "As we've heard yesterday so convincingly," he began, "we're better than the Slytherins in almost every position - that's what Cho said. But she was just trying to lure us into some reckless confidence ... Of course we're better, but if we don't concentrate, if we think the match is already won, we've lost before we started."

"Okay, Ron," replied Katie, "we've heard you - now let's start so we can win."

Maybe Ron had intended to say more, only the team took Katie's remark literally and got up, heading toward the Quidditch pit.

Lee Jordan's voice came through the loudspeakers. "And there are the Gryffindors in their scarlet robes ... Red against green - in a minute, we'll have to concentrate on Quidditch, while until then, you cannot help thinking that the Gryffindors should lend two of their girls to the

Slytherins, just for good balance - only I don't think Ron Weasley, the Gryffindor captain, would agree to that ..."

The Gryffindor captain was shaking hands with Adrian Pucey, his colleague, who looked tense - naturally so, because either the Slytherins won the match, or they were out of the race for the Hogwarts cup.

Harry watched Adrian, watched also Nigel Humphries, the second Slytherin Beater. What he sensed was fierce determination - a good sign, those two were so eager to show their skill, they would keep the Bludgers in the game.

"... Two ... One ..." Viktor's whistle pierced into his ears.

Harry shot up, caught the game from the very first second, his senses gripping the wheelwork of figures, speeds, and actions. Chris Curlington and Eugene Hammett, two of the Slytherin Chasers, were approaching closely together, the Quaffle sent back and forth between them. Harry saw Ron coming toward a Bludger, saw the point where the Bludger would be hit, the point where Chris and Eugene would be at the time the Bludger had reached him, sped forward ...

The Bludger came pelting, was there. Harry's club came up, his eyes fixed on Chris, then the club swung downward, forward, sent the Bludger - and Chris saw it, had waited for this moment, was passing the Quaffle over to Eugene.

Only the Bludger wasn't zooming toward Chris. It shot toward Eugene straight as an arrow, would reach him the same instant as the Quaffle.

Eugene made the mistake to seize for the Quaffle.

The Bludger hit him hard into the stomach. Eugene coughed, dropped the Quaffle, which was trundling through the air, then Eugene started gasping for air in earnest, losing all interest in Quidditch for the next minutes.

Totally in contrast to Alicia who stood closest, caught the Quaffle, sent it to Ginny who had been behind, now the one closest to the other goal.

Harry had pushed forward the moment after hitting the Bludger. He passed Eugene, hit the same Bludger again, this time sent toward Ron, raced forward to take his position at Ginny's side, following her toward Simon, lonely Simon in the Slytherin goal who had no one else to help him - too suddenly had the change occurred.

"... SCORE! SCORE! Ginny scores for Gryffindor - forty seconds in the game, not quite a record but almost. And Eugene still looks bad, and Adrian looks mad, really mad, and you know what this ..."

Adrian Pucey - mad he was as a captain, mad as a Beater, mad enough to forget all tactics. Tried to shoot Bludgers at Harry, with disastrous effects for the game because they bounced off Harry's club, miraculously whooshing toward obstacles in the path of Katie and Alicia.

For a change, Harry sent a Bludger, shot at closest range toward him, back to Adrian, hitting the Slytherin captain hard in the ribs.

Adrian forgot about Bludgers, came on with his club raised - in the *middle*, had this been *kenjutsu*. Harry parred, his own club coming from *above*, crashing Adrian's down. He sneered, "Wanna see the yellow card?"

He should have used his superior speed to escape. Viktor's whistle cut in - penalties against both teams, for using a club toward a player.

Alicia started, raised her arm to shoot - no, to send Simon into the wrong corner while the Quaffle sailed leisurely through the wide open goal. Seven to zero for Gryffindor.

Joseph Walsh started, pushed, reaching full speed, shooting the Quaffle as hard as he could. The red ball zoomed across, into the corner where Wynton had arrived a split second earlier, moving exceptionally fast for his standards. Still seven to zero for Gryffindor.

Adrian sobered up enough to call for a time-out. Unfortunately, calling for a time-out required that his team held the Quaffle. Unfortunately, until then, the score reached eight to zero for Gryffindor.

Down at the ground, Ron grinned. "Was a nice game so far ... I guess now it will turn a bit more difficult, unless Harry can do the same trick again."

Ron was right. The Slytherins had realized that there were some superior broomsticks in the other team, and that this team included a Beater who should be kept away from Bludgers. They started a game without Bludgers, a slow one in which manoeuvring was trump.

For several minutes, nobody scored. Then the Slytherins made their first point.

Harry tried to appear more *promising* again, hunting Bludgers and sending them the wrong direction. The first effect - Eugene Hammett scored again for the Slytherins.

The second effect was that Nigel Humphries - a moment later, when Ginny, guided by Harry, tried a speed attack alone - sent a Bludger to Adrian who was waiting in good position.

The Bludger raced toward Ginny, was hit by Harry's club, bounced off into nowhere, rather than clearing the path ahead. As if angry about his failure, Harry drove a narrow arc - Ginny might score or not, at any rate, it was too late for another Bludger.

Ginny didn't score.

Harry got the Bludger again in midfield, in good position to send it toward Chris Curlington.

"... comes the Bludger, and poor Chris will ... no, Harry missed again, for the second time in sequence, and Chris is through, Quaffle goes to Joseph, Katie tries to block, Quaffle back to Chris whose path is free, and in a second he'll test Wyn - ouch, that must hurt ..."

The Bludger, sent by Harry after receiving it from Ron, hit Chris in the back, exactly at the shoulder blade, an instant before Chris was ready to shoot. The Quaffle fell from a suddenly powerless arm, and Alicia was there, took it, shot it toward Ginny who pushed forward, leaving behind all Slytherins who just couldn't follow.

Guarding Ginny, Harry saw - *felt* - Adrian as the only player still in the way, not enough to block Ginny, unless he got a Bludger, and except he was trying a body attack ... and there came the Bludger, was sent into the air by Harry, Harry who suddenly lost speed, almost collided with Adrian, in this crucial moment in which Adrian had seen a chance for a collision with Ginny - and then it was too late, and Harry shot already back toward the closest Bludger while Ginny dumped the Quaffle through a goal, too close, too fast for any reaction from Simon. Nine to two for Gryffindor.

The Slytherins tried another position play at low speed, did it quite well, finished with a shot into Wynton's low-speed arms.

Running the counter attack, at Katie's side, Harry saw two other broomsticks buzzing through the air - Rahewa and Paul Larmer, almost side by side, Rahewa slightly ahead.

Then he saw the Snitch - a second before Rahewa, bending sideways, grabbed it, to push upward and to the side, driving her Firebolt into a looping of sheer joy before she shot down, incredibly steep, to bolt in the last moment.

Harry reached her first.

Rahewa held the twisting Snitch, her face beaming. "You owe me a story." Then her fist pounded onto the ground. The match was over - twenty-four to two for Gryffindor.

In the Gryffindor tower, with the usual guests, Ron turned to Cho. "Now the math is simple enough even for me - if you lose against Hufflepuff, we can lose against you - provided it's not more than one point."

"It's not impossible - we lose a player by a red card, your Chasers knock us flat, until I get the Snitch just in time ... We've seen such games, haven't we?"

Ron started to explain why this scenario was so unrealistic, and that his remark had to be understood as covering the extreme, while in practice there was a much simpler solution, meaning ...

Rahewa glanced at Harry. "Until they're finished with that discussion, we have time enough."

Harry saw the expectant look. "You want every detail, right?"

Yes, definitely so.

"Then it's impossible now - I was in those tunnels for more than an hour."

Rahewa swallowed - of course Harry was right, the codex of honouring guests couldn't be broken, only she was still an eleven-year-old who had hoped ...

Harry found the solution. "I met this man three times, and I was attacked each time - for compensation, because we have to delay it until tomorrow, I'll tell you about the other occasions too."

This was more than acceptable.

A week later, in the Quidditch stadium as a spectator, Harry watched how the Hufflepuffs scored twelve times against the three goals of the Ravenclaws Chasers before Cho outperformed William Chadwick effortlessly with her Firebolt Two.

Eighteen to twelve for Ravenclaw. Harry looked to Ron at his side, who nodded grimly - this math was the simplest of all. In little more than two months, they would play against today's winner in the Hogwarts Cup Final.

\* \* \*

Easter was lying ahead, and it would bring a short break. However, the weekend before Easter seemed still more important for many students, at least when listening to their conversations which rotated around partners and dresses. Saturday would be the day of the Beauxbatons Ball.

From Harry's perspective, preparing for the ball meant some training sessions with his Cree - or not so Cree - dance formation, while issues like partners and dresses were settled, although still reason enough to talk with the former about the latter. He was sitting at the Ravenclaw table, after lunch, when he saw a well-known, yet totally unexpected figure.

His godfather. "Oy! Sirius!"

Sirius came over, had three different smiles for Harry, Cho, and Almyra, and sat down.

"What are you doing here?"

"Didn't they tell you? ... Maybe it was planned as a surprise." Then Sirius explained that Dumbledore had invited him, to do a presentation for the seventh-years and the sixth-years. Vocational counsel was the issue, and Sirius was supposed to roll the drums for the Law Enforcement Squad. He would start with the seventh-years, which had Defence immediately after lunch, then come to the sixth-years, who had Social Ethics first.

Sirius looked at Cho and Almyra. "What about you? How are the chances?"

Cho smiled sweetly. "For the squad?"

Still busy to keep his face straight, Harry saw two other figures, not quite so well-known, equally unexpected although now he could guess the reason - Deborah and Paul.

When in doubt, invite them - even if it's not your table. "Oy! Deborah - Paul!"

They came over, raising a situation in which Harry felt sorry for his good manners - he had to introduce back and forth, while he would have preferred to watch the looks between Sirius and Deborah, in particular since one hadn't known of the other, here in Hogwarts.

Manners prevailed. Before the silence could go awkward, Harry turned to Paul. "So - at last, I've answered your question."

Paul nodded, smiling, while Almyra didn't have a clue.

"Some days ago," explained Harry, "when we met for the first time here and I asked you for your room, Paul wanted to know whether this was Miss Almyra Benedict. Only I didn't want to answer - not before I had fetched Nagini to test them a bit."

Several people looked relieved to have something to talk about that was as innocent as a mind-reading snake. After confirming that they would see each other in a short while, the three counsellors left to contact the class teachers - Sirius toward Snape, Deborah and Paul toward Professor Binns.

Cho watched them leave. When they were out of earshot, she turned to Harry, with a smile that looked a bit threatening. "Say, tricky Potter - you didn't tell us everything, did you?"

"Huh?"

"The way Sirius and that woman were looking at each other ..."

"I couldn't see that - I was busy introducing people."

Cho smiled triumphantly. "Wrong answer, you lousy spy ... You didn't ask how they were looking - which means you knew in advance."

Unable to resist any longer, Harry grinned broadly. "I'm still lacking details, but - after all, there's a limited variety, isn't it?"

Almyra made a sound which came suspiciously close to a giggle.

Cho glared at him. "And I was worrying because that woman is just the proper age for your taste ... You must have wet your pants from laughing."

Almyra kept totally noiseless - hands pressed on her mouth, her stomach already twisting.

"I'm not - er ... Anyway - please call her Deborah. She's nice."

"Oh, is she? ... You better fill in the gaps quickly, and now!"

Harry confessed that parts of the interviews had been about more private issues, and that his last visit with Sirius had been surprisingly - no, not surprisingly, anyway short. "That's all I know," he finished. "... You've seen the glances - how far has it developed?"

Cho turned to Almyra. "What's your guess?"

"Why do you ask me? ... You know Sirius as - er, as long as I."

Cho found the tact not to comment on that, and they agreed - whichever level these two had reached, the rest was only a question of time.

When Deborah and Paul gave their presentation about journalism, they had a very interested listener - Neville Longbottom. Harry could imagine Neville as a writer quite easily, while he wondered how this bundle of twisting nerves would ever manage an interview with a reluctant customer. But apparently, Neville was aware of that problem - his questions confirmed it.

Paul showed the solution. "Miss Beckett and I work as a team to complete each other ... We both have our strengths, so it's only natural to split tasks according to our preferences."

Parvati Patil had to grin about that, and Harry had to grin about Parvati.

Neville asked, "What's different between a newspaper and the WWN?"

Deborah answered. "In terms of work, less than you might expect. The people you hear talking are just the counterpart of the paper - behind the scene, it looks very similar."

Harry couldn't resist. "Think twice about the WWN, Neville."

Heads turned to him, including those of Deborah and Paul. And Neville himself, his voice slightly flippant. "Why? Because I'm not up to it?"

"No - you'd be an excellent moderator, I didn't forget your sceptor presentation ..."

Neville's expression changed to attentiveness.

"... but with the WWN, you had to be careful what to say. If you want to tell the truth, criticize people, you're better off with the *Daily Prophet* ... Ask them." Harry pointed toward Deborah and Paul, who looked pleased.

Deborah started, "We're of course prejudiced ..."

The ghostly teacher gave the answer. "Unfortunately, Mr. Potter is right ... The *Daily Prophet* is not the only alternative - this newspaper tends to some exaggeration, while the *Magical Times* is a bit conservative, but the WWN is just too docile ... They're owned by the wrong people."

Harry gaped at Binns. Once more, the translucent ghost had shown what Social Ethics could be, if not for his boring style. This seemed just another example where a twin team might do wonders.

Sirius' presentation was quite realistic - for the daily work of a Law Enforcement Squad member, with lots of boring tasks, demanding patience and stubbornness. Only, he found himself confronted with a tiny little problem - his own person being notorious for some recent undercover work, Snape notorious for the same, and whatever the other Gryffindors knew about Harry's activities was badly suited to emphasize *regular* squad routine.

Sirius looked desperate. "I'm not here to promise dream careers - by the way, what you're interested in is not a dream but a nightmare ... I'd do you a bad favour if I'd recommend that - ask your teacher."

It was the wrong signal. All students wanted to hear exciting stories about hide-and-seek at the dangerous level.

"Listen," said Sirius, "even if you come out unharmed, you'll be fired from the squad next thing - unless you have some strings to pull."

It made things worse. The students wanted to know about the strings, and it didn't help when neither Harry nor Ron could look as curious as the others. Altogether, it was a very interesting Defence lesson, while totally different from what Sirius had in mind. Anyway, a year from now, he would have a second chance.

Harry asked his godfather, "Did you find some candidates in the other class?"

"Maybe - I'm not sure ... All I know is - we need people. After this clean-up, we're short of reliable squad members."

"Did you find something else that looked promising?"

Sirius stared into an innocent-looking face. "In a few weeks, I'll invite my helpers to a party - plus some additional people. Until then, I'd recommend a virtue that would suit you well, since it's so poorly developed."

"There's such a virtue?" Harry grinned. "What on earth might that be?"

"In case you really don't know - to keep your nose out of other people's business."

"Now that surprises me - honestly."

His godfather didn't think so.

"Yeah, sure ... I mean, if it was your love life, I'd know what you mean, while business ..."

Sirius laughed. "It's not impossible to find an information leak somewhere else, but not with me."

This sounded like an excellent advice - unfortunately, Deborah had already left, and Harry couldn't help thinking Sirius had known in advance.

\* \* \*

Walking downstairs toward the Beauxbatons link gate, both Harry and Cho felt quite some expectation. They hadn't seen nor heard Marie-Christine since - well, since the Hogwarts ball. Somehow, something had prevented both sides from visiting each other, and a postcard would have looked just too ridiculous.

The first person they met was Oliver Wood, scheduled at the other side to guide people out of the gate. He smiled. "Brilliant performance, Cho, but do you really expect me to wish you luck?"

Harry grinned. "Why not? ... That's what she'll need - otherwise they won't have a chance."

Walking forward, Cho answered - into his ribs.

"Ouch - that's good for a penalty."

Cho kept her voice low. "With pleasure - but not here in public, and first there's a ball." It didn't sound like Quidditch, and Harry had a moment to think about the effect of balls toward Cho, and this effect's effect toward him.

Then they saw Marie-Christine.

She was alone - not a regular guest but a member of the organization team. It gave her the opportunity to join the event, and the school was glad for everyone ready to do some work. Beauxbatons standards demanded quite some people.

Cho asked, "Does it mean what I think it means?"

Marie-Christine grimaced. "Yes - we split, and it was a mess ... We might find time for a talk later."

They reached their seats. Using Janine as the request channel, they had ordered twelve of them - Harry and Cho, Ron and Janine, Ginny and Wynton, plus Harry's dance group, which would appear later. The effect was that, for the time being, they had a roomy spot in an otherwise crowded hall.

Harry went behind the stage to talk with the conférencier, and to make sure his group would do their presentation before any other - partly to limit the period of nervousness among them, though mostly with respect to a very impatient eleven-year-old who could hardly wait to join the ball.

Coming back, he recognized the glass in front of Cho. Inside, fine bubbles were rising upward. He smiled. "You start early."

"No need to worry - I'll stop earlier this time ... I really would like seeing a Beauxbatons ball to the end."

Ron and Janine laughed, remembering the previous year.

With the same memory in mind, Harry kept to his new favourite in the league of non-alcoholic drinks - Orangina. Basically a simple orange soda, offered it a distinct taste found nowhere else, in particular when it was served in these funny little bottles which hardly filled a glass.

The conférencier opened the ball, and Harry was gliding with Cho across the parquet. He smiled, smelling the champagne in her breath. She saw it. "A glass at the beginning - it gives you a kick start. You should've done the same."

"Later - when the presentation's over. This prairie grass charm is a bit tricky, and the parquet here is larger than in Hogwarts."

It was considerably larger, but there were also more people, filling the space to the limit. Cho had no objections to be pressed against him, helped even in this regard, giving Harry reason to ask, "Didn't you say you'd like to see the ball to the end?"

"Yes - why?" Cho's innocent voice was strangely out of sync with her body.

"Then maybe you should - er, keep dancing."

"You know, it's like with the champagne - it gives you ..."

"A kick start, yes - but please don't forget about a certain difference."

Cho giggled, kept a fraction of an inch more distance.

When Harry danced with Janine, he asked, "Are you celebrating?"

"Why? ... Yes, sure." She hadn't understood.

"No - the anniversary, with you and Ron. It's not exactly the same day, but a year ago ... Or do you count the Delacour visit?"

"Oh ..." Janine smiled. "Well - both ... Maybe we celebrate just in the middle."

The anniversary of the Delacour visit would be tomorrow, and the middle ... Apparently, thought Harry, the effect of balls wasn't restricted to Cho. At least, Janine kept normal distance to *him*.

While on the subject ... Dancing with Ginny, Harry said, "Some temporary solutions seem to develop a long life."

She smiled. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Harry."

"Shall I spell?"

"Didn't we agree on something? I'm not asking you - you're not asking me ... especially during balls."

Harry couldn't remember a promise not to ask Ginny, but even so, she was probably right. He definitely felt no need for increasing unbalanced states.

Then it was time to hurry behind the stage, to gather his six dancers, and to stand ready. This conf rencier offered a big advantage - he made the announcement, saved Harry from doing it himself, so he could concentrate on his spell.

"... Grass Dance!"

The keyword. Harry moved forward into the light, while his group hurried to the side exits - Rahewa, Gabrielle, Chloe to one side, Damon, Fabien, and Philippe to the other.

*"GRAMENALERE!"*

It worked! Harry stood calmly, relieved when the spotlights turned away from him to illuminate the scene in front and below, three pairs in opposite positions, moving gracefully to the uncommon music.

The lights went out. Harry heard the almost inaudible shuffle from Rahewa's feet. How funny it would be if he didn't manage to re-establish the parquet - for the others, but even for them not very long.

Of course it worked. Harry could feel it even before the light exploded in their faces - three girls to his right, three boys to his left. They bowed, and again, accepting the applause.

There was no such thing as a free supper. The conférencier had done the announcement for him; now Harry had to pay by answering questions.

How it had started? Quite naturally, what with dances, and American Indians ...

Why just this group? Oh - more by accident than by anything else.

If they would continue? Certainly ... Harry managed to suppress the remark that it had to last three more years before Gabrielle could give a damn for Grass Dance.

If they would enlarge the group? That might be something to think about ... And then to drop the idea.

At least, the conférencier let them go.

Harry waited while his troupe changed dresses, then they headed toward the table. It was interesting to see how Damon no longer showed any intention to leave, while he seemed to have no objections, should Fabien or Philippe come to this decision, or both together.

After bowing again for the *local* applause, they sat down. Harry wanted to order Orangina for all of them, except Gabrielle had a better idea, or so she said - champagne.

Harry shook his head. "No way."

"I've got some already, from my parents."

Harry looked at her. Fleur, who might have confirmed, or done just the opposite, was nowhere seen. "Would you say this also with Nagini around?"

"Honestly! ... Not much, only some."

"How much is some?"

She had been allowed to sip. They agreed on a quarter glass of champagne, filled with orange juice.

Then Damon wanted the same. Of course. "You'll get it, Damon," explained Harry, "but I warn you - French people can handle that better."

For a courageous second-year, in the presence of three girls within the proper age, this advice represented challenge enough to insist.

Harry ordered, shuddering inwardly at the thought of dealing with a dance formation the size this conférencier had suggested. But then, who knew - was there any difference between six and sixty, as long as Gabrielle belonged to them?

Marie-Christine came over to welcome the six new guests, and to congratulate them for their performance.

Looking around for an additional chair, Harry saw another figure coming closer, and suddenly a chair ranked as the least worry on his mind.

Gérard reached the table, stood almost at Marie-Christine's side, a mock version of past times. "Good evening everybody ... So we see each other again, and it's as if nothing has changed - but that's only how it looks to the outside, n'est-ce-pas, my dear Marie-Christine?"

Marie-Christine looked away, kept silent.

Gérard sneered toward Harry. "I watched your group. You let the girls dance, 'arry - really, quite a habit of yours, as I could see - and as I've been told." His quick glance toward Marie-Christine left little doubt what Gérard was talking about, giving Harry a feeling of what Marie-Christine had meant, mentioning *a mess*.

Gérard looked at Rahewa, met an expressionless stare from two dark eyes. "And here's the young lady who cannot only dance by herself - no, who can make other things dance too ... Knives, for example." Next instant, Gérard had something in his hand. With a faint click, a long blade popped up.

"But she's not the only one who has mastered the ... Gérard grabbed Marie-Christine's hair with one hand, the other held the knife toward her throat. He glared at Harry. "Don't you move, or she's dead." His eyes quickly scanned Rahewa and Ginny. "The same goes for you!"

The table stood between Harry and Gérard, with Christine in his grip. Worse - Harry's arms were lying on the table, his wand somewhere deep in his cloak.

Obviously, Gérard thought the same. "The great wizard, and fighter without weapons, and he's helpless ..." His expression changed. "One movement, 'arry, and Marie-Christine's smelling her own blood - although not very long."

Harry leaned back, careful to keep his arms on the table. "Okay ... I'm not going to move." Looking to his side, toward Rahewa and Ginny, he added, "Nor anyone else."

Gérard issued a high-pitched giggle. "Very good ... You see, I can make people dance too, or sit still - maybe it's not quite as pleasurable as your method, 'arry, but people may remember longer ... And I let others watch - although, maybe that was just a lack of audience in your case, what, 'arry?"

Marie-Christine made a choked sound, twisted a bit.

"Keep still," snarled Gérard, pressing his knife harder against her skin, "or you'll dance right now!"

Harry stared into Gérard's eyes. "That wouldn't be a good idea."

"Oh - don't you think so, great wizard?" Another one of these hysterical giggles. "And why not, my dear asshole 'arry?"

"Because if you touch her, I'll make sure you'll never touch her again."

"I mustn't touch her, huh? ... It's only you who's supposed to touch her, huh? Only, you don't use a knife, but ..."

Gérard's expression changed again. There was a horrible desperation in the sweat-streaming face. "You've touched her for the last time, 'arry - and I don't give a damn what you'll do ... No - it's a lie - I know what you'll do, in a moment - but first you'll watch how this knife goes deeper into this beautiful body than you ever ..."

Harry could sense it for the last minute. Gérard would kill Marie-Christine, and then he would stand there and wait to be killed himself. And if anything would prevent him from doing so now and here, in front of this audience he had selected on purpose, he would do it at the next opportunity, maybe not even waiting for another audience.

Without surprise, Harry realized that his decision had already been made before. The only thought running through his mind now - let it work, please let it work.

His hands touched, like in a prayer. His outstretched arms, now forming a long triangle like an arrowhead, rose slightly upward, pointing at the distorted mask of Gérard's face.

"... managed to put your bloody ..."

It's the intention that counts ... The magic is in yourself ... "AVADA KEDAVRA!!"

The green flash shot across the table, upward, hit Gérard's forehead, disappeared inside.

The hateful face slacked. Eyes, suddenly sightless, stopped moving and blinking. Cramping fingers opened. The knife was the first thing falling down, then Gérard's dead body followed while Marie-Christine, pushed forward from the collapsing weight, stretched her arms to hold on to the table.

Harry went around the table, probably fast though feeling like in slow motion, felt no need to check anything, had sensed the fading fire of hate and desperation an instant before. His arms were around Marie-Christine. "It's okay - it's over."

Her body started trembling. A chair was free - Harry pressed her down, his hands on her shoulders, his mind sending a wave of calmness and safety, his mouth forming words. "It's over - you're alive, and he'll never try it again."

Looking up, he saw faces staring at him. Consternation, after-shock, utter disbelief, first signs of relief - and a pair of coal-black eyes, burning like two flames in a brilliant fire.

Sending another wave, Harry felt Marie-Christine recover. She turned around, looked at the formless shape at the floor. "He's dead?"

"Yes."

"Thank God." Marie-Christine buried her face in her hand. A moment later, the first sobs could be heard.

Cho had come around, also Janine. Harry made room for them, walked the same way back, around the table to his seat, sat down. Waited.

## 20 - Interrogation

Sitting and waiting ... No longer in the Great Hall of Beauxbatons, no longer in this car which had brought Harry to a large building. Now he was sitting in a windowless room, at a table. The chairs were plain, nothing of the fancy style found in Beauxbatons.

He felt no difference.

He didn't feel much anyway. There was a numbness - not from any bad treatment, the policemen who had escorted him out of the school building and put him into the car hadn't been rough, not too careful either. The lack of sensory reception came from the knowledge what he had done, no matter how good the reasons.

Harry still saw no other possibility, knew - he would do it again.

Thinking returned slowly. How were the French police? Less friendly than their British colleagues, that's what he'd heard. Soon, he would know.

Should he pretend not to understand French? Little sense in that - it would take forever. Should he talk? Mr. Spinbottle crossed Harry's mind - did he need a lawyer? After this clear act of self-defence? ... He would wait and see.

It shouldn't take too long. Marie-Christine had given him an address where Harry would find her and Cho, waiting together. Some apartment. Maybe some kind of love nest - until recently, that was, until terms between Marie-Christine and Gérard had ended *in a mess*.

Wrong. They had ended half an hour ago, after a last embrace, under the brilliant green flash of a Killing Curse. The second one from Harry, the first against the will of the targeted person, and the first without a wand.

Was it true - against Gérard's will? ... No, not true, only right. Gérard had expected this curse - except he'd expected it a moment later. Self-destruction only after destroying the one who had made him lose for the first time in his life, in front of those having witnessed a milestone in this process.

Examining the seconds in the Beauxbatons hall again, Harry wondered if Gérard had expected this outcome, if he had known that Harry could send a Killing Curse without a wand, had uttered his insults only long enough until Harry was ready.

No. This would be thinking around one corner too much. How should Gérard know? Harry himself hadn't known.

The door opened. A man came in, walked around the table, sat down opposite, looking at Harry. Middle-aged, not thin, not thick. Dark-haired. Moustache. "Mr. Pottère." he said, "I am Claude Domingieux, Commaissaire du Police Domingieux ... We will talk."

"Good evening, Monsieur le Commissaire."

"Alors ... What happened?"

With surprise, Harry sensed burning anger, and what he heard was a snapping voice that would have suited in the interrogation of a criminal. He wasn't. "Didn't they tell you?"

"I'm the one who's asking the questions - you're here to give answers."

"Yes of course, Monsieur le Commissaire Claude Domingieux ... I killed Gérard, a moment before he could do the same with Marie-Christine. Only he tried to use a knife, while I used a Killing Curse ... And another difference - he wasn't successful."

"So you confess having killed Gérard Pouilly on purpose?"

"Pouilly? ... Oh, yes, I remember, although he was always Gérard for me ..." Remembering the meeting with the tiny lawyer, using him as some mental guide, Harry added, "Otherwise, I don't confess anything."

"You just said you killed Monsieur Pouilly with a Killing Curse."

"Yes."

"And this curse wasn't sent by accident?"

"No."

Domingieux' arms made an impatient gesture. "Then you killed him on purpose - what else?"

Harry kept silent - not only because he could see the trap in this statement, still more because the discrepancy between hearing and sensing hadn't faded, bothering him enough to search for another approach in his responses.

"Lost your speech?"

"Lost your politeness?"

The Commissaire jerked up a bit, leaned back again, a careful expression in his face. Maybe he remembered that there hadn't been a wand. With a voice of tempered impatience, he said, "Listen, young man, either you talk reasonably, or this will take awfully long - and I love it, sitting deep into the night with some wise-ass who's trying to teach me manners ..."

"Why - is it a hopeless case?"

For an instant, it looked as if Commissaire Domingieux would laugh. Then the moment was gone. Still, the words and the behaviour didn't match with Harry's sensing. Anger, yes - maybe even against him, but something didn't fit.

"Why did you kill him?"

When in doubt, try politeness. "Monsieur Domingieux, now and for the last time - I killed Gérard Pouilly in an act of defending Marie-Christine - er, Mademoiselle Thérooux, from being killed by him ... And from now on, I'll answer questions which are new and belong to this case."

"All right then ... Did you fuck her?"

Harry kept silent, not fully able to hold his expression straight.

"Doesn't it belong to the case, Monsieur Pottère? ... Or maybe I used the wrong language, huh? ... Well, then - " Commissaire Domingieux showed a mocking bow, "... did you ever have sexual intercourse with Mademoiselle Théroux?"

Harry kept silent, suppressing a surprisingly strong impulse to laugh at these ridiculously formalistic words, given with an overarticulating voice, otherwise not unlike Dobby's.

Which now changed to normal police snarl. "Answer, young man! ... This question is clearly related to the case!"

"Why?"

"As if you didn't know!" Amused sarcasm - quite impressive how quickly the Commissaire could change the mood in his voice. "This is the reason why he went crazy, and this is why you killed him - to have her for yourself!"

"So that's your version?"

"It's not my version, it's fact - they were lovers, you came in, she turned to you, and you got rid of him - the boring old story." Tired patience, followed by surfeit.

Harry kept silent.

"Forget about self-defence," said Domingieux. "Yes, we have witnesses that he had a knife at her throat - so what? He'd never done it, wasn't the type ... What makes you think he was serious? Some angry words from a cheated lover, that's all the witnesses confirmed."

Except that his *haragei* had told Harry something else ... How to explain this to a preoccupied French cop?

When in doubt, not at all. Harry said, "I don't think it makes sense to continue this conversation ... When can I see my lawyer?"

Commissaire Domingieux laughed. "Your lawyer - do you know how long we can hold you before you're entitled to see a lawyer? Fully according to the law? ... French law, Monsieur Pottère - forty-eight hours."

Harry hadn't known.

Seeing Harry's surprise and uneasiness, for once the Commissaire presented the same in sensing, hearing, watching - satisfaction. "So maybe we can talk now, after this little misunderstanding is out of the way?"

"I'm not going to comment on Gérard's motivations for what he did. It doesn't matter anyway what I think. All that matters is ..." Harry shook his head, slightly upset about his near slip. "No, I'm not going to repeat myself."

"Maybe I'm curious, Monsieur Pottère. Maybe I want to hear what you think - even if it doesn't matter ... So what drove Gérard Pouilly over the fence?"

"He couldn't ..." Harry stopped.

"He couldn't what? Is it too complicated for a simple cop's mind? Or too embarrassing? Didn't he get a hard one - was that the reason?" Seeing some reaction in Harry's face, Domingieux leaned forward. "Now?"

"No - for all I know, he wasn't impotent ... Yes, sex was involved, but it's something more fundamental - and very personal."

"Wow!" Domingieux' head was nodding in admiration. "More fundamental than sex - that's new to me ... Tell me."

Ignoring the sarcasm, Harry replied, "Self-esteem, for example."

"Ah - self-esteem ..." The mockery in the voice didn't catch - Harry could feel how the Commissaire recorded a fact. "And personal," continued Domingieux, "... *everything* that's spoken in this room is personal, so don't let yourself be misguided from some self-consciousness."

Harry didn't. "I can decide about my own personal feelings," he said, "not about those of other people ... You can ask them, don't ask me."

Another laugh. "What a delicate taste - so careful not to spill intimate secrets, not to hurt other people's feelings - except for a killing, that's not out of bounds, huh?"

Harry's face didn't change, and Domingieux seemed unsurprised of that, considering how quickly he continued, "Then please tell me about your own feelings - toward Gérard Pouilly, for example."

"I met him a year ago, at the previous ball ... He was amusing - I liked him."

"Has changed, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"To what?"

"Pity - and carefulness ... He's - was - dangerous."

"Dangerous?" The police officer snorted. "That's ridiculous."

"No, it's ..." Harry became aware that Commissaire Domingieux wasn't a beginner in interrogations, that he had changed his tactic, and that the new style seemed considerably more difficult to withstand.

"And toward Mademoiselle Théroux?"

"I like her. I'm obligated to her."

Domingieux looked thoughtful. "Obligated, hm? ... Is it too personal, or can we ..." He let the unfinished sentence hang in the air as an invitation.

"It has to do with Voldemort," explained Harry after a second. "She found out something - for that, I owe her."

"So if she asks you for something, you'll do it, right?"

"Yes."

"Even if it's a killing."

The accusation sounded so cheap, tempting protest so much, Harry had to remind himself of his carefulness. "The question didn't come up," he said. "She didn't ask me to kill someone. She didn't even ask me to save her life, I did it by myself."

"And you still owe her?"

Harry stopped himself just in time before answering - this man was breaking holes in his barriers awfully fast. And besides, he wouldn't have known how to answer.

"So you like her?"

"Yes."

"Enough to ..."

Just barely, Harry managed not to ask back, *To do what?* - the question Domingieux had tried to provoke.

"Do you love her?"

"No."

"You're right - it complicates things too much ..." The Commissaire hesitated a moment, just long enough to register any sign of protest at this provoking remark. When none appeared in Harry's face, he continued in a more conciliatory tone, "Okay - you like her, you have sex with her, Gérard finds out, it drives him crazy, he comes to the ball, fidgets with a knife, and you kill him because it looks as if he might hurt her - can we agree on that?"

Hardening himself against the invitation in this sympathetic voice, Harry kept silent.

"Why didn't you stupefy him?"

To make sure Gérard would try never again. But Harry didn't say it aloud.

"That's the little problem we face here, Monsieur Pottère ... If it was really self-defence, if he really was about to kill her, a stupefying spell would have been the natural choice. But it wasn't, and this is why we're dealing with a case of murder."

Harry didn't believe Commissaire Domingieux. Something was wrong - for a while, overwhelmed by his own emotions, he had put the thought aside. Now the doubt was back, for him reason enough not to say more. He felt a strong temptation to figure it out in a discussion, only this man was better than himself.

Twenty minutes later, after a series of unsuccessful attempts, alternating between questions and remarks, even a little monologue, Commissaire Domingieux said, "Silence is golden, huh? ... Think it over," and left the room.

Harry did.

After five minutes' thinking alone and without interruptions, he knew that his patience had almost run out. This room here wasn't even a cell - no water, no toilet, no place to lie down. He examined the door. No inside handles ... Well, either the door would open with fine work, or it would blow through the next wall.

He took the lotus position, used three minutes for calming down and concentration. A lock was a lock was a lock was holding him away from Cho and ...

*Click*

Harry pushed the door open, stepped out, closed it again. Sensing around, he recognized that the building was almost empty. It shouldn't be difficult to find Monsieur Domingieux.

Ten minutes later, he had located him. The tag at the door confirmed what his *haragei* was telling him - however without giving any hint why so much anger kept boiling in the Commissaire.

Harry opened the door.

Domingieux was sitting on a desk, and he had a quick reaction, his wand coming up very fast ...

*"Expelliarmus!"*

The wand shot through the room into Harry's hand. He moved closer, reached the desk. Which was covered with photos, quite a lot - most of them showing the slumped body of Gérard, as if any of them might reveal something new.

And his wand.

Harry took it, looked at Domingieux, feeling expectant carefulness, no fright - none at all. And the anger was gone. Harry took a chair, sat down. "I'm ready to talk - if you'll answer one question."

"You're threatening a police commissioner, that's the only thing that matters here - and there's no question about that!"

That was true - although not right.

Harry stood up, put Domingieux' wand on the desk, sat down again. "And now?"

Domingieux looked at his wand, at Harry, leaned back, shrugged. "Ask."

"You're mad about something - but it's not me, and it's not the killing ... What is it?"

For the first time, Harry felt a split second of fright. Domingieux' eyes widened, then his face went expressionless again.

"I cannot read thoughts," assured Harry, "but I can sense emotions ... It's called *haragei* - and it's been this *haragei* which told me that Gérard would try the same tomorrow, or next week ... That's why I didn't stupefy him ... I owe Marie-Christine too much."

Domingieux watched Harry's face while saying, "Gérard Pouilly."

"Yes, sure - the same person."

"No - quite a difference ..." The police officer presented a very French-looking pair of raised eyebrows. "Gérard was a young man - Pouilly is an old family."

And suddenly it was clear. Not in the details - only that Commissaire Domingieux had received a message, from somewhere above. Not for a second did Harry believe this had been the man's own decision. In this case, the anger would have felt differently.

"Okay, that's answer enough ... Thank you ... Where shall I begin?"

Where it began, of course. So Harry told Domingieux how they had met Marie-Christine and Gérard a year before, how they had met again in the Battle of Hogwarts, that the two had found to each other - only to realize that Gérard was unable to consolidate his love with his personal preferences, or habits. Then Harry described the scene during the Hogwarts ball.

Domingieux had listened silently until then. Now he interrupted, "Wait a second - your description of this fight was a little short. So Gérard made his remark, and Marie-Christine shot him a good one - okay. What came next?"

"I went over the table and kicked him, so he fell down with the chair."

"Can you show me?"

Domingieux barely suppressed a gasp when Harry obeyed, his feet of course missing the Commissaire on purpose. Then the police officer said, "Well, can nobody say you couldn't scale your attacks - sorry, was a police joke ... Okay, and then?"

"I was here on this side. Marie-Christine asked me to escort her out, and we started to walk." Harry demonstrated how, after a step or two, he had turned, while the Commissaire took over Gérard's role.

Domingieux looked at Harry in the attack stance. "And so you stopped because that girl came flying."

"Er - yes, Rahewa. She was at his neck and had the knife at his throat."

"A knife, huh? ... How old is she?"

"Erm - eleven."

Domingieux glanced at Harry. "Is this a habit in Hogwarts?"

"No - I mean, hopefully not ... She's American Indian, a Cree, and she knows how to handle it."

"I bet - she was impressive enough that Gérard got a knife for himself ... What do you think, could he really handle it?"

Harry looked at Domingieux, however, the question sounded like genuine interest, rather than an attempt for an interrogation trap. He asked back, "Is it really complicated to kill someone with a knife?"

The Commissaire snorted. "Not quite as simple as you think - although I have to admit, the throat is a simple target, compared to the heart."

"I didn't know ... Anyway, Gérard was really brilliant - I'm pretty sure he learned it thoroughly enough."

"Okay - back to that scene. So this girl showed him some metal."

"No - he couldn't see it, he only could feel it. Then Ginny came ... my step-sister, she's doing *aikido* like me, and like Rahewa ..."

Domingieux' expression was worth a look.

"... she came and told Rahewa it's okay, and then she said to Gérard he was lucky to be alive. Then ..."

"Was he?"

"As I said, the problem wasn't that Rahewa didn't know what she was doing ... He was lucky that Rahewa was quick enough. Had he sent a spell toward me - well ..." Harry's voice trailed off.

Domingieux showed a thin smile. "So the message is - don't mess with Harry while Rahewa's around, right?"

"Er - yes, definitely."

"Does she love you?"

"No ..." Seeing the doubt in the Commissaire's face, Harry added with a pointed casualness, "She adores me, that's all - so-to-speak."

"Could have been worse, couldn't it?" Not looking apologetic at all, Domingieux said, "Sorry - a French joke."

Harry had no intention to tell the Commissaire how right he was, that it wasn't funny at all.

"Okay - what came next?"

"Ginny walked Rahewa back to her seat, and Cho took over Marie-Christine. Then Gérard said something about big hero, protected by little girls. And I said yes, and that this was a difference between us, because he won't find any girl who'd do this for him."

"Uh-oh ... That must have hurt - more than your kick."

Harry looked surprised. "You're right - although I hit him once more, said it was a message from Marie-Christine ... But that was when I realized what his problem was, and I told Marie-Christine outside, in the park."

"A second before, she was still in the hall, and now ..."

"Sorry ... Gérard left, and I went after Cho and Marie-Christine, and found them outside. Marie-Christine was crying, almost broke down, couldn't be comforted for a while. Then we spoke, and I told her Gérard is dangerous. She didn't believe. I said yes he is, because he cannot lose - that was his biggest problem, he couldn't lose, couldn't even compromise ..."

"Why - er, why not? After so few meetings, you figured this out?" Domingieux' face showed just a trace of disbelief, more expectant curiosity.

"Well," said Harry, "I had some more information, for example from what Gérard said about himself, and also from my *haragei*. He was either excellent, or he didn't do it - like sports, for instance. You cannot play sports without losing one time or another, and that's why he didn't ... And compromising - he couldn't get his love and his ideals together, and it drove him crazy ..."

"Ah - so we come to a little sex, after all."

Harry nodded. "Yes, of course. He preferred the athletic type, well-trained - Cho, Ginny, he made clear to everybody that he'd like to - er, have them. And Marie-Christine, the one he loved, had breasts too big, and her body was too soft, or whatever ..."

"But he was alone with this opinion. I mean, you didn't think so?"

"No ... I think she has a wonderful body."

"As you know for sure?"

Harry swallowed, looked at Domingieux, not finding any teasing, or sneering. "Marie-Christine sounded a bit - er, suicidal in the park. Cho wasn't ready to let her go - you must know, Cho and I both owe Marie-Christine ... Cho got a key for a guest suite. And there - Marie-Christine didn't want to be alone, and Cho said she should - er, pick her choice ... But she couldn't decide."

Domingieux waited for him to continue.

"So we stayed there together. Then Marie-Christine started to talk about his complaints - I mean, her body, and her bosom. And we told her it's nonsense, that she's very attractive, and so. And - then she said, Show me ... And we did."

"Both of you?"

"Yes."

Commissaire du Police Domingieux didn't blink. "Convincingly enough?"

"Yes ... At one time, Marie-Christine said to me, 'You're right, he cannot lose.' She - she was doing something she seemed not to be allowed with him."

"But he loved her?"

Harry felt grateful for this change of topic. "For all I know - yes. I remember his look a year ago ... Yes, I'm sure."

"And then?"

"The next time we saw Marie-Christine was here, and we heard they'd split. She said, 'It was a mess.' When Gérard appeared - I mean, from what he said, it was obvious that she'd told him about us - about people other than him who didn't find her objectionable at all."

Thinking about this scene, Harry added, "This must have been the second blow ... Someone else could make his love happier than he himself - if he hadn't lost already before, if he could think this was just a problem, this knowledge made clear - he had scored only second ... He couldn't live with that."

Domingieux cleared his throat. "Monsieur Pottère - if the situation would be the same, Gérard with the knife at her - what would you do?"

Harry had to think about the question only a second, looked up. "The same."

"Why?"

"He was going to kill himself - this way or the other, that much was clear ... A day later, there might have been a small chance he'd do it only toward himself, but - for Marie-Christine, I wasn't ready to take chances. And I know Cho thought the same."

"Someone else too? ... Someone - er, outside these three people?"

"Oh ..." Only now, Harry understood the question. "I don't know - you may ask Fleur - Fleur Delacour, Gérard was her assistant in dance lessons ... Otherwise - I know Rahewa thinks the same, but I guess you're looking for someone less prejudiced."

"Yes, indeed ... Monsieur Pottère, would you repeat the essential parts of your statements in front of a jury?"

Harry's eyes widened. "Certainly not ... This was a conversation between you and me, Monsieur le Commissaire. I promised you to talk, after getting my answer, and I did. This has nothing to do ..." Harry shook his head. "In front of a jury, I'll sit with a lawyer, and for all I know, I'll claim self-defence, and nothing else."

"Then why did you tell me all this?"

"Because ... If I'd said Gérard couldn't lose, just so, you'd never believed me - the picture is complete only after knowing all details ... And I wanted to show you the picture ... And why I'd do it again."

Domingieux looked at the table. "I'd like to ask some more questions - maybe not fully related to this case ... After that, I guess we'll be done for today ... although it's already tomorrow."

Harry shrugged. "I don't promise, but - ask."

"How did you manage without a wand?"

Harry nodded. "And what is *haragei*, and *getsumai no michi* ... I learned these techniques from a Japanese teacher - his name is Matsuo Shigura. He showed me that all magic is in the wizard - provided he's ready to believe ... You could do the same."

"Provided I believe?"

"Yes."

"Hmm ... Maybe I'll ask you for his address ... How did you open the door?"

"With magic - moving things and such."

Domingieux grinned. "Is it a big repair?"

"Er - no ... I think the lock is still working."

"That's good ... How does this Shigura teach such tricks?"

For the first time in this conversation, Harry blushed. "He puts you in a cell while someone's waiting for you."

Domingieux laughed. "I'd like to know this Shigura ... Clever guy, really." Then his face steadied again. "Your obligation toward Mademoiselle Thérooux - would you be ready to give a more detailed statement ..."

"We can make it shorter," interrupted Harry, although for reasons of politeness. "Marie-Christine is a kind of expert on Voldemort. By conclusion, she found out what will be his next strategy - it is directed against Cho and me, of course - but against our child, rather than ourselves ... And some time ago, we found proof for that."

Even a French Commissaire could look horrified. "Thank you - and you can believe me, Monsieur Pottère, this won't appear in any protocol."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I know - that's why ..."

"Well, then ..." Domingieux' expression turned business-like. "That's it, Monsieur Pottère - thank you for your coming."

The smile about this joke was short at both sides of the table. Then Harry asked, "Monsieur Domingieux - what will happen next?"

"Oh - your lawyer will have to do some work, for sure, but I'd be surprised if you'd be ordered to appear here again."

Thinking it over, Harry found the shortest comment. "Thank you."

Domingieux grimaced. "Sometimes I have a grudge against old families ... Especially late in the night."

Harry stood up. "Do I find a cab downstairs?"

"Yes, turn left and around the corner."

"Okay ... Good night, Monsieur Domingieux."

Almost at the door, he was stopped. "Monsieur Pottère?"

"Yes?"

"Was it the first time?"

He knew what the Commissaire was talking about. "Not exactly, but - in the sense you're asking, yes."

"Then be prepared for the after-shock. It will take a while, so you won't be caught in the cab ... You'll feel like hell."

"Yes, I know - my teachers told me."

Domingieux looked sympathetic. "Did they? ... But they didn't tell you how it really feels."

\* \* \*

Both Cho and Marie-Christine awaited him at the door when Harry came up the stairs in this old building, feeling grateful that the bell had worked, and also the door opener.

He stepped in, looked around.

Basically one large room, with a mini kitchen built into a corner, and another door in addition to the exit, probably to a bathroom. At the other end, Harry could see mattresses on the floor rather than a bed, not unlike futons, only thicker. A student's apartment - for a rich parents' kid who had to overcome some limitations of the Beauxbatons dormitories.

And who was dead now.

Cho and Marie-Christine made him sit down, gave him a glass with something, had thousand questions. Harry summarized his two conversations with Domingieux, so very different, and with some details left out. Only when the glass was empty and Marie-Christine gave him a refill, he realized it was white wine.

Cho asked, "So you're free?"

"Yes, that's what he said ... We could go."

"But you won't - not tonight." It was Marie-Christine.

Harry didn't care much, this way or the other, stared mindlessly ahead.

Cho took his hand. "How do you feel?"

"Dunno ... Not at all, I guess."

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Can we do something else for you?"

"No ... Just let me sit here."

Cho, in his back, bent over him, hugging. "You were great ... You did right."

Harry nodded. "Yes."

The girls were walking through the room, doing something he wasn't aware of. After some time, Cho stood in front of him. With surprise, he realized she was wearing a pyjama - much too big for her. With the long trouser legs falling over her feet, she looked like a child.

"Come to bed, Harry."

"No ... Let me sit here still for a while."

A small lamp in the mini kitchen was the only illumination, giving little light at the table where Harry was sitting, almost none toward the end where the two girls had disappeared under the bedcover.

After a while, Harry could hear regular breathing from both sides of the bed. Looking up, he tried to remember what had made him listen - the faint noise was hardly loud enough to cut into his brooding mind. Then he realized - his mind itself had sent the message, more exactly, his *haragei*.

Stupid Gérard. Bloody, stupid, stupid Gérard who had found a way to be killed by him. Suddenly Harry knew - had it failed, somehow, Gérard would have waited. He wanted Harry to do it. What had Marie-Christine said at the lake? "... the only one he isn't talking about with detest, not even in bad mood."

And what did it mean? Gérard had - long ago, in this short year - accepted Harry as the better - what? ... Wizard? Human? Man? Was it then wrong what he had said, that Gérard couldn't lose? ... No - Gérard had just made sure he wouldn't compete against Harry. He had never really tried to seduce Cho - regardless of what little chance there might have been. And after Harry had sent him a warning because of Ginny? It had been Ginny herself who stopped it, and of course his own doing - anyway, Gérard had never tried to challenge him.

One exception - the failed attempt with a wand, stopped by Rahewa.

Had there ever been a curse, coming out of the wand?

Too late to ask ... As if he'd got an answer.

Would he really have killed Marie-Christine?

Let's see ... Gérard, for whom Harry is out of any competition, realizes that this Harry has made Marie-Christine moan and gasp and twist and spasm - worse, this Harry surrendered any control to let her ride on a wave of ecstasy - and this information certainly has been given with the most angry words. And then - Gérard doesn't make any attempt to violate him ... Wrong - of course he does! He tries to destroy this desirable body right in front of Harry's eyes, as a punishment for him, for her, and as a guarantee that, only seconds later, he would be killed by Harry.

A brilliant plan, so very much like Gérard. Had almost worked.

So Harry had done right. In this case, he could as well stop feeling sick.

Failing that, to go into the bathroom and vomit.

Failing that, to drink a glass of water and go to bed.

A pyjama was lying in the bathroom, apparently put there by Marie-Christine. Gérard's, of course ... Harry's body tensed in anticipation at the thought of feeling the fine silk.

Stripped down to his underpants, he climbed under the bedcover at Cho's side, carefully nudging her to move a bit toward the middle. Not coming awake, she obeyed just enough to make room for him, without showing any intention to inch away from the body in her back.

\* \* \*

He woke - pretty early, considering the time he had gone to bed. Both girls were still sound asleep. Harry climbed out, careful not to let cold air come in.

In the bathroom, he examined the shower. For all he knew, these pipes would make noises like a landing aeroplane, while hot water might be a game of luck. He dropped the idea - maybe later.

Then he recognized one of the reasons why he had come awake - hunger.

Checking the fridge and a cabinet, he found sausages, cheese - no bread. Of course - fresh baguettes were a French standard even Sunday morning.

The thought alone made Harry's mouth water. He dressed, took his money, found a ring with keys - if these were the wrong ones, so what? Wasn't he the world champion in opening doors?

Standing in the shop, just in time he remembered that some people preferred these tasteless bulks of baked dough called *croissants*. And there was a glass of confiture, and a glass of ... Shopping hungry made full arms, if you'd been too much in a hurry for coming with a basket.

Returning into the large room, Harry checked toward the bed. A jet-black mane and a dark-brown one, shorter. No movement, an occasional sound of snoring.

He found no tea in the kitchen. Well, then ... café au lait would do. Minutes later, he had found all items to start the first coffee brewing of his life.

The scent of fresh coffee was really great - funny, how much better than the taste, especially in combination with the scent of fresh baguettes. And it was good enough to wake two girls. In rapid succession, they disappeared in the bathroom, hurried back under the cover, from there watching his every movement.

Seeing the two expectant faces, Harry asked, "Won't you come out for breakfast?"

"My God, no!" Cho looked shocked. "Breakfast in bed, that's almost like heaven - in particular when it's served."

Guided by Marie-Christine's comments, Harry found trays, cups - nobody in Great Britain would call them cups - dishes. Marie-Christine looked delighted when he offered the choice between baguette and croissants.

Croissants, as Harry learned at this occasion, weren't that bad - not for eating, Heaven beware, however you could pass them over right away while baguette required butter, and confiture, cheese on the second - no, the other, Harry - and this one with sausage, please.

Eating in the lotus position - you didn't have to travel as far as Japan for that. The sight of the two girls in front of Harry was spectacular in its own way - Marie-Christine doing awful things with pieces of her croissant and her café au lait, while Cho kept crunching away as if this pyjama had to fit within the next twenty minutes.

Then Harry remembered how all this had started, and the joy in his mood turned to bitterness.

He carried the trays into the kitchen, came back, sat down, looked at Cho, at Marie-Christine, at Cho again who right now changed from a more sitting position to a flat shape under the cover.

"What's this?" he asked. "Won't you come out?"

"Certainly not! What's the sense of a breakfast in bed if not for lying a bit longer, maybe to sleep, maybe not ... I've got a much better idea - you come in."

Harry watched Cho, who had a hopeful expression in her face, glanced at Marie-Christine, who didn't look much different, and if so, then ... "What for?"

Cho smiled. "Oh - we'll find something."

Harry shook his head, fighting with the memory of another room, only it had been darker, with the result that Marie-Christine and Gérard had a row in which suddenly quite surprising

arguments were appearing, with the result that they split, met again at a ball, and Gérard had a new argument of a special type, glittery and sharp, stupid Gérard who had tried ... This damn fool had made him do it, and now he was dead, to argue never again, never ever ... Harry started to cry.

A moment later, he was sobbing, his stomach twisting in painful spasms of sorrow and helplessness.

Cho was out. "Come, Harry, come to us." She started to undress him.

"What are you doing?"

"You're under shock. You need warmth, and as much skin contact as you can get."

He didn't resist when she finished her work, pushed him under the cover, into the middle, against another body which started to comfort him too.

After some time, his crying stopped. Maybe he had cried enough for his foolish victim, or Cho was right and it was the warmth, or the skin contact, or all of that together.

He felt a lot of skin contact, from both sides. It was good to calm down his mind, while his body, recovering quicker after some sleep and a delicious breakfast, started to go out of sync, showing totally different interests.

But his mind still refused, and his mind was the boss, wasn't it? ... Harry looked to his right side, which meant Marie-Christine. "Stop it."

She didn't. "Why?"

"Because I'm not in the mood."

"It's hard - er, to believe that." Marie-Christine's eyes didn't fit, somehow, looking so hungry only minutes after a breakfast.

"Some hours ago, I killed your lover. This here's his apartment - and now you're lying there, and all that's on your mind is ..."

Marie-Christine's hands stopped. "Wrong ... I pay my share of the rent for this here, and yesterday - you killed the man who tried to kill me - yes, he's been my lover, and for a while I thought I could love him, but I didn't ... So what? You've been my lover too, and I want you to be it again!"

Harry shook his head.

"You don't understand, Harry ... I was dead! He was holding me, and I knew - in a few seconds, I'd be dead - no matter what anybody would do, no matter what would be afterwards, it'd come too late for me ..."

Harry felt her trembling.

"... and then you said it, and I was still alive - and then ... 'arry, I can feel the knife still at my throat, but I don't want to feel it any longer - I want to feel something else, something that doesn't kill, and someone who's not going to kill me ... You've saved me, 'arry, you've done what nobody could do - that's why I want to feel you, inside me - now, and I'm not going to wait any longer ..."

He was pulled forward, and pushed forward, felt her twisting body under his own, her legs parting, clasping around him, felt her wet heat, his mind no longer resisting, his body eagerly following this invitation which lacked any politeness, any artistry, any decency.

Marie-Christine cried out only moments later, had left him far behind. Not for the shortest instant felt he ready to stop now, or to slow down, no matter what the body under him was signaling, this body which had infected him with its frenzy, which found no answer in its protest, stopped protesting quickly, started to respond again, receiving back its own fever, receiving his thrusts, his shot, his continuing until he felt this body go rigid again, then fall back and relax, powered out and calm.

He withdrew, fell down on his back, looked at Cho. Her expression showed no anger, no disappointment, only the fever Harry had felt seconds before.

Marie-Christine turned a bit, looked at Cho. "I'm sorry - this was very selfish of me ..."

Cho shook her head, found her voice after a second. "No - it's fine with me - it was ... Watching you - I was following quite a bit ... But I can wait."

Marie-Christine looked at Harry. "Put her in the middle."

He obeyed, not finding resistance, raising a moan which didn't result from any roughness in this movement.

Marie-Christine's arms were moving under the cover, raising a gasp from Cho. "Take care of your half, 'arry."

His half meant an arm to be secured, and a leg to be put under his own, and some territory that could be shared, or explored simultaneously.

Cho tried to protest. "No - let me wait ... I'm too close ..." Her words trailed off in another moan.

Marie-Christine's eyes were shining. "I've a better idea - we'll wait together ... But first, we have to make sure you'll find the patience ... although, I'm afraid, you won't find it as quickly as you may hope, because - this game is just too enticing, with you in this desperate state."

Cho's breath came in gasps. "No - please ... You promised we'd wait together."

"Oh, we will - first for you, and then for some new spirit." Marie-Christine looked up. "Be very careful, 'arry - we have lots of time."

## 21 - After the Events

Back in Hogwarts, in these last days before the Easter break, Harry felt reminded of a time four years ago. Of a time when the news of his Parseltongue was going round in Hogwarts, when a lot of students had thought of him as Slytherin's heir. Because something similar seemed to go through many minds now - he could see it in their faces, and feel it with his *haragei*.

Not that he would scan - the signals were strong enough by themselves. But there were differences. People too. Ron, for example. "I saw it, Harry. She was dead - if not for your spell. You saved her, it was the only way - and whoever's saying different will be sorry for that."

"Don't you wonder why I didn't stupefy him?"

Ron shook his head vigorously. "It's true, I'm asking myself, but one thing's for sure, nobody can react as fast and accurately as you - I know you had a good reason."

Harry hugged his friend, feeling a burning in his own eyes.

"C'mon, brother." But Ron's voice was a bit choked, too.

Harry found his balance again. "It's a bit complicated, and a bit embarrassing, too ... Do you mind hearing it together with Hermione? Then I have to tell it only once."

They had to wait only a short time, until Hermione found the opportunity, and the place, and anybody else out of earshot. Hermione hadn't seen it, but she had asked others, had come to her own conclusions. She said, "He'd tried it again, right?"

Harry nodded. "How did you know?"

Hermione looked surprised. "It was the only possible answer - you must have felt something, otherwise, you'd have used stupefying, or a disarming spell."

"Thank you ..." He hugged her also. "You're the best know-it-all I can imagine."

Hermione grinned. "I still might have some questions, Harry ..."

"Yes, I know." Then he told them the full story - until Saturday evening, that was.

Hermione looked as if she could extrapolate further by herself. "How long did it take with the police?"

"Quite a while ... Someone had tried to pull strings, to blame it on me." Harry looked up. "Did you know that Pouilly is some old wizard family? Maybe something like Malfoy here ..."

Ron looked satisfied. "That may stop now."

With respect to Harry's expression, Hermione kept her reply polite. "Our Ron - tactful as always."

"Oops - sorry, Harry."

Harry tried to grin. "It's okay - I better get used to such remarks, so why not be trained by a Weasley?"

Hermione asked, "Why didn't it work? The string-pulling, I mean."

"It worked, but only in the beginning." Harry gave an outline of his talk with Domingieux.

"And then?"

"Then I took a cab to the apartment where Cho and Marie-Christine were waiting for me."

Hermione looked at him.

"Then I sat there, had time to think it over ... But the worst came this morning ... Anyway, I'm through." Seeing Hermione's unwavering stare, Harry asked, "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I was wondering how Marie-Christine feels now."

Ron glared at Hermione. "That's really a stupid question."

Challenging Hermione was a mistake - *always*. "Is it? ... My dear Ron, on occasion, you should read how death affects people - those who didn't die, of course ... Among other things, it's the strongest aphrodisiac, and our Harry here knows exactly what I'm talking about." This said, Hermione stood up and marched off - Harry's face had been answer enough.

Ron gaped at him. "Is it true?"

Harry nodded. "Honestly - I tried what I could, but - there was no chance."

Ron looked disbelieving. "Chance, huh?"

Harry glanced up. "Believe me - there's no reason to be envious ... I mean - yes, it's very ... But if you ever look for an opportunity, make sure you don't have to pay the same price."

Two other people expressed their friendship with him in an unexpected way. When Harry followed Lupin into his office, he found someone waiting there - Almyra. Lupin smiled. "We thought we should ask you together, Harry - are you okay?"

"No, not really - not yet ... But sitting here with you two - er, thank you."

Lupin grew serious. "I think we know why you didn't try anything else ... Do you remember our lessons last year, Harry? What I said about sadness, and looking into the mirror afterwards?"

"Yes, Prof ... You were right - by the way, that commissaire too, he warned me of the after-shock ... But I'm through, and yes, I can look into the mirror."

Almyra said, "We have still another reason to call you in, Harry ... Something to put your mind off this story - and you're entitled to hear it first."

"Huh?" For a moment, Harry couldn't follow.

Almyra turned to Lupin, her face beaming. "Tell him."

"It worked ..." Lupin's smile was back. "You had the right idea, Harry."

"Wha - oh, yes, of ... Wow - super!" Somehow it was strange. Harry would have hugged Lupin, he would have hugged Almyra, while the presence of them together prevented both. Instead, he said, "Your second shape didn't take long, Prof ... What's your next?"

Lupin laughed. "I'm no collector ... And you - what about your first?"

"None, for a while. I'm busy with Apparition and Apparition Pursuit ... That reminds me - can you apparate as an animal?"

They didn't know because they hadn't tried so far.

Harry looked hopeful. "If it works - and if I can pursue, maybe I find a shortcut to an Animagus."

Lupin and Almyra saw little hope for that. Also, they showed little inclination to serve as test objects, recommended that Harry might come back once he had found a way to pursue with his full body - the idea of being tracked by a spirit alone struck them as somehow less inviting.

For Fleur, the events in Beauxbatons were no reason for a longer discussion, certainly no reason to behave differently. She examined him. "Are you okay, 'arry?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Did you settle with the police?"

"Yes - except for some formalities."

"How is Marie-Christine?"

"She's okay ... I guess she'll have still a few bad dreams, but she's not twisting at every sound."

"Good." Fleur's expression made clear - whatever had been required to recover from the shock had her full approval, in particular since her own advice would have shown little respect of public conventions.

But Harry himself had a question. "How's Gabrielle?"

Fleur grimaced. "The good news - she has no trauma."

"Erm - and the bad news?"

"She's walking around telling everybody how her hero has killed a murderer."

Harry sighed. "Well - no, not well, but it could be worse."

Fleur had a similar opinion, expressed the hope it would fade soon, replaced by some other fascinating news - for example by a wedding that was due in a few weeks' time.

Ginny had looked very relieved, seeing Harry back in Hogwarts - maybe because she had heard horror stories about French police, or because she had known more about the Pouilly family, or because of another reason. She caught him for her own private conversation.

"Harry, I wanted to tell you ..." she was searching for words, "when you warned me of Gérard - er, you were totally right. I don't dare to think how it might have turned out ..."

Harry saw the opportunity for checking his own conclusions. "Say - how was the exact sequence, I mean who stopped being interested when?"

Ginny looked embarrassed. "Do we need to talk about these details?"

"Please, Ginny - it's important for me."

"Well - erm, after that scene, when you warned him, I was quite upset. At that time, he'd have found ... But there was no offer from his side, and soon afterwards ..." She blushed.

Busy with his own thoughts, Harry nodded. "Yes - that fits."

"Huh?"

Looking up, he registered Ginny's expression. "Sorry to touch sensitive issues, but it's exactly what I had expected - the warning pushed him off, because he wasn't ready to challenge me ... Except for this one time."

"He forced you to kill him, right?"

"Yes."

Now Ginny looked as if she would like to hug him. "Then give it a rest, Harry - he'd planned it, and his planning worked - as simple as that."

She was right, and true. And he could hug her. "Thank you."

"How's Marie-Christine?"

"Better than yesterday." Had his face been under control?

Not quite, apparently. Ginny took her breath to say something, kept it to herself, walked away. Harry suppressed the impulse to call after her. Whatever he could say, none of it would help - quite the opposite, probably.

Monday afternoon, he had another conversation, very formal, somewhat embarrassing - with the Headmaster of Hogwarts and with the Headmistress of Gryffindor.

"This is a Hogwarts rule, Harry," explained Dumbledore. "Using an Unforgivable Curse demands an inquiry and a written report. We know what happened, so it will be as short as possible."

Meanwhile, Harry could have sung the song in his sleep. It wasn't even difficult to leave out delicate details. And he could anticipate questions. "I knew that he would try it again - as soon as possible. That's why I used the Killing Curse, not stupefying or something else ... I'm too much obligated to Marie-Christine to leave her at such a risk."

What had been the sense in bypassing details in such artful linguistics? The expressions of Dumbledore and McGonagall, hearing about *obligation*, showed him they knew the background. So he said, "Marie-Christine has found out Voldemort's next strategy - that's why Cho and I owe her enough to ..." He didn't finish the sentence.

Dumbledore looked expectant now. "That's enough for the inquiry - which means the next is off the record, Harry ... Can you tell me what she found out?"

Harry looked at him, at McGonagall ... His Headmistress was about to rise. "I guess that's something between ..."

"No," he protested quickly. "Please, Prof ... It's just - well, you'll know in a minute." He described the plot and told them how he had found a mole wizard in the Chang family.

Dumbledore looked friendlier than since this conversation had started. "You're right, Harry ... I didn't know, and that's why - never mind." He smiled. "I'd like to ask you a favour."

Harry waited silently. He had learned - answering yes in advance was risky with Dumbledore.

"Please keep me informed about things related to Voldemort - even if they are as personal or intimate as those ... After all, I'm supposed to be your mentor in this regard."

Harry nodded. "Yes, Prof ... In this case, I have to tell you a bit more about - er, owls ... Disappearing owls."

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled. "Not really ... All I need are the details unknown to my own sources."

"Yes, of course." For Harry, it seemed of limited interest which source had delivered what. There were three candidates - Black, Lupin, and Snape, and for all Harry knew about his Headmaster, each of them had been milked to the individual limit.

He had another conversation with his Headmistress the next day, still related to the events in Beauxbatons, although with a context that was more entertaining than serious. It started after breakfast. Sitting at his table, Harry heard some noise in the large group of younger students streaming out of the Hall. Checking closer with all his senses, he felt something that made him jump up and rush over.

Breaking through a ring of students, he found three figures in the middle. One was a student he didn't know, lying on the floor, moaning, apparently recovering from some unconsciousness.

The other two, standing side by side, were Rahewa - in attack stance - and Damon Harker, his fists raised.

When the other students recognized Harry, the circle dissolved within seconds. Not even the threat of lost points would have achieved such quick disappearances. Some of the students grabbed the victim, who joined them in their hurry.

Harry looked at Rahewa. "What happened?"

No answer.

Damon Harker felt less reluctant. "That ruddy pigface called you a murderer, Harry - but Rahewa gave him the right answer ... Then the others wanted to pay back, that's why I came to help her." Young Damon looked proud.

Harry turned back to Rahewa. "Did you use *aikido*?"

He earned a nod.

This was of course a violation of the *aikido* codex, and Kenzo would have to say something about that. Harry, on the other side, felt only relief - Rahewa hadn't used a knife, giving proof of a well developed sense in scaling attacks.

"Hm ..." He had to search for words, mostly for didactic reasons. "First, let me thank you for saving my - er, honour ... But - generally speaking, you shouldn't hit other students for such nonsense remarks ..."

A flash from dark eyes. "It's no nonsense!"

Harry stepped closer, put his arm around Rahewa's shoulders. "No, it's not ... But we both know it's not true, so let them talk ... You cannot hit every student who's making bad remarks about me."

Rahewa smiled - partly about the joke, partly about the question whether it would really be impossible - after all, you could work with lists, couldn't you?

Harry saw her again at lunch. The expression in Rahewa's face was bad enough to walk the few steps down the table. "What's wrong, Rahewa?"

No answer.

He sat down. "Please."

Never before had he seen these eyes as close to tears as now. "I've got detention."

"For hitting this student?"

A nod, careful, and looking away - impossible the thought of crying in the presence ...

Harry stood up, grabbed her. "Let's go."

Surprise, replacing something worse. "Where to?"

"McGonagall."

"She's not going to take it back."

"I know ... C'mon!"

Thunderstruck, Rahewa followed.

McGonagall looked at the two students, sitting opposite her desk, managed to steady her twisting lips. "What can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

"Professor, I just heard that Rahewa has got detention."

"Yes, Mr. Potter - for violating another student, although not through magic ... You know the rules, don't you?"

"Yes, Professor ... She did it to defend my honour. That's why I have to do the same - detention, I mean ..."

It took the Headmistress hard, keeping serious.

"... so, please, if you could find something we can do together, we'd appreciate it very much."

After some more seconds, McGonagall had her voice under control. "I think that's feasible, Mr. Potter - Miss Lightfoot ... Although, it won't be the Forbidden Forest."

Outside, Rahewa didn't know how to look. The result was a pair of beaming eyes in a dark red face. Still, she had a question. "What did she mean with Forbidden Forest?"

"That was my job - when I had detention."

Utter disbelief. "You??"

"Yes." Harry grinned. "It had to do with a dragon, and with Hagrid ... When doing the detention together, we'll have time - then I'll tell you how it came and what happened in the Forbidden Forest - that was when I met Firenze."

Suddenly, Rahewa couldn't await this shameful punishment.

Harry met her again on his way into the training hall. Rahewa was walking the opposite direction, with a face worse than that at the lunch table. He stopped her. "Kenzo?"

She nodded.

From the scene alone, Harry could imagine what Kenzo had selected as punishment - a ban from the training, with only one question left open. "How long?"

"One - chck - month."

With her first sob, dams started breaking away, and Rahewa started to run away. Tried, at least, except Harry caught the girl. "Come here."

For a moment, she tried to free herself, then her face kept buried at his chest, a thin body twisting in silent sobs. When she had calmed down a bit, he said, "All right - we'll do it together ... Follow me."

She would not.

Harry smiled. "Keep still ..." After finishing his face repair, he asked, "Okay - want to check in a mirror?"

Oh yes, she wanted, too preoccupied for realizing that this doubt might be a crime worse than blasphemy. In the hall, they sat down on the floor, as close to the door as possible without sitting in the way.

Kenzo let them wait twenty minutes. Then he came over, sat down opposite.

"Sensei," said Harry, "Rahewa has violated *bushido*, the codex of the warrior, and she accepts your verdict for that."

Kenzo didn't move, nor speak.

"She did it for me ... This is why I see only one solution - I have to suffer from the same verdict."

Kenzo could have taught McGonagall a lesson or two in steady faces. And in taking his time - for that, and for thinking. Finally, he bowed. "The punishment was intended to create a time period without *aikido*, and *kenjutsu*. Since this goal seems at risk now," a short flash from Kenzo's eyes, "we have to change it ... During this month, you, Harry, will teach Rahewa *bushido* - here in this hall. You'll do it with talking, with meditation ... and with not more exercises than required to reach the proper calmness of mind and body."

Harry bowed.

Rahewa bowed.

Kenzo bowed.

The next day, McGonagall called Harry and Rahewa into her office. "I've found something for you together," she said, "and you'll do it this evening, so it's out of the way before the Easter break."

When both Harry and Rahewa bowed silently, the Headmistress had again trouble with her face. "Mr. Filch asked for help to polish the items in the trophies cabinet ... If I remember right, Mr. Weasley could tell you how it's done - with your hand's work. Before you start, you'll deliver your wands here in this office."

His eyes widening, Harry stared at her. What he saw was an entreating look - not to say anything, not to ask what exactly was meant with hand's work. He nodded. "Yes, Professor."

In the evening, Mr. Filch provided them with polish and rags, then let them alone - Harry's presence made the caretaker very nervous.

"Oy! The no-goods of Gryffindor - Potter for polish! Lightfoot for lacquer!"

Of course - Peeves.

"May I help you?" Peeves was about to come down, no doubt to make the worst mess of the trophies.

Harry had an idea. "Peeves - do you know what I did in Beauxbatons?"

"Sure - you made a new ghost." Peeves cackled. "Nasty Potter makes a nasty ghost - and other nasty ..."

"You know that I did it without a wand?"

Peeves looked watchful. "That's what I heard."

"It's true ... And now I'd like to show you something else. Would you come a bit closer?"

"What is it?" Peeves' expression was very suspicious.

"It's called *The ghost in the bottle* - and this bottle of polish seems about right ... Now, if you could just ..." Harry stopped, grinning. There was no sense in talking with empty air.

Sobering up, he said, "Okay ... Rahewa, get yourself a piece - we need something in our hands if Filch comes in ... I don't want to watch all the time, because we have a lot to talk about."

For starters, he sent a cleaning spell across the first two pieces, a cup and a plate - with engravings good enough to demand ten minutes, had it been done with rag and polish.

Rahewa looked doubtful. "Isn't this cheating? ... I don't want to cheat McGonagall, and we're not supposed to use magic."

"No, it's not ... Remember what she said?"

Rahewa scanned her memory. "Not exactly - only that we had to deliver our wands."

"She said, 'with your hand's work' - and that's what we'll do. You'll pass me the pieces - that's your hand's work. I'll polish them - that's my hand's work - and there was nowhere said it has to be rag and polish ... If Mr. Filch cannot imagine another method, that's not our problem, is it?"

At this moment, Mrs. Norris came around the corner, hunched, stared at them.

"Oh, dammit ..." Harry eyed the cat. "I don't know how, but she's telling Filch everything."

"No, she isn't." Rahewa moved to the cat, grabbed her, hung her halfway over a shoulder, the rest supported by two arms. She came back, sat down again.

Harry stared at the shapeless bunch, which kept purring like a rusty pipe, strongly reminding him of an owl in someone else's arms. "I can't believe it."

Rahewa beamed. "A Cree trick ... So, how was this story with a dragon and Hagrid?"

\* \* \*

Easter with the Weasleys proved nice, giving Harry a warm feeling of family and home and peace. Strongly contributing to that peace was the absence of the kind of remarks, whispers, and glances he experienced in Hogwarts.

This quiet state encountered an interruption, though only a short one, by the twins' arrival. When they started with their comments, talking about brilliant performance and a cool mind, Ma Weasley stopped them cold. "Shut up! Harry was forced to do what he did, and he's done it properly - still, it's nothing to celebrate."

She was very concerned about the formalities still pending. Harry assured her that these were really just formalities, that he would contact Mr. Spinbottle next Tuesday, and that both sides would feel best if he stayed out of France for some time.

His own concerns dealt with something totally different. The Changs had invited him for another dinner. This dinner would take place Easter Monday, and from Cho, Harry had been forewarned - while to the outside he was expected to do another performance as an amateur magician, the true reason for this dinner party was a thorough check of the invited people. Mr. Chang had new business partners, maybe also new employees of the high ranks, and he wanted to hear Harry's comments, of course also those of Nagini.

In one aspect, the invitation showed a remarkable difference to the previous one. As the letter stated, Harry *might be prepared to stay until the next morning*. He thought a lot about this peculiar formulation, remembering Cho's explanations at the last time. In the end, he felt pretty sure - this was Mr. Chang's - or maybe Mrs. Chang's - version of something which, in plain English, would read, "Dear Harry, you don't have to travel back in the night, so don't forget your toothbrush, and let's forget about this ridiculous story with a driver who's drunk, sick, or nightblind."

The thought sent a thrill through him. Guest suites had this effect - in particular if they were located in the house of the future parents-in-law.

Preparing for his second performance as an amateur magician included a request toward the twins. Some of their designs seemed wonderfully suited for an audience of Muggles, designs which had been improved since a first test in the Gryffindor tower, offered from a mini flying carpet.

The limousine arrived with a passenger in the back compartment - Cho. She found the time for saying hello to the Weasley family, naturally so, as she had come with flowers for Ma Weasley, and with the promise of visiting for a longer time during the summer break.

Ma Weasley beamed about the flowers.

With delight, Cho went through The Burrow - an endless number of cosy corners, steep staircases, and a ghoul! Ma Weasley looked a bit suspicious at first, but then beamed still

more since there was no doubt - The Burrow raised some unconscious memory of early childhood in Cho. Obviously, this style of buildings was quite common in Hong Kong.

And then they had to go - the Changs wanted a few minutes with Harry before the other guests arrived. On the road, Cho showed signs of adventurousness. Harry, in contrast, showed none. His demand for a week's worth of thrills was more than covered, tinted glasses or not.

Mr. Chang's welcome looked almost normal. However, barely inside, Harry recognized differences.

Mrs. Chang accepted today's flower - an orchid, naturally, blue with fine shades of violet - and then greeted him in French style.

Mr. Chang, dropping any formality, beamed at him. "Harry, we're proud of you."

Harry looked from one to the other. "Proud?"

Mrs. Chang nodded emphatically. "Yes, of course ... It's very satisfying to know that our daughter is going to marry someone who really can protect her."

Harry didn't know what to say.

Mr. Chang said, "Harry, we're too much Chinese to get overly excited about the death of a person. But we feel very excited to learn that - with only seconds to decide, you've found the courage, the willpower, and the skill to solve the problem with the only solution - no matter how unpopular it might appear, and I'm sure it does ... That makes you one in a million ..."

"No," protested Cho, "he's unique."

Mr. Chang smiled at her. "Yes, my little flower - but you should leave him some room for improvement."

Harry managed some improvement in his magical performance. Knowing more than the last time, he avoided all similarities with standard Muggles tricks. Yes, he showed levitation as before - only this time with Nagini, floating at eye level along the guests.

And he had learned that the most scary trick - lie detector - had to be followed by something funnier. So he placed this part in the middle, and he used cards. Picking one of the guests, he let the man shuffle a deck of cards - "once more, please, they're still too ordered" - and then take one card after the other in rapid sequence, to tell the suit and the value with an arbitrary number of lies put in.

Of course, for most guests, this had to be one of these very popular card tricks, except they were at a loss to imagine how he was doing it.

Another guest wanted to break what could only be a hoax, failed. A third guest showed his own deck of cards. "Can we use them?"

"Certainly ... Oh, Tarot cards - wonderful."

After twenty cards or so, the man gave up, with a desperate look in his face. But he was just a clueless Muggle, like all the others.

The final tricks, aside from Harry's trademark with flowers for the ladies and emptied glasses for the gentlemen, were based on two of the twins' designs - "Magical cakes," as he called them quite truthfully, not earning any faith in his statement.

First, he used the Star-Spangled Sugar Pearls. All he had to do was breathe a bit heavier than normal, then the colour sparks were flying from his mouth into the air, and the guests roared in applause.

Then came Fred's Funny-Talks, however in the advanced design. The effective period was not more than a minute, and a single bubble could hold a short sentence. Harry asked Mrs. Chang as his assistant to the front, gave her his wand, and instructed her to make the bubbles pop exactly in the sequence in which they arrived. Then he walked into the corner, to produce the bubbles and to send them with a little magic toward Cho's mother.

Mrs. Chang stood ready with the wand, looking as expectant as a child.

*Pop* "Ladies and gentlemen, this is bubble speech."

*Pop* "You know - like in the comics."

*Pop* "That's how the comic bubbles were invented."

Mrs. Chang started to chuckle.

*Pop* "And that's what people mean if they say - "

*Pop* "Save your speech."

*Pop* "Only my charming assistant doesn't save it."

*Pop* "No - she can't wait to hear this nonsense."

Mrs. Chang started to giggle.

*Pop* "I mean - what can you expect from bubble speech?"

*Pop* "But you can say things you didn't say, did you?"

Mrs. Chang was laughing so much, she had trouble with the last bubble.

*Pop* "Anyway - applause for my curious assistant!"

Flushed from joy, Mrs. Chang bowed.

Afterwards, one guest talked first with Mr. Chang, was sent to Harry. "Mr. Potter," the man said, "tell me your price for an evening, it doesn't matter how much, but I simply must ..."

Harry interrupted him. "I'm sorry - it's reserved exclusively for this house."

The man stared in disbelief. "You mean - the house is the trick?"

Harry nodded gravely. "You could say so, yes."

Now Mr. Chang had trouble with his face.

When the guests were gone, Mrs. Chang looked at Harry. "These bubbles - no, really ..." She started to giggle again.

"The honour goes to Fred," explained Harry. "He's the designer."

"Yes - please tell him ... But it was you who filled the bubbles."

Mr. Chang, on the other side, was too much of a salesman to let Harry's refusal go uncommented upon. "Do you know what you could have asked for? ... Ten thousand is nothing on the stages this man is handling!"

Harry grinned. "Yes, sir - but I would spend it on broomsticks, so what's the loss?"

Mr. Chang exploded in laughter.

"Don't laugh!" Cho looked indignant at her father. "He's serious - he'd buy Firebolts Two for the rest of his team - and then?"

Mr. Chang was gasping for breath. Recovering, he asked, "I take it there was no new mole, Harry?"

"No, sir ... Just Muggles, and all of them as happy as kids."

Mr. Chang looked satisfied. He failed to mention the unlucky Mr. Millar, or enterprises located in Nassau or Hong Kong. It could mean there was no news, or he was waiting for next morning, in order not to break the leisurely atmosphere. Instead, he asked with a cunning smile, "Who's going to win the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup, Harry?"

"Well, it's Cho versus Rahewa ... Our teams are too much on a par to win any other way."

The Changs wanted to know about Rahewa.

Cho answered for Harry. "His newest acquisition ... You know, Harry's collecting family like other people stamps - and this is his first daughter, after he's got enough brothers and sisters ... I mean, I could imagine adopting her - after the cup, that is - but how to raise a daughter that's six years younger than you and can handle a knife better than her stockings?"

Mrs. Chang smiled at her daughter. "If it's family, it's no competition."

"Is that so?" After a second, Cho seemed quite in a hurry to talk further. "No, that's not the problem - I mean ..." She trailed off, blushing.

Harry came to help. "Young Damon is Rahewa's cavalier - I'm just an idol ... The other day, she was really shocked, hearing I got detention years ago." After this remark, of course he had to tell the story of the trophy cleaning.

Cho looked at her mother. "See what I mean?"

Mrs. Chang nodded. "As I said - if you can't fight it, embrace it."

Cho looked fierce. "*After* the cup."

She looked less fierce when she came into the guest room a while later, still very determined, although not with Quidditch on her mind, as could be easily recognized with a look at this garment Harry remembered so well.

The look alone was enough to accelerate his breath.

Cho noticed with satisfaction. "Today it's just the two of us, so I thought I might put in a bit of fancy ... Unwrapping, for example - would be a pity if your hard-earned skill got lost."

Harry relished the sight of the wrapping, which so artfully gave hints of the content. "That's very unlikely," he said.

Cho bent closer, sniffed at him, taking some more of the *Samurai* scent. "I'd like to know how the others smell ... Harry, that should be *your* wrapping the next time - *Clair de Hune*, for example."

"Really?"

"Yes - that's some touch of ..." Cho's eyes were glittering. "To smell you, and at the same time a perfume from another woman - there's nothing wrong with this combination, believe me."

Harry traced a line across the thin fabric. "I don't get it ... One time, you're going mad because your perfume wasn't the only one, and the next time, you want me to use the other - especially for occasions like this ... And then - you didn't exactly help me to stay off from Marie-Christine."

"No, I didn't." There was no denying - the memory of that scene was tearing off some of Cho's patience with a slow and sensual unwrapping.

Harry glanced up, to examine her face for a change. "In public, you're a book case of jealousy, while privately ..."

Cho shook her head. "No, I'm not ... Anyway, let's discuss this another time because right now, there's something more urgent ..."

His fingers were teasing a bit harder, then stopped. "But I'd like to know."

"There's no need to know everything ... And besides, weren't you told it's very impolite to let a lady wait?"

He obeyed, but only until her breath came ragged. Then he stopped again. "I can't concentrate - this question is bothering me a lot."

"That's a lie - you feel very concentrated here."

"Maybe so - " he had to pause for a gasp because Cho was probing this particular concentration. "Still - my mind is wondering ..."

"This mind will stop wondering in a second." Cho tried to get up, couldn't - even without a third person's assistance, Harry's lessons with various Japanese teachers had enabled him to hold her in a tight grip - badly suited to calm her down.

"That's ... You'll suffer for ..." Maybe so, but right now, it looked very much as if she was suffering first - if that was the right term.

Not losing his grip, Harry used his mouth for some more teasing. "Tell me."

"I'm not jealous - not in the common sense. The thought of you doing it with another woman doesn't upset me, quite the opp ... er, not exactly the opposite, you know what I mean ..."

Oh yes, he did, remembering so well.

"Maybe it's limited to Marie-Christine, and you better not running tests for that, because that's exactly the point ..."

"Indeed." The exact point he was playing with made it impossible for her to speak ... Until he stopped again. "Which point?"

"It must be my choice - at least I must have had a chance saying yes or no."

He wasn't really surprised. "You mean, if I came along with someone, and you could say 'She's okay' or 'She's not,' then you ..."

"I don't know, and I can wait to find out ... And now, would you please concentrate on the only woman that's around??"

He did.

\* \* \*

What made him wake next morning was a door which opened with considerably more noise than the night before, however the person was the same. Cho grinned. "I'm here officially - to call you for your last chance of a breakfast. And since I'm hungry, that's all ... Get dressed."

Checking the time, Harry almost jumped out of bed.

Some minutes later, after a short shower, he met Cho again at the breakfast table. With some embarrassment, he greeted Mrs. Chang. "I'm sorry for being so late."

Mrs. Chang smiled. "A long sleep is the hallmark of a peaceful mind."

Or maybe of a tired body.

Mr. Chang, for whom this was an ordinary business day, had left a message for him, although not on paper. "He's trying to gather information through business channels," explained Mrs. Chang. "This is a slow process, since he doesn't want to be noticed for a special interest

toward *Amalgamated Enterprises*. He said, so far there was nothing significant, but it takes a while to recognize a pattern."

Harry looked thoughtful. "I won't even know how a pattern looks ... Please give him my thanks, Mrs. Chang."

Cho's mother looked grim. "He's not going to stop ... He's been challenged, which means he'll keep it in mind until he sees a chance to return the favour."

"But don't we know that it's Voldemort who's sent this wizard?"

"Certainly, Harry. But there are people in the middle - business people who must have some knowledge."

"This Mr. Millar - is there any news?"

Mrs. Chang's face lost all expression. "No."

Harry had left Nagini in the guest room. Even so, his *haragei* told him - this answer might have been literally right, while certainly not true.

When in doubt, ask. "Would it be - er, *very* surprising to hear from him?"

Mrs. Chang looked innocent. "How should I know? I'm a Muggle, not a witch."

Which was answer enough.

Mr. Chang had sent car and driver back from his office, to be available at Harry's disposal when returning to The Burrow. Harry accepted the lift, however directed the driver downtown where he sent him off.

His first stop was Mr. Spinbottle's office, only to hear that Mr. Spinbottle was in court, and to make an appointment for late afternoon.

His next stop was Sirius' office - the anteroom, to be precise. A young woman blocked his path. For what he saw, Sirius could have kidnapped her from a Hogwarts class, sixth year more likely than seventh. Except Harry didn't remember such a face. And she seemed very determined. "Are you looking for something specific, sir?"

"Er - yes, indeed, it's Sirius I'm looking for ... Sorry - Harry Potter's my name."

A quick glance at his forehead, almost a nod - and the girl didn't move! "Do you have an appoint ..."

She was interrupted by the opening door. Sirius stood in the frame, put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Jessica - he's not going to hurt me ... That's Harry Potter, my godchild ... Harry, meet Jessica Crow, my new secretary."

"Nice to meet you." From her side, it was a outright lie.

Inside the office, Harry and Sirius were looking at each other, both with the same question in the face - what the hell the other had done. Harry pointed to the outside. "Did you raid an orphanage?"

"Don't get confused by her looks - she's up to the task, and she's not as young as you might think."

"Does she know she's hired as a secretary?"

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What I saw was a bodyguard, and she seemed convinced I came here to do something horrible."

"You can't blame her - did you read the newspapers about your case?"

Harry hadn't - quite purposefully so.

"Well - you're not exactly Jack the Ripper, but the difference's more with your first name than anything else."

"I think I know why," said Harry. "The French press took over the version of the Pouilly family, and the British press took over the version of the French press."

"And the police?"

"I met a Claude Domingieux ... For him, it's self-defence."

Sirius stared at him a moment longer, then went to the door, opened it. "Jessica? ... Please come in."

The girl-like woman entered the room, looked at Sirius, avoiding Harry's glance.

"Jessica," said Sirius, "please send a letter to the French police and ask them for a copy of the Potter file. Send it to ..." He looked at Harry.

"Domingieux - Commissaire du Police Claude Domingieux."

The secretary started to write, stopped, looking desperate. Having a fair guess of what was causing her trouble, Harry moved his hand toward the parchment. "May I?"

Not-so-young Jessica almost jumped away. Only after a second, she managed to offer parchment and quill.

Harry wrote the title and the name, returned parchment and quill, looked at Sirius. "What do you have in mind with that file?"

"First Jessica will read it, and then she'll know you have a good reason when killing people." Sirius looked at his secretary. "Harry's the one who followed that man in Middle Station ... But I don't think he'll develop it to a habit - killing people, I mean."

Harry stared at his godfather. "Thanks a lot - really, I always appreciate such good faith."

Sirius wasn't impressed. "And then I'll read it - just to be sure."

Now Harry was really speechless.

Sirius looked apologetic. "Harry, I trust your judgement ... But you should read these articles, then you'll know why I would like to see the file."

"Better not ... Tell me - what's their version?"

"Oh - it's a story of sex and crime and passion and betrayal - just the kind that's selling newspapers, that's why they presented it five times in a row ... What's your version?"

Seeing two faces looking expectantly at him, anger was boiling up in Harry like a wave of fire. "Mine? ... It's a story of sex and crime and passion and betrayal - you'll find the details in the file ... Bye." He stood up, walked to the door.

"Harry!"

He stopped, not turning.

"Please come back."

He turned, tried a cold stare, failed. "Something else?"

"Why didn't you stupefy him?"

"Because ... Read it in the file." Harry turned again, stepped toward the door, his sight already swimming in a haze.

Sirius caught him at the door, turned him round, hugged him. "I'm sorry."

"He would have killed her, Sirius ... He wanted me to kill him - only that he wanted to kill her first." Clutching to Sirius' chest, Harry started to cry for the second time.

Sirius seemed frozen in helplessness, and embarrassment. It was Jessica who guided Harry to a seat, who found a tissue, brought him a glass of water. Then she left the room.

When Harry had calmed down, Sirius asked, "If you want, we can ask Deborah for another press article to put it straight."

Harry shook his head. "Who'd be interested in that? As you said - the first story's just too good."

"But if the truth is a good story too ..."

Harry had a short laugh. "The facts are pretty much the same - only the accentuation's a bit different - nobody would realize the finer details." He gave Sirius the shortest possible summary of the facts with the proper accents.

Even the shortest version made Sirius' eyes widen. "Harry, you're astonishing me."

Harry snorted, maybe for revenge. "You're not long enough in the job. Domingieux didn't even blink."

"That reminds me - did you get along with him?"

"Not in the beginning, but in the end ... He's the one who took the pressure from the Pouilly family without passing it further." Harry explained about his appointment with Spinbottle, and that these formalities were the only task left to do.

Sirius looked relieved. "Okay ... Something else - two weeks from now, I'll give a party for my rescuers. I'd like to check the invitation list with you, to - er, make sure there's no rough edge left."

"Rough edge?"

"To make sure there's an even number of guests."

"Where's the problem? Invite an even number of guests."

Sirius sighed. "My God - for someone who just told me this story, you're awfully slow in understanding."

Relishing the moment, Harry grinned. "Oh - you mean equal numbers of ... Well, didn't the story make clear why I'm slow with that?"

Sirius shook his head. "And that's my godchild ... So, for the slow kind of mind - I'm inviting people which may come alone or with a partner, and I'd like to know in advance where I have to balance out ... Got it now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then ..."

"Start with the host."

"That's me."

"Plus?"

"As if you didn't know!"

"Deborah ... You sure she's coming alone?"

Sirius stared at Harry with a perplexed expression, met a broad grin, asked, "Are you trying to pay back?"

"No - I mean no longer ... Go ahead."

"Harry and?" Now Sirius was grinning.

"Are we doing a list or are we scoring wisecracks?"

"Cho ... Ron and?"

"Janine."

"Viktor?"

"Hermione."

"Remus?"

"Almyra."

Sirius' head snapped up. "You joking?"

Harry smiled. "Not at all."

Sirius whistled. "Well, well, well - my old friend Remus." He looked conspiratorial. "Say - how did they ... how do they ..."

"What I can tell you without violating confidentiality - the feelings are totally mutual, and it's nothing new - not at all, if you get my bearing ..."

Sirius blushed a bit.

"... only it took them awfully long to - er, express themselves, what with the natural barrier ... And because there's some codex, if you get my bearing again, they're waiting desperately for end of terms, when Almyra's no longer a student of Hogwarts."

Sirius looked pitiful.

Harry laughed. "No need to worry ... They're very inventive, if you get ..."

Sirius looked blank. "No - this time, you've lost me."

Harry grinned maliciously. "To quote someone - it's not impossible to find an information leak somewhere else, though not with me."

Sirius nodded ruefully. "Okay - got my lesson ... Anyway - Severus?"

"No idea."

"Hmm ... Alone, for all I know ... Kenzo?"

"Alone, I'd say ... But that's just an educated guess."

"Educated, huh? ... Some education ..."

"Now give it a rest! You're asking me about the love life of my teachers, and then you're complaining if you get an answer!"

Sirius chuckled. "Okay ... Then we have Paul who'll come with his girlfriend ..."

"How do you know?"

"Wasn't it you who said you shouldn't answer stupid questions? ... And two colleagues of mine, both married ... So we have two singles that need balancing ..."

"What about your secretary?"

"Yes - that's what I was about to say."

"By the way - what's Deborah's comment on her?"

Sirius grinned. "Whatever's crossing your mind, forget it - Deborah's the one who recommended her." Jessica Crow, as Sirius explained, had been working for the *Daily Prophet*, showing a remarkable skill in organization - together with a deep horror of the cynical style among the staff. Hearing about Sirius' need for an efficient assistant and anteroom dragon, Deborah had suggested a change into a world where the distinction between good and bad was sharper than in a newspaper office.

Then, checking his paper, Sirius said, "We're one woman short ... Any suggestions?"

Harry looked surprised. "Isn't it obvious? ... You invite all your helpers, right?"

Sirius swallowed. "Is this a good idea, Harry?"

Harry's face was beaming. "It's perfectly Zen."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, sure ... Maybe it doesn't look right, but it's certainly true - and you know, it's the intention that counts."

Sirius sighed. "Okay ... Ginny."

He checked again. "Well - let's say, Severus and Jessica - that would mean Kenzo and Ginny ... Harry, that's some weird combination."

Looking innocent, Harry replied, "No - why?"

## 22 - Social Life

Sirius' event for his rescuers was the first real party in Harry's life, different from anything he had seen so far. Not a ball, no dinner party either - this was a party, and there were some guests who made sure it was.

Sirius' colleagues, for example. When the Potter-Weasley gang arrived from The Burrow, together with the Krum-Granger mini gang, they were already there - Tommy and Brenda Sullivan, a couple somewhere around thirty, and another couple which was clearly past fifty. Sirius introduced. "Harry, Cho - this is Curry, the fossil of the squad."

Curry?

The man had developed a pair of cop's eyes. Still, they hadn't forgotten how to smile. "Harry, I was looking forward to seeing you again - we'll certainly find time to talk." This said, Curry turned to Cho. "You look gorgeous - exactly as Sirius has promised ... Let's have a drink." He moved away with her.

A quick and clean manoeuver. Harry was still trying to figure out what kind of name that was, when *Mrs. Curry* came into his view. "Hello, Harry," she said, "I'm Laureen."

Registering Harry's blank look, Laureen explained. "Curry's his nickname in the squad - he has a preference for spicy food, that's why ... In civilian life, he'd be called Derek Wylie, except he has no civilian life ..." The woman laughed, seeing Harry's glance following the two. "But he's civilized - more or less."

"Er - yes, er, Laureen ... This is all quite new to me, I've never been to a party."

The woman grinned. "Squad parties are famous - they've a tendency to run a bit wild ... But I guess this evening's mix will keep it within bounds."

It would be interesting to know whether she considered this an improvement or a lack of spirit. Also, Harry wondered what Laureen meant with *a bit wild*.

They reached the bar.

"Harry," she said, "believe a party veteran - get your shot of booze now, and then make sure to hold that level, not more, while certainly not less ... You'll have more fun." Laureen took his glass of orange juice, grabbed a bottle with a clear liquid, and added a solid quantity. "Try this - the best method to scale up or down."

Harry sniffed. All he could smell - there was alcohol, without any particular scent. "What's this?"

"Vodka - pure, simple, efficient."

He tasted. It was still orange juice, with a totally new spirit.

The Hogwarts fraction arrived. A moment later, Curry Wylie heard Harry addressing Lupin with "Prof", and saw reason to cut in. "Hey - stop that crap! ... This is a party - no titles, no ranks, no Misters."

Harry looked at Lupin. "Moony?"

Lupin smiled. "No longer, as you know ... Remus."

Lupin - no, Remus - was the simple case. The other ... Snape had a sparkling in his eyes. "This isn't Hogwarts, Harry - I'm sure you'll manage."

"Yes - er, Severus."

Hermione had less trouble with this name. And Severus was her choice when adapting to what seemed a standard for parties - grabbing someone's partner, at least someone other than the own partner, and finding a place to talk.

Only with Kenzo, Harry had no intention to use anything other than *sensei*. Either Curry was unaware of this title, or he knew too well, at least, he didn't object.

Aside from the style of conversation, Harry registered still another significant difference between balls and parties - the dresses of the women. Not all of them were short, but with the exception of Laureen's, they saved fabric wherever possible. And some of them were really short - Janine's, for example.

Ginny's, for another example.

Harry met Cho, just long enough for a short exchange of opinions. She looked at his glass. "That's a mistake, Harry - everybody'll have fun, only you'll hang around, cold-sober."

He held the glass, grinning. "Try."

She did. "Wow - that's heavy ... How did you ..."

"Laureen."

Cho grinned. "Of course - of all ages represented here, your choice is ..."

Harry interrupted her on purpose, in time, and with the proper remark. "Say hello to Curry."

Cho nodded, left.

And still another difference - the women didn't wait for something like *Ladies' choice*. Calling a partner for a dance was one method, simply grabbing another. Deborah's method was a combination. "That's our music, Harry."

Hearing this song, very popular in the current charts, Harry felt some surprise about Sirius' collection. Deborah grinned. "No, he wasn't up-to-date, not at all ... But with the help from a colleague in the music department, and with a generous cheque, we could close this gap."

"It's good to see how the various gaps in Sirius' life are going to be closed."

"Oh - it's not unbalanced, Harry, not at all ..." Deborah smiled roguishly. "Although I still don't know what *Hippogriff* means."

"Really?"

"Well - maybe I never find the time to ask."

Harry managed not to giggle, a reminder that it was time to use a bit more orange juice per glass. "You may ask Hermione - she was involved as much as Sirius and I."

Deborah glanced into the corner where Hermione was sitting. "Seems as if Paul might find out quicker."

Sirius' well-balanced invitation list worked nicely, although not quite in the order as written on paper. Hermione sat deeply in conversation with Paul, Viktor with Jessica, Snape - er, Severus with Laureen, and so forth. Harry saw only two couples keeping the nominal order, if this was the right term - Ron and Janine the first of them, Ginny and Kenzo the other.

The noise level was remarkable. Infected from so many reminders of Hogwarts, and certainly from a number of drinks, Curry and Tommy started to fall back to the habits of fifth-years. Harry's present had been a tricky collection from *Swashbuckle Sweets*, and Curry was roaring in laughter while Tommy produced bubble speech.

Other people were infected too, if not from Hogwarts memories then from drinks. Deborah went down into the basement to get more bottles.

Sirius saw it, grinned at Lupin - no, Remus. "I think she'll need help." With a soft pop, the air closed into the space where, an instant before, Sirius' body had been. To shorten the procedure, he had used apparition.

Harry had sensed it, had decided to contribute with his own joke, to scare Sirius - and maybe to speed up the refill. Without thinking, he synchronized with Sirius' impulse and *followed*.

A cellar, well illuminated. A figure in front of him, putting arms around another one who squeaked.

Sirius asked, "Did I scare you?"

Before Deborah could answer, Harry asked. "Do I scare you?"

Another squeak, and a choked sound from Sirius who spun around. "Harry! Damn you - how did you ..."

Sirius was staring wide-eyed. Deborah was staring wide-eyed - both at the same spot.

Harry stared wide-eyed - at his arms, his legs, his body. "Yipee! ... I did it - I did it ..." He was almost dancing, stopped next moment when Sirius' fist hit him in the ribs. "Ouch ... Stop it - it's the first time I managed ..." He explained how he had followed, and that his own surprise was at least as big as that of the other two down here.

Deborah put bottles in his hands. "Here - take them. I'm still too shaky, thanks to you!"

Coming up, this time using the stairs, Harry was greeted with laughter and excitement - except from Cho, who looked very upset. "Harry, you ... You scared me like hell."

Just *Harry* - that was a bad sign. "Sorry - I didn't expect to disappear ... It never worked before."

Snape - Severus came over, smiling broadly. "That's the solution, Harry - you've been always too sober - until now." He looked challenging. "Wanna give it another try?"

"Where to?"

"Just in the garden."

"Okay ... Jump."

A moment later, Harry stood in the dark garden, touching his arms to make sure he had followed with his body. And still a moment later, he was back inside.

Almyra came closer. "What did you do differently, Harry?"

"Beats me ... I'd like to know."

Kenzo said, "It was Zen."

"Huh?"

"You've laughed the difference away, Ha-ri."

Harry still didn't understand.

"It was a joke ... Sure, you wanted to scare Sirius, or catch them while - er, getting bottles. But you didn't give a damn, generally speaking - so you were relaxed enough to do it right ... And now it works - probably also when you've sobered up ... Another try?"

"Where to?"

Kenzo smiled. "Surprise, Ha-ri."

"Erm - okay."

There was a moment like an eternity in nowhere, then Harry looked at the train platform near Hogsmeade. He turned to Kenzo. "Wow ... Although - how stupid would it look if I couldn't follow back."

"Who told you I'd jump back?"

Into the terrible instant of cold surprise, Harry felt the signal come, rise, and *followed*.

They were in Sirius' garden - Kenzo's target for safety reasons, apparating into a room of eighteen more or less drunken party guests wasn't exactly his cup of tea. Kenzo smiled. "A little stress test, Ha-ri ... Very good."

Inside, Curry Wylie pumped Harry's arm up and down. "Bloody excellent, Harry - you're our man ... When can we expect you in the squad?"

Sirius stepped in. "Not before the end of next year."

Curry bent closer, whispered in Harry's ear, unfortunately loud enough for half of the room, "Although I have to admit - we're supposed to catch them alive, Harry." Next instant, he was hurrying away as Brenda and Deborah were both trying to hit him in the ribs.

Cho watched the spectacle, looked at Harry. "Your new bodyguards?"

Wise enough not to reply, Harry sat down, beaming madly. He could pursue! The thought filled him with deep satisfaction.

The excitement faded - in him as well as in the other people, and the party drifted into the phase with dim light, slow music, slow-moving dancers, closely together, and low-talking groups. And little by little, the grouping resembled pretty much that on Sirius' list.

Tommy and Brenda said good-night, left. Curry and Laureen followed. Remus and Almyra followed, then Ron and Janine. Jessica stood up to say goodbye, accepted Severus' offer to escort her home. Paul and Ellen had intended to leave at the same time, decided to await the next pass of the Knight Bus.

Kenzo stood up to leave, agreed to escort Ginny home.

Hermione and Viktor said good-night. Their way was the shortest - just upstairs into Sirius' only guest room. With respect to The Burrow so close by, it hadn't been a question who was getting this privilege.

Cho was fighting sleep, and another problem. "Less' go, Harry."

Which meant, to The Burrow - the place toward which Ron and Janine had left not so long ago, reason enough for Harry to answer, "In a few minutes."

"No - less' go now."

"If we go now, we've to wait until - er, the bathroom's free."

"Oh - yes'f cours'."

Deborah showed amusement, more about Harry's argument than about Cho's state. Sirius joined them for a last glass - in Harry's case, orange juice pure. Harry raised the glass. "To a super party - cheers."

"Thanks ... To our newest pursuer - cheers."

"Thanks ... Now we only have to find him." Harry looked from Sirius to Deborah. "Any new tracks?"

Deborah answered. "One - Wesley Warrington has a very nice vacation home on the Bahamas." It earned her an angry look from Sirius.

Harry saw it. "Don't worry - not my business ... But maybe Mr. Chang can add some information - he's scanning in the high finance level."

Deborah found this a good idea, asked Harry for something that would identify her as a trustworthy person toward Mr. Chang.

Maybe his look toward Cho, almost asleep, gave Harry the association. "Okay - a keyword ... *Drunken Driver.*"

Deborah smiled, then dropped her smile. Apparently, she had remembered that the Riter Skeeter case was officially still a hit-and-run. At least, she had no idea what the keyword meant.

Harry said good-night, for himself as well as for Cho, grabbed her, more carrying than guiding, and flagged the Knight Bus down.

In The Burrow, everything was silent. Considering the time in advance, it was not unlikely that even Ron and Janine were already asleep.

In his room, Cho looked at him. "I'm deeply sorry, and I hate it to say, but - I drank too much ... Even with your skill, Harry, tonight it's a hopeless case."

This came as no surprise to him. Harry started to giggle.

Cho looked quite embarrassed. "Don't ... It's shameful enough, and a real pity."

He kissed her. "Never mind ... In particular because - nobody will believe it."

It wasn't exactly helpful to ease her embarrassment, quite the opposite.

\* \* \*

At the beginning of the school year, Harry would have thought it impossible, while now, close to the First of May, he really felt reluctant to join the Durmstrang ball. With so many events in such a short time, suddenly a quiet weekend in Hogwarts seemed very attractive.

Of course, this was just one reason, and not the most valid one. More important seemed his severely troubled memory of ball evenings. The keyword *ball* was enough, then - with closed eyes - he saw the scene again.

There were also some unspoken reasons. Provided they would go, he and Cho would reach Durmstrang through the link gate, and at the end of the evening, they would return to Hogwarts, each of them returning to the respective dormitory. Not the most appealing end of a ball.

And - without admitting to anyone, not even Cho, Harry had another reason. Marie-Christine would not be there.

He knew, Cho wanted to join the ball. He also knew, she would accept his decision, would not insist. But Hermione insisted. "You cannot do that, Harry. This is Durmstrang - Viktor's old

school ... He'll never tell you, but he would be disappointed if you and Cho won't come - that's why I'm telling you."

"Yeah, sure ..."

"I know - I mean, I can imagine why a ball evening's currently not the most promising thought for you - " Hermione looked pointedly, "in particular this one, far away - erm, in Bulgaria ... But you have to return to normalcy, Harry." Again, her eyes made clear that she could see more than one meaning in that.

"And," she added, "you would sit at the teacher's table - simply because you've held these seminars for Drilencu." Suddenly, Hermione looked pleading rather than challenging. "Do you know how long since we've sat together at a ball?"

It was this argument which settled the issue.

And so it came that Harry was sitting with Cho in Durmstrang, Viktor and Hermione to their left, Remus and Almyra to their right. Yes, Remus - outside Hogwarts, both considered it awkward, continuing with *Prof.* With an inward grin, Harry realized that this codex would hold a year longer than some other.

As much as Beauxbatons emphasized a big city flair, Durmstrang kept to a rural style. Harry saw a lot of wood, covered with artful carving. The ceiling was nowhere as high as in Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, you could see it clearly - of course covered with carved wood. Also the music - the band played some popular chart hits, while most songs were folk music of the Bulgarian kind - pretty strange in the ears of the common northwesterner, unless you knew even stranger rhythms - American Indians, for example.

American Indian music wasn't played. Harry's dance formation had not been invited, to the limited disappointment of some eleven-year-olds, and the unlimited disappointment of a certain Ravenclaw student.

Soon, Harry recognized why. These Bulgarians had a lot of local dances, presented formations of their own, and played music to let the students and teachers dance. Polka, for example - not quite Bulgarian, however from the neighbourhood, anyway not part of Harry's repertoire because Polka wasn't taught by Fleur.

And Fleur wasn't around to show him. The preparations for the wedding, scheduled for Pentecost, kept her busy all the time.

Hermione grabbed him. "C'mon, Harry - if you know quickstep, then polka is a piece of cake." And she whirled him around, while Viktor did the same with Cho.

Dances from the neighbourhood seemed a habit of this band. The next was sirtaki, a Greek dance, originally only for men, although here in Durmstrang this rule was not kept. The steps were simple, boringly so, as it seemed - at the beginning, when the music still was slow. Then it accelerated.

Then it accelerated more.

Then it ran incredibly fast.

Thanks to his extensive *aikido* training, and to his perfect sense of balance, Harry turned out the only foreigner who mastered keeping the pace through the final, at his sides only Durmstrang students left, probably all of them Greeks. It earned him a loud applause.

Next came kazachoc, a Russian dance, also intended for men only and - in contrast to sirtaki - kept that way. After the first steps, Harry knew why - for sure it would have looked spectacular if the girls had thrown their legs that high, while certainly not decent.

If he had thought sirtaki was stressful, kazachoc told him what stressful really meant. Soon, he stopped, watching the few dancers who continued, among them Viktor.

Starting slow and finishing wild, this seemed the hallmark of all dances here. Csardas came next, for a change danced by several pairs together in a circle, with simple movements, which was good because, toward the end, it was no longer simple.

And, of course, Vienna waltz - considerably more than what could be heard at a Hogwarts ball, even more than in Beauxbatons, where it was called musette waltz.

A waltz was it also when the singer announced "Ladies' choice." Harry watched as Cho spurred toward Drilencu, then glanced up because Professor Trelawney was standing in front of him. "Mr. Potter," the witch said, "may I have this dance?"

She wasn't quite as tall as he had expected. After a moment, he became aware that his picture of her, from years ago, was somewhat outdated - simply because he had gained height since then.

"How's life without Divination, Mr. Potter?"

Harry grinned. "Very surprising, Prof ... And how's Divination without the Weasley-Potter gang?"

"Sometimes a bit boring - but only in classes." The witch smiled. "As you know perfectly well, there's a lot of mud and occasionally a clear view - while with only true believers around, of course everybody claims to be successful all the time."

He laughed. "I'd never guessed."

"But as I said - every now and then, you catch a glance ... It won't surprise you to hear that you're still my most fascinating study object, Mr. Potter - there's nobody who's bending the odds as much as you do."

When in doubt, ask. "And - did you have a clear view recently?"

"Maybe ... You were travelling a lot recently, and you had company."

Harry stared at her. Did Trelawney know that he had mastered apparition pursuit? It wasn't impossible, although unlikely.

"You'll travel more, Mr. Potter - and for what I saw, your company at some of these travels isn't agreeable ... Not at all."

Harry felt his neck hair rising.

Trelawney had lost her smile. "It wasn't very clear - too many possibilities, not surprisingly so ... At any rate, Mr. Potter - make sure you're travelling with your snake."

"Nagini?"

"Yes, right, that's her name, I didn't remember ... She's playing a key role, so much I can tell." Trelawney forced her smile back. "But let's concentrate on dancing - these travels won't happen in the next days."

Harry was very thoughtful after he had escorted the witch back to her place. True, she had missed the point ever so often - but rarely the event. Well - if the solution meant travelling with Nagini, there was no need to worry.

Returning to Hogwarts, he escorted Cho to the Ravenclaw tower. This alone contributed more to a feeling of *normalcy* than the entire evening in Durmstrang. After saying each other good night, which took its time, Cho looked up. "Now let's be good students and go to bed."

"Excellent idea ... Where?"

She laughed. "Don't remind me ... Anyway, Pentecost isn't too far away."

"Three weeks!"

"Well - use the time for hard work, cold showers ..."

"Hot water tub and steam room ..."

Cho nodded. "And nothing else." Turned, and disappeared upstairs.

\* \* \*

In these three weeks, Harry kept pestering everybody who could apparate, asking for a chance to pursue them. Of course, a jump of hundred yards was no longer his goal - this, in combination with the need for a long walk to leave the protected zone around Hogwarts was the reason that he found few ears ready to listen.

At the Ravenclaw table, he asked Cho. "How's your apparition?"

"Sorry - still a long way to go."

Almyra grinned. "I wonder if it's really apparition you're after, Harry."

"Of course not - pursuit!"

Almyra grinned broader. "That's what I thought - although it's more commonly known under different ..."

"How's your apparition?"

Suddenly, Cho had a glaring look in her face.

Almyra saw it. "Sorry - no license yet."

It confirmed what Harry had expected - Almyra could apparate, and for quite a while as he suspected. He turned back to Cho. "How come you're so slow with that?"

"Stop bullying me! ... And all just because ..." Cho stopped.

Almyra smiled sweetly. "Because?"

"Ask him - no, for God's sake, don't ask him - he might really answer."

Almyra smiled at Harry. "In the mood for a walk?"

Cho looked trapped. Toward Almyra, Harry said, "Only if you apparate."

"Well ... hmm ..."

Cho's face showed desperation.

Almyra laughed. "Only joking ... Look somewhere else, Harry - I've found a better idea, I'll squeeze Cho a bit."

Harry stood up, walked away. Almost outside the hall, a squeak, followed by a high-pitched sound, made him turn.

Almyra was hanging in her chair, twisted in the worst fit of laughter he'd ever seen with her.

Harry's eyes met Cho's, receiving the unspoken message to get lost - quickly.

For a while, he was similarly unsuccessful in his attempts at getting a look into Fleur's list of wedding presents. This list offered a pile of sheets, each of them specifying a possible present, something that was still missing in the future household, with alternatives up and down the money scale. Whenever Harry asked, this mysterious list wasn't at hand, somewhere else, already given further.

He went to Fleur. "It's very strange, but somehow I never catch this list of yours."

Fleur smiled. "You - the big hunter? ... 'arry, that's a poor performance."

"As if they did it on purpose." Something in Fleur's laughter made him suspicious - maybe it was more his *haragei* than her laughter. "Do I have to fetch Nagini for this conversation?"

Fleur giggled. "Okay, okay - I'll tell you ... You're right - they're forbidden to pass it over to you."

Harry looked perplexed.

"Yes - Bill and I, we found it inappropriate, because your help with the request was so much more ..."

"But that's nonsense ..." Pleadingly, he said, "Fleur, I cannot arrive there, being the only one without a present."

"Don't be silly ... Look, 'arry - the list includes all kinds of things for a household - after you found the proper idea for the entire house, it'd be simply ridiculous."

Harry shook his head. To small avail - apparently, this information channel was blocked for him. "Say," he asked, "how did you make sure nobody will give it to me?"

"Very simple - on the cover of the list, there's something like *Don't give this to Harry Potter ...*" Fleur grinned. "And as far as I can see, they all have fun making sure of that."

At least he had solved the riddle. Still, he fell one idea short - what to hold in his hands when arriving there? Harry had no intention to come with nothing, if it couldn't be something from the list, he had to find out by himself.

Some days later, he knew. It took him a while to prepare, and it took all his skill in meditation and concentration to be ready. Then he went to the person that was required for creating the present.

After hearing what he had in mind, the person looked delighted. "Yes of course - what a wonderful idea - and it gives me the opportunity to see it in advance."

Two hours later, the raw material was available, and Harry's helper promised to have the final thing ready day after tomorrow.

When he arrived two days later, he had the opportunity to watch the final test. At the end, he said, "That's brilliant, Prof ... Still better than I had expected ... Thank you very much - I owe you for that."

The witch smiled. "Okay, Mr. Potter ... Having an ob on you is not the worst feeling."

Compared to Fleur's and Bill's trouble with this big-scale wedding, Harry's own had to be called a trifle. However, the weekend before, he and Ron and Ginny had to come to The Burrow - a shopping tour for new dresses.

From Harry's own perspective, his ball dress had looked okay, except Ma Weasley had different opinions. And she made sure to be the one who received bill. No doubt - the name Delacour was drawing a shadow in this issue too.

In addition, Ma Weasley had a lot of questions about Fleur's parents. Somehow, Arthur and Molly Weasley had never managed to follow any of the informal invitations, and now it was too late. They would meet them at the wedding for the first time.

Ron tried to calm down his mother. "Mum - they're nice, really. Yes, it's a castle, but they're so perfectly normal ..."

Ma Weasley looked at Harry. "What's your comment?"

Harry couldn't resist. "Funny you're asking Ron ... He arrived, and there was Janine, and from this moment on, he was lost ... I think he wouldn't recognize the Delacours on a picture."

Ron shot him a glance in which anger mixed with self-consciousness. "It's not true - I remember them clearly."

Harry grinned. "What's the first name of Fleur's mother?"

"Erm ..."

Ma Weasley had heard enough. "Okay, Harry - *you* tell me."

"Ron's right, Ma ... I know they're happy with Bill, so they'll be happy with you."

Ma Weasley wasn't convinced. "How does she look?"

"Like Fleur, only better."

The admiration in Harry's voice was unmistakable. Both Ron and his mother were looking at him, and Harry realized that his judgement of older women was taken very seriously. Ma Weasley, who had needed new dresses not only because this was the wedding of her oldest son but also because she had lost some pounds, didn't look happy.

Harry took her. "Listen, Ma ... Okay, they have a lot of money and a big castle and Madame Delacour is a half-Veela - but they have two children, and you have seven, and that's why she's envying you."

"Really?"

"The other guests were the Baillards, and they've five - you could see it from her looks ... Ask Ron - no, don't ask him, he had no time to ..."

This time, Ron mustered a counter. "You can ask Janine, Mum ... He's right."

Ma Weasley looked a lot better. "Thank you - both of you."

On the Saturday of the wedding, they arrived quite early at the Delacour castle, using the direct route from Hogwarts through Beauxbatons, where Janine joined their group. Fleur had asked for this early time since some helping hands were urgently needed. Harry was scheduled as a broomstick pilot for children - Gabrielle had made sure that even those without such a request by themselves would demand a flight on an Omniair 27 DS.

Monsieur Delacour asked if Harry and Cho had a minute.

Harry nodded, with some fluttering in his stomach. For all he knew, Delacour was also an old family in France, otherwise, this castle could not be explained. And Cho together with him - what did it mean?

Then he saw Madame Delacour and relaxed - serious talk about some unpleasant story would have been handled by their host alone.

Monsieur Delacour said, "In a few hours, the Weasley and the Delacour families are related. From our perspective, it's no question that you, Harry, are a member of the Weasley family. We are more than happy about that, and for good reason."

Monsieur Delacour looked solemn. "Two years ago, you did the right thing, 'arry - down in a lake. You didn't care about rules, you didn't think twice what other people might say - you just did right ... And recently, you've been forced to do something which - for us - fits in the same category, no matter how different it may look to other people. This is one of the reasons, and my wife and I, we wanted to tell you."

Harry swallowed, then bowed. "Thank you ... It - it means a lot for me."

"The other reason," now Monsieur Delacour smiled toward Cho, "is this charming young lady - sooner or later, I'll be related to her too, which is a very pleasurable thought."

Cho's face had been shining before. Now she beamed.

"So it's high time to drop Monsieur and Madame ... 'arry, Cho - this is Elienne, and I'm Jean-Baptiste - and now we need some champagne."

It took a moment for four people to kiss cheeks at both sides - much longer than it took to raise a glass and to empty it, as this was a must at such an occasion. At least, Jean-Baptiste had filled the glasses only to half height.

Cho grinned at Harry. "That's number three."

Neither Harry nor the Delacours could follow.

"He's collecting sisters ... Step-sisters like Ginny, sisters in spirit like Almyra - and now he has a sister-in-law."

Elienne smiled. "And Gabrielle - how does she count?"

"Oh - I'd say here it's the other way around - she has collected him."

They agreed that Cho's description was certainly more to the point than any official term for the sister of a step-sister-in-law. Then Harry went to find his new sister and her groom, because he had to deliver his present. He found them near a gigantic table with a number of boxes that seemed to grow by the minute. He said, "Fleur, Bill - you made it a bit difficult, but now I'm glad that this list was kept away from me."

Bill looked satisfied. "This would have been the first rule Harry's keeping - other people's rules, I mean."

Fleur examined the box. "Please, 'arry - since we don't have time to open it now ... What is it?"

"A spector cassette."

Fleur looked blank, while Bill started to smile - apparently he had an idea.

"You know," explained Harry, "that a spector can record a scene when it's told? ... Well, this cassette is a collection of scenes. You might call it *Fleur - seen from Harry's perspective*. It starts with our first meeting in the Triwizard Tournament - then the scene in the hut, with us waiting for our dragons - then the scene in the lake - dance lessons ..."

Fleur came forward, hugged him. "What a wonderful idea, 'arry - and all from your perspective?"

"Yes, sure - that's the only way I could tell."

Fleur flushed. "Oh my God, the first scenes must be horrible - with my comments at that time ..."

Harry grinned. "Don't be surprised if I was more impressed by - er, your appearance than by your English."

Bill laughed. "No - it won't surprise me at all."

Harry turned to Bill. "Of course you appear in some scenes - especially in two of them ... The first is the day of the Weasley visit - when I watched you watching Fleur ... The second is at the Gryffindor table - a conversation between you and Fleur."

Bill beamed. "So this is a document of how Fleur and I met."

Harry grinned. "Maybe so - but only the public part."

Laughing, Fleur and Bill assured that this was exactly the amount they'd like to see recorded on a sceptor cassette.

For the rest of the day, Harry experienced a wedding party in which he was truly and deeply involved, at multiple levels, all of them very personal. He was a de facto member of the groom's family. He was a friend of the Delacour family, and still before that small ceremony of this morning, he had felt four individual strings to Jean-Baptiste and Elienne, Fleur and Gabrielle. He was tied in a bond with Goblins, and Goblins appeared as a factor in this wedding.

Bill's best man turned out to be a Goblin - Wynor the Whistler, a figure which gave Harry the opportunity for examining a *young* Goblin, since he knew that Wynor was about Bill's age. The name wasn't explained, and Wynor did not whistle - all Harry could find out was that he had worked with Bill in the times of the Goblin espionage network.

Wynor wasn't the only Goblin at this wedding, while he raised quite some glances, standing in the church at Bill's side. Not all emotions Harry sensed were pleasant and friendly, but whoever felt irritated by non-humans in the growing and growing number of guests did better to keep silent.

Jean-Baptiste made sure of that, announcing what bride and groom had received from their request for a place to raise children in the spirit of three races - humans, Veela, Goblins. A house in Paris, a magnificent old villa - in the middle of the small Goblins quarter. This had come together with Bill's promotion from Egypt to France - into the Gringotts residence where he himself, Harry had little doubt, was a customer with a new vault, established together with the villa.

Former and present students and teachers from two schools contributed a lot to the guests. And here again, Harry could watch a purposeful combination. Two flower girls were busy before and after the church ceremony - one of them Gabrielle, the other Rahewa. As Harry

learned later that day, Gabrielle had been ordered to select the other girl from Hogwarts, so Rahewa was her natural choice - to the bitter disappointment of Chloe.

Even the Delacour castle was insufficient to hold all guests. Large tents in the park served as the official location for an endless sequence of food and drinks, without any recognizable start or end. This arrangement left the house free for gatherings, conversations, and exchange of gossip to be told in a quiet corner.

For quite a while, Harry could watch the coming and going from a bird's view - serving as one of several pilots on an Omniair 27 DS. He did so with pleasure, more than Ron, certainly more than Cho who dropped her broomstick after a while in favour of something to eat.

Rahewa offered to join the service squad - only to realize that parents seemed quite reluctant to let their children mount the second seat on a broomstick under the control of an eleven-year-old.

With a look at the queue of waiting children, Harry agreed with Rahewa to run a twin patrol - at least when starting and landing, with him again and again assuring that yes, this girl was up to the task, and no, his own passenger seat would only be available *after* Rahewa's.

The parents were still reluctant, only they had no choice - their children made sure of that.

At some time in the afternoon, the queue faded. What the arrival of cakes in the tents hadn't done, Fred and George had managed - with a giant box of sweets. Harry and Rahewa stored their Omniairs away, grateful to see that attractions like vampire teeth ranked higher - maybe only among the children, however theirs were the votes that counted.

Then Bill and Fleur disappeared into their wedding night - more exactly, into the link gate that connected the castle with Paris. They had been wise enough not to tell anyone where they would spend this night - not their new house, this was the only public information. All the popular jokes, which could be played by wizards when the room was known, would be avoided this way.

Harry watched as Fleur threw her flower bouquet into the crowd. Only afterwards, he learned that this was some kind of Divination technique - the girl or woman who caught the bouquet was supposedly the next one to marry. He wondered what Professor Trelawney would think of that. Anyway, the girls he knew had made no efforts to catch it.

Some time later, Jean-Baptiste came to Harry and Cho. "Please, do me a favour," he said. "Play the hosts for us in this tent here ... Elienne and I, we want to have a talk with Arthur and Molly - otherwise, the wedding's over and we're still unknown to each other."

Playing the host seemed basically a simple task - more or less the only duty was to stand up, shake hands, smile, and nod toward guests leaving. Pretty quickly, Harry lost track of all the names, decided to report just a summary - that all guests had left, sending greetings through him.

However, this time never came. Young people were sitting, talking, drinking deep into the night. They had gathered in one tent - with the twins right in the middle, doing conversation with some girls, in a kind that included some mix of English, French, arms, hands, mouths.

Harry went to them. "Fred, George - you're the hosts now ... We're going to - er, retire."

For a moment, George let go of his conversation partner. "Retiring? ... Tirelessly, I hope."

The girl at his side wanted to know what George had said.

George wanted Harry to translate.

"There's a better idea," replied Harry. "If you don't know the words, explain it to her by some other means."

George promised to do his best, and Harry and Cho walked into the house to find their own guest room. On their way, they passed Max, the big black dog. Recognizing Harry, the dog fell back, to receive a patting and to continue sleeping.

Harry sat down on the bed. "Stressful, such a wedding."

Cho looked at him suspiciously. "You've made the little girls fly all the afternoon - now's the time to make a big girl fly."

"Is it? ... Then wait a second, I'll get me an Omniair."

She came closer. "Don't bother ... I know a stick, and some kind of broom - and if it doesn't turn out a two-seater, then maybe a two-layer ... Might be even better ..."

She was right.

George wasn't.

\* \* \*

Back in Hogwarts, Harry settled his mind for the final rush toward the end of terms. The wedding had been the last in a chain of social events. For all Harry knew, there was just one major event left to be awaited - the Quidditch match Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw. And to be prepared for, with Ron scheduling lots of training sessions.

However, two days later, Harry's concentration on Hogwarts issues was severely disturbed.

Entering the Great Hall for lunch, he saw Deborah waiting at his place. Coming closer, seeing her face, his smile faded. "Deborah - what's wrong?"

"Maybe nothing ... Do you know where Sirius is?"

"No - why?"

"I expected him yesterday evening, but he didn't come ... His office doesn't know his whereabouts - I haven't seen him since Sunday."

## **23 - The Search**

Harry stared into Deborah's face. Her words let his neck hair rise and his lips tighten. This, in turn, changed her expression from concern to deep worry, bordering desperation.

He took her shoulders, gently pushed her on a seat. "Wait here - I'll be back in a few minutes."

She stopped him. "What are you going to do?"

"Pack some things ... Talk with some people ... Then we'll return to London - and then we'll look for Sirius."

"But where? ... And how?"

"Everywhere ... We'll lift every lid and look into every pot - and if the lid refuses to open, it'll blow into the air." Harry realized that he had gritted his teeth, opened them again with some effort. "We'll find him, Deborah."

"And if he's dead?"

"Sunday you saw him the last time, right?"

She nodded.

"And yesterday he didn't appear, and today's Wednesday - that means he disappeared Monday ..." Harry shook his head. "If they'd killed him, he would have been found yesterday or this morning ... No, he's alive - I'd say, he's a prisoner of Voldemort."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"I cannot - but it's not the first time something like this has happened ... The last time, it was Lupin, and I had to wait until Dumbledore could rescue him because I wasn't prepared. But this time I am prepared."

Deborah wanted to know more, wanted to hear a story with a happy end.

"Later," replied Harry. "First let me collect my things - we'll have time enough for stories while waiting, but not now."

In his dormitory, he packed some clothes and his Invisibility Cloak. When his glance fell on Nagini, the conversation with Professor Trelawney resurfaced in his memory. He said, "Come round me, partner - time for some travelling."

Reaching the hall again, his first stop was at the Ravenclaw table where, meanwhile, Cho and Almyra had arrived. "Deborah's here," he said. "Sirius has disappeared, probably around Monday ... I'm going to travel to London with her, and look for him."

Cho dropped her fork. "I'll come with you."

Harry shook his head. "Not yet ... Maybe if we know more - although I'll feel much better knowing you're here ... Please do me a favour - when I'm gone, tell Dumbledore what happened and that I'm looking for Sirius."

Cho's face had paled a bit. "Harry, is this the - the big encounter?"

"Dunno ... I'm pretty sure it was Voldemort - looks a bit like the Lupin story, only this time I'm better equipped, so it's not impossible."

Cho bit her lips. "When ..."

Harry interrupted her. "I simply don't know. According to what I have in mind, the earliest time I'll be back is tomorrow evening, maybe a day later." He bent down. "You know what I promised, so please - don't get into a frenzy if it takes longer." He kissed her. "See you."

She stopped him. "Harry - I always had this picture, with me standing in a doorway and waving at you how you walk away to meet Voldemort - and now it's me sitting here for lunch, and you're passing by and saying, See you ... It's so ..."

He smiled. "Leaving you with some food - I like this picture much better."

"I love you, Harry ... If you see Voldemort, do me a favour and kill him."

He kissed her again. "I love you too ... Otherwise - all I'm promising is to come back."

Almyra was up, apparently to hug him - only Nagini was in the way. So she grabbed his head, kissed him. "There are some more people who love you - and if you can do with some help, come back and call, okay?"

Harry nodded. "You bet."

At the Gryffindor table, he met Ron and Hermione, who had found time to talk with Deborah, to hear the news, to look concerned. Harry turned to Ron. "Listen - I'll be off for a while, maybe only for two days or so ... Please tell the teachers."

"What can I tell them?"

Harry managed a grin. "Make it simple - tell them the truth." He turned to Hermione. "What's the Hogwarts rule for leaving in search for your godfather - I mean, it's not exactly without notice."

Hermione tried to smile. "As if there'd be any rule that fits you, Harry." Then she came round, encountered the same problem as Almyra before, found the same solution. "Please find him, Harry."

He shook hands with Ron. "Okay, brother - for a few days, you have to train Quidditch for two." Outside, he took his Steel Wing, then walked with Deborah toward the Hogsmeade linkport.

Deborah said, "This must be a dream - and it's alternating between a nightmare and a fantasy ... Sirius disappears, then I come to Hogwarts and tell you. And you say yes, Voldemort has

caught him - he does it by a habit, it's not the first time ... That's the nightmarish part ... Then I'm sitting there, waiting, and then I watch some sixth-years talking and kissing and saying goodbye and watch your back - like for some boat party or whatever ... That's the fantasy part."

"There's nothing wrong with sixth-years ..." Harry chuckled. "Actually, Cho and Almyra are seventh-years."

Deborah glanced at him from the side. "For most people, when it's about searching for a grown man who has disappeared, there's little difference between sixth and seventh year."

"Basically, they're right. But in a few weeks, there's a world of difference."

It took Deborah a moment to realize what Harry was talking about. At least the issue seemed good to let her think about something else, as her next words indicated. "Harry, how come your girl is older than you?"

"Good question ... Deborah, how come your man is older than you?"

She could smile. "Well - people consider this normal, if the man's older than the woman."

Harry shrugged. "The French think differently."

"Really? ... What do they think?"

"They say, love hits where it hits ... Apart from that, for - er, educational purposes, they're convinced that a young student should look for an older teacher."

"And that's your policy?"

Suddenly, Harry realized that the question - asked from someone that close to Sirius - might have a larger scope than just himself. He glanced to his side, not learning anything from this face owned by an experienced interviewer.

When in doubt, use the truth. "Yes."

"That's what I heard."

He glanced again. "Did you?"

They had reached the linkport, reason enough for Deborah not to answer.

\* \* \*

Sirius' office was their first station. Harry felt not quite sure how Sirius' secretary would cooperate. When she addressed him as "Mr. Potter", he knew that another problem had to be solved first. He asked, "Do you think it was me?"

The secretary almost jumped. "No - of course not."

"Good ... This isn't a party here, but still - can we go along with Harry and Jessica and Deborah?"

"Er - yes, sure."

"All right, Jessica ... When did you see Sirius the last time?"

"He didn't arrive yesterday - Monday was a holiday, so Friday was the last time I saw him."

"What did you do when he didn't appear yesterday?"

The girl-like woman blushed, but kept silent.

"Did you do anything?"

Finally, she answered. "No ... After that long weekend, it could have been ... And then, this morning, er - Deborah came and asked for him, and then I knew ... But we agreed that she'd contact you first ..."

Apparently, Jessica's qualities in organization didn't extend to an unplanned situation, to anything out of the ordinary. She was no trouble-shooter, and she was no cop. Harry asked, "What case was Sirius working on?"

"Nothing special - none that I know of."

Glancing at Deborah, seeing her expression, Harry became aware that Sirius had changed his old habit in one aspect. He hadn't stopped telling his findings to someone else - he had only shifted from his secretary to another person. Well, considering the fact that Belinda had been more than his secretary, in a way he hadn't changed at all.

Harry asked, "Did you scan his desk?"

Jessica hadn't. The thought alone - even now - made her arms flutter through the air.

"Listen, Jessica ... If someone's asking, you'll say Sirius is travelling to meet a person, and he didn't tell you when to expect him back, okay? ... And keep track of who's asking, so you can tell us when we pass by again ... And now we'll turn his office upside down."

"Erm - er, Harry, what do you think happened to him?"

Harry saw no benefit in telling the truth to this girl who passed for a woman. He had the strong feeling the name Voldemort alone would make her panicking. "I think someone caught him," he said, "and is holding him prisoner now ... And we're going to find him."

"How do you know?"

So Jessica wasn't stupid. Unfortunately, right now this seemed more of a burden than a help.

"He didn't get lost voluntarily," answered Harry. "... If someone had killed him, he would have been found by now - so he's alive. That means, he's been kidnapped for some purpose - and sooner or later, we'll hear from the kidnappers."

Which drifted Jessica's thoughts toward some anonymous figures in the background, figures which hadn't been caught in the failed assault at Middle Station. To some degree, it was even true.

Inside Sirius' office, Deborah started to speak, but Harry stopped her, pointing around the room. "I'm not sure whether this room's clean ... Let's talk later."

If Harry was right, if Deborah was Sirius' partner for loud thinking and for storing information in more than one head, most likely the desk would contain nothing of interest. However, it was a bit more than nothing.

He found a data sheet on Wesley Warrington, the head of the Transportation department. He found the copy of a letter to the Bahamas authorities, asking for information about real estate owned by a Wesley Warrington.

He also found a copy of the Potter-Pouilly file, took it together with the other findings.

Outside in the street, Deborah looked at him. "What now?"

"His house."

"And how do we get inside?"

"Oh ... I thought you had a key."

She smiled. "Could have been ... But just by coincidence, I have none."

"Well - it's not a real problem, but ..." They went back to Jessica to ask for a key, learned that yes, the ministry had keys to all houses that went with a job, but - unfortunately - it would take a triplicate form, and about half a dozen signatures, and ...

"Forget it," interrupted Harry. "I think I know where to find a key." Outside again, he looked at Deborah. "Can you apparate?"

"Sure."

"Let's go."

"But - oh, yes of course." She grinned wryly. "Not my day."

A moment later, they stood in front of Sirius' house. Deborah glanced at Harry. "Better we break into a backside door - here in front, it's too ..."

"Breaking in? ... Why?"

"Maybe because we have no key? Maybe because we want to go inside, except the door's locked?"

He grinned. "Calm down ... and keep still for a moment."

Deborah watched as Harry sat down just in front of the door, taking the lotus position. She opened her mouth, closed it again.

*Click*

She stared at the open door. "Cool."

Harry stood up. "Ladies first ..."

"Said the farmer and decapitated the hen." Nonetheless, Deborah stepped inside. Then she stopped. "What are we doing here?"

"Same as in his office - scanning." Harry's finger drew a circle in the air. "And the problem might be the same."

"But what do you expect to find?"

"Most likely - nothing. Only it would be stupid not to look ... It's just doing your homework before getting public - funny that I have to tell you, an experienced journalist."

"No, not funny - it's a shame ... Only I have trouble thinking of this as some kind of research for an article."

Harry nodded. "Understandably so ... Where do you want to start - upstairs?" Upstairs were the bedrooms.

Deborah grimaced. "I'm not sure - but I think better me than you ... Okay." She went upstairs.

Harry dropped Nagini on the rug. Then a thought crossed his mind. "Say - can you detect hidden rooms?"

"No, master - not as such."

"What do you mean - not as such?"

"I can sense people - in this regard, it won't matter whether they are in an open or in a hidden room."

Harry stared at his snake, as if he could learn something from the expression in this face. "People, yes ... What else?"

"Magic ... But that's nothing new to you, master."

"No ..." Only he hadn't thought of it. "Do you sense any magic now?"

"None - of course except you and that woman. But there was something outside."

Next moment, Harry had grabbed Nagini again, went back, put the mat between door and frame so it would not close, and stepped outside.

"It's very weak, master."

"Okay - I'm walking with you, and you say *Warmer* if it's getting stronger, or *Colder* if it's fading."

Five minutes later, with Nagini being as sure as she could be, Harry stared at the object which looked so perfectly innocent - the mailbox. Then it struck him. "Nagini, can you detect portkeys?"

"Only in the sense of a magical item ... A portkey doesn't feel special in any regard, except that it emanates strong magic."

"Could this mailbox have been activated as a portkey, and deactivated afterwards?"

Yes, this could be - at least Nagini felt nothing that would contradict her master's theory.

Harry went inside, sat down, to think it over. Nagini found her way down to the rug without his help.

After some time, steps came down the stairs, taking him off his thoughts. Deborah showed a self-conscious smile. "Nothing ... No hidden places, no dirty secrets, no map to the end of the rainbow ... And you?"

"I didn't even start yet."

"Oh - leaving the hard work to the girls, huh? ... Well, I have a surprise for you - I can sit down too." Deborah did.

Not catching the challenging half-joke, Harry said, "I think I know how it was done ... Nagini found it." He explained what they had detected outside. "Monday morning - Sirius is checking the mailbox, and bouff - off he goes ... That's typical Voldemort - he did the same with me."

Deborah lost all sense of joking. Harry, in contrast, felt encouraged. "That confirms what we have suspected - which is good news."

"Good??"

Harry nodded. "Now I'm sure ... To be honest, until a few minutes ago, I hadn't ruled out the possibility that Sirius would be found tomorrow morning - dead, I mean. But I think we can drop that - and that makes me feel a lot better."

"How good for you." Deborah looked miserable.

He went over, sat down beside her. "Deborah, now it's a million to one that Voldemort's holding Sirius as hostage - not someone in the middle, not someone with a grudge from his undercover time - no, Voldemort himself."

"Harry - did someone tell you that your way of cheering up people is a bit scary?"

He grinned. "Not exactly in these words, but - I guess I know what you're talking about."

"Then, please, for the simple-minded, like me - what's so good about this news?"

Harry became aware that Deborah, in some sense, counted as a total outsider, despite everything she might have read in the press about him. He said, "That's a longer story - in a way, it's the story of my life ... But for now, the good news is that Sirius will be alive and well until Voldemort and I meet."

"Then we just have to wait until you get a message?"

"No - the message will come, but if I have a choice, I'll track him down before ... That's why we should finish our scan here."

More than an hour later, they had checked everything, had found nothing that would offer another trail. Outside, when the door had closed behind them, Deborah asked, "What now?"

"Well - for what comes next, today it's too late ... Except for one thing - I didn't ask you yet what you can tell me about his latest activities."

Deborah nodded. "That fits just nicely, because you owe me a few answers too ... Follow me, Harry."

A short time later, he stood in her apartment and looked around. Through an open door, he could see what seemed to be her office, library, and work room in one, crammed with paper, parchments, books, newspapers, in shelves, in piles, in heaps. He realized that Sirius hadn't lived long enough in his house to make it a real home. Scanning this apartment would take a day, if not more.

Deborah appeared in the door. "Is it too early for something to eat?"

Too early? Suddenly Harry became aware that he had left Hogwarts *before* lunch - and now it was late afternoon. He told her.

"I'm no good cook," she said, "but I'm a good shopper ... Beats that pub in Hogsmeade any time."

Not long afterwards, they were sitting at a table opposite each other, between them on the table numerous salads, meat, fish, French bread - somehow, the large variety reminded Harry of the Japanese food culture.

For a while, he was busy eating. Apparently, Deborah had skipped lunch too, for she was keeping pace with him, although not to the end. Eventually, she leaned back. "As you're still chewing, maybe I should start by answering your questions. But I don't see anything relevant ... If I had a clue, I would have told you already."

Harry swallowed a bite. "Since Sirius is head of the squad, he has developed a technique of making sure that important information is known at least by two people, and I don't think he's changed that ... When Belinda was still alive, it was her ... Of course, in the months afterwards, he changed it, but I hope he has found back to that habit. And one thing's for sure - Jessica's not his backup mind ... So the only one left is you."

Deborah looked thoughtful. "I won't say you're wrong ... He doesn't discuss daily routine with me, not the way he probably did with Belinda ... When we were talking about these things

lately, it was about Warrington, and how to get further ... Only we had no idea, not with this slimey eel - although we didn't work too hard on that, not when we were together ..."

Harry smiled.

"... The only thing he was pressing on and on - I shouldn't hang my neck too wide out of the window. 'Don't follow the tracks of Rita Skeeter,' he said. It wasn't my job but his." Deborah's expression changed. "Harry - are you sure he won't be found tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, I am ... By the way, the more I think about the Skeeter case, the more I think it wasn't Voldemort - or his helpers. Somehow it doesn't fit."

"Tell me why - I'm glad to hear everything that supports your theory."

"Look at the other cases, the four *Magical Tours* employees and Belinda ... It's obvious to everyone that they've been killed on purpose - it might be unclear why, but these were no accidents, and they shouldn't look like accidents. That's Voldemort's style - he lets other people know that it was him, or someone under his command, and this jump artist was just the kind he would have hired ... While in the case of Rita Skeeter, nominally it was an accident."

"Meaning what?"

"Assume she found something, or she came too close to some secret, some knowledge that would discredit or compromise someone. And this knowledge was important enough, and this someone was unscrupulous enough, and powerful enough, to arrange an accident ... Would this description fit Warrington?"

"Probably ... At least, I have no information that would contradict ..." After a moment's thinking, Deborah asked, "But then, doesn't it mean Warrington and Voldemort are two different tracks?"

"No, I won't say so ... Voldemort has no mercy with his helpers, not more than with anyone else - if they're too stupid to cover themselves, it's not his problem ... You know, he doesn't hide his doing - he only hides himself."

"That's something to think about for a moment." Deborah stood up, started to store the remnants in the kitchen.

Harry offered his help.

"No," said Deborah with more energy in her voice than before. "Stay out of the kitchen, and let me think at my own speed. You're dealing with Voldemort for quite some time, but for me it's something new."

He used the time to think his own arguments over, found no flaw in them. Wesley Warrington had been the last entry in Rita Skeeter's list, before she was killed. It seemed time to pay a visit to this Warrington - after some other visits, that was.

Deborah returned from the kitchen, carrying a bottle and two glasses.

According to Jean-Baptiste, this was the best time - after a lot of food, and the best choice - red wine. Harry accepted a glass.

"Okay, Harry ... You said it's the story of your life, when I asked why Voldemort captured Sirius. Then please, tell me the - no, I've another question first ... What does *Hippogriff* mean?"

"My God - did nobody tell you until today?"

"Guess what? ... Maybe I can't hear this story often enough."

He laughed. "Hermione and I, we used a Hippogriff to save Sirius - actually, the Hippogriff was saved too ... Buckbeak was its name, and this is already part of the complete story."

"That's just fine - a good article starts in the middle, jumps back to the start, and then forward to the end ... I'm listening, Harry."

And so he told the story of Buckbeak, which was the final in the story about a prisoner of Azkaban, which was a centerpiece in the story of his life-long fight against Voldemort, condensing in four encounters - as a baby, as a first-year against Quirrel, as a fourth-year in the Tournament, and recently in the Battle of Hogwarts.

"Since he disappeared from that ship," finished Harry, "I was thinking over and over what I could do in another encounter. That was the missing element, but now this gap is closed ... I can pursue him, so I think I'm ready. The only problem is to find him."

Deborah had listened, asking only a few questions. Now she was looking at the table, her fingers playing with the glass. Thoughtfully, she said, "What a story ... I knew pieces - facts from the archive, some events from Sirius ... He talks about himself only when talking about you ..."

"Does he?"

"Oh yes ... He says you're the perfect match of your parents."

Harry leaned forward. "He never spoke with me about that ... What did he say?"

"I'm not sure ..." Deborah blushed a bit. "Part of it was - er, pillow talk, and normally ... But if it's appropriate to send you against Voldemort, I think it's okay to tell you."

Examining the question himself, Harry said, "Don't ask me what's appropriate. I've learned a lot about ethics, but for all I know, that's something different."

"Yes, that fits ... He says your total recklessness comes from your father, except he calls him James. And from Lily - from your mother, you've got this unconditional devotion ... And both together is a ... He says there's no limit for you, no borderline that couldn't be crossed."

"Hmm ... You were going to say both together is a - what is it?"

Deborah glanced up, looked down again. "A frightening combination - that's what he said."

"Well - I've heard that from other people too ..." Inspecting this new facet in the picture of his godfather, another thought struck Harry. "Although it's funny - Sirius, of all people ..." He stared into Deborah's face. "Do you know what it means, to survive twelve years in Azkaban? Did you ever meet a Dementor - face to face? I did, and if there's anything that's scaring me, it's the thought of being in their hands for some time ... I cannot even imagine a day in that state, not to mention twelve years."

"But you developed your Patronus, and that's what he meant - if there's a barrier, you don't give a rest until it's broken, and if this requires a spell which so far has been just a myth in old books, then so what ..." After a second, Deborah added, "Besides, don't get me wrong - he says it's the combination which is frightening, it's not you."

Harry grimaced. "That's good to know."

"He says you've compensated, so it's under control ... You've balanced out ..."

"Balanced - oh yes." He laughed.

Deborah's face kept solemn. "Sirius thinks that one of the main reasons why you had to stay with your relatives was to keep you in proportion. With a normal life, in a normal family, you could have developed arrogance, or ignorance of other people, quite easily ... While now, normal things like family life are precious and new, and that balances with your collection of powers and skills no one else can offer."

Harry stared at her. "You mean it wasn't for any special protection in Privet Drive?"

"Oh, that was probably another reason - and what I'm telling you is more speculation than knowledge ... But Sirius says this was the reason that you could adapt high ethics so easily - those of the Giants, the bond with the Goblins, your education in Japan."

"Except that I have trouble with conventions, huh?"

"Oh, c'mon, Harry." Deborah smiled. "People break conventions all the time - the only difference is you don't give a damn ... No - " she giggled, "there's another difference - some of your problem solutions are highly unusual."

Which answered a question he had asked at the Hogsmeade linkport.

At this moment, Deborah shook her head. "No, Harry - it's not true ... You don't break conventions - you simply ignore them."

"Must be a side-effect from the lack of a decent family education."

Deborah laughed. "Maybe so ... In any case - Sirius has no complaints about your ethics - none whatsoever, if you get my bearing."

"Yes - loud and clear."

She looked at him. "The evening is young ... Tell me more about you, Harry."

"Now wait a second - when I said it's the story of my life, basically I meant Voldemort ... And besides, I have to look for a place where to sleep, and get prepared for ..."

Deborah came forward, looked pleadingly. "I can offer a couch in the office that can be stretched to a bed ... Please ... Harry - inside, I'm scared shitless. Part of me wants to believe there's a chance, while another part says that's nonsense, be realistic - only I don't want to listen to that part. Please, tell me - tell me anything, as long as it's not about here and today."

"It's not unrealistic. It's only ..."

"I know!" She almost shouted. "I know about Remus, and how he was saved, and that he paid with an eye - it gives me the ..." She stopped, continued calmer, "Tomorrow, Harry - tomorrow we can discuss chances, and tomorrow I'll ask you what are our next steps - today, all I want to hear are fairytales with happy endings."

He watched her. "There's a story about real fairies - two actually, Muriel and Céline."

"Yes - tell me, please."

"What about you? In the mood for a bit trading?"

"Me? ..." Deborah made a dismissive gesture. "I'm not holding back, only there isn't much of a story. My life splits into three parts. The first part went until recently, when I met a man and fell in love with him, except he wasn't interested. Then I met another man who's incredibly young, and knows a lot of tricks, and some of these tricks helped me to get in touch with the man I love. Well - that's about part two ... Part three started yesterday, when this man didn't appear, and I ran to that young man to cry for help."

"Give or take a few details, huh?"

"Yeah, sure ... There are some men in my past, except they don't matter, and nobody cares about them." Deborah showed a short grin. "I'm not hiding skeletons in the basement, it's not that bad, only these stories aren't really entertaining ... I know there are some women in Sirius' past - but for what I've heard, there's little sense in telling you." She tried to smile. "Tell me about your love, Harry."

"Cho? You know about her."

"Yes - give or take a few details ... When did you fall in love with her?"

"I guess it was the first time I saw her - only I didn't know then." Thinking about the milestones in his own life, especially those regarding Cho, Harry looked up. "Deborah - I cannot tell about Cho without touching sensitive details, like the time when Remus was captured. It was in these days that I realized - that I told her ..."

"It's okay. Do it like in a good article - make the unpleasant parts short, and stress the other."

"Well - all right, then ..." Harry exhaled. "Once, upon a time in the north ..."

Deborah giggled. "Very good ... Go ahead."

And he did - telling about Cho and invitations to a ball, about Almyra and involuntary transformations, about Gabrielle and fairies and heroes, about Ron and Hermione, and how their friendship had formed. He avoided stories about Hagrid, because Hagrid was dead, and his ending hadn't been happy.

When he finished, Deborah said, "I wish I had a fairy, to trance me and to tell me it will be all right ... But I haven't, so I'll try without." She showed him the office, the bathroom, opened up the sofa-bed, came with a bedcover. "Which time tomorrow, Harry?"

"Normal - not too late."

"Okay ... Thank you for some fairytales ... Good night."

Harry was lying awake, thinking about his planning for the next day, and how to handle this. Once more, he would visit the *Magical Tours* headquarter, and until then, he had to be prepared with some arguments - words, that was. If they failed, it would be still early enough for a little destructive work with a powerful wand, toward this building which seemed to have an unlucky ...

A jolt in his *haragei*, and a muffled cry in his ears.

He reached Deborah, found her sitting upright in bed, face covered in her hands, shaking from sobs. He sat down, took her shoulders. "Hey, c'mon ... It was just a bad dream."

"Harry - he ... He was ..." Again, she broke into tears.

He tried to send a wave of calmness and confidence.

She gasped, almost jumped. "What's this?"

"It's me - mind energy ... I was trying to calm you down."

"Sorry - I'm too shaky ... Just hold me, please."

Skin contact, as Harry remembered, was indeed a means for curing a shock. Except, like all good medicines, it had some side-effects. He said, "You should lie down and try to sleep."

"No - I'm frightened to sleep, and to dream it again."

"Well - getting a cold won't help either."

"No, but there's a solution." She held the bedcover up. "Come in."

Harry shook his head. "That's not a good idea."

She had a short laugh. "That's the least of my worries, and anyway, I'm too ... Never mind. Just hold me, Harry - otherwise, as soon as I'm asleep you'll jump again from my screaming."

He scanned her face. "Sounds a bit like blackmailing."

"No, it's not - just a simple fact, unfortunately ..."

He came under the cover, lying in her back, one arm on Deborah's shoulder, careful not to come much closer.

She relaxed a bit. "I'm sorry - you must think I'm a despicable weakling ... That's not the picture I like to give, but I'm not playing in the same league as you and Sirius."

"You don't have to."

"Usually not, but maybe today ... Whatever, at least I won't fall apart if you come a bit closer."

"I was trying to avoid that."

"Harry, what I had in mind was to be held, not to be tickled." Deborah moved closer to him, grabbed his arm, put it around her body. With some consternation, he realized that she was wearing a night gown rather than a pyjama, and a pretty short one.

A thin one.

Fright could heat a body as good as any other strong emotion. Feeling the heat through the thin fabric, feeling her body pressed against him, Harry reacted almost automatically.

Her breath changed when registering this. "You're not scared at all, are you?"

"That's not quite correct - this situation goes a bit unplanned ..."

"Even so - I guess you're right." She took his hand, moved it under her gown.

"Deborah, I didn't ..."

"Sssh ... This is a dream, Harry, it's not reality ... It started as a nightmare, and now it changes to a wet dream ... Probably the best that could happen." She turned around to lie on her back. He felt how his hand was taken again, then placed on an inviting intersection.

Her legs were spreading. "Dream, Harry ... Dream for both of us - your dream's by far the better one."

Although wide awake, for Harry the moment felt dreamlike enough - caught, irresistibly, unable to escape, to change direction, without control ... Out of time.

He could sense how the remnants of horror faded from her, replaced by calmness, by heaviness, wetness, a slow wave of sensuality, growing, building momentum.

His stroking was slow, careful, almost hesitant. Contrary to what Deborah had said, this wasn't his dream. He saw himself as a visitor, had *followed* in a kind of emotional pursuit, dependent of his guide to proceed or to return - that was the perspective of his mind, in sharp contrast to his body which claimed a questionable right with undiminished vigorousness.

There was a moment when it seemed possible to stop, to conserve the dream in a stasis which, eventually, would fade into sleep. His hand stopped, still resting at this wonderful landscape of softness, crests and rifts.

A whisper. "Come - share your strength with me."

His guide had taken the decision. He was only to follow. And so he followed, passing the entrance.

"Keep still ... It's a dream - don't move."

Balancing the weight of his upper torso on his elbows, he kept as motionless as he could, feeling her around him, her calmness interrupted by a casual tremble, by an involuntary contraction.

The wave was still growing, forerunners lapping against his senses, probing his quietness at such a high level. He sent them back to her, raising another offshoot which was returned as well, undermining her balance, pushing her uphill.

Deborah was lying motionless under him, surrendering to the rules of this dream - only her breath, and the twisting of muscles beyond control, told him that she was already washed offshore by the wave, whirling through the surges of emotion.

Stronger came the gusts of passion that blew against his inner senses - as much as against his self, tightly enclosed by her. He sent them into her, no longer aware whose mind was burning in this heat, still trying to keep his role of a mere katalyst.

Her trembling grew stronger, stopped. He felt her body go rigid. With the tiniest movement, he sent her over the cliff.

Her sharp contractions ripped him off balance, a sudden attack which pushed him into the same maelstrom. Dropping his full weight onto her, he surrendering to the dream rules - a passive spectator, watching in awe as his own spasms started, rose, and erupted in the final blow of ecstasy.

A deep sigh from her. "What a dream ... In the morning, we won't remember, Harry - which is a pity, somehow, but that's the way with dreams, isn't it?"

"Yes, definitely."

About to leave, was he stopped by her. "Where do you want to go?"

"Back into my own ..."

"Nonsense ... I'll sleep a lot better with you in my back - and besides ..." She smiled. "I guess now there's little risk of some - er, unplanned activity, right?"

She was right, although not true. For quite a while still, Harry lay awake, feeling Deborah's shoulders at his chest, her breasts under his hand, her buttocks against his groin, wishing that either sleep might come or another dream of this forgettable quality.

\* \* \*

Sitting at the breakfast table, Harry felt hands at his shoulders, heard a voice from behind whispering in his ear. "You were very gentle ... And now I'm ready to fight."

Deborah shut down opposite, looked at him. "All right ... What next?"

"I'll make a visit to the *Magical Tours* headquarters. This managing director, Mr. Boonhill, might be a contact. Probably he doesn't know much, but he knows that there's someone in the background ... I'll make him call this someone."

"How?"

Harry stared into her eyes. "You don't want to know, Deborah."

"Yes, I do ... Don't confuse today with yesterday." Only a sparkling in her eyes reminded him not to confuse nights and dreams either.

"No, I won't. But it's unlawful - better you read it first in the newspaper."

The joke didn't catch. "Are you going to torture him?"

"Heavens, no! ... He's innocent, for all I know - well, almost. To trigger a reaction, I have to hit them where it hurts, and that someone in the background doesn't care about him."

Deborah looked relieved. "And where does it hurt?"

"Money - quite simple ..." Harry grinned almost joyfully. "Either they talk, or I'll blow their buildings into pieces - small pieces, mind you."

Deborah stared at him, nodded. "Yes - you'd do that."

He grinned broader. "I did it already - once, together with Belinda. It works, believe me."

"Oh, I do ... And then?"

"Then I'll visit Mr. Morony at Gringotts, and ask them for help ... Information, that's what we need - about this Mr. Warrington. He's the one we have to squeeze more thoroughly."

"More thoroughly?"

"I'm pretty sure he's a murderer, Deborah - not him personally, only that makes it even worse ... Still, torturing isn't really a good method of interrogation, that's why we have to use something else, and I have already an idea ... Do we know the address of his vacation house on the Bahamas?"

"No - unfortunately not."

Harry looked surprised. "That's strange - you know there is one, but you don't have the address?"

"Oh, we got an address - only it was a fake."

"That's interesting ... Might be that's the place we're looking for."

"You mean - Sirius?"

"I mean Voldemort." Examining the thought, Harry added, "He might keep Sirius there, but not necessarily so."

"And how do we get the address?"

"One approach is Cho's father ... I'll ask him to scan from top - somewhere in some Bahama office, this real estate must be recorded, and maybe he knows someone who knows someone ... It's a try."

"And if not?"

"Well - Warrington himself would know, won't he?"

Seeing his expression, Deborah swallowed. "Er - yes ... And what am I supposed to do?"

"I'd know something - if you're ready to do it ... It's not very pleasant."

"What is it?"

"I need to know Warrington's daily routine - when does he reach the ministry, how does he travel, when does he return home - things like that."

Deborah's eyes widened. "For kidnapping him?"

"Exactly ... Is this a job for a journalist?"

She inhaled deeply. "Yes - for a journalist whose lover has been stolen."

"Good ... I'll return this evening to Hogwarts, to get some help for the kidnapping. I guess we'll arrive tomorrow evening - that gives you two days to check his routine ... Can I leave my bag here in your apartment?"

A quick smile. "Sure ... Who'll be the help?"

"If she agrees, Almyra."

"Why her?"

"She can turn into a falcon, into a dog ... We know how to work together."

\* \* \*

Harry put Nagini around, donned his Invisibility Cloak, and mounted his Steel Wing for the trip to the *Magical Tours* headquarter. Just outside the entrance, he took the cloak off, walked in.

The reception lady talked with Mr. Boonhill's secretary. This took the first hurdle out of Harry's way. The secretary realized that Harry had no appointment, started to shake him off.

"Please give him my name," he insisted. "I'm sure he'll find a few minutes for me."

The secretary didn't think so.

"Madam, I'm the exception from the rule." Harry smiled. "If I'm wrong, I owe you a dinner."

The secretary started to laugh, stopped, examined him again. "That's a new trick ... Please wait a minute."

It turned out ten minutes, but then Harry was sitting in front of Mr. Boonhill's desk. "Mr. Potter," said the manager, "what can I do for you? ... I hope the network tickets are working properly."

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Boonhill, they do fine - that's not the reason for my visit ... I'm looking for a man - his name is Sirius Black, and he's head of the Law Enforcement Squad."

The manager was silent for a moment. Dropping all foreplay, he said, "I was trying to find the link between him and me, but if there's any, I cannot see it."

"There is, Mr. Boonhill. If you allow me to explain ..."

"Yes, please, Mr. Potter."

"The link appears in two aspects," began Harry. "The first one is less relevant for the current situation, but it has the advantage to be fact from start to end. The second one includes a bit of speculation, though only marginally."

"Then let's start with the first, Mr. Potter."

"Well ... At my last visit here, you had an - er, assistant, Mr. Boonhill. I never found out his name ... Anyway, the same man appeared in Middle Station, the link to the wizard prison that's run by Goblins. There he tried to kill Mr. Black but failed ... You may have read it in the newspaper."

Mr. Boonhill looked expressionless. "Yes, I did - also how this story ended."

"Right ... At that time, we saw no reason to bother you - mostly because I had the impression this assistant wasn't entirely your own choice. That's all to the first aspect - although it's the basis for the second."

"Go ahead, Mr. Potter."

"This assistant was - er, recommended by some people in the background. And the same people, or maybe someone in the background of the background, has caught Mr. Black ..." Harry looked up. "Mr. Boonhill, I'm looking for a way to reach the people in the background, and you are my entry key."

"Am I? ... Mr. Potter, my comment on this weird story is simple - I don't know about people in the background, so there's no sense in agreeing or disagreeing with you. If there are some, this background is so remote that I cannot see them. I won't know how to provide a contact."

Nagini kept silent.

Harry said, "From your perspective, Mr. Boonhill, you're certainly right. But, for example, there is *Amalgamated Enterprises*."

The manager's eyes widened a bit. "You're well informed, Mr. Potter - but these aren't people in the background ... It's a mother company, a relationship that's played in accounts and balance sheets more than anywhere else."

"Not in this case, Mr. Boonhill."

Somewhere in the managing director's mind, he had pulled a string. Harry could see it in the man's face. The manager asked, "What exactly do you expect from me, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, to put it as precisely as I can - I want you to talk with the place where your assistant came from, and to tell them that we have to talk, those people and I ... And this talk is urgent, Mr. Boonhill."

"But ... they'll laugh at me, Mr. Potter - they'll ask me whether I don't have other things to do, and push me off."

Harry showed a thin smile. "No, Mr. Boonhill ... You'll certainly use my name, and the effect might be very much the same as here - giving me time to talk without an appointment."

Mr. Boonhill looked as if searching for a pair of gloves to handle this task. "Maybe so, Mr. Potter, maybe not. What if they simply block off?"

"They won't - because I'll provide you with an excellent argument, a business argument ..." Harry's voice was calm. "Please tell them that - two days from now - the *Magical Tours* offices and linkports will develop a sudden tendency to fall apart, until I've found Mr. Black."

The managing director stared at Harry, and whatever his face expressed, it wasn't disbelief.

Harry nodded, as if confirming an unspoken question. "I'm glad to see that you're taking me seriously, Mr. Boonhill ... It saves me from blowing this nice glass facade out of its frame - after all, it's still a bit cold in the year."

"Yes, Mr. Potter ... I'll do what I can."

"Thank you, Mr. Boonhill. I'm sorry to push you into a direction you were obviously trying to avoid as much as possible, but that's the only way I see ... I'll be back day after tomorrow, to ask you for a place and a name."

The manager examined him, and his snake, with genuine interest. "A last question, Mr. Potter ... What makes you so sure I'm none of the people you're looking for?"

Harry pointed at Nagini. "You didn't tell me a single lie, Mr. Boonhill - otherwise, this snake would have noticed. And then, this conversation would have changed in style ... By the way, it might be helpful to pass this information further - just to speed up things"

Harry stood up. "Goodbye, Mr. Boonhill ... And thank you for listening to me."

## 24 - Interviews

A Steel Wing was something wonderful ... The most expensive broomstick of the world, and you could drop it anywhere without being afraid it would be gone when returning. Not that the entrance of Gringotts had to be rated as the most risky place, but then, you never knew.

Mr. Morony was in his office, and it took not more than three minutes until Harry was sitting opposite him, in this room which seemed smaller than Mr. Boonhill's file cabinet.

"Mr. Potter", said the Goblin, "your visits have all the ingredients of excitement and thrill."

"Unfortunately so, Mr. Morony ... Thank you for seeing me at such a short notice. The reason for my visit is Sirius Black - he disappeared." Harry explained what had happened, and why he felt sure about Sirius being in the hands of Voldemort.

The Goblin had listened silently. "Is there anything particular where we can help you, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Morony ... My immediate target is Wesley Warrington, the head of the Transportation Department. As far as we know, he's deeply involved - more, I think he's responsible for the murder of Rita Skeeter, a journalist of the *Daily Prophet*. Although, that's my speculation - I cannot prove it. Anyway, this man has a vacation house on the Bahamas - just where the mother company of *Magical Tours* is located. And there's something funny with this house - the listed address is a fake ... So, what I'm trying to find out currently is the address of this house."

"An interesting dilemma, Mr. Potter ... On one side Mr. Warrington, a respected customer of Gringotts, and considered innocent until proven guilty ... On the other side your speculation ... Hmm."

The Goblin thought for a moment. "Mr. Potter, it won't surprise you to hear that your speculations are taken very, very seriously by Goblins. Still - what makes you think Mr. Warrington is guilty?"

"The details of Rita Skeeter's death, Mr. Morony ... It was done to appear as an accident, a hit-and-run. That's so untypical of Voldemort - he never left any doubt of the circumstances when he killed, or let someone else kill for him ... On the other side, I got a post-mortem letter from Rita Skeeter's lawyer, with the list of items and facts she had gathered. And the last entry she wrote was how she planned to check Mr. Warrington's whereabouts through all channels she knew."

"I see ..." After a moment, Mr. Morony explained, "Frankly, Mr. Potter, a murder between wizards won't be enough for Gringotts to break the rule of confidentiality, while the topic of Voldemort is something totally different ... Assume you find this house, what then?"

"Well - I've got the feeling I could find Voldemort there ... Once I know the address, I'll go to that house."

The Goblin nodded. "Your request is reasonable, Mr. Potter, definitely so ..." He smiled. "Anything else would have been a surprise ... I'll check around, to see if we can offer some information ... How shall we keep in touch?"

"I'll be back day after tomorrow - maybe I should pass by, although I don't want to appear obtrusive ..."

"You should do that, Mr. Potter - even if there may be nothing to report."

"Okay ... Aside from that, I think Professor Dumbledore in Hogwarts is the best address to send information." Harry stood up, bowed. "Thank you, Mr. Morony ... Even if there's no information available, it's a great help for me to talk with you, or other Goblins - it makes me feel safe, and sure."

A wider smile. "You met another Goblin recently, didn't you, Mr. Potter?"

"Huh? ... Oh, yes, of course - Wynor the Whistler." Harry grinned. "It would have been interesting to talk with him more, but somehow we didn't find much time."

"There was also a Goblin Request in play ... A very interesting document - I had the opportunity to read it." There was satisfaction in Mr. Morony's voice. "An excellent sample how to meet the true intention of these rewards - somehow, I was strongly reminded of your own."

"Really?" With some effort to ban a similar emotion from his own voice, Harry said, "That might be just coincidence."

"Yes, might be ... Some people attract coincidences, don't they, Mr. Potter?"

It was the closest thing to small talk Harry had ever encountered with Goblins, except that he knew for sure - Goblins didn't do small talk. So Mr. Morony had given him a message. Maybe there was still something underneath, but what he had heard was obvious enough ... The Goblins knew about his family relationships, naturally so, they suspected him to work as a ghostwriter - at least occasionally - and they didn't object.

Which was just fine.

\* \* \*

Harry had seen the way to the Chang house only from the inside of a luxury limousine, with tinted glass preventing a clear view forward. Worse, most times he had been busy with other things, unaware of road signs passing outside. Up in the air on his Steel Wing, it took him quite some time to follow the route. Eventually, he recognized the unmistakable shape of this building with its mix of styles.

"Harry!" Mrs. Chang's face showed surprise, joy, astonishment, concern in a rapid sequence. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Not with Cho ... Otherwise, yes."

"Come in - you took me so much by surprise, I was dropping all my manners." However, even inside, Mrs. Chang seemed not inclined to raise much formality. "Are you hungry?"

Considering the time of day - shortly after noon, the question was perfectly normal. And, as Harry realized, the answer was a resonant yes.

He followed Mrs. Chang into the kitchen, to sit down and to tell her what had happened while she was busy to prepare some food - happy with her doing, not so happy with his story.

"I came here" explained Harry, "to ask Mr. Chang whether he sees a possibility of looking for this particular detail - for the address of a house under the name of Warrington."

"I don't expect him before the evening, but you can phone him in his office - after the meal, because that's the only reasonable time for important talk, at least for Chinese - " Mrs. Chang smiled, "and for Japanese too ... Do you mind eating in the kitchen?"

"Not at all ... It feels homey, so totally informal."

A quick glance. "So for once, you can drop the burden of formality in this house."

Harry kept silent, registering with limited surprise that Cho had inherited her style of conversation from both parents.

At any rate, Mrs. Chang expected no reply. She put dishes on the table. "It's our first opportunity for a private chat, Harry, and then this ... Anyway, it won't be the last."

Only it was Mrs. Chang herself who couldn't wait until the end of the meal before talking. "So Voldemort has caught your godfather, Harry ... Why?"

"To have a hostage."

"Obviously ... And for what?"

"Hmm ... He forces me to visit him."

"Really? ... What's his advantage from your visit? So far, he's hiding quite successfully - if he wants to see you, there'd be a simpler way."

"Sure - but maybe not under his own conditions, in his own environment."

Mrs. Chang looked at him. "Harry - all your encounters with Voldemort took place under his own conditions and in his own environments, and it helped him a great deal ... You take hostages for just one purpose."

"For blackmailing."

"Right ... Visiting him is probably a necessary step - after all, he has to tell you what he wants from you."

Thinking it over, Harry was forced to draw a few conclusions, one less pleasant than the other. He could see only one request Voldemort might have toward him - of a kind which included Cho still more, of a nature that a mother - Cho's own, for example - would recognize the pattern quicker than anyone else. Worse, it would mean the meeting with Voldemort - if planned by him - would take place far away from where Sirius was kept.

Watching him, Mrs. Chang could see that Harry had followed her thought. She said, "I'm not asking what you'll do, Harry ..."

"Whatever - I won't fulfill his request."

She put a hand on his arm. "Harry - as horrible as the thought is, don't fix your mind prematurely ... That's something I learned from my husband - take the time you're granted, and if we're right, it's in the nature of Voldemort's demand that there is quite some time."

"Yes, Mrs. Chang ... But the answer'll be always the same, only considering my own part, even without Cho's."

"And your godfather?"

Yes, what about Sirius? Refusing the demand would condemn him to death. Playing for time would not change anything, other than offering an opportunity to feel sick for months. Of course, one could argue that Voldemort would never let go of Sirius, no matter what happened, because Voldemort was no reliable contract partner. Reliable contracts ... Promises, to be kept.

This was a Zen riddle that could not be laughed away. But it could be solved with a similar method - provided it was done properly. Harry looked up. "I'll get him out - without fulfilling the request."

"Then you're a true magician, and you can see more than I do, Harry ... Where's the weak spot?"

"There isn't any ... That's why I have to create one."

Mrs. Chang examined his face. "You really have an idea, Harry - it's incredible, and so quickly!"

"Well - let's say I have a strategy ... And besides, what do you mean, so quickly? I had time to think it over, sleep it over ..."

Dream it over.

"... while it was you who saw the most likely reason immediately."

Mrs. Chang shook her head. "All I did was point it out - I didn't even say the words, which tells us both you knew all the time ... While for me - since I've heard about this plot, I can't forget it, so it's only natural that this was my first idea."

"You're right ... I violated the rule of meditation, of preparing for the fight - I wasn't honest to myself, but you've corrected this mistake." He bowed.

"You see, Harry, what can be the result when dropping formality here."

The joke didn't catch, and a moment later, the smile in Mrs. Chang's face faded entirely. "Harry," she asked, "is the price very high?"

"No ... It's acceptable, considering what we get for it. From a certain perspective, it may even look as if there's no price to pay, except ..."

"There's no such thing as a free supper, right?"

"No." Harry smiled. "All you can get is a free lunch."

His own joke didn't fare much better. Mrs. Chang went to the telephone. Harry heard her dialing, then a rapid sequence of sounds - apparently Chinese, then she called him.

He talked with Mr. Chang, to hear that the chances were low but that Mr. Chang would give it the best try he could think of, and that Harry might be very careful.

"I will, Mr. Chang ... Thank you - bye."

Mrs. Chang came closer. "You want to leave, Harry?"

"Yes - back to Hogwarts, to get some help for the next steps." Seeing her expression, he added, "Not Cho - she's no Animagus. I'll ask Almyra - and stay in full cover until Cho's finished shouting with me." He grinned.

Mrs. Chang smiled. "You know how to stop that, don't you?"

Did he? He wasn't sure.

Mrs. Chang came closer. "It's very simple." Then she drew a diagram for him - raising two fingers, putting them to her lips first and his own then. "Goodbye, Harry - come again when you have something to tell, and come again when there's really time for a chat."

"Definitely, Mrs. Chang ... Bye."

\* \* \*

Linkport travel would have been fastest. On the other side, Harry had a lot to think about, and he simply didn't feel like joining the afternoon classes. This, in combination with a wonderful June weather, made him mount his Steel Wing for a long-distance travel back to Hogwarts.

Up in the sky, surrounded by the thundering air outside the protective sphere of his windshield, he found the quietness for thinking his strategy over. Yes, he would find only Voldemort, and Voldemort would feel safe - assuming he could disappear any second. Would be a bad surprise for him ... And then, Harry had to play his cards - with the goal of getting Sirius back. These cards still needed a bit honing, there was one *maybe* too much for Harry's taste.

When touching down at the staircase to the Hogwarts Entrance Hall, Harry knew - this *maybe* had shrunk in size, however without disappearing, and this was reason enough to talk with Dumbledore.

He found the Headmaster in his office.

"Harry," said Dumbledore when Fawkes had folded its wings on Harry's shoulder, "I hope you have a lot to tell, and I can listen, because - if I had to talk, it would be about Hogwarts rules and what they would mean for you."

"Yes, Prof, I have a lot to tell." Harry reported the current state, all assumptions, and speculations, as well as the planning for his next steps. With every minute, he felt more self-confident - partly because each new telling made the assumptions appear more conclusive, but mainly because Fawkes on his shoulder caused the usual effect.

Dumbledore showed a thin smile. "If you ever tell someone that the Headmaster of Hogwarts has agreed to that, I'll be fired ... What's more interesting - what if you find Voldemort?"

"That's what I wanted to discuss with you, Prof ... I need someone to pick at the weak spots, and you're the only one I'm ready to tell the plan." Harry explained his strategy, outlining the chances, the risks, and the consequences.

Dumbledore listened till the end. Even after Harry had finished, the Headmaster kept silent for a while. Finally, he looked up. "Remarkable, Harry ... It's as simple as daring - and it answers a question I had."

"Which?"

"I was asking myself whether you have reached the level to confront Voldemort from your own initiative. But your plan shows so much of maturity, there's no doubt left ..." Dumbledore grinned. "Even if we had to expel you afterwards, we could attest the full qualification."

"Hmm ... For some reason, it's a tempting offer, Prof."

"Is it? Well, then I should take it back ... But that reminds me of something else - you should discuss the crucial estimations in your plan with that Beauxbatons student ..."

"Marie-Christine?"

"... yes, that's her name - I have to admit, her psychological profile of Voldemort is the best I can imagine."

For Harry, the kind of association Dumbledore's mind was taking seemed quite interesting, to say the least, however badly suited to comment on them. So he agreed to talk with Marie-Christine and left.

In the Great Hall, he had a few minutes before the rows filled with students, waiting for supper. Cho found him first, came running. "Harry, how are you? What did you find? Anything new from Sirius?"

He smiled. "After the meal - I have to talk with Al ... Greetings from your mother."

"Really?" Cho looked pleased. "Why did you visit her?"

"Oh - I was hungry, and she cooked me a lunch, and then she showed me a trick - how to make you shut up when I'll ask Al for her help."

"You're joking!"

"Oh no - wait and see ..." Harry hunched his shoulders. "I mean, you could just listen silently, but that's a fat chance, isn't it?"

"Unbelievable - from my own mother ... But of course, you're courting her wherever you can."

"Right - and this investment now paid off."

Harry walked to his own seat, already expected by Ron and Hermione, who had many questions. He answered carefully - basically, all he told them was that there was no real news, things were in progress, and his presence here in Hogwarts was just a step in-between.

After the meal, he returned to the Ravenclaw table, greeted Almyra. "Can we talk?"

The weather offered warmth enough for doing it outside, at their common place - near Hagrid's grave. Harry explained the situation, without stressing the subject of Voldemort's motives. It wasn't exactly an attempt to hide them, only they were not relevant when discussing a way to squeeze Warrington. "I'm going to kidnap Warrington," he said, "and to ask him questions at a quiet place. For that, I need help ... You'd fit perfectly, Al."

"Why?"

"Not for the kidnapping - Deborah's currently spying out his routine, and tomorrow evening, when we'll meet again, hopefully she has enough material to select a place and a time where to catch him ... No, it's for the interrogation."

"You didn't answer my question!"

"That's true ... I'd prefer to explain the details only if you agree."

Cho asked, "Why not Remus?"

"One reason - it's of course completely unlawful, and somehow I can't help feeling he'd be compromised more - a teacher of Hogwarts. The other reason is that Al knows more animals."

"More animals? ... What do you have in mind?"

Harry smiled. "Is it time for your mother's trick?"

"That's infamous! You're going to trick me, and you're asking *me* whether it's the proper time? ... No, it's not - it's never."

Harry sighed. "Pity ... It's really nice, and she demonstrated it so well ..."

Cho was twisting in her own curiosity.

Almyra saw it. "It's time, Harry."

"All right." He turned to Cho. "Your mother said it's very simple to make you shut up - so." He showed her.

Almyra applauded. "Very clever - especially considering who gave this advice."

A moment later, Cho said, "Yes, that crossed my mind too ..." She looked at Harry. "And you said she demonstrated it??"

"Well - she drew a diagram." Harry demonstrated how.

Hardly relieved, Cho said, "Young Potter, you're running a bit too loose for my taste."

"I told you, didn't I? ... By the way, just to keep you informed - after this conversation here, I have to meet Marie-Christine."

"Oh ... What for?"

"To talk about Voldemort ... I have a few questions - actually, it was Dumbledore's idea."

The expression in Harry's face told Cho enough. "You want to talk with her alone, right?"

"Yes. It's ... There's a crucial aspect, and ... Yes, with her alone."

Cho had a wry grin. "Don't stay too long."

Another joke which didn't catch. But then, maybe it hadn't been a joke. "No," replied Harry, "shouldn't take long." He looked at Almyra. "And you?"

"Yes, of course, Harry ... And if it's only to hear how you want to squeeze that Warrington."

"Great - thank you." He bent closer to hug her.

From behind came a voice. "There's no need to shut her up."

Somewhat handicapped from the grin spreading in her face, Almyra started, "Tweedle-di tweedle-dum doodle-ray doodle ..."

Harry stopped her as expected, turned to Cho. "Wrong, as you heard."

Almyra said, "And now - why do you need a multi-Animagus?"

Harry explained what he had in mind.

Cho whistled. "That's heavy."

Almyra had only one question. "Are you sure it was him who gave the order to kill Rita Skeeter?"

"For me there's no doubt." Seeing the other two faces, Harry added, "I'm not a jury, but then, I'm not condemning him - all I want are some answers."

"Assume you get your answers, and they confirm your assumption - what then?"

"I don't know ... My first priority is Sirius, as simple as that."

Harry agreed with Almyra to meet after supper tomorrow, then went back into the building to pass the port toward Beauxbatons. He had to ask several students, raising quite some glances, before he found a girl that knew where to look for Marie-Christine.

Sitting in a corner, he saw her coming through the hall. He stood up, greeted her. "I hope I didn't compromise you."

Marie-Christine smiled. "Not more than before."

"Oh ... Is it that bad?"

"I'm a celebrity ..." Marie-Christine looked apologetic. "arry, for the first time I really know what you meant - how it is, walking around with that scar. Did you read the newspapers?"

"No, but I know what you mean."

"Doesn't matter - they can write what they want, it's not going to change anything ... Let's find a place where we can sit without being stared at." Marie-Christine grinned. "If I still had the apartment ..."

"You gave it up?"

"Sure - it was too expensive for me alone, I didn't use it, and there were too many bad memories ... I took out my things and one memory."

They found a bench in the park - the weather at Beauxbatons was even better, offering the promise of summer. Sitting down, Marie-Christine asked, "How is Cho?"

"Good, given the circumstances ... How are you?"

"Just a second - what circumstances?"

"We'll talk about them in a minute, but first - how are your dreams?"

"I can handle them - I'm using a trick ..." Marie-Christine hesitated.

"What kind of trick?"

"Well - every now and then, I dream the scene again, and then I wake up, sweaty all over ... And then I remember the next morning, every detail, until - anyway, shortly afterwards, I can sleep." Her cheeks were flushed.

"From a nightmare to a wet dream?"

Marie-Christine smiled. "You really have a sense for nice descriptions, 'arry."

"Yeah, maybe so." He thought better than to direct this compliment toward the proper address.

Sobering up, Marie-Christine asked, "Now then - what's bothering you, or Cho?"

"Sirius, my godfather - he disappeared, and for all we know, Voldemort has caught him." Harry explained a bit more, however leaving out the details of his next planning. "Marie-Christine, what I need from you is a judgement of Voldemort's motives - in particular, his priorities."

"Oh God - 'arry, ten minutes ago, I could have talked for hours about this topic, but suddenly - you've something in mind, don't you? And depending on what I'll answer, you're going to use one plan or another ... Am I right?"

"Not quite - I have only one plan. At least, Dumbledore said your psychological profile is the best he knows."

"Did he? That's a help ... Okay, ask."

"Well ... What do you think is Voldemort's most important goal?"

Marie-Christine's answer came without hesitation. "To stay alive."

"Hmm ... As simple as that?"

"Yes. Of course, this is everybody's goal, but with him, it's extreme - simply because he has additional desires, very extreme ones, and still this first priority is dominating everything."

"Not power, or revenge?"

Marie-Christine shook her head. "Definitely not. Consider the scene at the ship, 'arry - if the hunger for power was the strongest motive, he would have tried to kill you - yes, we all think it would kill him finally, but there's just one way to prove it, right? ... But he didn't dare, which means the risk to die was too high."

"And revenge?"

"Only within the limits of higher priorities. If revenge was the most important motive, then Lupin would have died, rather than serving as the means to ..." Marie-Christine stopped, her eyes widening. "And Sirius ... He's caught him to ... Oh my God!"

"Yes, I know ... Just for my ease of mind - he's not waiting for me to kill Sirius in front of my eyes?"

"No, 'arry. It might happen *after* he's got what he wants - until then, Sirius is safe, so-to-speak."

"Excellent!" Harry felt better. "Marie-Christine, that's good news - better than I hoped."

"But how ..." She looked desperate. "What are you planning, 'arry?"

"Calm down - I'm not going to give him what he wants, and if you're right, I'll come back together with Sirius."

Marie-Christine stared at Harry, then nodded. "Basically speaking, it's impossible - but so what, basically speaking, I'm dead for a while."

Harry grinned. "That's the spirit - I was telling myself, but it's good to hear it from you."

"Any time, 'arry - as long as you want." According to her expression, Marie-Christine seemed ready to offer more.

"Not today - I promised Cho to come back early."

"You should have come with her." It was surprising how quickly Marie-Christine's voice, seconds after this topic, could hint disappointment and reproach.

Harry shook his head. "Not for this conversation. She isn't yet fully aware of the plot - the later, the better."

"I guess you're right ... Please keep me informed, 'arry."

He promised, expressing the hope to see her again early, with better news, and together with Cho - the same Cho who was sitting in the hall when he returned to Hogwarts, who grabbed him for another walk outside.

Where she said, "I had time to think a little bit, Harry - for example, about what Voldemort wants to achieve. It took me a moment, but then ..."

"Me too - your mother was quicker, she saw it immediately."

Cho stopped him, looked into his face. "What can we do? We cannot ..."

He hugged her. "I have a plan. He won't get what he wants, and he'll give up Sirius - I only have to find him."

"Really?"

"Yes - I checked it with Dumbledore, and I checked some details with Marie-Christine ... It's a good plan, except that I have to think it over, that's why I don't want to tell."

"Okay - I know you well enough to feel better even so."

"Thank you." He kissed her.

"How's Deborah?"

"Well enough to spy out Warrington ... First she was a mess, but then she recovered - definitely better than Jessica who's not useful at all in this ..."

Totally uninterested in Jessica, Cho interrupted him. "Did you help her to recover?"

"Yes, of course."

"Was it difficult?"

"Difficult? ... It took a while."

Cho sighed. "Harry, the walking first-aid kit ... Something tells me I want to hear every detail, but not now - I'm too shaky for exciting stories."

\* \* \*

Mr. Wesley Warrington, head of the Transportation Department in the Ministry of Magic, walked down the staircases to the exit of this large, old-fashioned office building which was so difficult to survey. It seemed a bit early for a lunch break, only this time guaranteed the best places in the restaurant across the street, and Mr. Warrington saw it as a privilege that went with the position.

Reaching the landing, he stopped, staring. Some feet apart sat a large black dog!

Mr. Warrington could have sworn the dog hadn't been there a second before - but there it was, out of nowhere.

The dog seemed to grow ... No - he was coming at him, flying through the air, right into his ... His senses faded, large teeth in an opened mouth the last view before unconsciousness caught him.

\* \* \*

Barely touching the man's shoulders, Almyra jumped down, landing on all four legs. By the time she had turned, two legs had already changed to arms, and a dog to a young woman.

A second later, the collapsed body of Mr. Warrington disappeared. A muffled voice, as if coming from under a cloak, said, "Okay - call her."

Almyra sprinted down the stairs, through the door, stopped, looking around.

A car appeared, stopped in front of her, another young woman in the driver's seat.

Almyra opened the backseat door, stood there as if waiting for someone to come out. Except there was nobody. Seconds later, the car twisted as if some weight had been dropped on it. Still, the backseats looked empty ... Well, maybe a bit dented.

Almyra closed the door, opened the front door, climbed in. The car accelerated without untidy haste, disappeared around the corner.

Half an hour later, the car stopped at another building - also owned by the Ministry, but smaller, more modern, well suited for an employee of the higher ranks. Currently it was empty.

Only the night before, one could have heard noises from the cellar, for quite a while, as if someone was rearranging a room down there, and closing the small windows, like for a party from which neither light nor sound should reach the outside - a strange thought, in the middle of the night.

\* \* \*

Mr. Warrington came awake from a feeling as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water into his face.

He gasped, looked around - tried to look around. It didn't work, he couldn't see anything. Total blackness. Was it a dream? ... No - pinching himself worked, and hurt.

For a horrible instant, he knew he was buried alive. Panic-stricken, his arms moved around, hitting empty air. Touching down, he felt concrete. He started to get upright.

With a cry, he slumped down again.

The large teeth at his neck let go, the sniffing faded. A dog - he'd seen a dog in the Ministry, and then ... Had to be the same dog. A dog in total darkness - a half-forgotten memory resurfaced in his mind, raising another terrible thought ... Was he alive? Or was this the hell-hound, and he was ... A whimper escaped his throat.

He felt alive, and he had to pee - quite urgently so. Was this proof? He didn't know. And if this was Hell, and he was dead, how come the smallest movement sent this hellish creature toward his neck, scaring him to death? A contradiction ... So he was alive - except this was Hell, and eternal fright was the punishment for ... The thought was enough to lose control of his bladder.

The smell, and the wetness, growing cold after some minutes, convinced him he was alive. Feeling extremely unpleasant, but alive. A shaky laughter was building in him ...

A rush in the air, then a weight landed on his shoulders. Next instant, he felt a sharp pain as several needles dug into his flesh. Touching, grabbing, he felt a shape like a large bird, then a blow like from a beak hit his head.

A bird?? Was there a hell bird? He started to cry, uncontrollably.

The bird went off.

He tried to collect himself, intaking breath with a sob, when something smooth glided over his shoulder, around his neck ... a rope, no - too thick for a rope, but it was tight, started to strangle him. He grabbed, tried to move it off, found something hard, muscular, like a snake, not letting go, pressing harder, another blackness rising in him ...

The inner blackness faded, but the snake was still around his throat. He didn't dare to move.

"Scared?"

Mr. Warrington cried and twisted simultaneously. This voice - deep, metallic, threatening, unlike any human voice.

He sobbed. "Yes - please ... I'm scared, more than - scared shitless." This was almost literally true, he could feel it. "Where ... what ... Am I alive?"

"An interesting question ... Maybe."

"Where - where's this?"

"Somewhere in the middle ... Call it the place of confession."

"Con ..." Icy terror grabbed Mr. Warrington. If this wasn't Hell yet, his confession would certainly ...

"I've got nothing to confess - nothing!"

"Good."

The voice sounded indifferent, unconcerned, only the snake around his throat was again pressing, pressing, still tighter ... His consciousness faded for the second time.

When he woke again, he was alone. No snake, no dog, no bird - and he was dry. But it was still black around him.

A voice like an angel's. "Wesley Warrington, say what you have to say."

A second chance? And maybe with another outcome ...

Mr. Warrington blurted it out as fast as he could - how the offer had come to get rich, really rich, for what initially seemed not more than doing the job he was ordered to do, only not quite as unbiased as he was supposed, and how other things had occurred, at a time when he already knew the taste of money, and luxury, and just when he had come out roses from this nasty press campaign, that stupid witch was about to find some really important facts, but he had found help to get rid of her - this was his only serious crime, and he ...

"You will be judged again," said the angelic voice, "later ... In the meantime, you will be sent back to Earth. You may recover and think about your life ... There is a house, on the Bahamas - seems a good place to ..."

"Plana Cays? No, please - not there, for the mercy of God, not this place ... Send me home to London - please ..." Mr. Warrington started to cry.

"Good."

An instant later, his senses faded once more.

\* \* \*

Half an hour had passed since then. Mr. Weasley Warrington was sitting in the grass, leaning snugly against a tree near his home - with the data sheet from Sirius' office, it had been found easily.

The car with Deborah and Almyra drove around a corner, out of sight.

From a safe distance, and under the cover of his Invisibility Cloak, Harry sent the stunning spell toward the man, then walked around the same corner to climb into the car, all the way careful not to make noise or crush down any grass. It was most unlikely, but Mr. Warrington might suddenly start thinking of people who still were completely earth-bound.

Deborah started the engine and drove away, as leisurely as seemed appropriate in this noble neighbourhood. "What now?"

"If you don't mind," said Harry, "we could check with Mr. Boonhill. Driving in a car's less suspicious than a broomstick ride."

They drove almost silently, each of them reconsidering the scenes in the cellar, and each of them with a different perspective. Only Harry had seen more than blackness, thanks to his *getsumai no michi*. Almyra had relied mostly on smell, as a dog - or sound, as a bird. For Deborah, the angel voice, the experience had consisted of little more than sound.

They reached the *Magical Tours* headquarter.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." Harry climbed out, grabbed Nagini to take her around his body - just in case, and remembering Trelawney's advice. Anyway, he was back soon afterwards.

Driving off, Deborah asked, "Did you get anything?"

"Yes ... A name, and an address, although the address is nothing new - it's *Amalgamated Enterprises* in Nassau."

"And now? What next?"

Almyra said, "If you hear a growling, it's not a dog - it's my stomach. So I'd suggest, the next thing to do is to get some food."

This was a wonderful idea, and they made a stop at a supermarket, for something as simple and nourishing as grilled chicken, French fries, and a salad bowl.

Harry turned to Deborah. "Do you have maps of the Bahamas at home?"

She hadn't, but the *Daily Prophet* office had. So Almyra had to wait a little longer before they were sitting around Deborah's kitchen table, ripping off pieces of chicken meat, not bothering with a fork except for the salad.

When only a pile of bones was left, Harry looked at Almyra. "Was it enough, or are you still hungry?"

"I'll survive for a few hours ... Why, do you have something else to offer?"

"Sure - provided you turn into a dog." Harry pointed at the bones.

For a moment, Almyra looked very interested, then shook her head. "Not the best idea ... I would have to stay a dog until the bones were digested - the human stomach cannot handle them ... No thanks."

Deborah cleaned the table, came back with the map. "So what was the name our dear guest has said? Planar keys?"

"No, it wasn't keys - it sounded a bit darker, more like ..."

"Cays - here, look. The Bahamas consist of umpteen cays ... Rum Cay ... Samana Cay ... Bingo!"

Deborah's finger pointed. Plana Cays were two small islands, the bigger of the two not more than ten miles diameter, between Crooked Island and Mayaguana Island.

Harry checked it. "With a broomstick, you've scanned the small island in ten minutes, and the big one in two hours ... Super, it saves us the hazzle with official records - imagine, it would have been this one." He pointed at Andros Island, the biggest of the Bahama islands, about the size of Puerto Rico.

Almyra asked, "Okay, you scan the island, and you detect the houses ... And then?"

"Then I go down and knock at the door - and in one of them, it will be Voldemort who's opening the door ... No, maybe Wormtail." Harry looked grim.

Deborah had an idea. "Maybe the address was correct - only the wrong island ... It was Dune Road, and that's a valid address in Nassau, on New Providence Island."

"Dune Road ..." Harry snorted. "There's probably a Dune Road on every island, except they won't have street signs."

Deborah said, "We could hire a local investigator, in the name of the *Daily Prophet*. He could check for vacation homes of British foreigners."

Harry shook his head. "Better not - if Voldemort's there, he'll recognize everything unusual ... No, the first contact must be the real one."

Almyra asked, "This name you got, Harry - what about that?"

He reached in his pocket, extracted the piece of paper, read it. "It's a Mr. Crownshield - some rank in *Amalgamated Enterprises*. They can be found at Hillcrest Avenue, Nassau, Bahamas ... Mr. Boonhill had no additional information, except that Mr. Crownshield expects my visit ... He said I should be careful."

"You mean, it might be a trap?"

Harry shrugged. "Could be ... A trap laid by that company is unlikely - they know that I'd leave someone behind who's informed of every step ... And if it's a trap of Voldemort - okay, saves me some effort."

"Are you serious??" Both Almyra and Deborah stared at him.

"Pretty much ... I'll discuss it with Dumbledore, but aside from that - time's running, and Sirius will be glad of every day saved."

Almyra glanced at him. "Harry - you need help. Someone has to go with you."

"Not in the front line - that's too dangerous. For a remote post, it's okay, to check whether I'll be back in time ... Why - don't tell me you want to volunteer, Cho'll never forgive me ..."

"Remus or I - or maybe both. I know Spanish - for a remote post, that's just the proper qualification."

"Let's find out in Hogwarts ... Since I'm a coward, I'd prefer you make this offer by yourself - in the presence of Cho."

Almyra grinned, somewhat miserably. "That's what I was trying to avoid."

Deborah had watched the exchange. "And what about me? Why's nobody asking for my help?"

Harry smiled. "For the same reasons that excluded Cho from this adventure."

"Which are?"

"Too much personal involvement, lack of combat experience, lack of qualification - in any convenient order of priority."

"You mean - don't take it personally, but ..."

"You're no Animagus, nor is Cho ... That's the most significant difference."

"Then what shall I do in the meantime? ... Bite my nails?"

Almyra grinned.

Harry had a better idea. "Talk with Paul about the chances for another press campaign against Warrington ... Or, if you like the idea, write some anonymous letters to him."

"First I'd like to hear Sirius' opinion about that, before starting any action in this regard."

"Yeah, you're probably right ... Although, I don't think there's anything that can be done at the official level. He's not going to confess in public."

Deborah looked thoughtful. "Maybe he's going to change ... This performance - I tried to imagine how I'd have reacted in his situation, and then I quickly stopped to imagine."

"Do you feel pity? ... You heard it - he gave the order to kill Rita Skeeter, a colleague of yours."

"Yes ... Still, he might change."

Harry didn't think so. "If he changes, his *business partners* will talk with him - to say the least ... But I agree with you to some point - I mean, if he hasn't committed suicide already, I'm not interested to push him in this direction ... We know he did it, and that's enough to cover the obligation from Rita. If she wants more, she has to come back as a ghost and haunt him."

Deborah nodded. "Tell her that, Harry."

He grinned. "I'll ask Myrtle for a contact address ... All right, I guess we're done. We've made a lot of progress today - now it's time to go back to Hogwarts and to figure out who's travelling to the Caribbean."

Deborah hugged Almyra, then Harry. "Be careful."

First they went to Gringotts. Almyra took the opportunity to fetch some money from her vault while Harry had a short conversation with Mr. Morony, offering more news than he received in return.

On their way to the linkport, Almyra said, "She takes it quite well - could be much worse."

"Huh?"

"Deborah ... She could be driving herself nuts - when I remember how it was with Remus ..."

"You've been directly involved," replied Harry, "watching the house and so. So you had lots of time to see what could go wrong, and you heard him ... While for Deborah, her biggest problem is to control her imagination. Otherwise - we all know Sirius is alive, and she's decided to believe me that I'll come back with him."

Almyra nodded. "Yes - as simple as that."

\* \* \*

In the linkport, Harry found a phone cell which accepted wizard money. He called Mrs. Chang to give her the news about Plana Cays and Mr. Crownshield, to be passed further to her husband. Some minutes later, he and Almyra were back in Hogsmeade.

Reaching the school, they split - Harry wanted to talk with Dumbledore, Almyra with Lupin.

The Headmaster listened to Harry's summary, which only presented results and plannings, while no details. However, he seemed hardly satisfied with that. "Harry - what did you use to squeeze the information out of Mr. Warrington?"

"Mostly darkness, Prof, and silence ... I didn't touch him, I didn't ask him direct questions."

Dumbledore still wasn't satisfied. "Then who touched him instead, if not you?"

"Oh - a dog, a falcon, a snake ... He seemed to think he was in some anteroom of Hell - or Heaven, afterwards ... We played a bit with voices."

"Voices in the darkness? I guess the picture is detailed enough, I shouldn't ask further ... So you've tracked down a small island and a man in a large company - and now?"

"First I'll contact that man, and then I'll look around at that island, to find the house."

"Alone?"

"Erm - not quite ... What I had in mind was an anchor man close by, although not when scanning for the house ... Or an anchor woman."

"You're talking about Professor Lupin and Miss Benedict, right?"

"Er - yes, Prof."

"Hmm ..." Dumbledore thought for a moment, then looked up. "Professor Lupin, yes - Miss Benedict, no ... I cannot send you alone, but I cannot send a student of this school. Remus is master of his own decisions, so his choice is acceptable for me."

"That's a strange argument, Prof."

Dumbledore looked unhappy. "Don't tell me, Harry - I know well by myself ... Yes, of course you're a student too, although right now that's more of a formality than anything else - but you return from encounters with Voldemort unharmed, which isn't true for anyone else, certainly not for students."

There was no need to remind Harry of the unlucky Cedric Diggory. "Prof - I'm ready to do it alone, if you think that's the only alternative we might call safe."

"Safe??" Dumbledore suppressed a laugh. "There's nothing safe - it couldn't be farther away from that ... But your idea seems the best compromise - provided your anchor man keeps away from the dangerous places. Can we agree that Remus won't set foot on that island?"

Harry nodded. "Sounds reasonable - with just ten miles diameter, it's really a bit close."

"Well, then ... When do you want to start?"

"Tomorrow, after breakfast - if Re - if Professor Lupin's ready."

The Headmaster didn't smile when he said, "Professor Lupin shouldn't, but Remus will."

He was right. Lupin fully agreed with Dumbledore, found his job in this action less dangerous than many others in the past, calmed down Almyra who complained about nepotism, sexism, and other prejudices, but maybe with some guilt, feeling relieved that she wasn't part of the task force.

Cho was more than happy with the Headmaster's decision. "You're the only one with a protection that's working, Harry ... Make sure Lupin's staying off - I know you'll come back, but your promise didn't extend to anyone else."

"Still, I have the intention to return with Sirius - and Remus, of course."

"Yes - but you didn't promise, and for good reason."

Ron stared at Harry. "You go to that island and visit Voldemort? Just so?"

"What do you mean, just so? ... You know why, don't you?"

"Yes, of course ... No, it's so - I don't know ..."

Harry grinned. "Would you feel better with trumpets and drums, big banners and pathetic words?"

"Yes, probably - except for the pathetic words ... No, I know what feels wrong - tomorrow, we'll listen first to Hooch and then to Boring Binns, while you travel to the Bahamas to fight Voldemort - it's so out of proportion ..."

Hermione interrupted him. "There's only one thing out of proportion - the time schedule. At breakfast here, it's still deep night for the Bahamas, so they'll travel later ..."

Harry laughed. "Without your remark, we really might have done this mistake - what a pity, I thought I'd miss Social Ethics."

Nobody had told Rahewa details, but somehow she knew what was going on. She caught Harry in the hall, asked for a walk outside. Near the lake, she held something up. "I wanted to give you this - for your journey."

Harry examined it. A medium-sized knife, twin-bladed, razor-sharp, in a leather sheath, with thin leather stripes, obviously to fix it somewhere at a body. "Thank you ... I hope I can return it ... Where's the best place to carry a hidden knife?"

"At your calves, just below the knee ... You won't reach it quite as fast as from your lower arm, but people forget to check there."

"Well - I don't think it will be a matter of speed, since I'm not used to it - I'd cut myself when trying to draw it in a hurry."

Rahewa took it for a joke.

"By the way," said Harry, using the opportunity, "somehow, I'd expected yours would be a jack-knife."

Rahewa shook her head. "They break easily, are only single-bladed - toys, compared to this one."

Harry remembered a jack-knife that hadn't been a toy at all. Still, Rahewa was right - this weapon, forged of a single piece of steel, would stand more than a delicate throat.

It was just after lunch when he and Lupin reached the Hogsmeade linkport, made the jump to London. It was early afternoon when they took the link to Miami Beach, arriving early in the morning, in good time for the link to Nassau.

They found a hotel near the linkport, mainly as a place to drop their luggage and Harry's Steel Wing. Then Harry was ready to visit *Amalgamated Enterprises*.

But Lupin wasn't ready to stay behind. "We agreed Plana Cays is your territory, Harry, while this is Nassau, and we're discussing a visit in the office building of a public enterprise."

"Okay - but don't complain afterwards."

Lupin grinned. "Don't you listen? ... I'm complaining in advance."

Nassau wasn't exactly a big city; still, Hillcrest Avenue seemed too far away for a walk in this incredible heat. They took a cab.

With one experience more, they reached their destination. Caribbean cabs were an adventure of their own. Harry examined the building. "Seems pretty small to me - the headquarters of *Magical Tours* is already bigger."

"Why not? This company here owns other companies - that's all they're doing. You need just a few lawyers, a few secretaries, and some people with money. For that, it's big enough."

Inside, they realized quickly that the company was bigger than it seemed from the outside. A large array of linkport cabins, marked with street and building names, made clear that this was just the central place. Rather than building skyscrapers, *Amalgamated Enterprises* spread over multiple smaller buildings, and made a show of using linkports where other companies might have used escalators.

The lady at the reception desk looked in a list, dialed a number - apparently, this Mr. Crownshield had a secretary to reject people of lesser importance. However, the name "Potter" seemed good enough.

The lady smiled. "You were expected alone, Mr. Potter, but there's a nice lobby in that building." She pressed a button. "See the cabin with the green light? That's your link."

The cabin she was pointing had no street sign.

"Where does it lead to?"

"The directorate wing - it's activated separately for each visitor." The lady looked politely, trying to find an expression as if a snake was quite a common accessoire for visitors of the directorate wing.

"Thank you." Harry reached the gate cabin, Lupin in his trail.

He stepped through, made another step forward to give room for Lupin.

There was something terribly wrong. He was in a small room - definitely not the lobby of a directorate wing. And the air - an unpleasant smell, like some flower, only ... The room seemed to grow, the walls retreating, or Harry himself shrinking, shrinking into sleep, or blackness, a hissing in his ears that seemed to fill his entire mind.

He barely registered how Lupin came through, then there was only a black hole, and then there was nothing.

## 25 - The Fight

With a jolt, Harry came awake, his mind registering the unmistakable sensation of a stunning spell. Still before gaining full consciousness, he remembered what this could only mean, who had to be the one stunning him.

So he had to use everything learned in preparation for this day ... Until his eyes had focused, the first phase of his *balancing* was already performed - recognizing his self, his position.

He was sitting in a chair, quite comfortably, unharmed, as far as he could judge. Fully operative - mentally at least, otherwise not quite, because his arms were tied at his back, with something metallic, and apparently the same metal fixed him to this chair.

He looked around.

A room in a house. Probably not too far away from where he and Lupin had been knocked off, considering the heat and the daylight from outside. Also, the furnishing in what could be a living room, quite spacious, matched the style Harry had seen in the hotel.

Some feet to his side another chair. Filled with Lupin, obviously still stupefied, Lupin's arms at his back, no doubt tied as well.

Some more feet opposite Harry, a third chair of the same type, Voldemort sitting in it.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter."

The grotesque figure, mockery of a human body, emanated the air of a plantation owner whose slaves and servants were working dutifully, enabling him to smile and be generous, and to let the whip rest for a while.

Harry reminded himself that he had to appear unsuspecting in the sense of Voldemort's plot, that this behaviour had to match their last encounter - and Sirius' kidnapping, of course. He said, "The last time it was still Harry ... No - that was before, the last time it was *foolish boy*."

Voldemort smiled, destroying the appearance of generosity at once - an inevitable effect with this flat, masklike face. "The last time I was upset," he said lightly, "while there's no reason for that now ... I have my wand back, I have my snake back, although she seems shrunk - and I have you, among some other people."

The wand - Harry's wand - rested idly in Voldemort's lap, with Voldemort's long, thin hand around the grip. Nagini was lying on the rug-covered floor next to Voldemort's chair.

With some amusement in his voice, Voldemort said, "In addition, Mr. Potter, I've honed my manners - just a convenience between business people, meaningless but a common habit. I found out that these men confuse bluntness with a lack of self-confidence, and that direct commands invariably raise some fruitless resistance ... Killing some of them helped, but in business, you have to deal with so many different people - in the end, I found it simpler to speak their language."

Small talk Voldemort style - not quite Harry's first experience, he remembered similar remarks from the encounter in the graveyard. However, things had changed since then, and he saw no benefit in playing for time. He asked, "Where's Mr. Crownshield?"

"Oh - in his office, I hope, working with papers and other business toys, certainly relieved that the favour I asked him could be done so quickly and effortlessly ..." Voldemort seemed not taking offence from Harry's refusal to catch the light mood. "He's an excellent example for another symptom I recognized - punishing these people directly is more damaging than helping, while doing it with someone else - in their presence, of course - has an effect which is immediate as well as long-standing ..."

Voldemort paused a moment to let his remark sink in, then continued, "In this regard, Mr. Potter, you would blend well into the business world, that's why I preferred to have someone ready before doing business with you." Pointing toward the other chair, Voldemort added, "Mr. Lupin here comes as a surprise - a small one, however a welcome addition to the topics in our business ... But I'm possibly advancing too fast - you still may have questions, Mr. Potter, quite naturally so, I'd say."

"No."

"None at all? ..." Voldemort's face reflected a surprise less mocking than probably intended. "That's hard to believe," he said, "and a bit of pretense, I might guess, which is also understandable in your situation. Let me tell you, Mr. Potter - I do not expect you to be scared, or if you are, it's as meaningless as polite manners ..."

Harry saw no reason to look any different than a second before.

"Yes," said Voldemort as if in confirmation, "it took me a while to learn that, but I have adjusted, and more - I have found other weaknesses. It requires a little more effort, but then, they work as well as fright with other people, so we can save the time, and concentrate on more important issues ... Asking questions is most often a quicker method - although you might be afraid I won't tell you the truth, maybe that's the reason?"

Listening to this droning on, Harry had found the time to sketch out his strategy in this conversation. Part of his approach would be a kind of unwilling politeness - insulting Voldemort in this situation would have no effect at best, would earn him some torturing at the worst while he had no power to waste. More important was the question how much knowledge he should present.

He decided to appear informed about details while totally unaware of what he expected as the main topic. He said, "No, Voldemort, that's not the reason - it's more like you won't answer at all ... But I don't know what to ask."

Instinctively, Harry had left out another argument. For all he knew, Nagini would tell him about Voldemort lying. However - either this was true, then the snake's loyalty might come up as an issue earlier than Harry had planned, or it was no longer true, then he could await this bitter moment.

"This place here, Mr. Potter - aren't you interested to know where we are?"

Harry made a surprised face. "Plana Cays, isn't it?"

He had scored - Voldemort's expression showed it. "Very interesting," said the Dark Lord with little amusement in his voice. "Would you please tell me where you got this information?"

Taking the momentum, Harry grinned. "If I could follow properly, then saying *please* in business language means this is a serious request, to be followed instantly - am I right?"

Politeness was a thin coating on top of Voldemort's natural habits. "Answer, Mr. Potter!"

"Why not? ... Mr. Warrington gave me the information, and he was quite concerned to stay off this place."

"Was he? He'll be still more concerned to leave this place, once I've asked him some questions personally. But let's not digress ..."

"Do you know," interrupted Harry, taking over the part of the light gossip, "that he hired someone to kill a journalist? Rita Skeeter was her name ... For a while I thought it was you, until I realized it wasn't your style."

"What's this, Mr. Potter - some kind of courtesy, to catch the mood of our conversation? I'd say that's another pretense."

Harry shrugged, at the same time testing the tightness of this metal around his wrists. "No - simple fact. Not wasting time sounds good to me - the sooner we're done, the better."

Voldemort produced another grimace of smile. "A joke, Mr. Potter - how nice."

"No, I'm serious ... By the way, I have indeed a question - what's that thing around my arms? It feels quite unusual."

"Handcuffs," explained Voldemort. "Simple, efficient, and surprisingly resistant against the common variety of magical tricks ... A police tool, which brings us to another topic - Mr. Black. Would you like to hear about Mr. Black?"

"Like what?"

"Where he is ... How he feels - things like that."

"No," replied Harry with the best dismissiveness he could manage. "Sirius isn't here, and you won't tell me where he is. If he's not okay, I'll kill you - that's why I'm pretty sure he's unharmed."

He had scored again, better than the first time. His *haragei* told him how much Voldemort felt disquieted from this argument.

"Would you really, Mr. Potter? ... Allow me some doubts - you are in no position to do anything, although this is more a precaution to make sure you're not trying some useless action while we're talking ... More important is - what makes you think you could kill me?"

Harry looked astonished. "Voldemort, it doesn't matter what I think or what you think. I simply can - your body is mortal, and definitely not the best model."

"Then I have news for you, Mr. Potter ..." Voldemort had recovered, looked triumphant. "We share the same fate - I cannot kill you without risking my life, and you cannot kill me for the same reason."

"Why should I die killing you?"

"Because it's your blood that's running in this poor model of a body. You would kill yourself when trying."

"Even if that's true - and I still have my doubts - there's a little mistake in your argument. It won't be trying - you'd be dead for sure, and this might be the best solution from my perspective."

He had hit the core of Voldemort's concerns.

"This," explained the Dark Lord, "is one of the reasons why I prefer you seated in this chair, Mr. Potter ... I'll show you that this would be a very inappropriate solution, in particular since Mr. Black is alive and well - suffering not more than inevitable in this situation."

Nagini said, "It's not true, master."

For an instant, Voldemort looked truly perplexed. "This snake seems to think she still belongs to you - something else I have to re-adjust. But this has ..."

Harry interrupted him. "You have tortured Sirius - or someone else has, carrying out your command ... You better tell me a good reason not to kill you, Voldemort."

"The best reason is that you may want to live longer - a Cruciatus or two is not enough to commit suicide ..."

"It's my destiny to fight you and to kill you. I have accepted this fate - if it kills me too, then be it."

Again, Voldemort ignored the interruption, confirming that the topic in this discussion was bothering him considerably more than impoliteness. "That's said easily," he replied, "if someone is as young as you - and that's still to be seen, how you're going to kill me. Right now you cannot do anything other than listen to me, which gives me the time to explain a fundamental error in your assumptions, in particular those regarding my fate, and ..."

"A fundamental error?" Harry grinned humourlessly. "That'll be the day! So far, fundamental errors have been made from your side!"

"Yes, that's true."

For the first time in this conversation, Voldemort had scored. He knew it, and he relished the moment as Harry looked perplexed.

"Yes, Mr. Potter - I've made not only mistakes, I fell to a fundamental misinterpretation, and a natural consequence of my mistakes is your belief that destiny has selected you as the sword to destroy me, even at the price of your own life ... Let me explain the terrible flaw in my analysis."

Harry moved a bit, apparently to sit more comfortably, while the true purpose was to get a precise feeling of the handcuffs in his back. He resisted the temptation to concentrate on *getsumai no michi* - while he could have seen the room effortlessly even in the darkest of the night, it would take him some effort to recognize items as small as these manacles in his back, and he knew how dangerous it would be, letting Voldemort know about unexpected skills.

"Still before you were born," said Voldemort, "I realized that the child of James and Lily Potter would have a severe impact on my power, my success, my life. Unfortunately, Divination has never been as precise a magic as other techniques, like Potions, for example. The unclear picture I received - and also my efforts at that time which dealt mainly with gathering followers and fighting enemies - let me draw the conclusion that you'd be a threat to my planning. Consequently, I tried everything to eliminate this threat."

"Oh yes, you did," snapped Harry. "You killed my parents - you killed Hagrid who was my first friend, and Charlie who was something like a post-mortem brother, only counting those closest to me. That's fundamental enough for my taste ..."

"Hear me to the end!"

It was definitely no plea, not a real command either. Maybe it was the best Voldemort could muster in the scope of convincing suggestions, a skill which, after all, would be poorly developed in him.

"Yes I killed them, but I didn't do it for fun. I don't enjoy killing - for me it's a measure like any other work, unless it's for revenge, like with my parents - but not with yours. As you know perfectly well, I did what I could to let your mother live ..."

"You did what you could?? ... You killed her when she didn't step aside, when she wasn't ready to let you kill me!" Harry was shouting, his head bent forward, his arms stressed to the extent against the handcuffs. However, part of his mind was recording every detail of what he felt around his hands, and still another part was probing how far he could go before Voldemort lost patience and started to enforce the attention of his audience with more common methods - such as a *Cruciatus*.

But Voldemort kept calm - disquietingly so, in a way. "I did what I could under the wrong premises I'd taken - blame me for the initial error, not for the consequences! Killing as a necessary step isn't entirely unknown to you, Mr. Potter, is it?"

Harry had no trouble to show consternation, to fall back in his chair, giving his hands as much leeway as possible.

"It took me until last year to realize that our encounters went terribly wrong because of my own wrong assumption ... And still, destiny did its work no matter how badly I was steering the wrong course - while all the time, the signs were so remarkable, so clearly visible to anybody with an objective mind, and not as preoccupied as I was."

"Which signs?"

"Each time we met, you received powerful gifts from me, Mr. Potter - seemingly against my own will, but that's where you can see fate at work ... Your Parseltongue, your immunity from

the Imperius curse, your powerful wand, and certainly other skills of lesser significance - all of that came from me ... But eventually, I saw the light."

"Did you?"

"Yes ... Step by step, you had become the most powerful wizard in history - if not by actual state, then certainly by potential - through my gifts! And this took place on purpose, a purpose of destiny which is stronger than my efforts, or your efforts ... Destiny prevented me killing you, and destiny has made sure that you cannot kill me - because the culminating point is not yet reached, Mr. Potter, it's still before us, and we both are only tools in the hand of fate, tools which have to serve dutifully for the true king of wizardry, the master of all masters, the Lord of the Magic!"

"Wow - Voldemort as the servant of a super wizard ... Now that's unique, really." Harry sneered - with some effort, successful only thanks to his careful preparation for this encounter.

"It's not unique - new is only that I know about my role, and that I accept it."

"Bravo! Bravo! ... Then just let me free, so I can accept my own role too."

Voldemort smiled. "Pretty soon, Mr. Potter, because that's exactly what I expect from you. Once you know what I've learned through hard lessons, I will untie you and let you make your own contribution."

"All right, then ... Make it short, this isn't the most comfortable position."

Direct commands toward himself had no place in Voldemort's picture of his role. For a dangling moment, Harry expected to receive a hard lesson in good manners, prepared inwardly for this moment that would be crucial as much as cruciating.

But Voldemort's face relaxed, if this was the proper term for such a physiognomy. He asked, "Are you not interested to hear who'll be a greater wizard than you and me together, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, of course. Who is it?"

"Will be, Mr. Potter ... Your own son."

Harry managed to look dumbstruck. Most likely, his performance wasn't any better than other attempts in the past, however it seemed convincingly enough for his opponent who fell to the trap of self-fulfilling prophecy - if you expect blank astonishment in a face, than you'll count even deep disgust in your sense.

Harry shook his head. "That's crazy, but never mind ... Okay, if that's all, then please open this thing and let me tell Cho the news ... Oh, I almost forgot - there's still ..."

"Don't play stupid, Mr. Potter - the role doesn't fit ... Your son will need careful teaching, of a kind that can be offered only by myself - I still have some capabilities not passed over to you. This is the reason for this charade, to make sure this child will reach its proper destination."

"If you think ..."

"You'll deliver this child to me, Mr. Potter - as soon as possible without interfering with nature's demands, which means at the age of six months or so ... Until then, Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin here will be held in pledge of your obedience, and that of the child's mother ... Afterwards, you all may live your own life - it's no longer important for destiny."

Harry stared at Voldemort. "You really believe your own words, do you?"

"Yes, of course ... This time, there's no doubt that the interpretation is correct. The magical power that has been created by the union of you and Miss Chang is the best sign that only the product of this alliance can be the true culmination of fate."

Harry felt grateful, having reached the point where he could drop any pretense. "You're mad, Voldemort, you're insane ... If you really believe that I'll give my own child to you, no matter which reason, then I must assume the hot weather here has dried your brain to vulture dirt - unless this happened already before."

The little colour in Voldemort's face left, returned as a purplish flaring. "You just have no manners, Harry ... I can only blame myself - I should have awakened Lupin in the beginning and then punished *him* for each of your insults. We'll do that in a moment, but just as a reminder, to let you know what it'll be for him ..."

The two-coloured wand came up. "*Crucio!*"

Since his awakening in this room, Harry knew that the few seconds of concentration, needed to open the handcuffs, would not come for free. Doing it with Voldemort watching was too risky - his suspicious mind would react immediately, and in the worst case, Voldemort would be gone earlier than Harry was able to follow. Doing it without Voldemort watching had turned out impossible - another Zen riddle which could be solved only - no, not by laughing this time, by yelling at peak level, under the impact of the Cruciatus curse.

The pain was incredible, almost unbearable - certainly so in a few seconds. Until then, the white-hot flame in Harry's mind created a zone of burning calmness, of roaring concentration in full sight of the enemy, without looking suspicious - for someone with enough training to find the precious instant of balance even when all nerves in his body were crying for release ...

... ignored by Harry's brain, which had locked the door for just a short moment ...

*Click* - inaudible in this concerto his mouth was producing, felt through a wrist coming off.

Only the right hand was free, but there was no time for getting rid of this thing - a second longer, and Harry would lose control under the soaring pain ...

His arms came forward, pointing, the left one still with the dangling hand-cuff.  
"*Expelliarmus!*"

The wand shot through the air, reached his outstretched hand, was pointing at Voldemort who didn't believe his own eyes, eyes which tried to pop out of their sockets.

"All right, you piece of shit ... Let's do business."

\* \* \*

Harry wasn't listening to his own words, planned no action by himself at this moment, as much as he wished to find the time for getting Nagini, for destupefying Lupin, for uncuffing him.

All he did was watching this grimace of raging fury, and listening to a signal he expected any second now ... And here it came.

He *followed*.

They were behind a large bungalow - most likely just the building in which they had been sitting all the time. Of course - just enough for Voldemort to think clearly, to plan his next move.

Voldemort stood in front of him, inhaling deeply, and shaking slightly - no doubt from rage, although Harry intended to change this. Stunning him now was no help - stupefied people couldn't see the black colour of fright, couldn't smell the bitter taste of desperation.

The wand barely touched Voldemort's shoulders. "Tickle tickle!"

With a small outcry, the misshaped figure wheeled around, eyes widening in utter disbelief.

Harry sneered. "Jump, rabbit - the dogs are coming."

Voldemort, a trapped look in his face, didn't hesitate.

Harry *followed*.

This time, it had felt like eons in nowhere. Looking around, Harry saw trees in the distance, bushes close by - could have been England, maybe somewhere near Little Hangleton - didn't people on the run try to reach the place where they had grown up?

And the time of day fit - early evening.

Voldemort stood in front of him. His shoulders signaled clearly - he wanted to know what was behind him, didn't dare to turn.

Harry kept silent, motionless - waiting, listening.

The signal rose in the turning of the tiny figure, reached its peak the instant Voldemort saw Harry's smile.

He *followed*.

Somewhere in a forest, darker, tighter than the previous one. Still the same time of day ... Was this Albania, where Voldemort had been hiding so long?

The next signal came very quickly. Harry *followed*.

Plain ground, hot, although the sun stood deep over the horizon. Maybe the south of Europe, maybe Africa.

Another signal, to be followed. And another, and another.

Harry kept track through a sequence of places without any recognizable pattern, meeting all time zones, from early morning to deep night and total darkness - meaningless for him, not having any effect regarding his reflective registering of the rising signals and his *following*.

After the third or fourth attempt, certainly after the first place in total darkness, it should have been obvious that this was no method to get rid of the pursuer. Voldemort's sequence of obstinate tries left only one conclusion - he had panicked.

Harry had lost all feeling for time when Voldemort stopped his frenzy.

The place they had reached seemed to be somewhere in the Caribbean, considering the heat and the time of day. Harry could smell the ocean somewhere close. So this was probably a tiny island - maybe even the smaller of the two Plana Cays islands.

Then Harry realized - Voldemort was hoping that Harry could not leave the island at his own, that he hadn't mastered yet the simple version of Apparition. While this was correct, Harry had no intention to leave Voldemort - not until the issue was settled.

He asked, "Tired of jumping, rabbit?"

Voldemort didn't answer. He sat down, with the movements of a desperate fugitive. As much as this seemed an accurate reaction, somehow it was surprising to see how little control this man, formerly called Dark Lord, had over his expressions and movements. Of course - there had never been the need for self control, at least not since Voldemort had left Hogwarts, still under the name Tom Riddle.

"I could cruciate you now ... However, since ..." Harry stopped, feeling the signal rise. But it faded as quickly as it had started - obviously Voldemort had interpreted Harry's stopping properly.

"... since it's as much a waste of time as cruciating me, I don't see much sense in that - not now ... Although - if you start again to hop around the world, I'll make sure you'll lose the interest in that. We have to talk."

"How ... how can you send spells without ..."

"Ohhh - is there really a gift in me which doesn't come from you, my great magical sponsor? ... What a surprise, isn't it? And in such a critical moment ... You stupid little would-be, did it ever cross your mind that there's a counterpart to dark magic? Call it white magic, if you need a name for it ... All you have to know is, this realm's forever closed to you - you've burned the bridges long ago."

"I don't believe it. There's just magic - nothing else. Dark magic is a term invented by people who are afraid using the full scale of their power ... It must be something else."

Harry stored his wand - and closed the open half of the handcuff around his left arm. Keeping it open was a bit risky, while the thing might come in handy before this story was over.

His arms pointed toward Voldemort. "Okay ... What shall it be?"

The thin arms came up as if to protect from a blow. "No - I believe that you can send spells without a wand. I only said this isn't white magic."

"You know that I killed a student in Beauxbatons?"

Voldemort nodded.

"I did it without a wand."

Deep horror crept into Voldemort's eyes. He didn't look scared - maybe he was unable to feel this emotion, but his face expressed a state beyond fright, a loss of hope and future, if only for the moment.

"Voldemort?"

They looked at each other.

"In an hour, I'll kill you."

Some life returned into these eyes. "If you do that, you'll kill yourself too. I'm serious, it wasn't a lie." Suddenly, there was a pleading in Voldemort's voice. "It's exactly as I described - we're linked to each other, by many bonds - your blood in my veins is only one of them, however the one which matters here. Killing me is like committing suicide - Harry, what reason should there be for you killing yourself? You're young, you have a splendid future ..."

"Maybe you're right, maybe not ... An hour from now, we'll find out, won't we?"

"But - your son, Harry! I was serious - he'll be the greatest wizard ever. How can you deny the right of this unborn life? It would be a tragedy ... Such a potential, never to see the light of day. Please ..."

Was there really something in Voldemort which could admire magical power even if it wasn't his own? Probably not - it was just another pleading for his miserable life.

"My son ..." Harry stared at Voldemort. "I know what kind of education you had in mind for him - your own mind, your foul spirit, destroying the self of an innocent child - to give you a young and powerful body ... How did you plan to grow up, Voldemort? Which person is trusted by you so much that you give yourself - as a baby - into his or her hands? Or did you want to wait a few years? ... Maybe you hoped this greatest wizard ever would be powerful enough at the age of three or four? ... Doesn't matter - either I survive, then my son can expect a future without you, or I don't, and the question will never arise."

A grinning crept into Harry's face. "Imagine - after all, it's not unlikely that this child could defeat you even more than I did ... Won't this be the greatest irony - I could give the child to you, except I can't be sure, so I won't, and then I really die from killing you ... Destiny has a tricky way, Voldemort, and a macabre sense of humour."

The thought seemed realistic enough, at least something Voldemort himself had considered already before. With his *haragei*, Harry sensed a kind of confidence to overcome this risk, had it ever come true.

He glanced at Voldemort. "You thought you could condition him long enough to be on the safe side when transmigrating, huh? ... Forget it, it'll never happen."

After a moment, Voldemort said, "You're not going to kill me, Harry."

"No? ... I have a surprise for you, Voldemort - I will."

"No - if you were serious, you'd do it right now. I'd be dead already, and you too ... It's a trick - you're waiting for me to offer something, to save my life ... Well, I might have something to offer."

Harry laughed. "In that house, you said to me *Don't play stupid*, and I did. I'm still doing it ... Yes, I had a plan, but I realized that it depends on your trustworthiness, on your ability to keep a promise. Only, this ability doesn't exist. That's why I dropped ..."

"It's not true! I can keep promises - I swore to the Death-Eaters, and I kept my ..."

"Oh yes, at least you tried, except that they're still in prison, while Snape's still alive ... Anyway, what I mean is - maybe you keep promises as best as you can, but still you're not trustworthy - nobody knows whether you give a promise or just some nice words. I don't see a realistic chance, while I take the threat for my unborn son seriously - that's why you'll die in a while, alone or with me ... Enjoy the minutes left - I said one hour to give you time for a goodbye to the world, and maybe for myself too."

"Harry - if I promise, really promise ... Nagini knows when I lie, so she knows when I'm true - isn't this the method to escape this deadlock? Let's go to her and settle an agreement that's satisfying for both ..."

"That's an interesting idea, only - what could you offer that's worth to let you live?"

"Sirius Black - you'll never find him, Harry ... Even if you do, any attempt to rescue him will sign his death, unless you know how to do it ... He's in good shape - I only cruciated him to enforce obedience to some rule, otherwise he wasn't hurt ..."

"Stop it, Voldemort! ... You're lying even now, quite obviously - Sirius isn't following any rule just to avoid a Cruciatius, you tortured him as some punishment, probably because you felt insulted, or as a revenge for whatever ... You're discrediting your own suggestion, which is only natural since you're no contract partner of any reasonable choice."

"Isn't it a rule, not to insult me? I didn't lie - but just to make things easier, shouldn't we return to the house and continue this discussion in the presence of Nagini? Then a misunderstanding like this won't occur, just from using words which might be understood differently."

Harry shrugged. "Why not? ... Time's ticking, here or in that house - go ahead."

Voldemort stood up, slowly, giving the picture of an old man with arthritic joints.

Feeling the signal, Harry *followed* - and was down, rolling sideways, his wand already pointing, in perfect balance, anticipating the manoeuvre he had expected.

The white flash from Voldemort's wand hit the place where Harry had apparated, had been an instant before.

The two-coloured wand gave the answer. "*CRUCIO!*"

It was the first time Harry sent this unforgivable curse. He did it with accuracy, with the full force of his magic, focused against that figure which, miraculously, had lost all its clumsiness.

This sound ... Couldn't possibly come from a human body - not this piercing scream, high-pitched and monotonous as if superheated steam was forced out a pipe too narrow for the high pressure. Voldemort on his knees, his head dangling low, his body shaking, hands stretching to claws, clamping to fists, opening again in the futile attempt to cope with the unbearable stimulus that kept rippling his synapses.

His wand had dropped from fingers beyond control. Harry kicked it out of reach, took it, his own wand constantly pointing at the twisting body before his eyes.

He walked to Nagini, put her around his body. "How are you, partner - how was the gas attack for you?"

"I'm not yet fully recovered, master, but only my smelling is still damaged."

"Is your body under control?"

"Yes, master."

"So you can strangle Voldemort if I tell you so?"

"Certainly - and I would welcome this command, master."

"Well - don't expect too much, we still need him to find Sirius."

Harry's first attempt to open Lupin's handcuffs failed - apparently, his Cruciatus curse, still pounding toward the crumpled figure on the floor, took all power, left nothing to open a lock.

His second attempt was a quick scan across open places, and drawers in a sideboard - looking for a key. No luck. Maybe Voldemort had a key in his pockets, only Harry wasn't taking chances.

He stopped the Cruciatus.

Voldemort's body fell forward, lying motionlessly for a moment. By the time the long, thin figure could master the first controlled movement, Harry had opened the cuff around Lupin's right wrist, had stunned him.

His eyes not turning from the trembling figure, which slumped into the opposite chair, Harry asked, "Remus?"

"I'm fine, Harry ... No - not quite, because I miss my wand."

"Look around - it's not in these drawers, I checked already ... Be careful what you touch."

"I'll try." Lupin walked out and - to Harry's great relief - was back a few minutes later, minutes in which Harry kept watching Voldemort, neither of them speaking a word.

"All right, Harry - I'm back in business ... What happened here?"

"First we were talking a bit, then we had a short wizard duel, and then we made a few trips around the world. Then this charming dipshit suggested negotiating in the presence of Nagini, to prove he's not lying, and so we came back ... He's a real master in Apparition, Remus - would have caught me if not for a few months' training of *aikido* ... That's why the last five minutes were a bit loud."

"Was it something you'd regret having missed?"

"Not really - I don't think I'll ever forget that scream ... Can you move your chair to the side, so that we have him in cross-fire?"

"Sure."

Harry heard shuffling over the rug, then Lupin's voice. "Okay - got in place ... What now?"

"Our host wanted to make an offer, before we were interrupted ... Oh yes, I forgot to tell you - half an hour from now, I'm going to kill him. He had trouble believing me, mainly because he says it would kill me too ... But I guess for the last few minutes he can hear the clock ticking."

"Is he right - would it kill you?" Lupin's voice sounded flat, not showing much emotion - for him like for Harry, this seemingly quiet scene in the living room of a Caribbean bungalow was combat action at peak level, nothing else.

"Could be ... My blood's running in his veins, that's his argument - not totally out of discussion he's right, but even so - he had some suggestions concerning Cho's and my future son that were totally unacceptable ..."

Harry's eyes met those of Voldemort. "I didn't know you're a jump artist too - except it's Apparition rather than martial arts ... Anyway, it wasn't bad, really - makes me hope for my own technique. But now, back to business ... What did you have in mind to change my plans?"

Voldemort's voice was still croaky. "Sirius Black's life for mine - that's the deal."

"Really? ... What a surprise - and how did you think would this take place?"

"We jump to where he's kept. I'll secure the death trap which is installed there. Then I'll give you the key to the chain he's locked with. You can untie him, which gives me time to disappear."

Harry laughed, although with little joy. "Wonderful ... You really found the words to offer something that sounds realistic, and Nagini kept silent - great, Voldemort, no denying ... Only there's a little flaw, or maybe two ..."

"Why? This is a serious offer, as Nagini has confirmed, isn't that so? She ..."

"Sure - a serious offer which ends with you far away, and Sirius and I trapped in some hole that's probably killing us two minutes later - just outside the time frame you've had in mind in your offer ... No, Voldemort, no way."

Lupin asked, "Where's Wormtail?"

Voldemort's head turned. "He's guarding the prisoner."

"Summon him to this place."

"No ... Besides, he doesn't know by himself where he is - you won't learn anything from him."

"Harry, what do you think - is it time for an Imperius, or another Cruciatu?"

"No, Remus ... The Imperius doesn't work - what do you think where I got my immunity from? And another cruciating - if you want to hear that scream, why not, only it's not going to change his mind ... No - twenty-five minutes from now, he'll be gone, and we'll know whether he was right."

"Hmm ..." As if discussing a stubborn child, Lupin asked, "What do you think - why doesn't he want to summon Wormtail?"

"Most likely because Wormtail's needed to trigger another death trap after ..."

Harry's *haragei* received a wave from Voldemort that could be interpreted easily - his assumption was obviously a full hit. He grinned. "Remus, I have to correct myself - not most likely, but definitely ... Voldemort just confirmed it."

The masklike face of Voldemort had not shown pleasant feelings before, but at Harry's words, it distorted to a grimace of nameless horror.

"Yeah, Voldemort, I forgot to tell you - this white magic covers a bit more than I've shown before ... But don't worry - for the last twenty minutes of your life, it's unlikely that I have to surprise you as badly as before."

A choking. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Lupin - I'm extending my offer. I'll secure all traps at Mr. Black's prison, so you both will come out alive and unharmed."

Harry answered. "Forget it ... There's so much room for another trick - sorry, Voldemort, but you just aren't the contract partner of my choice."

"No - my offer covers everything in this encounter - I cannot promise anything that may happen tomorrow, or next week - I'm true, you see, Nagini is still silent ... To show my good will, I'll summon Wormtail now!"

Harry shrugged. "If you like company, go ahead."

"Then would you please give me my wand?"

Harry grinned. "You're truly the master of all wordsmiths, Voldemort ... Say, 'I need my wand to summon Wormtail'."

Of course, this obvious lie was never spoken. Instead, Harry felt a growing surge of magic in his *haragei* - even without Nagini's comment, he knew what was taking place.

And there he stood, looking surprised - Peter Pettigrew, better known as Wormtail, easily recognizable for his silvery-glistening left hand.

Lupin's voice had lost its flatness, came hard and metallic. "Hello, Wormtail."

## 26 - The Deal

With bulging eyes, Peter Pettigrew looked around. He stared at Harry, at Lupin - and then his eyes fell on Voldemort, so obviously disarmed and unable to express any threat. Next instant, the human figure disappeared, and a rat was hurrying across the floor toward the near exit.

It came just to the corner.

A large black dog had crossed the distance with two jumps. The dog's teeth closed around the small grey body - only the neck-breaking twist didn't come. With the squeaking rat tightly packed, the dog returned to the middle of the room.

Harry hadn't seen much of the scene, as his eyes never left Voldemort for more than a quick glance aside. Grinning toward the skeleton-like figure in his view, he said, "Wormtail seems not too happy about your call - actually, it looked very much as if he saw a chance to get lost from us all ... Do you have a problem with your servants, Voldemort?"

The dark wizard watched the twisting rat with an expression hardly suited to promise a pleasant treatment. Apparently, the servant's attempted escape counted worse than being seen by him as powerless as here. "If so," said Voldemort with some effort to remain calm, "I take it it's none of your concern, Mr. Potter, and you won't object the way how I'll punish this insubordination."

"Well - as long as we're together here, I'll object all of your plannings, and afterwards - there isn't much of an afterwards, at least not in the common sense."

"But, Mr. Potter, I thought we had reached a common base for an agreement, and my summoning Wormtail was a first step in that direction?"

Harry shook his head. "From my perspective, getting Wormtail was just a prerequisite, or an upfront payment, as business people would call it - you see, Voldemort, we both have learned a bit of the trading language ... At any rate, I guess it's more productive to have him listening."

Not turning away, Harry called, "Remus - drop him in my viewing angle ... I'm going to switch him back."

The dog moved a few steps forward. The fang opened, and the rat fell onto the rug, while the dog retreated a step to guard the exit.

Harry's wand movement was swift. "*Praebetuipe!*"

The figure of Peter Pettigrew shot upward, reached its full height. The eyes had normalized in size, however were still looking hunted.

"Wormtail," said Harry, "do you need a lesson to know that your next transfiguring will be an extremely painful experience? ... A lesson from me, that is - not from your master, who's currently quite upset from your bad manners?"

Sweat appeared on the man's forehead. "Er - no, Harry, no - really, I understand even so, it's not necessary - definitely not, please ..."

"Stop shitting language, Wormtail ... Remus - please, I need you with a wand."

A moment later, Lupin's voice came from the chair. "All right, Harry."

"Remus, I'm not sure if my argument was convincing enough for Wormtail ... Please be careful - and if he tries again, don't bother to bring him back, okay?"

Lupin's voice expressed hope and anticipation. "It'll be a pleasure, Harry ... Maybe you could provoke him a bit - this was a dream for quite some time, me closing my teeth around this rat and then really ..."

Wormtail's human voice seemed as squeaky as a moment before. "No - I won't try - please, Harry, tell him ..."

"Shut up!"

The speed at which this servant could follow commands, in this case Harry's, gave little reason for complaint.

Turning his eyes back to the opposite chair, Harry said, "Now to your proposal, Voldemort ... It's insufficient in the beginning, it's thin in the middle, and it lacks completeness toward the end - to express it in polite business terms. Let me formulate my view of a possible deal - and that's the only one to be discussed, I'm afraid."

Voldemort was suddenly very attentive. "Yes, Mr. Potter - I'm sure we'll find an arrangement ..."

"Don't you listen, dull-brain? ... I just said there's only my version of a deal - if any. We don't have to find it - we only have to see whether it works."

Voldemort almost choked on his efforts to suppress a remark, and to look like an expectant businessman.

"There's just one part in which I'm ready to concede an agreement - without your help, we won't find Sirius, and since this is the only reason that may - *may*, Voldemort, not does - that may save you from death, we can just assume there's no conceivable magic that extracts this information from you - in particular since we never could be sure you told us everything that's needed ... So far, I think, you'd agree, don't you?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Potter."

"Fine ... Now to the question of mutual trust, a very important issue in this transaction. Unfortunately, I don't trust you - not farther than my spell can make you vibrate like a dynamo ..."

"Er - Mr. Potter, what's a dynamo?"

"Never mind - the message's probably clear anyway ... So, that leaves only one trustworthy partner in a possible deal, and that's me. Listen carefully, Voldemort, since I'm going to make a promise in three parts. Afterwards, I'll ask you whether you believe me, and you'll answer - this way or the other ... This looks a bit like blackmailing, but it's not - blackmailing is a

pressure to accept a disadvantage, while - if we don't find an agreement, I'll certainly kill you, and this is probably the biggest disadvantage, after all."

Voldemort looked expectant.

"Oh - before I'm going to give my promise, still a word to an aspect you're rating much too high, Voldemort ... You may have trouble fully accepting the thought that I'll kill you if the need arises ..."

"No, Mr. Potter, no longer ..."

"Seems to be true, according to Nagini's silence ... But even so - I will, no matter what the outcome for me, that's a fact. Now the outcome - I'm not saying it's nonsense, to find myself dead afterwards - no, I take this possibility quite seriously ... That's why - in a moment - I'll show you a few alternatives how to kill you *and* survive by myself."

It was almost funny to watch the concern in Voldemort's face when he said, "Mr. Potter, that's impossible - whoever's going to ..."

"Wait and see - afterwards, you can argue. Now to my promise. Ready?"

A nod.

"Okay ..." Harry inhaled, then said to himself as much to his audience, "Part one applies to the lucky outcome. If you instruct Remus - or Wormtail and Remus - how to free Sirius and bring him here - and if Remus and Sirius arrive here alive and well, and unharmed, and if they can safely return to Hogwarts - under these conditions, I'll jump with you to Nassau, or to a place near London, whatever's your choice, as long as we're close to some civilization, and then I'll let you go, without following further. I won't even return to this house - in other words, this business is then closed for me."

"Excellent, Mr. Potter - we can ..."

"Save it - I'm not finished yet ... Let's come to part two. If any of these steps fail, if something happens to Remus, if something has happened to Sirius - for example, if he's missing a finger or an eye or another part of his body ..."

"No - he's complete!"

"... in short, if this transaction doesn't go exactly as planned, you'll be dead minutes after the failed step."

"It won't fail, Mr. Potter."

"Third, Voldemort, and I strongly suggest listening to my every word ... This is the last time that we see each other, and you come out alive. I mean, if we meet by accident, I'll look away. But if you ever again harm people precious to me, innocent people, whether wizards, Muggles, Giants, Goblins, Veela - no matter which race - if you cannot find your kingdom of dark magic without hurting and killing normal people, I'll find you again, and then I'll kill you ..." Harry's voice grew in intensity. "The next time, there's no escape - I'm going to stop your

blackmailing here and today ... You may play with people like Warrington, that's none of my concern. Otherwise, Voldemort, we'll have another encounter - a last one."

Voldemort kept silent. His face was a mirror of different thoughts - the chance to survive the day, an uncertain future, overshadowed by Harry's third promise which was limiting so much - but still, if Marie-Christine was right, a better choice than anything else.

Harry exhaled. "That's it, Voldemort ... Now - do you believe that I'll keep my promises?"

The words were carefully chosen. "If not for this one issue, Mr. Potter, I'd say yes immediately, and Nagini would keep silent. I deeply wish to say yes, only I have difficulties to imagine that you'd sacrifice your young life - and your unborn child - to a claim of destiny."

Voldemort couldn't imagine that someone was ready to die! ... Inwardly, Harry felt triumphant - Marie-Christine was right, and the plan was working! Staying alive - Voldemort's rule not to be broken by anything else.

"Well," said Harry, "assuming I can demonstrate sufficiently that I have a way to bypass this problem, Voldemort, will you believe my promises then?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Potter."

"Nagini?"

"It's the truth, Master - only that he thinks it's not real."

Of course, Voldemort had followed this conversation. He hastened to say, "That's correct, Mr. Potter, but the moment you can give proof, I won't have any doubt left ... Nagini has sensed my true conviction."

"Okay - then I just have to show you that a magical fact can be bypassed in many ways ... Voldemort, without discussing moralic principles - if there's one weakness in you, it's the disrespect of things other than a century-old tree of wizard ancestors. Muggles, for example ... Anyway - you said we're bound by my blood running in your veins, and that's why killing you would be suicide for me - right?"

"Correct, Mr. Potter."

"Well, Hermione is right, even with you - people just don't see the obvious ... Voldemort, the simplest solution for that problem is to change it!" A terrible laughter came from Harry's lips.

"What do you mean, Mr. Potter? You cannot ..."

"Quite simple - making sure there's none of my blood left in you when you're dying." With an incredibly fast movement, Harry reached Voldemort's chair. Suddenly, a razor-sharp knife was in his hand, twin-bladed. He grabbed Voldemort's right arm, turned the inside up - a quick stroke across the wrist, and a thin, ruby fountain pulsed up, eight inches into the air, collapsed, replaced by another.

Into the gasping of Voldemort's disbelief, Harry grabbed the other arm, struck the second time, producing another fountain that pulsed in the rhythm of the dark wizard's heartbeat.

He made a step back. "You see, Voldemort - a simple Muggle weapon, and fifteen minutes from now, you'd fall unconscious, never to wake up ... Except there's one detail not quite correct - when killing you this way, I'll cut your throat - it's going much faster, and to the end that comes within seconds, there's little blood left in you ... What do you guess, will I survive the impact from this little blood left?"

The dark wizard stared in numb disbelief at the blood that was rhythmically pouring out of both arms, at the growing pools at the floor, then looked up, desperation in his face. "Mr. Potter - you promised to let me live ... why do you ..."

"Don't panic." Harry's wand was pointing - a moment later, the fountains stopped, and the cuts across Voldemort's wrists had closed, kept by two thick seams of fresh and vulnerable scar tissue.

He said, "Don't move in a haste, Voldemort - these spots are still very shock-sensitive until tomorrow."

Voldemort had lost all control of his emotions. Slowly, the deep fright in his face was replaced by clean, pure hatred.

"Okay, Voldemort, this is one alternative. I presented it first for the dramatic effect - and it has impressed you considerably, didn't it? ... Although I have to admit, my first choice is another method - to let someone else do the killing - Wormtail, to be precise."

Voldemort sneered. "Wormtail? ... He won't do it - and besides, he'd die as well. My flesh stems from his body, like my blood stems from yours."

The subject of this discussion was staring at Voldemort, at Harry, his body shaking uncontrollably. "Please, I cannot ... Harry, he's right - I'd die from ..."

His eyes still not leaving Voldemort, his voice hard and cold, Harry said, "Oh yes, you can, Wormtail ... I saw you killing Cedric, you have no trouble sending this curse. And Voldemort will be unconscious when you kill him, because he'll have lost a lot of blood by then."

"Even so, Harry, he's right, it'd kill me ..."

"What a pity ... Your life is in my hands, Wormtail. I saved you three years ago, and the result was that Cedric was killed, not even mentioning Voldemort's crimes since then. If it's true, if you really die from killing Voldemort, then you have one good argument when asked in Heaven or wherever ... On the other side, if you don't do it, you'll die for sure. There's just the tiny chance that ..."

Wormtail's wailing raised in pitch. "No, please, no - I cannot, Harry, I just cannot do it, I'll certainly fail, and then ..."

"And this from the man who killed a bunch of Muggles to hide his crime ..." The rage in Harry's voice made room for contempt. "But his time as Voldemort's servant has broken his spine - okay Remus, kill him now, this noise is intolerable."

Lupin's answer vibrated from a deep satisfaction. "Okay, Harry ... Peter - turn into a rat, I'll give you six feet."

"No - no, I'll do it, I'll do what you want, Harry - I'll try my best, so please tell him to stop, and I'm not going to change into a rat - he'd catch me and kill me before you could turn your head, I know it, he's only waiting for this opportunity, no matter what you tell him ..."

Harry shook his head. "Wormtail, you're as unreliable as your master. If you don't want to die as a rat, then ..."

Voldemort interrupted him. "Mr. Potter, I believe you. Wormtail's used so much to hope for the tiniest chance, he'll give it a try after you've left me with just enough blood to stay unconscious ... It won't change anything for him, but he'll try ... Yes, Mr. Potter, your arguments were both very convincing - I think we can settle the deal now."

"Can we?" Harry's grin was a grimace. "I wasn't even finished yet showing you the alternatives. For example, I could ask Nagini to strangle you to death - and don't tell me that'd be me killing you in this case, because it's her, a fully qualified individual."

Voldemort glanced at the snake, with considerably more expression in his eyes than in those staring back. "She would die too," he said. "Whoever's killing me will die."

"There's no sense in discussing this argument, because Nagini would do it for me."

Nagini's comment was short. "Yes, Master."

"Okay, Voldemort - do we have a deal?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter."

\* \* \*

Harry sat in his chair, watching Voldemort, motionless, silent. He had been sitting that way for the last thirty minutes. He would do it for ten more minutes, and then he would kill Voldemort.

Unless Remus and Sirius arrived in that time.

For the first ten minutes of the last half hour, Harry had been listening to Voldemort's careful explanations - not for the details, which were given to Lupin, more for the signals he received through his *haragei*. He had paid attention to comments from Nagini, which didn't come, had watched Voldemort's body language.

No warning had reached his senses, only that the operation required extreme care - reaching the smaller island of the two Plana Cays, overcoming the first death trap, which would send yellow-fuming poison balls into the faces of passers-by, if not keeping strictly to the step marks. Reaching the building, which looked small from outside. Avoiding any door or window handle, which would port the careless intruder into the next vulcano at the southern continent. Then apparating inside, switching off the third death trap, which would drop a bucket of engorged tarantulas onto the head of the unknowing rescuer - to take out Sirius, to

open the door from the inside with the key given by Voldemort, since Apparition did not work in the building, and to return.

All this, Voldemort had assured, would take just a few minutes - ten, fifteen at the most.

The fifteen minutes had passed.

Voldemort's face showed deep concern - something had gone wrong, and a few minutes from now, the dark wizard would pay the price for someone else's clumsiness, or carelessness, or stupid attempt to be clever at the worst place and the worst time. If ever possible, this thought was corroding Voldemort's composure still more than the situation altogether.

Harry, in contrast, moved no muscle. He had not looked at the situation as some reality, had not considered success as the most likely result. For the last days, since his plan had formed, the prospect of finding Voldemort, being forced to let him live for the sake of Sirius, had turned his inner self to a gloomy place. Carrying this burden for another period of unknown duration - a small price for Sirius' life, a hard fate to enjoy.

Harry never expected Voldemort to keep the rules that resulted from his own third promise. For all he knew, the dark wizard was literally incapable of that - guiding a life without imposing his will and his power upon involuntary helpers. It was just impossible that all of them would turn out evil enough to be neglected. Sooner or later, the last part of a long crusade would come due.

While now, in three minutes' time, a short-cut was waiting for him.

The part of his mind which wasn't checking and scanning relentlessly jumped into an unknown future - away from here, away from the nearest future in which he would have to find the strength, and the words, to tell Almyra and Deborah. This thought was for later - after the last strike in this terrible combat.

Instead, that part of his mind was idling ahead in time, came back and said, "He would have killed you."

Voldemort jumped, thrown out of his own thoughts. "What?"

"Our son ... he'd have blasted off your foul spirit at the first attempt to take him over. You're doomed, Voldemort, like any other mortal, only ..."

*Pop. Pop-pop.*

Lupin, relief spreading his face to see Harry, regret and distaste seeing Voldemort alive as well.

Sirius, looking not quite as bad as three years ago, when Harry had seen him for the first time in the Shrieking Shack. Still - the same look in his eyes, haunted, ill. At least, his lips started to grin.

Wormtail - bleeding heavily from a large wound across his chest, a wound that continued at his back, as Harry saw a moment later.

Voldemort spoke first, staring at his unlucky servant. "You foolish creature - you put my life at risk! You'll regret that, and you'll never forget this lesson - never!" He was almost spitting.

Harry sent a quick glance to Lupin. "What happened?"

"Our clever rat brain here found it the right time for getting lost - of course in the worst possible moment. We barely escaped Voldemort's little friends with the eight legs, and then there was a rat hunt - with two dogs. We've been lucky - this island is too dry for good rat hiding."

Sirius' voice sounded almost apologetic. "It was me who caught him - my bite was a bit hard, just in time Remus warned me to keep him alive because you might still need him, Harry."

"No - not after you two are gone."

"You mean, I can finish my bite?"

"There's nothing in the agreement which talks about Wormtail ... But think twice, Sirius ..."

"I had a lot of time to think, and I did already. It's due for three years, Harry."

"Sirius, please, think again ... What satisfaction is there in death? Seeing you alive - although I'll find time to examine you only in a minute - that's what counts. And besides - leaving him with Voldemort, isn't that a judgement worse than hell?"

Silence from Sirius, Lupin's voice, comforting. "Harry's right ... Leave him - enjoy your own life, knowing him in the hands of this monstrosity."

A thought crossed Harry's mind. "Wormtail - if you want to be free, kill Voldemort - now."

Before the bleeding figure, from which all fighting spirit was gone, could shake a sweaty head, Voldemort leapt up. "That's breaking your promise, Mr. Potter! ... You said you'd let me ..."

"Is it, Voldemort?" Harry showed a joyless grin. "It's exactly what we had to expect from you - fulfilling the words but not the sense - and you complain when tasting your own medicine? ... But in some sense you're right, so I take the offer back - hadn't been accepted anyway ... Remember, Voldemort, and never forget - I keep my promises by word and intention, especially the third part."

Harry sent a short glance to his godfather. "Sirius, ready to go?"

"Yes, Harry, but I cannot apparate to Nassau - I've never been there ... And I cannot pursue it."

"What's your business in Nassau? Jump home - still better, to Deborah."

"But - I'd like to talk with you, and tell you ..."

"Yes," interrupted Harry, "for me it's the same, but it's too risky here around, and right now I have just one wish - knowing you off from here, and safe ... Tell Deborah she has to hug you for me too, okay?"

"Harry," said Sirius with some unsteadiness in his voice, "I owe you - more than .."

"No you don't - ask a Goblin why you cannot owe the other side in a bond ... And now get lost."

"Okay ... See you two soon." Sirius disappeared.

Harry felt lighter by a ton. "Remus," he asked, "can we jump back to the hotel - me following you?"

"Sure, Harry ... Ready?"

"Yes."

The picture of Voldemort, eagerly awaiting the first moment alone with his servant, was Harry's last impression before the room disappeared and this moment of eternal void passed.

He stood in the hotel lobby. Lupin nowhere in sight.

Looking around, Harry encountered the darkest moment in this day which - eons ago - had started with a breakfast and continued with Boring Binn's dry rhetorics. And now, so close to the end, Voldemort had managed something of which he didn't even know ...

"Harry!"

He wheeled around. Lupin - once more looking relieved, though certainly not as much as Harry himself. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I apparated to the outside, only I didn't find you behind me."

"That's strange - I followed you into the lobby, except you weren't there."

"How ..." Lupin stopped, a wide grin spreading his face. "Harry - how long did Voldemort jump with you around the world?"

"Dunno ... With that many changes of the daytime, you lose all feeling .. Why?"

"Don't you see what happened? ... You didn't follow, you jumped by yourself! Voldemort's last present for you - Apparition of the most accurate kind. I didn't dare anything other than the outside, toward a target I saw only for minutes - the lobby was your choice, Harry." Lupin laughed, laughed, pouring out the stress of the recent hours in a roaring laughter.

After a moment, Harry joined him. This was no Zen riddle at all, and still there was an element similar enough - Voldemort would never know about this joke.

A few minutes later, Lupin said, "Ready to jump, Harry?"

"The Hogsmeade platform?"

"Sure ... You first."

And suddenly, Harry understood. Apparation and Apparition Pursuit were not different at all, somehow. For him, Apparation meant *following* someone to a target known in advance - except this someone didn't exist.

Another Zen riddle - reason enough to jump it away.

\* \* \*

Yawning, Harry poured tea into his cup. Breakfast time at the Gryffindor table, soon to be followed by an ordinary day in Hogwarts - suddenly a very inviting prospect. Charms, in particular, where he might have a joke in store for Madam Hooch ... If only he would feel more awake than right now.

The night hadn't really been short. When they reached the Entrance Hall - he and Remus who, touching the first step, invisibly changed to *Lupin* and *Prof* - it was close to midnight. A bit late, though nothing out of the ordinary.

Four people were sitting there, too uneasy for sleep, too tired for counting them awake - Cho and Almyra, Ron and Hermione. They jumped up, stopped cold - a terrible moment of uncertainty, seeing only two figures ...

"He's at home, or with Deborah!" Planned to calm down, for immediate comfort, the words came from Harry's mouth as a shout of triumph.

He had just time to deposit Nagini, then Cho clung to him, Almyra to Lupin, while Ron and Hermione were first hugging each other and then dancing around the other two couples in a kind of War Dance, Ron not ending to carol, "They got him! Yes, sir, they got him!"

And Cho was crying, violently, unable to stop. Harry held her, rocked her gently from side to side. "I told you, didn't I?"

A nod, and another outburst of tears.

However, minutes later, they were sitting at the best place in this situation - the Hogwarts kitchen, surrounded by Dobby, Winky, and other house-elves who hurried to get more food and drinks, hurried back not to miss anything important in Harry's and Remus' summary.

And this was one of the reasons why now, at breakfast, Harry didn't feel hungry, would have preferred some more sleep. He was sipping his tea, reconsidering the previous day, and its ending.

The news of Voldemort being alive had been a mild shock for the others, overcome quickly with the hope the dark wizard might remember Harry's promise, with the insight that there had been no other choice, and of course with the - unspoken - expectation that Harry would handle it - the latter more from Ron, less from Cho, mostly however from Dobby.

Lupin had promised to inform Dumbledore, so this Hogwarts schoolday might indeed be the first in a while to run completely undisturbed. The only special event Harry had in mind would take place in the evening - a quick visit to pass some information further.

Rahewa appeared in the hall, uncommonly late for her habits - maybe because her first glance toward the Gryffindor table should confirm or deny her expectations, excluding the possibility of a sixth-year still asleep.

Harry suppressed a laugh. Rahewa, unable to take her eyes away from him, had stumbled into an older student, who gave an angry shout, walking away with a shaking head when this skinny girl didn't even bother to register him.

Harry waved to her. Rahewa came speeding around the table. He said, "I have something to give back to you - but not here in public, maybe after lunch ... Sirius is okay, we got him."

Two dark fires started to glow. "Did you ... Was it a help for you?"

"Oh yes ... You may still find Voldemort's blood on it - I had no time to clean it properly."

For a second, Harry felt sure the Great Hall would see the second War Dance, this time original Cree. He said quickly, "But he's still alive - had to be, the only way to get Sirius."

Rahewa accepted this without the slightest trace of disappointment - probably in the hope her twin-bladed knife would, some time in the future, receive a second baptism of this special kind. She marched to her place, started eating, would certainly have eaten sawdust cakes without even noticing.

Charms started after lunch. With respect to the hot day, the Gryffindors and Madam Hooch used broomsticks to reach the training area outside the school's protective sphere. And of course, most students tried to jumble around in cool air, rather than starting their tedious exercises.

Not so Harry. For once, he knew something better than air dives. And for once, he wanted to make a show of it.

So he moved around, asking his classmates, "Want a pumpkin fizz?" earning only assent, what else, together with laughters for what sounded like a nice joke - there was no pumpkin fizz in Hogwarts, and Madam Hooch had confiscated all broomsticks as the only method to get the lesson running.

Harry reached her. "A pumpkin fizz, Prof?"

A suspicious look. "What do you have in mind, Harry?"

As long as it was *Harry* rather than *Mr. Potter*, he could play along. "First questions first, Prof! ... So - a pumpkin fizz or something else?"

A suppressed grin. "Pumpkin fizz is fine - except ..." Madam Hooch stopped - for her as for anybody else, there was no sense in talking with empty air.

She was still looking around, trying to find another explanation because the obvious one seemed impossible, when Harry appeared some yards to her side, since she had moved in the short time. He stepped closer. "Here we are, Madam - a pumpkin fizz, with compliments from ..."

"Harry! Where have you been??"

He looked innocent. "In Hogsmeade, in the store - why, do you know a better place to get some fizz?"

"How did ..." She stopped again, her eyes widening. "Harry - have you figured out ..." She stopped once more, lost in a frantic giggle - before her eyes, the figure of Harry shrank to the horizon, in a rapid staccato of Apparition jumps.

Then he stood in front of her again, beaming. "Yes, Prof - I found out."

"You tricky ... How did you manage?"

"Erm - I had a special training, so-to-speak ... It was enough for the breakthrough."

"And who was your trainer?"

His beaming faded. "Voldemort."

Madam Hooch gasped. "You're joking!"

"No, Prof, not at all."

Of course, for the next five minutes, the witch didn't give a damn whether her other students splinched themselves, was listening to Harry's short summary, given in fair distance from the next ears.

Afterwards, Ron came to him. "Harry - I'll learn it in good time, no doubt - after all, if Percy has managed, it can't be that difficult. I mean, I'm not envious - the price is a bit too high ... But still, I won't mind a tip or two."

"Well - what I figured out is, Apparition and Pursuit are the same, in a way. We always tried to push ourselves to the destination, and I think that's wrong. A better picture is - you reach the destination, and then you let your body follow ... Something like a summons toward yourself."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, I see what you mean ... That's why Hooch always says we shouldn't try a long-distance levitation - it's the first time this remark makes sense to me."

For some minutes, Harry zoomed through the landscape, until Madam Hooch told him he should either stop or get lost before frustrating the others too much. Then he sat down near Ron and Hermione, trying to give the most precise description of what he was doing when apparating.

Back in the school building, he saw Cho waiting for him. She smiled. "We have an invitation, Harry."

"Really? ... When, where, who?" Seeing her look, he added, "In the order of asking, please."

"This evening ... Here in Hogwarts - Dumbledore has offered the guest suite for the small round ..." she grinned, "the big one, that is ... Who? Sirius - he's invited his rescuers again, but ..."

"Where is he?"

Cho laughed. "With Dumbledore - probably already in the suite ... But the true reason is, they want to hear every detail of yesterday - and the days before."

Every detail? Certainly not.

Then Harry remembered what he had in mind. "There's a short visit I still have to make - the sooner, the better. Can we ..."

"A visit - whom?"

He grinned. "Your father - or your mother, if he's not home yet."

For an instant, Cho was thinking of a joke, looked as if stomping her feet next moment, then she remembered. "Because of ..."

"Crownshield, yes ... He's the one your father is looking for, and we have to agree how to proceed."

"Proceed?"

"Yes - who's going to get him, your father or I."

Cho's expression hardened. "You know what he'll say, don't you?"

"Yes, I know."

"And what's your comment?"

"I'll tell your father to call for my help if some magic is required."

Cho nodded. "Yes, Harry ... My feeling's the same."

About to leave, he stopped. "This party - did Sirius really say, *his rescuers*?"

Another nod. "His own words."

"In this case - please, can you go to Beauxbatons and fetch Marie-Christine? She has contributed as much as Remus or I ... And when I'm back, I guess we'll meet in the suite, so you don't have to hang around here."

"Where do I find her?"

"Ask along - she said she's a celebrity."

Apparition was a wonderful thing - except for the tedious preparation to leave the Hogwarts sphere. At least, Harry had a short flight on his Steel Wing, the only broomstick that could not get lost.

Mrs. Chang saw him, saw his face, and hugged him. "Harry ... Harry."

Mr. Chang appeared, registered the important news, beamed, bowed. "I knew it, Harry - only I wasn't entirely sure."

"Yeah, I know that feeling ... Sir, I know the man you're looking for."

Harry was pulled inside, although this was the only contribution to Chinese formality. Sitting in a chair, he gave a detailed description of the scenes in the *Amalgamated Enterprises* building, and a short summary of the rest. He finished, "This issue is still open, sir, that's why I came here ... I wanted to agree with you who's going to - er, talk with this man."

Mr. Chang looked expressionless. "I would like to take this over, Harry."

"That's what I thought, sir ... And Cho thinks the same ... Only if it looks as if - er, if you realize there's some ..."

Mr. Chang interrupted him. "In plain English, Harry - you're trying to tell me, 'Don't mess with dark magic,' right?"

"Yes - exactly, sir."

"I won't ..." Mr. Chang bowed. "I'm in your debt, for the implicit offer and still more ..."

"Excuse me for interrupting you, sir, but you're not ... It's shared work, nothing else."

Another tiny bow. "Is this the ethic taught at Hogwarts, Harry?"

"Well - I had teachers outside Hogwarts too, but even there, the name Voldemort makes the difference. If you ever see Dumbledore furious, you'll know that he'd agree with us ... And besides, the same is true for the Goblins."

After promising a longer report at the next opportunity, Harry returned to his broomstick, feeling joy and excitement about this wonderful skill - not that it would render his linkport network ticket obsolete, for there were lots of unknown places around the world, while for daily routine, having the places closer than next door was something hard to beat.

He arrived at supper in full swing. Checking around, Harry realized that the other party guests were probably waiting for him in the suite. This left only one short preparation, requiring a few words, another argument, finally a gentle pulling.

A moment later, he knocked at the door which seemed to come into play whenever evil planning had to be, or had been, thwarted.

It was Cho who opened the door. She looked, grinned. "I knew it ... Come in."

Six more people stared - Sirius and Deborah, Remus and Almyra, Dumbledore and Marie-Christine. Only Arbogast in his picture kept busy preparing drinks.

Harry beamed into the round. "That's a rescuer party, right? ... In this case - please meet the one who gave me the weapon - and the idea - to break the bloody bond with Voldemort, and who's entitled for the full story like anybody else in this room ... Her name is Rahewa Lightfoot."

Smiles, one or two a bit forced, and hellos.

"She's just a bit nervous, mind you ... Rahewa doesn't know what it means to be scared." And only now, Harry opened his tight grip around a thin hand which had stopped trembling already outside.

The helplessness in Dumbledore's face wasn't entirely faked. "Miss Lightfoot, please keep this a secret ... If Professor McGonagall ever finds out, we're in deep trouble."

Into the laughter, Sirius and Deborah came storming toward Harry. Sirius hugged him first. "I still don't know what to say, Harry."

"That's okay - you've invited enough people to do the talking."

Deborah came to hug him, and to whisper, "You've started the fourth part of my life."

And then the talking began, first from Sirius who reported how the trap link had carried him into Voldemort's hands and how he was treated - reasonably well, given the circumstances, confirming that Voldemort had a clear perception of the limits, and what would disqualify his pledge. This was followed by Harry's description of the days spent searching, by Almyra's view of Warrington's interrogation, by Marie-Christine's analysis of motives, until finally Harry's part was due - the fight with Voldemort.

When he explained how the handcuffs had been opened, under the Cruciatus spell, his audience gasped. Even Dumbledore looked awe-struck. "How could you do that, Harry?"

"It's Zen, Prof ... I heard about people walking barefeet over burning coal - might be the same."

When he spoke about the second Cruciatus - his own against Voldemort, and how long it had lasted, there was grim satisfaction in all faces, except his own. He knew too well - this scream was nothing ever to forget.

His sketching of the bloody demonstration, using Voldemort's own flesh and blood, raised another round of gasps, this time leaving out two more guests - Dumbledore and Rahewa. Sirius looked at the girl. "I'd like to see that knife."

A moment later, the shining weapon lay on the table.

Lupin grinned. "Don't look now, Albus ... You don't want to see what I'm seeing."

The others were asking each other if someone had seen the weapon appear in Rahewa's hand. Only Marie-Christine looked pale, and there was some sweat on her face.

Almyra glanced at Dumbledore. "Professor, what's your judgement - is Voldemort right with his argument, and would this - er, butchering prevent the effect toward Harry?"

The Headmaster looked uneasy. "I have to be careful with my answer - people tend to take me literally, I guess Mademoiselle Théroux knows that feeling too ..."

Marie-Christine nodded empathetically.

"... I'm sure there *is* some connection, and without preparation, it would have a fatal effect ... On the other side, magic is rarely a question of yes or no, and this is no exception. My own assumption would be that Harry probably would lose the skills he inherited from Voldemort, while I'd be truly surprised if he'd die ..."

Cho flared up. "Me too!"

Harry giggled. For once, the blow out of nowhere hadn't been directed toward him.

Deborah asked, "And after the loss of blood?"

It was Marie-Christine who answered. "The human body holds about twelve pints of blood. Losing three to four pints is lethal - in other words, there would be eight to nine pints left."

Dumbledore nodded. "True - on the other side, this could be just the downscaling required to survive ... It was brilliant, Harry, to take it literally and to diminish the risk that way ..."

Harry patted a thin shoulder at his side. "Here's my mentor for that, Prof."

The Headmaster sighed. "Please allow me not to comment on that ... At any rate, if the question will ever arise again, I'd prefer if you'll find a way to let Wormtail do it - or Voldemort himself."

Wormtail was the keyword for the last part of the story - told by Sirius. When he described the whirling mass of tarantulas, coming down inches apart from his own and Lupin's bodies, some faces showed a greenish shade.

To the end, Lupin had fun telling the audience how they had met in the hotel lobby, realizing that Harry had performed his first Apparition. After finishing, he looked at Harry. "That reminds me - what about that guy, this Crownshield?"

Harry's glance was blank. "What about him?"

"Well, I had the feeling you might plan another visit - to the building, or to the man."

Harry's voice was flat. "No ... I don't think I'll ever meet him."

A quick exchange of glances between Lupin and Sirius. "Ah ... er, yes."

Dumbledore stood up. "I have heard what I wanted to know - and a bit more ..." a wry look toward the knife at the table, "so please allow me to say good night ... Miss Lightfoot ..."

Rahewa was up. "Of course, Professor." Next second, the knife was gone, and moments later, the unlikely pair had left the room.

Sirius said, "That's some girl - try as I might, I didn't see the knife disappear ... Anyway, Harry, now you can tell us the truth about that Crownshield."

Harry tried to look upset. "I did!"

"No flattening of a few buildings, in the days to come?"

"No, honestly ... By the way, they're flat by themselves."

Sirius examined his face. "Where were you before arriving here?"

"Not in Nassau, if that's your question ... Otherwise, you don't want to know - not you, chief of police."

For an instant, Sirius looked blank, then he nodded, his face still expressionless, yet somehow totally different. "Yes, you're right - sorry, I was a bit slow."

Later that evening, Harry and Cho escorted Marie-Christine down to the Beauxbatons linkport, said good night, after promising to visit her soon. Coming upstairs, Cho suggested a minute of fresh air outside. Near the lake, she said, "Pity she hasn't that apartment any longer."

Harry grinned. "What about you? A few weeks from now, you're free to rent your own, right?"

"You're just poking to find out about my plans."

"Well ... Whatever it'll be, now I can visit you easily - that's simply fantastic!"

"You have no Apparition license yet."

"Yeah, terrible, isn't it?"

Cho giggled, stopped giggling. "Talking about apartments, and staying overnight - is there a guest room in Deborah's flat?"

For once, Harry had seen the blow coming - actually the moment when Cho had suggested the walk. He answered, "Not really ... Her office serves for that, with a couch you can flatten out."

"Is it wide enough for two?"

"I'd say no - but I didn't try."

"But good enough to sleep alone?"

"Basically yes ... Unless someone next door shrieks up from a nightmare, terrified as hell, and refuses to sleep for fear to dream it again. In this case, you find yourself forced to calm her down, hold her ..."

"Tightly ..."

Harry sighed. "Yes - if not immediately, then because she's coming closer by herself ... And suddenly you realize all she's wearing is something thin, and *very* short ... Then it could be you respond, if you want or not, and suddenly she thinks a wet dream is far better than a nightmare."

"A wet dream, huh?" Cho's voice was calm, thoughtful.

"Yes, that's what it was - only we were awake."

Cho stopped, stared into his face. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Answering yes is somehow inaccurate, and answering no is certainly wrong ... I didn't volunteer, and I didn't resist either ... It didn't feel wrong then, and now - you asked me, and I'm not going to lie to you."

Cho nodded. "No, and that's ..." She grabbed him. "I wasn't asked, and that's why you'll be ordered to dream the same dream with me - at the next opportunity."

He held her tightly. "I know what you mean, and I will - while otherwise, I can do without this nightmare ... Much better, actually."

They stood a moment in silent embrace. Then Harry saw Cho look up, saw the unspoken question, kissed her, murmured, "Yes, that's another difference."

"Maybe it's a similarity, huh?"

Knowing exactly what Cho meant, while not overly interested in a longer discussion, Harry saw a chance to change the subject. "There's something I didn't tell the others - even Remus doesn't know, because he was fetching Sirius when I told Voldemort ... It's of course speculation, but I'm pretty sure about my guess."

Curiosity had gripped her. "What??"

"Our son ... If Voldemort would ever try to take him over, that child would crush him the same instant - no matter which age."

Cho nodded. "Yes - you're right, I'm sure you are ... Maybe except for one detail." Seeing his blank look, she grinned. "Who said it would be a son?"

## **27 - The Match**

With new energy, Harry dove into the last weeks of this quite remarkable school year. After all that time, the year had brought a temporary stop to his life-long crusade, and a workable solution to his other serious problem - how to endure a year at Hogwarts without Cho.

In view of such important goals, other things seemed of minor importance, except these were the ones left to do - winning the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup, for example ... Oh yes, and to pass a few end-of-year exams, he'd almost forgotten about them.

It was Hermione, of course, who reminded them when Harry and Ron were discussing Quidditch training schedules, and how to re-synchronize between Harry and the rest of the team. "What about a few learning sessions?" asked Hermione. "You've fought Voldemort - great, but the teachers may have some other topics to ask."

Harry grinned. "Are you sure?"

Hermione sighed. "Be reasonable ... Yes, okay, Charms is no longer an issue for you ..."

Definitely so - not with Harry as the only one having mastered Apparation long before schedule, for the first time creating a situation in which Hermione wasn't top of the pop in a matter taught in classes - although there was little doubt she would master Apparition soon by herself.

"... Defence is a self-runner too - even if your gaps are as wide as the Hogwarts lake, Snape'll make you pass after two minutes ... And Transfiguration - you haven't got the foggiest about that, but Lupin will have a nice chat with you, and at the end, you'll have to remind him not to forget his signature on the exam form."

Harry beamed. "How did you know?"

"But there's still Care, there's Social Ethics ..."

"Grubbly-Plank and Binns won't let me hang - never!"

"... and there's Potions, in case you forgot - and that's McGonagall."

"Oops." Harry knew, the Headmistress would not hang him either, only he wasn't ready to encounter the shameful scene of McGonagall doing a triple-G for him - a generous grading by grace ... Not with her and, come to think of it, not with another teacher either. He glanced at Hermione. "How are the chances for a little coaching from your side?"

"Hmm ..." Greed appeared in Hermione's face. "You know what I'm going to trade for, don't you?"

"You mean test candidates for your new recipes?"

"Yes, what else? ... And one candidate in particular, for whom your vote has a lot of weight."

For a fleeting instant, Harry had to fight the temptation of a cheap deal. Then he said, "Hermione, you don't need my help for that ... He's ready to do it - first thing next terms, after they've settled their own issues. What I can ..."

"Really? Super!" Hermione's face was shining, then showed an appreciating smile. "I have to admit, Harry - no matter how bad your morale as a student, there's nothing wrong with your ethics."

Harry felt pleasure and self-consciousness at the same time. "I've heard that before," he said, "although in some other context ... Anyway, what I can offer is the role of a business agent - between you and some candidates in Haiti ... We only have to find some werewolves there."

Hermione thought for a moment. "It's a deal ... You still have no Apparition license, but who said it's my job to watch other people keeping the rules?"

Ron looked deeply astonished. "Why? ... I always thought there's a voice from Heaven, telling you each morning - maybe under the shower, maybe when ..."

Hermione just laughed. "Who told you that? ... But recently, the shower's too loud to hear a word."

Ron nodded. "Ahh - that explains a lot."

And so Harry started working hard on things as mundane as Potions, Care, and Social Ethics - in the spare time left besides regular classes and Quidditch training. However, his good intentions were corrupted soon. The first blow came some days later, when reading the *Daily Prophet* during breakfast. The headline covered almost half of the first page.

- ***Gruesome Linkport Accident Kills Warrington***

*A ghastly discovery horrified some linkport staff only yesterday - at London Linkport and at Miami Linkport. A wizard was cut in two halves, from head to feet. His left half was found in the London gate to Miami, while his other half was detected soon afterwards in the corresponding destination cabin in Miami Linkport.*

*Due to the terrible state of the body pieces, it took a while to identify the victim of this accident, unprecedented in the history of linkport travelling. From his belongings, the man was positively identified as Wesley Warrington, head of the Transportation Department in the Ministry of Magic and recently the subject of some rumours dealing with tax irregularities.*

*A closer investigation revealed the most likely reason for this accident. Apparently, Mr. Warrington had tried to apparate directly into the gate - a dangerous manoeuvre even in the best of cases. Somehow, his Apparition jump was not quite perfect, and the linkport pull took place while the body had not apparated yet completely.*

*When asked for a comment about this accident, Mr. Boonhill, Managing Director of Magical Tours, which runs the linkport business, denied any responsibility of his company. 'Nobody in his right mind would apparate into a port cabin,' he stated, pointing out that this is the first case of a deadly accident with portkey travelling.*

*The connection from London to Miami is locked until the investigation is finished. Even so, the portkey traffic jam has thus far been limited since the accident struck a severe blow against customer's trust in the safety of this new technology.*

*See inside for interviews with the linkport employees who found the mutilated body.*

For a moment, Harry pondered two alternatives - a suicide of the spectacular kind the first, a punishment in Voldemort's usual style the second. Then, reconsidering what he had felt in the dark cellar of Sirius' house, he knew - this had been no suicide.

To get another opinion, he marched over to the Ravenclaw table, made Cho and Almyra read the article, and asked, "What's your guess - suicide or Voldemort?"

Almyra's answer came instantly. "No suicide ... Otherwise, you're the better expert."

Cho looked uneasy. "What does it mean for you, Harry?"

"For me?" Then he understood. "Oh - nothing ... When talking with Voldemort, I excluded Warrington explicitly. I told him he can do with that guy whatever he wants ... Well, he did, didn't he?"

"Yep ... Now Rita Skeeter can rest in peace."

"And Warrington will rest in pieces."

Harry's bad joke raised a grimace from Cho - after all, this was breakfast, a sanctified time of day for her. Almyra, in contrast, looked more approving than distasteful, quite understandably so for an earwitness of Warrington's confession.

However, there was an aspect in the accident which caused Harry to think for a while, through most of Social Ethics. At the end of the class, his decision was made, just in time because double Charms came next.

He had barely dropped his broomstick in the training area when he jumped to the front of the *Magical Tours* headquarters. Moments later, he stood before the Managing Director's secretary.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but today it's impossible - honestly. Mr. Boonhill ..."

"I know, Madam - but it's about this accident ... I have some information, and I want to tell Mr. Boonhill."

A minute later, he was sitting in front of the large desk. The manager's face looked tired. "Good morning, Mr. Potter. Was your talk with Mr. Crownshield satisfying?"

"I never saw him, Mr. Boonhill. It was a trap, although that was no real surprise." Seeing the man's expression, Harry continued quickly, "But to make a long story short - yes, the result was quite satisfying ... I'm thankful for your help, Mr. Boonhill, and that's the reason for my coming - I know about the background of that accident."

"Then you know more than we do - it's a mystery for our technicians."

"They might as well stop investigating," stated Harry, "because they'll never find out. It was a murder, Mr. Boonhill - committed by Voldemort. Warrington was Voldemort's helper, if not to say his employee, and he had the clumsiness to reveal an important detail where to find Voldemort. That was reason enough for Voldemort to kill him in the most spectacular way ... Although - it's probably not by accident that the linkports of *Magical Tours* were used for that purpose, my feeling is Voldemort has some grudge against his business partners."

Mr. Boonhill's eyes had widened, narrowed, widened again. "Mr. Potter - just assuming I believe you every word, can you prove what you said?"

"That'll be difficult ..." Seeing the manager's look, Harry added, "Don't get me wrong, Mr. Boonhill - it's fact from start to end, and I'll help you if I can, but there's a significant difference between knowing and proving."

"You said Warrington was killed because he told somebody something. What did he tell?"

"The address of his vacation house on the Bahamas. That's where Voldemort was hiding."

"And whom did he tell?"

"Me - and two other people who were present at that time."

Mr. Boonhill asked with some carefulness, "Is my impression right that this information wasn't given voluntarily, Mr. Potter?"

"Basically, yes ... We didn't torture him, if that's what you think, but we forced him to reveal some details ... But before you feel pity, Mr. Boonhill - Warrington was the murderer of Rita Skeeter, a journalist."

"And why's Voldemort interested in hurting *Magical Tours* - to discredit us with the most spectacular accident you can imagine?"

"Some people in your mother company - *Amalgamated Enterprises* - are, or were, his business partners. Mr. Crownshield is one of them, and your predecessor, Mr. Gallagher, was another ... Business partners of Voldemort have unlucky fates, Mr. Boonhill - you know the old saying, about the long spoon you need when lunching with the devil."

"Mr. Potter - I really appreciate your help, at least we know what happened. If I understand you right, these details are badly suited to be recorded in an affidavit ... Although it won't help to keep the damage at bay."

"How bad is it for your business, Mr. Boonhill?"

A bitter laugh. "The worst ... Do you know about Muggle techniques, such as aeroplanes, Mr. Potter?"

"A bit ... Why?"

"When flying, these aeroplanes can shake horribly in wind and storm - that's why they always have lots of bags ready, if people start retching ... Well, and now, we need the same bags because our passengers are scared to death entering a linkport gate."

Harry's next decision was taken in a second. "Mr. Boonhill - you need positive publicity, right?"

With his fine ear for business chances, the Managing Director looked very expectant.

"I'm ready to be interviewed by the *Daily Prophet*. In this interview, I'll explain that this wasn't an accident but Voldemort's doing, and why ... I'll state in public that Warrington has ordered the murder of Rita Skeeter ... I don't know how much it'll help, but I think it's better than some signed paper in some office."

Hope was glowing in Mr. Boonhill's face. "You'd do that, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well - I learned to distinguish between *Magical Tours* in general and specific people in particular, so maybe it's a bit of an apology. I have some obligation toward you specifically ... And it gives me an opportunity to settle another obligation toward Rita Skeeter."

"And how do we handle the other side - I mean the interviewer?" The manager looked apologetic. "You know - we're definitely ready to be grateful, but the slightest suspicion that this interview is just a paid advertisement ..."

Harry grinned. "Don't worry, Mr. Boonhill - I know whom to contact."

When he returned to his classmates, Madam Hooch looked very upset. "I'm not forcing you to hang around here, Mr. Potter, but do me a favour - before you jump through the world, tell me in advance when to expect you back ... Then at least I know when I have to start being scared, rather than all the time."

Harry blushed. "You're right ... I'm sorry, Prof."

"It's okay, Harry ... Do you still have other visits to make?"

"Erm - yes, with the Law Enforcement Squad ... Why?"

The witch grinned. "If you pass a store - I won't mind a pumpkin fizz."

\* \* \*

Harry's interview was recorded the same evening - in Hogwarts, for authenticity as much as to keep Harry's unlawful Apparition travels within bounds. Thanks to the nice weather, they did it outside, near Hagrid's grave. It was a private place with a certain affinity to Voldemort's crimes, and a writer pen didn't mind working without a desk.

Deborah promised to publish the interview as soon as possible. In the meantime, another sensational news prepared the ground better than anything they could have invented. Next morning, opening his *Daily Prophet* issue, Harry found a surprise.

- ***Warrington Fortune Raided?***

*A new discovery makes the mysterious linkport accident of Wesley Warrington, the former head of the Transportation Department, still more obscure. The surprising news has to do with Mr. Warrington's bank account.*

*With respect to the running investigation, the tax authorities contacted Gringotts to confiscate the Warrington account and to keep it in custody until the irregularities in Mr. Warrington's tax declarations would be explained - this way or the other. However, all they found was a nearly empty vault!*

*Only a day before his tragic death, Mr. Warrington transferred all his money to an account outside British jurisdiction. The same sources which revealed this information stated that the sum was clearly above a million.*

*Neither the tax authorities nor Gringotts could be reached for a comment. In contrast, both announced steps to find out the leak through which this newspaper was informed, and both sides are accusing each other to be responsible for the publication of what is supposed to be confidential information in a running investigation.*

Harry wondered who had been the initiator of this transaction, more precisely, who was authorized to access the destination account. His prime candidate would be Voldemort, naturally so, except that this dark wizard's greed had never extended to money. Crownshield, or the people around him, were another possibility. At any rate, this transaction hadn't been the first step of Warrington's preparation to escape law's long arm.

Harry's own interview was printed in next day's issue, at page three, however with a front page headline that asked *New Light in the Warrington Accident?* - followed by a wild speculation that Warrington had been the victim of a clever robbery before he was murdered. In a sense, the interview was new even to Harry - he'd given Deborah full freedom to edit the recording:

***Mr. Potter, you claim to have information about the recent accident in which Mr. Warrington was killed. Is this correct?***

"Yes, I do. In particular, I know it wasn't an accident."

***No? Then what else was it?***

"A murder. Mr. Warrington has been murdered."

***By whom?***

"By Voldemort."

***Indeed. Did you see it happen?***

"No, of course not. But there's no doubt - it's the only explanation that fits."

***So it's just an assertion? That's daring - what if Voldemort takes you responsible for such unproven statements?***

"How could he - by suing me? (*Mr. Potter laughs.*) Or by attacking me?"

The last time he tried it was some days ago - since then, he has other worries than searching for me. Anyway, it's more than an assertion.

I have enough information to be sure, I think the police would call it circumstantial evidence."

***Then please explain your evidence.***

"Well - for starters, it's a fact that Voldemort has the skill to make such an accident happen. In Apparition and Summoning, he's really perfect - I saw it with my own eyes. The next fact is that Warrington was Voldemort's helper. And finally, Warrington did something which gave Voldemort a lot of trouble, to say the least. (*Grinning.*) Put these facts together, and look what happened to Voldemort's helpers in the past, if they made a mistake, then you know that I'm right."

***Careful, Mr. Potter. So far, I just see a bunch of assertions. What did Mr. Warrington do to deserve Voldemort's wrath?***

"He told me where to find him. I mean, not in these words, but he told me the address of his house on the Bahamas, and I knew I'd find Voldemort there - and so it was. Voldemort living in Warrington's house, at an address that was kept a deep secret - I think this is proof enough that Warrington was his helper."

***And how did Voldemort know where you got the address from?***

"Very simple - he asked me, and I told him."

***That's hard to believe, Mr. Potter. Wasn't it obvious to you that Mr. Warrington would suffer from Voldemort's revenge?***

"Of course it was. But I saw no reason to protect him - not because he helped Voldemort, this alone doesn't say much since you never know if these people do it voluntarily or under pressure. No, Warrington was the one who ordered the murder of Rita Skeeter." (*Rita Skeeter was a journalist of this newspaper who died in a car accident, a hit-and-run still under investigation.*)

***Another assertion?***

"Oh no. He told me - at an opportunity when he was pretty sure his words couldn't be used against him. I'm not sure whether Voldemort knew, that's why I told him that too. Voldemort doesn't like his helpers killing other people without his authorization, probably another reason why he was really mad at Warrington."

***You are quoting a conversation with a dead person, Mr. Potter. How can we be sure you are not making this up?***

"Oh, there were other people present, so I have witnesses. Not many, but some."

***Which people?***

"I'd prefer to keep their names to myself. If this case ever comes up in front of a jury, it's soon enough to present witnesses."

***A jury? A murder trial or a lawsuit from the Warrington family?***

"Whatever. By the way, there are also witnesses for the meeting with Voldemort - this might be of interest for anybody thinking about a lawsuit."

***What was the reason for this meeting with Voldemort? We are surprised to hear that you would like to meet Voldemort, still more surprised that Voldemort would like to meet you.***

"I didn't like it, I was forced to meet him. But I can tell you, he didn't like it either, after our meeting was over. Aside from that, we should drop the matter - it was a very private meeting, in contrast to the previous one which took place in full public."

***Mr. Potter, what was your motivation for this interview?***

"I'm fighting Voldemort where I can hit him, even if it's just a company he's hurting, not a single person."

***But obviously, your protective impulse didn't extend to Mr. Warrington.***

(*Silence*)

***Would you comment on that, Mr. Potter?***

"Why? It wasn't a question, and as you said, it's obvious. No - I have a comment. I wanted to declare in public that Wesley Warrington was responsible for the murder of Rita Skeeter, and this was the right opportunity."

***That's a very clear comment. How is your relationship with Magical Tours, the company which is suffering from Voldemort's action?***

"I had my trouble with them in the past. It took me quite a while to realize that my troubles were caused by specific people, not by the company as such. So if you want, you might say I give this interview as an apology."

***Have you been paid by them?***

"Paid? (*Laughter*) I wish I was. No - they had a lot of expenses, from things I did, but none of that money went into my pockets."

***So you would claim yourself neutral regarding Magical Tours?***

"Not at all. Most likely, there are still some people - either in that company or in their mother company, Amalgamated Enterprises - which have helped Voldemort, or still are helping him. And if so, my best advice is to get rid of them quickly, otherwise they'll have more expenses. But this has nothing to do with their service, I mean linkport travelling. I do it all the time."

***Thank you, Mr. Potter, for this conversation.***

Other people in Hogwarts had also read the interview, Harry could recognize from their glances. Not quite as bad as after the story with Gérard, however these glances weren't friendly either. Well, stirring up mud didn't make friends, nor did a reminder that Voldemort was alive and kicking - or throwing people into linkports.

Up to a point, Harry felt expectant to get a reaction from other people, some authorities for example, or the Warrington family. However, the only person who reacted, by visiting him in Hogwarts, came as a real surprise.

Mr. Spinbottle.

When they had found a quiet place, the lawyer presented the *Daily Prophet* issue. "Mr. Potter, your interview is the reason for my coming. I was deeply astonished to read your statements, since I have proof that Mr. Warrington committed suicide."

"What??"

"I received a letter, Mr. Potter ... It's not exactly the kind of letter you'd find, or expect, but it comes very close. More - the letter came together with a substantial amount of money, an amount which allows the conclusion that the writer is going to abandon his former life, maybe even his life altogether."

"A letter from Warrington?"

"Yes. He expresses his deep sorrow about the death of Mrs. Skeeter, that he feels, to some degree, responsible for these events, and that he sends that money for compensation, together with some suggestions how to use it."

"Responsible to some degree? That's ..." Harry stopped, as a fantastic thought started to build in his mind. "Mr. Spinbottle, when did this letter arrive?"

"Two or three days after this accident ... I'd have to check in my office for the exact date."

"And this money - is it as substantial as, say, what could have been found some days earlier at Mr. Warrington's account?"

The lawyer hesitated.

Listening to his *haragei*, Harry grinned. "It's okay, Mr. Spinbottle - you gave the answer already ... So - two days before Warrington's death, the money disappears. Two days after his death, the money reappears together with a letter ... Mr. Spinbottle, where has it been in-between, and how come this letter took so long?"

"It's indeed a bit mysterious, although there might be a simple explanation. For example, Mr. Warrington might have deposited both with a colleague of mine, to be sent after his death."

"But you don't believe it, do you?"

"Well - it's highly unusual to write anonymously from one lawyer to another ... There's no reason I can see - except that Mr. Warrington required this explicitly."

"I'd know a better reason, and a better explanation."

"I'm looking forward to hearing it, Mr. Potter."

Now it was Harry's turn to hesitate - if his assumption was correct, maybe he had no right to reveal the details. "Let me ask another question first, Mr. Spinbottle - what suggestions did the writer give for the handling of the money?"

"I'm not sure whether I'm entitled to tell you, Mr. Potter."

"Yeah, and I have a similar problem. Let's see ... Assume I tell you about the sender, how confidential would you take this information?"

Mr. Spinbottle cooled a bit. "I'm not giving interviews to the press, Mr. Potter."

Harry felt up to this heavy artillery. "Another question, Mr. Spinbottle - since we're talking about more than a million, isn't it quite interesting to see that this money wanders from one lawyer to another, without anyone else knowing, and these lawyers have professional ethics that stand a million?"

Mr. Spinbottle went totally stiff. "I think we should finish this conversation, Mr. Potter."

"Just a moment, sir - I wasn't questioning *your* ethics, and I'll show you why the sender could be perfectly sure too."

There was no lawyer born yet who didn't fall for curiosity, even after insulting implications. "Go ahead, Mr. Potter."

"All right ... To make sure not even a grand jury can force you to report this, Mr. Spinbottle, what I'm telling you is no statement but a wild speculation - okay?"

A very small grin appeared in the thin-lipped face.

"The speculation starts at a time when the money is still safely at Gringotts, and Mr. Warrington hasn't the slightest intention to change this state. But then, as I said, he's killed by Voldemort ... By some coincidence, the Goblins know that Warrington was Voldemort's figure, and they also know that he was the one who ordered the murder of Rita Skeeter ... In case you don't know, Mr. Spinbottle - for Goblins, Voldemort is a deadly enemy, and justification enough to break their common rules. This - not the murder, mind - Warrington's connection with Voldemort is reason enough for them to perform a little bank fraud that makes the money disappear. For them, it's of course a piece of cake to date back the transaction by two days - while there's no way to send that letter quicker than it was done ...

And now let me finish my speculation - the purpose is probably good to stand the highest demands of morale, am I right?"

Spinbottle had listened first with disbelief, then with simple astonishment. "How would the Goblins learn about these facts, Mr. Potter?"

"I'd say - someone told them. That would be my guess."

"Your guess, huh? ..." Apparently, the lawyer could judge this guess properly. Next moment, he said, "But you didn't show how they could be sure about my integrity."

"Isn't it obvious, Mr. Spinbottle? ... In this speculation, the Goblins know about your behaviour with money - more, they'd know if suddenly a large amount would appear in your vault, right? ... And then they'd take measures."

The lawyer swallowed. "I have to admit - I didn't think for a moment about keeping it, while I was wondering indeed how ... Yes, you're right, Mr. Potter."

"In this case, I'd like to hear a - speculation what might be the purpose of that money."

Mr. Spinbottle nodded. "Naturally ... It's not really a secret, not for the bigger part. The writer of that letter suggested to establish something like a *Rita Skeeter Award*, a price for courageous journalism, to be paid from that money - more exactly, from the interest."

Harry smiled. "That's nice ... Rita would have liked it a lot, what do you think, Mr. Spinbottle?"

"Oh yes - and I'll be glad to follow this suggestion. But there's still a minor part to be dealt with."

"Another suggestion?"

"Yes. The writer recommends to set out a premium for the person, or persons, who contribute to the conviction of Rita Skeeter's murderer - not including police and other authorities ... Now, the only person that fits this qualification, Mr. Potter, is you."

Harry's answer came without hesitation. "No ... First, the nominal murderer was of course the one who drove the car, and I don't think we'll ever find him, or if so, then just by accident ..."

"That's agreed, Mr. Potter, but I'd say it's justified to take Mr. Warrington as the responsible one, and that's the intention - quite obviously, following this wild speculation."

"That's also my view, and that's why I cannot accept this money, Mr. Spinbottle ... If my assumption is right, Voldemort killed Warrington for reasons I told him. I stand to what I did, but I'm not going to take a galleon for that."

"Hmm ... Do you see other candidates for that money, Mr. Potter - people who qualify but who don't have this ethical problem?"

This time, Harry was thinking longer. "I know some people who'd qualify, but they won't take that money ... No, Mr. Spinbottle, I cannot offer candidates."

"How can you be sure about their answer, Mr. Potter?"

"The people I have in mind could hear Warrington's confession ... Believe me, sir, the thought of that money would make them sick."

"I see ... Do you have another suggestion what to do with it?"

"Certainly ... Send it to the widow fund of the Law Enforcement Squad - for some reason, that's pretty close to the suggested usage."

Mr. Spinbottle nodded thoughtfully. "Very well, Mr. Potter ... Thank you for all this information, whether as statement or ..."

"By the way - how much is it?"

"The suggested premium? ... Fifty-thousand galleons."

"Yeah, something like that was my guess ... The squad can use it - I hope you'll do it anonymously, they don't need to know about the background."

"That's difficult, Mr. Potter - I see your reason, but ..."

Harry shook his head. "No, it's not - talk with the Goblins, and let them run a trusted order for that ... I bet they won't ask."

Mr. Spinbottle smiled. "I'm not holding against that bid, Mr. Potter."

\* \* \*

With these issues settled, Harry found the proper concentration for the final rush toward end of terms. His free time - a badly inaccurate term under the given circumstances - was spent to equal parts between Ron and Hermione, the one calling for Quidditch training, the other coaching him through Potions, Social Ethics, and Care of Magical Creatures, in descending order of time shares.

Reading the *Daily Prophet* each breakfast, Harry could also watch how the excitement about the Warrington accident faded, how columnists stopped commenting on his interview, and how linkport business slowly recovered from a deep shock - except that service checks at link gates had to be done more often than before, probably as often as had been reasonable from the beginning, if not for the sloppy control from the Transportation Department.

There seemed nothing left to disturb his role as a diligent Hogwarts student - until that morning when an owl took his attention by neatly slicing the newspaper he was reading in two. The scene felt strangely familiar, also the Gringotts emblem on the letter - only the letter itself wasn't.

Dear Mr. Potter,  
with respect to the recent transaction onto your account, we strongly recommend to consult our customer services at the next opportunity, in order to discuss a profitable disposition of the

accumulated sum. As you may not be fully aware, a simple vault deposit does not yield any interest, while other forms of investment are as secure as a vault but considerably more profitable. We hope you appreciate this reminder as a courtesy rather than an obtrusion, and expect your visit soon. Yours sincerely,  
Modragh Morony, Managing Director

Transaction? Which transaction? Harry's first thought was that Mr. Spinbottle had sent him money, then he dropped the idea - they had agreed how to handle it.

What crossed his mind next was a present from *Magical Tours*. Not impossible though unlikely; on the other hand, his mind couldn't deliver any other realistic idea.

Ron watched him. "Gringotts, huh?"

"Yes - how did you know?"

"This owl - bigger than life, that's Goblin style ... Let me guess - some unknown uncle died and made you heir of his fortune."

"Yes - how did you know?"

Hermione laughed, even Ron grinned approvingly. "Couldn't be another Request, so that's all that came to my mind."

According to Harry's schedule, Charms classes were the times to learn Social Ethics, but a weird transaction onto his account had to be investigated quickly. He went to Madam Hooch. "Prof, I've good news and bad news ... The good news, I'll come back with a pumpkin fizz."

The witch chuckled. "And the bad news?"

"Probably not before the end of this class."

The air was pleasantly cool in the large hall of the Gringotts building - and cold on the long journey with this little cart, down into the maze of tunnels and passageways. A moment after they passed the underground lake, Harry jolted up. "That's the wrong way - my vault's somewhere else."

"No, sir," said the Goblin at his side. "You've been assigned a new one, for space reasons."

Then they stopped, and when the green smoke had dissipated, Harry stared in disbelief. The vault - considerably larger than his old one - was crammed from floor to ceiling with large green bags of a heavy fabric.

He stepped to the closest bag, opened it, feeling numb. Galleons - one of these bags weighing enough to make him ache when storing it back. He looked at the Goblin, who seemed totally unimpressed. "I have to talk with someone."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Morony is awaiting you."

The Managing Director smiled broadly - for Goblin standards. "Mr. Potter, you won't believe what a pleasure it is to discuss something as mundane as money with you - I took the liberty to reserve this consultancy for myself ... Where shall we start? Time deposits? Bonds? Investment certificates?"

"Wait a second, Mr. Morony ... Maybe it sounds stupid, but - are you sure this transaction was correct?"

"Definitely, Mr. Potter ... Here's the ledger - recipient, Mr. Harry Potter, forwarder, Mr. Curtis Crownshield, sum ..."

"Crownshield??"

"Yes, transferred from the Trade and Merchant's Bank of Bahamas, Nassau - just the address from where you'd expect such orders ..." The Goblin director looked up. "It seems to me, Mr. Potter, the name tells you enough."

"Well - maybe not enough, but ... How much is it?"

"Five hundred grand, Mr. Potter."

"Huh??"

"I'm sorry - banker language ... Five hundred thousand, Mr. Potter - half a million, in other words. At the least, it'll give you an interest of twenty thousand per year - but I'm sure, with a reasonable placement, we can raise this to fifty without taking any risk."

Dumbstruck, Harry listened for a while how the Managing Director was explaining a clever mix of Goblin certificates, public loan shares, and venture capital bonds, plus a slim hundred grand in time deposits to be fluent in an emergency. Eventually, having recovered sufficiently, Harry said, "Mr. Morony - please, let me interrupt you ... I'm sorry, but you've lost me minutes ago."

"My mistake, Mr. Potter - I have to temper myself, it's a while since I had a chance to design such a nice portfolio ..."

"Well - since you're the expert, I'd say if you set up an investment plan, I'll follow your advice entirely, Mr. Morony ... I wouldn't know anything better."

The Goblin beamed. "I'm flattered, Mr. Potter - it'll be a pleasure. Just let me ask - how much should be left as cash in your vault?"

"Erm ..."

"I'd say twenty - does this sound appropriate?"

Just in time, Harry stopped his protest. The managing director was talking about twenty thousand. "That's okay, yes."

"And short-term availability, say, within two months? ... I'd recommend another fifty."

"Yeah, that should be enough, probably ..." As if he knew what to do with fifty thousand galleons.

Harry still felt under shock when returning to the training area, and of course, he'd forgotten the drink. Madam Hooch looked concerned. "Harry, are you okay?"

"Er - yes, Prof ... I'll be back in a minute with the fizz."

It was hard to wait until the evening, and difficult to find non-committal remarks when people asked what was bothering him. But eventually, it was late enough to find Mr. Chang at home. Harry turned to Ron. "Don't wait for me with the training - I'll be late, or maybe I'll not show up at all."

"Damn, Harry - where do you go to?"

"To the end of the rainbow."

Ron looked sour, for Harry missing the Quidditch training so close before the match as well as for the answer - which could only be rated as an unfriendly advice to mind his own business.

While, in fact, only one detail was wrong - Harry was heading for the start of the rainbow, since the end with the pot of gold had already been found in Gringotts. Mr. Chang opened, saw him, smiled. "Good evening, Harry. Your visit comes unexpected."

Unexpected - not to be confused with a surprise.

Mrs. Chang greeted him warmly. "A pity Cho cannot apparate yet ... Wouldn't this be a nice evening to sit in the garden ..."

"For what's on my mind, Mrs. Chang, I'm glad she's out of earshot."

"Ooh - what's that? Deep secrets from her, to be discussed with us?"

"Yes, at least until I know some more details."

He was offered tea - ice tea, with respect to the weather, and Mr. Chang seemed having fun while this ceremony was taking its time, and the guest's impatience growing by the second. Finally, Harry could speak. "Sir, today I was at Gringotts, after I got a letter from them."

"Did you?" The fine smile in Mr. Chang's face was crumbling away, making room for a broader grin.

"Yes - and what I saw was almost unbelievable ... A Mr. Crownshield has made a transfer to my account, and right now, Mr. Morony feels like a kid with his toys while designing an investment plan."

"Yes, I know that feeling ... How much was it, Harry?"

"Half a million - galleons."

"A very solid currency." Mr. Chang looked deeply satisfied. "So he did it - excellent."

"Did it?? ... I'm not sure what's more surprising to me, that he transferred this money or that he's still ..." Harry stopped, barely avoiding an extremely tactless remark.

But Mr. Chang had understood anyway. "Well - let's say I found reason to change my strategy a bit."

With effort, Harry kept silent - either Cho's father would tell him or not, pushing questions were no means to alter that.

"My original planning," said Mr. Chang after a moment, "was of course different. But then - maybe because I wasn't entirely sure how much this man was involved by his own free will, I thought it over once more ... It's a good Chinese habit to be careful before - er, doing irreversible actions. And then I had a better idea, and also a plan how to make it true. The idea was of course to make him pay - I had thought of it before, only I didn't want that money ... But suddenly I knew who could benefit, without having the same uneasiness because he wasn't involved in the plot, and still to my deepest satisfaction ..." Mr. Chang showed a pleased smile. "You, Harry - to make my future son-in-law rich, rather than killing a man, made me feel very, very good."

"And how did you ..."

"Aaah - that's another beauty in this plot. Mr. Crownshield received a letter, telling him that - by an unlucky accident - he had disturbed the harmony of some people for whom the writer felt deep concern, and that this little flaw could easily be forgiven after - well, doing the transfer he did."

"I can't help thinking the letter used totally different words, Mr. Chang."

The host beamed. "No, Harry - I was quoting almost literally ... But I forgot to tell you - the paper had the signature of the Black Triad, a congregation of - er, business people which is well-known in Hong Kong and, as it turns out, also in Nassau."

Harry stared at his future father-in-law, not feeling well.

Mr. Chang laughed. "No, no - I'm no member of that society, my only contact is just good enough to provide me with some sheets of paper, showing a very nice emblem."

Harry swallowed. "I need still a moment to say thank you, sir ... This news - I have no idea how to tell Cho, or the others. When I saw that vault ..."

"How does it look, Harry?"

"To be honest - frightening."

Mr. Chang grinned. "After all that time, we've found something that can scare you? ... There's no need - it's just money ... You'll get used to it, I can promise you that."

"Hopefully, sir ... Right now, the interest alone is enough to feel giddy ... I don't know what to do with so much money."

Mrs. Chang smiled. "No need to worry - Cho will help you to figure out."

\* \* \*

A thousand galleons were nice, while half a million was a burden - Harry realized this old wisdom quickly, in the few days left before the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup final. He simply found no way to pass the news to anyone - not even to Cho.

His mind kept running in circles. *By the way, I got some money - if I'm not very careful, ten years from now I'll be a millionaire, and if bad comes to worse, still before.* They would laugh, wouldn't believe him at first, and then they would believe, and stop laughing. Harry had the distinct feeling his fortune would separate him from the others worse than his Parseltongue had done in the past.

And of course, they would ask. *Yeah, my future father-in-law was about to kill a man, but then he blackmailed him instead, and because of his high ethics, he didn't want the money for himself - well, what can you do?* Without knowledge of the background, such a story was excellently suited to make him very unpopular in Hogwarts.

Suddenly he felt stupid, having declined the fifty thousand from Mr. Spinbottle. On the other hand, if Almyra or Deborah would find out, he could pay them from his own money - a year's interest, if Mr. Morony was right, peanuts, so-to-speak.

During the Quidditch training, it crossed his mind that he could have bought Firebolts Two for all team members still missing one - had there been a way, without revealing the story, without spoiling the challenge entirely. They'd crush the Ravenclaw team, no question about that - and winning the cup would feel like ashes in his mouth.

Harry's troubled mood didn't go unnoticed, however, after he had truthfully confirmed that no, there wasn't any bad news to be concerned about, the others assumed he was thinking of end-of-year exams, or a cup final in which he had to play against Cho, or an end of terms after which this Cho would no longer be around.

He made a few attempts, failing miserably. The first was with Cho. "What would you do if you were rich?"

Cho didn't understand. "What do you mean? ... I'll be - sooner or later. It won't change anything."

He tried with Ron. "Say - assume you had hundred thousand galleons. What would you do?"

Ron shrugged. "No idea ... Some time ago, I'd have said I'd go shopping for two days, and take the rest to the bank. But now - I can go shopping any time I feel like it ... Okay, there's a limit, but then - how many clothes can you wear, and how many Firebolts can you fly? I guess I would buy a new car for Mum and Dad - that's all I know."

A new car for the Weasleys - replacement for the one Harry and Ron had lost to the Forbidden Forest, four years ago, that was an idea to cheer up. Harry decided - he would

confess to Ron at the next opportunity, and then ask him how to handle the purchase without driving Ma Weasley nuts, either because of the money or because of this new toy for her husband.

But right now, Ron could only think about the cup final, which was due soon, would be played tomorrow, would start in the evening, was about to begin in a few minutes, while the seven Gryffindors in their scarlet robes were walking toward the Quidditch pit.

The stadium was full - no place left, people standing, hanging in trees, and they could hear how Lee Jordan was doing his best to convince some others who thought they could watch from midair.

"... know perfectly well that spectators are not allowed to fly broomsticks while the game's running, in order not to confuse the team players ... So please, dear guests, come down to the ground and find yourself a place - the sooner the better, since the match won't start unless the air's clear."

Only the air wasn't clear at all, half of the sky darkening quickly behind a black wall of thunderclouds.

Bobby Gillinshaw, captain of the Ravenclaw team and one of their Chasers, was talking in a low voice with Ron. Once in the air, these two would fight each other tooth and nail, while as long as Viktor's whistle hadn't blown yet, they shared the same concerns - those stupid airwatchers, and the thunderstorm that would strike soon.

Lee's voice again. "This is the last warning - Mr. Krum just told me, if there's still a broomstick in the air three minutes from now, he'll gather the veterans of the Hogwarts Flying Squad, and then you'll see a few Steel Wings in action - remember, touching a Steel Wing which isn't your own is an extremely unpleasant feeling ... So please, be reasonable and show a bit of goodwill - and don't forget, the other spectators may become rather unfriendly if you make them wait much longer."

Harry felt impatient, wasn't in the mood for hunting spectators on a Steel Wing. Checking around, he had a better idea, went to Viktor.

Viktor nodded, spoke with Lee, who announced, "A last offer for goodwill - if you move into a treetop, so that you surely won't be confused with a team player, it's okay to stay on your broomsticks ... Now please, hurry - there are enough trees around, and we're already five minutes late."

Within seconds, the airwatchers had placed themselves between the topmost branches of some trees, grateful not to lose their excellent view so high above ground.

Cho was standing there, a challenging look in her face. It crossed Harry's mind how peculiar this situation was - like a ball for a very special dance, only today he was the one wearing red, while Cho's robe showed the same steely blue as those of the other Ravenclaws.

At Cho's side stood Miranda Pincus, the second girl in the Ravenclaw team and their Keeper. Since the Ravenclaw versus Slytherin match, stupid remarks about a girl between the goalposts had stopped, and Wynton had expressed quite some respect for her performance.

Harry's and Ron's immediate opponents were Terry Boot and Quentin Bedlam, the Ravenclaw Beaters. They were talking with each other, probably discussing their own strategy against the Potter-Weasley gang with these broomsticks that could accelerate so frighteningly fast.

Viktor's whistle shrilled, and the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup final was running.

Harry shot up, had a Bludger before him, waited still a moment, his perception of Quidditch nautics already working - shooting now would mean the Quaffle was bound to leave Jasper Stone's hand, only to be caught by Oleg Kurassov, while in a second ... And now his club came down, hit the Bludger, sent it on a perfect course toward Jasper, and Oleg was a few feet behind Katie who got the Quaffle, passed it to Alicia, who passed it further, and Harry was speeding to reach Ginny, escorting her toward the Ravenclaw goal, nowhere a Bludger in sight, none close enough to reach them, nobody able to follow, so he could already turn in a loop, to hunt a Bludger.

Under him, Ginny shot the Quaffle at short distance - and Miranda had her fingers at the ball, brilliant Miranda ... poor Miranda who could only block, couldn't hold, giving Ginny time to take it again and to score before the first defender had arrived.

One - zero for Gryffindor.

Against a black sky, Harry saw two figures zoom through the air - Rahewa, who was performing artistry on a Firebolt, and Cho, following her at close distance, always ready to play her trump card - the Firebolt Two, should the sparkling of the Snitch be seen.

This technique - Harry remembered his own game against her, when Cho had done this marking with an old Comet. He had outmanoeuvred her more by his Firebolt's steering control than by speed, while here in this match, Cho wasn't suffering from her broomstick's slow reaction.

To win the match, the Gryffindors needed fifteen points in the lead through scoring, or more luck at Rahewa's side than could be reasonably expected.

It wasn't impossible - Katie, Alicia, and Ginny scored about twice as often as Bobby, Oleg, and Jasper, thanks to their skill and to the superior speed and accuracy of the Gryffindor Beaters. But so far, the score was seven - four, still way to go before they were at the safe side.

Then Ron and Terry had a short conversation, with the result that Viktor came up with some presents - a yellow card for both of them, and a penalty against each team.

Bobby made it simple and straightforward, not offering any hint, and Wynton saw his chance in the wrong corner. Seven - five.

Alicia made it as usual, coming at high speed and feigning a shot, just in time to see Miranda not falling for it, and catching the Quaffle with all the time of the world. Still seven - five.

Escorting Katie in the next counter attack, Harry saw the Snitch - near the Ravenclaw goal. And others had seen it too, among them Rahewa and Cho, racing through the sky, Cho closely behind, now at Rahewa's side, getting ahead, the slightly higher speed of the Firebolt Two enough to win the contest.

Harry's mind was racing through calculations, found no way to stop Cho in time, found only one solution, reached the Bludger, took this extra second for maximum accuracy ...

The Bludger shot along, hit the Snitch, pushed it out of the way Cho was coming. Harry saw her fist, grinned - you couldn't stomp your feet airborne on a broomstick.

Rahewa had changed her course immediately, hurrying after the Bludger to find the Snitch again. But it was gone.

By now, the sky looked almost black. Toward this dark background, a sparkling dot appeared high up in the air, almost in the middle.

Everybody had seen it - the spectators, shouting, pointing - Harry, racing toward that spot in search for the next Bludger - and the two Seekers, for the first time in the match slightly apart, Rahewa a hopeful bit nearer.

The wheelwork in Harry's mind was clicking frantically. A second calculation confirmed the first - Rahewa would reach it an arm's length before Cho, who had lost precious time in a turn. Harry stopped, watching ... Three seconds from now, the score of ten - six would jump to twenty-five to six for Gryffindor.

The world disappeared in a bluish-white flare. Same instant, all senses drowned in a thunderclap which left thousands of eardrums numb.

The Snitch was gone.

Into the stunned shock among audience and players, Ginny was racing with the Quaffle toward the Ravenclaw goal, shooting effortlessly, not raising a reaction from Miranda who seemed paralyzed by the first flash. Eleven - six.

Another flash, another bang almost as deafening as the first.

Harry saw the Bludger coming, hit it, sent it point blank into the stomach of Bobby Gillinshaw, whose attention had been caught by his teammates, probably to call for a time-out.

The Quaffle trundled off, away from Bobby who wouldn't call any syllable for the next two minutes, was caught by Alicia, was passed forward, was racing in Katie's hands toward a goal with a stupefied Miranda. Before the red ball could pass the line, the world disappeared again - in a grey wall of water.

Any sight was lost - for all players except one. With his *getsumai no michi*, Harry watched the scoring for twelve - six.

He raced toward Ron, toward Ginny. "Keep playing! Keep on - I can see enough for us together!"

The rain was drumming onto their heads, hammering into their faces, the Quaffle pounding like a drum. The players seemed lost in waterspace - the Ravenclaws, that was, while Harry kept screaming commands with mouth and mind at peak level.

Until Bobby had recovered enough to get a time-out, it was fifteen - six.

Harry caught his teammates. "We're staying, so the time-out's over in two minutes ... Just hold position, until the rain's over, it'll be a single-player game, and they cannot see anything."

Viktor came up, urgently suggesting a referee break.

Ron shook his head. "No way - the weather's perfect ... Watch the time."

An angry swarm of dripping-wet blue figures came up, mad as hell, almost blindfolded, mostly relying on Lee Jordan's comment to register how the Gryffindors scored five times in a row.

Twenty - six.

The rain had faded enough for human eyes to see, enough for Bobby, Oleg, and Jasper to score.

Twenty - seven.

Harry scanned the sky for two Seekers and a Snitch. Cho had changed her tactic - in the rain, marking was the inferior technique. By the time Harry's attention had found back to the Quaffle hunt, Ginny had lost the ball while avoiding a Bludger, and Oleg was up and away.

Twenty - eight.

Another Gryffindor attack, stopped. Counter-strike stopped by Harry's Bludger, speed attack by Ginny. Twenty-one - eight.

The last light of the day was raising a million sparkling reflexes from raindrops everywhere - and a single one from a golden spot near the Gryffindor goal.

And two Seekers were pushing, pushing, from different angles, flat over their Firebolts, seemingly identical, yet so different.

Harry saw it like in slow motion. Cho was going to win the race. He himself in the right position to prevent this. Ron had reached a Bludger, sent it to him. The Bludger came pelting through the air, reached Harry in time, and all he had to do was to shoot ...

He had two choices.

One - to hit the Snitch. In this case, Snitch and Bludger would bang into Rahewa, who was coming straight from opposite, leaving her no chance to duck or dodge.

The other - to hit Cho, fullsize from the side. And Harry knew for sure - whether on purpose or not, she wasn't going to stop, or to roll over, because this would mean losing the race and the game. She would catch the Snitch, and then she would come down, with some ribs broken or a fractured arm - depending on where she was hit.

The Bludger came buzzing ...

With a slight twist, Harry moved aside, his eyes not leaving the scene ahead.

"... CAUGHT THE SNITCH!! Cho's got it - she's coming down, she's down, touches ground! ... Ravenclaw wins the cup final in the last possible instant - twenty-three to twenty-one! Congratulations to the lucky winner of the most remarkable game in Hogwarts history ..."

Harry dived down, touched ground, unmounted. The game was over. They had lost.

Ron stomped closer, a mad glittering in his eyes. "You stupid fool! Bloody Beater, you! Can't you hit a Bludger when it's time?? You would've stopped her! What's wrong with you - love-sick or ..."

Ron stopped - in front of him stood Rahewa, snarling, claws outstretched - thank God, no knife. "STOP IT! IT'S NOT HIS FAULT - I LOST IT!"

Ron just sat down, pounded his fists onto the ground. "Damn! Damn! Damn! ... So close - a minute longer, and nobody'd cared about the snitch. Stupid me, spending a Personal on a ruddy Firebolt Two - for what? How can you win if your own partner cannot stand sending a Bludger only because the other player happens to be his ..."

Rahewa's leg kicked him flat. Even in his gloomy mood, Harry realized that she had been quite careful - Ron wasn't unconscious.

Ron sat up again, glaring at the girl. "You insane? Why ..."

"He loves her! Isn't that reason enough??"

The other team members had arrived, stood around the scene, watching with various emotions, none of them amusement.

Harry sat down, facing Ron. "She would have caught it anyway - with or without a few bones broken ... That's why."

"How can you be sure? It was a chance!"

Ginny's hand rested on her brother's shoulder. "Save it. Harry's a ballistic computer on legs - was it all through the game, you know it. Why should he be wrong here?"

"I didn't say he's wrong! But even a chance against all odds ..."

Alicia interrupted him. "Cho has a Firebolt Two - you knew in advance what it meant. If the cup's that important, why didn't you lend your own to Rahewa? ... She was brilliant - with a Firebolt Two, she'd won the race."

Ron looked perplexed. Maybe he was asking himself the same question.

The complete Gryffindor team had received an invitation to the party in the Ravenclaw tower, with a broadly grinning Bobby Gillinshaw making a show to announce it in public. And for Harry, it was no question that he would follow the invitation, together with some teammates or alone.

Ron shook his head. "No thanks. I don't need help to rub salt into the wound - I'm perfectly up to the task by myself."

"C'mon - life goes on ... Here's your chance to show the good spirit of a loser."

A wry grin. "Maybe later - once I've found that spirit ... Right now, I'd spoil the fun for everybody."

Harry found just two people ready to follow - Ginny and Rahewa.

When they arrived in the Ravenclaw tower, they were greeted with applause. A grinning Cho turned to Almyra at her side. "Wasn't I right? He'd come, a girl at each side."

Harry bent down, kissed her. "My congratulations. You're the true cup winner, and you deserve it."

"Thank you ... It's only half of the truth, as we know quite well. Almyra's the other half - without her present, this party would take place in the Gryffindor tower."

"If you think so ..." Harry bent down again, to kiss the other half of the truth. "My congratulations. You've found a worthy target for your sponsoring."

Cho asked, "How's Ron?"

Ginny answered. "Mad ... At himself, at Harry, at Rahewa ..."

"Why her? ... There's no reason, you may tell him that - none at all. Without ..."

Ginny grinned. "No - not for her playing. But she kicked him afterwards, when he didn't stop shouting at Harry."

"Really?" Cho looked at Rahewa. "Harry saved me, and you saved Harry ... I owe you for that, and I know already how to balance out."

A head with black hair was shaking violently.

"Let's discuss it later." Cho glanced at Harry. "To be honest, I had awaited one more Bludger."

"Yeah ... But you weren't going to dodge - the Snitch was yours, this way or the other. I like you better with healthy bones."

Cho stood up, hugged him. "Thank you again - you're the best loser I can imagine."

Harry smiled. "As with you, it's only half of the truth."

"Huh?" After a second, Cho understood, put her arm around skinny shoulders. "Right you are - Rahewa's the other half."

## **28 - Older Girls**

Harry's last school year together with Cho was racing toward the end, and even with the Quidditch cup done, there were still some issues to be settled. Exams, for starters, although these were the least of his worries.

McGonagall welcomed him with a smile. "Harry, that's supposed to be a Potions exam, but since you've been so busy with other things during the last weeks - er, well, if you promise not to tell anyone, I mean ..."

Deeply shocked, Harry stared at his Headmistress. "Prof - I've been coached for the last three weeks ... And I paid for that - should this have been for nothing??"

"Really? ..." The witch looked guilty for an instant, as if caught at something totally inappropriate, however recovered quickly. "I guess I know who's been coaching you, but how did you pay her?"

"I promised to be her business agent - between here and Haiti, assuming that we find a few werewolves as test candidates."

McGonagall rolled her eyes, although with some relief, apparently grateful for having found at least one irregularity. "Somehow I missed the news - about the Apparition license no longer a prerequisite."

"Oh - erm ..." Harry hadn't expected this particular topic in his Potions exam. And to tell the truth, he didn't think it was an issue here. So he said, "Well, I guess I can settle that during vacation."

"Settle - oh yes, and Sirius Black will hold the pen for your registration."

Harry's expression showed little guilt. "Even so - I'd pass any exam."

The Headmistress nodded. "Which brings us back to our own topic ... So you've worked hard, and want to be squeezed under all circumstances. In this case - what do you want to talk about?"

"Hmm ... I knew a topic, Prof - the only problem is, it hasn't been taught yet, I'm not even sure it's a regular lesson in Hogwarts."

McGonagall's lips were twisting. "That's pretty much what I should have expected after such an invitation. Anyway - what is it, Harry?"

"One of the death traps around Sirius' prison was armed with poison balls - these yellow-fuming things. I'm pretty sure Voldemort used the same type in the Battle of Hogwarts."

The joy was gone from both faces. "No," said the Headmistress, "it's not part of the regular program. To be honest - I wouldn't know how to make them, they might even exceed Severus' skill ... Would this be a topic of your interest for the next year?"

"Yes, Prof ... Mainly how to fight them, but I guess creating them is a prerequisite for that."

"This would be a project, Harry, of an uncertain outcome, and with very restrictive safety rules ... No," McGonagall smiled, "let's call them precautions, rules have such a hard life with you."

And for ten more minutes, they discussed the possibilities of such a project, of course after Harry had described in some more detail which nasty traps had separated Sirius from freedom. And this was his Potions exam.

For Social Ethics, Binns opened the discussion with a question about ethical conflicts. This was all Harry needed - a minute later, the ghost was listening to an exciting story how far Goblins could go, for example with the money of a former customer, if higher priorities came into play.

Then Binns asked, "Mr. Potter, how much of that is true?"

"Well - with respect to some people involved, I can only say it's entirely speculation. But reality has a tricky way - in a month or two, you might look out for a *Rita Skeeter Award*, mark my words, Prof."

And with that, his second and last traphole in his end-of-year exams was closed.

Of course, there were some more exams ... With Lupin, Harry had a nice chat about Transfiguration, in which he promised to give it a try next year. With Snape, Harry had a discussion about when, and how, Voldemort would reveal the first traces of his new activities. Calling the conversation nice was certainly wrong, while otherwise the atmosphere couldn't have been better. The most strenuous exam - naturally so - presented a breathtaking performance with Kenzo in which *sennin* and *sensei* went through Harry's complete repertoire of *aikido* and *kenjutsu*.

Best of all - Harry's Charms exam, a little contest. Student and teacher were apparating to a tree, across a distance of two hundred yards, with the goal to come as close as possible without banging into the tree, five tries for each of them.

Madam Hooch, chanceless, stopped the contest after the third jump.

Care of Magical Creatures marked Harry's last exam. Basically easy play, only that Grubbly-Plank had some strange remarks Harry couldn't place properly. For example, she mentioned that they might see each other more often in the future, probably at very interesting places, and how nice it was that Harry had mastered Apparition - this would simplify things considerably.

Then she recognized his puzzled look. "Oops - sorry, Mr. Potter, I thought ... Well, never mind - my mistake."

And this was the most mysterious remark, giving him a riddle without any clue how to solve it.

Whatever had been in her mind, Harry forgot quickly because now, with his exams done, he could concentrate on the other two issues. One was his burning desire to find out about Cho's plans, the other, the news about his Gringotts account.

With Cho, he would combine both in one conversation, had planned to do that at a pleasant evening, after reaching this particular place at the lake, maybe after some swimming, maybe before some other sports ... But of course, as soon as he was again master of his evening time, the weather brought a lot of rain, enough to stay inside.

Harry decided to break the news first to his own family, meaning Ron and Ginny. For that, he had to wait until their own exams were done, and until the weather was dry enough to sit outside, near Hagrid's grave - impossible the thought some other student might hear his words, or some shout of surprise from the native Weasleys.

"Okay, Harry," said Ron, "we had something to eat, we're here, and we can talk. It must be awfully mysterious that we have to do it here - it's not exactly winter, but I've been sitting warmer than this."

"Yeah ... I would have invited you for a butterbeer in the *Three Broomsticks*, except ..."

"A wonderful idea! ... Let's go!"

"No - later, after we've ... I don't want anybody around, except you, that is."

Ginny watched him with astonishment. "Harry, what's up? I've never seen you so ..." she giggled, "with anybody else, I'd say he's scared, but this can't be the reason with you, can it?"

"Erm - well, not really, only ..."

Ginny exchanged a glance with Ron, looked at Harry. "Does it have to do with family?"

"Yes, in a way."

"Something with Cho?"

"Er - yes, with her too."

Ginny nodded. "I know what it is. You want to live with her, to move out of The Burrow - right?"

"Wha?? ... Nonsense - yeah, sure, certainly in the future, but so far, I don't even know what she's planning. She doesn't tell me a word, unbelievable, really."

Ron, the assistant administrator, knew what to do. "Why don't you start where the story begins - whatever it is ... I'm dying of curiosity - I simply can't think of anything that would make you as embarrassed as that."

Ginny giggled. "That's true."

Harry sighed. "Okay, then ... Do you remember what I told you about this trap in Nassau, how I got an address from the *Magical Tours* manager and went there with Lupin, except we never reached that office? ... Well, the name of that guy's Crownshield, and from Voldemort I heard that this Crownshield is somehow working for him, or did so in the past ... And he must have been the one who sent this mole wizard, this Graham Millar, toward Mr. Chang. And of course, Mr. Chang was trying to find out who did this to him - to his family."

Ron asked, "This Millar - what happened to him?"

"Don't ask me - and don't ask Mr. Chang, if you know what I mean."

"Ah ... yes, okay."

"So with this Crownshield, I thought before paying him a visit, it's better to find out - I mean, to synchronize with Mr. Chang. So I went to the Changs and told him about that man. And it was exactly as I expected - he said I should leave that to him."

Ron nodded. "And now he's dead - er, I mean, he was sent to find Mr. Millar."

"No, not at all."

"And that's your problem? Then ..." Ron stopped just in time, however too late for avoiding a reproachful glance from Ginny.

Harry could grin. "No, that's not my problem. Mr. Chang found another method to settle the issue, and he's quite happy about that ... He had a lot of fun when I met him the other day."

Ginny, receiver of five hundred galleons almost a year ago, hadn't forgotten this kind of alternative. "He got some compensation, right?"

"Er - yes."

"Some money."

An interview was a good method of confession. "Yes."

"After a nice conversation that this little misunderstanding was certainly by accident, and before bad would come to worse, it might be reasonable, and just a sign of goodwill, and so on, and so on."

"Yes - except it was a letter."

Ron looked uncomprehending. "Great ... Fine, excellent - and what's wrong with that?"

"Mr. Chang didn't want that money."

Ginny was again quicker. "So he gave it to you."

"Yes."

Seeing Harry's expression, Ron had a guess. "Under a condition."

"No - none whatsoever. The name Chang doesn't appear in that transaction - remember when I got that letter from Gringotts? ... That was when I heard about it - Mr. Chang confirmed only afterwards."

Ron was at a loss to find another reason for Harry's unhappy face. Ginny had an idea. "How much, Harry?"

When Harry swallowed, unable to answer, she asked, "Fifty thousand?"

Harry shook his head. "More."

"Hundred."

"More."

Ron's eyes were widening. "Two hundred."

Slowly, Harry's head went from side to side.

"Two hundred-and-fifty?"

His voice choked, Harry said, "Half a million ... I saw it - in a new vault - bags and bags and bags, there was no end ... And Mr. Morony says, the interest per year is twenty-thousand at the minimum."

Now Ron and Ginny were swallowing.

"I just didn't know how to come and tell you ... Cho doesn't know yet ... Can you tell me what to do with so much money?"

Ron found his voice. "Sure."

"Okay - I'm listening."

Ron opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. "No - I cannot."

Harry looked at Ginny. "And you?"

"No."

Ron said, "Gimme a day or so ... I'm sure I can think of a method how to ..."

Harry laughed. "You'll be surprised ... For example - my first idea was to buy Firebolts Two for the rest of the team. Next moment, I remembered how Draco's father did exactly the same for the Slytherins - and the remarks about that."

For an instant, there had been a sparkling in Ron's eyes. Now he looked miserable. "Yeah ... Little by little, I see the problem."

"Then I thought about a new family car. That's still my idea - I hope you can tell me how to do it." Harry looked at Ron. "We lost the old one together - shouldn't be a question, should it? ... But can you imagine yourself - you come home, it's suppertime, and you say, 'By the way, Dad, see that car under the tree? That's your's - if you find some time, please make it fly!'"

Ginny protested. "But it can't be that difficult - the idea is good, just go and do it!"

Harry grinned. "Not difficult, huh? ... Ginny - do you want ten-thousand galleons?"

She laughed, stopped. "I see what you mean ... No, thanks."

"Twenty? ... Fifty?"

Ginny's head was shaking. "Stop it!" Then she blushed. "Although ... for thousand, I wouldn't say no."

Harry nodded. "Yes, of course ... Now you see my problem. I'd guess - if I say please, you and Ron will both accept five thousand - each year, that is. Together, that's about a quarter of the interest Mr. Morony expects to manage."

Ron grinned wryly. "C'mon, let's have a butterbeer ... Suddenly, my mouth is so dry."

\* \* \*

After this conversation, Harry felt better. In the butterbeer conference that followed, both Ron and Ginny accepted the five grand per year, promised to talk with Harry if they knew something reasonable that could be achieved simply by paying some money - whether for themselves or for their parents. Now Harry's mind was free to concentrate on a meeting with Cho.

But, strangely, inexplicably, he failed time and again.

When he talked with her at the Ravenclaw table, Cho refused to discuss matters as important as their future - not here in public, she said. When he tried to arrange a meeting - a date, so-to-speak, she side-stepped his attempt with references to her own exams, to final activities, with the mysterious explanation that end-of-school required more conferences than end-of-year.

Harry could have accepted this explanation, if not for an obvious difference. Almyra, about to finish school together with Cho, had lots of time in the evenings, while any attempt to find Cho for an unplanned conversation failed miserably.

Someone else asked him for a short conversation in her office - Fleur.

Harry agreed, promised to meet there in a few minutes. Not knowing exactly why, he fetched Nagini before walking to the office. Fleur looked surprised. "I was trying to talk with you and Cho together, but currently it's impossible to find her ... Why did you come with your snake?"

"I'm not sure ... When you asked me, it was something ..."

Fleur's cheeks turned a bit pinkish.

Nagini hissed - making Harry's eyes widen, then beam. "Hey, Fleur, super - and so fast. Congratulations!"

The pink colour deepened. "Wha? ... 'arry, it's awful to spy out other people that way! I had prepared a nice speech, and then you come with your snake, and of course she's spoiling the surprise first thing."

Harry grinned. "Sorry ... At least, I guess I know what made me come with her. My *haragei* isn't quite as accurate as her senses, but something was different in your *wa* ... And now it's clear - it's no longer yours alone, there is another one growing ... Great, Fleur, really."

"Er - yes, that's one of the things I wanted to tell you. And that's why I'm going to leave Hogwarts. Dumbledore knows - I promised him to find another dance teacher."

"Well - that's no longer my concern. Without Cho ..."

"Of course. But then you're the perfect candidate for an assistant - I mean, if the new teacher is a woman, but for me there's little doubt."

Harry grinned. "It depends - first I have to see her."

Fleur looked indignant. "Don't you trust my taste?"

"Basically I do. Still - it might turn out a balance of priorities, if you get my bearing."

"I guess I do ... Anyway, this won't be my problem then." Fleur hesitated. "Around the end of the year, 'arry, we'll need a godfather ... Bill and I were discussing it, and we both agree upon our first candidate for that task - guess whom?"

Harry smiled. "I feel honoured - but think again."

Now Fleur looked disappointed. "Why? We hoped you'd say yes - to be honest, we were sure about that."

"Wait a second! ... I didn't say no, why should I? I'd like to do it, but you should consider another candidate first. If you insist ..."

"Whom?"

As always, people didn't see the obvious. "A Goblin of course! ... Maybe Wynor the Whistler, I don't know."

"Why? ... Because he's richer than you?"

Harry hadn't known that Bill's best could be called rich, felt no surprise either, while he grabbed at once the opportunity in this topic. "No," he said, "that's pretty unlikely, a few days ago, I got some money, quite a lot, to be honest ... No, I was thinking of your promise to raise your children in the spirit of different races - in this sense, a Goblin beats me any time."

Fleur nodded. "Yes, you're right, and of course we were thinking about that. Only we'd like you better - I mean, if you were a Goblin, it'd be perfect."

An interesting thought, although Harry preferred himself just the way he was. He said, "Tell you what - think it over, and if you insist, then it'll be as I said - I'll be honoured."

Fleur smiled archly. "Say, don't you count as good as a Goblin, with that bond of yours?"

"Good thinking, Fleur ..." Not responding the smile, Harry said, "Whatever's your decision, you'll never hear a reproach from them, that's why you have to be so careful with Goblins. At any rate, with a Goblin godfather, that child's future is settled - definitely so."

Fleur looked at Nagini, then at Harry. "I was wondering ... 'arry - could you ask her whether she can recognize the sex?"

After a short exchange of hissing, Harry grinned. "It's exactly what to expect from a Veela - a girl, what else?"

And only now, Fleur found the time to ask him about his money, listened to his explanation, beamed when hearing the sum, couldn't find anything wrong with that, or difficult - quite naturally so for someone raised in a large French castle.

Resuming his fruitless attempts to tell Cho some exciting news, Harry asked Almyra for a talk outside, near Hagrid's grave. Almyra accepted, although the weather was less than inviting. Having reached the place, Harry asked, "What's going on, Al?"

"Nothing specific ... As Cho said - she's preparing for the time after school."

Almyra knew more, no question. She wasn't supposed to tell him, no question either. So Harry could save his breath and Almyra's embarrassment. He nodded. "Well, then ... What are you going to do afterwards?"

Almyra beamed. "I have a job."

This answer, together with her shining face, together with the signal from his *haragei*, gave him more information than Almyra might have intended, and Harry's mind was drawing conclusions rapidly. Her beaming - couldn't be the job alone, had to be a job near Remus. That meant, either Almyra's job was here in Hogwarts, or both together had found something else, somewhere far away - reason enough to press a bit harder. "Will Remus still be a Hogwarts teacher, after vacation?"

Almyra blushed a bit. "You're too damn clever, Harry ... If I'd tell you more about my plans, it would reveal too much about Cho's - sorry, but you still have to wait."

Something in her answer told Harry - Remus would be found here when returning to Hogwarts. So the only possible conclusion left - Almyra had a job in Hogwarts. Of course, it might be something as boring as a liaison officer, but Harry didn't believe so for a second. Which meant, Almyra had a job as a teacher ... For what?

There wasn't any position vacant, meaning some other teacher would retire. Of course - Fleur. Except that Harry couldn't imagine Almyra as a dance teacher. But when in doubt, ask. "Al - how's your dancing skill?"

Almyra looked blank. "What can I say? ... You danced with me often enough, why don't you answer your own question?"

So she wasn't the replacement for Fleur. Suddenly, Harry remembered Grubbly-Plank's strange remarks. Was the witch going to retire? And if so, did it explain anything in this complex pattern of current states and future plannings?

Harry decided to ask no more in that direction, interrogating Almyra about Cho was simply unfair. But another issue was still open. "What are your plans for the vacation, Almyra?"

She blushed again. "Vacation? What makes you think this time counts as vacation for me?"

"Sorry - I didn't mean to squeeze you more. No - if, say, you'd be found in Jamaica, then maybe we could arrange a trip to Haiti ... Did Hermione talk with you about that?"

Hermione hadn't, but her name was enough to tell Almyra this trip would be in search for werewolves, and she found the idea wonderful. "Of course together with Remus - who'll be better suited to find a werewolf than a werewolf?"

They agreed to talk with Hermione - together. They also agreed that Hermione wasn't necessarily required in Haiti, might even be counter-productive - getting a Haitian werewolf to join the test program wasn't simpler with someone as pushy as her.

\* \* \*

What Harry would never have dreamed of became true - the end-of-year feast was starting, and he still didn't know what Cho was going to do, while Cho still didn't know about his new fortune.

It came as no surprise to him that the decorations were neutral. Even so, Harry felt more expectant to hear about changes in the Hogwarts staff than last-minute changes in the point scores of the four houses.

To his dismay, Dumbledore only mentioned "some changes, the details of which cannot be announced before the beginning of the new year, since not all of them are settled yet." Then the Headmaster addressed the topic of the Hogwarts House Cup, currently held by Ravenclaw.

Without additional points, Ravenclaw would have won again, since they were in the lead with four hundred and thirty-six points, before Hufflepuff with four hundred and twenty-one, while the Slytherins, who had won school-internal contests for many years, scored only third with four hundred and seven. As so often, Gryffindor came last with three hundred and ninety-nine. Still, the four houses were closer together than ever before.

Dumbledore first awarded several projects and graduate works. A Slytherin got fifty, two Hufflepuffs got fifty each for their projects, making Hufflepuff the current leader with five hundred and twenty-one. However, Harry had no doubt that the final contest was going to run between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.

"Next - to Miss Hermione Granger, for her project about the Wolfsbane Potion, I award twenty points - it will be more once this project is showing results, so this is an encouragement rather than a reward."

Hermione was happy even with that, while for the Gryffindor score, this added just some make-up to move them over the four hundred points line.

"Next - to Miss Almyra Benedict, for her Werewolf Mastery project, which has been completed successfully and which will change the fate of many people suffering from that illness, I award hundred points!"

Roaring applause, a beaming Almyra, and Ravenclaw had climbed the top again, Hufflepuff now fifteen points behind, both of them far ahead of Gryffindor.

The Headmaster smiled. "So far the points for performances which really have to do with wizarding skills as taught in Hogwarts. However, as in the previous year, there were quite some events outside our school which have to be rewarded nonetheless - because Hogwarts students were involved and because they provided services for the entire wizarding community. And please - " the Headmaster grinned, "forgive me if I cannot reveal all details."

This would be the real contest - between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.

"For a daring task, which solved the mystery of the disappearing owls, and which ended this terrible state, I award fifty points each to the students Almyra Benedict, Cho Chang, and Harry Potter."

While the others applauded, Harry was groaning. Ravenclaw had extended its lead, was now hundred and sixty-seven points ahead.

"For a similar task, in which an assault against the wizard prison was defeated, I award fifty points each to the students Ron Weasley and Harry Potter."

Better. Ravenclaw leading by sixty-nine points, and Harry felt confident the action at Plana Cays would yield that much.

"For a very special task, in which key information about a murder and a kidnapping was gathered, I award fifty points each to the students Almyra Benedict and Harry Potter."

Of course, the Warrington interrogation. Harry was surprised that Dumbledore counted this separately - at any rate, it changed nothing between the two houses.

"For his brilliant performance in the rescuing of the Law Enforcement Squad leader from his kidnapper Voldemort, I award Mr. Harry Potter fifty points."

Applause, and faces filled with consternation. Only fifty? It left Ravenclaw ahead by seventeen points, while a year before, Almyra had received seventy-five points for her part in rescuing Lupin.

Still, Harry didn't feel cheated. Yes, a little disappointment, however negligible, considering some faces around him. Dumbledore had awarded him two hundred points, exactly as much as Almyra, and this was a very pleasing thought. And Almyra's task a year before - Harry knew better than anyone else that his powers were inheritances from Voldemort, while Almyra had fought with nothing but her own skill - seen in this light, he could only agree with his Headmaster.

Well, yes, only they were seventeen points short ... Looking over to the Ravenclaw table, Harry could see many faces waiting expectantly for the decoration that would change any moment now.

"After all these events outside Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, "let me finish my list with two more performances which took place in our school, although not related to classes."

What was that? Something else, in Hogwarts but ...

"For their splendid presentation of the Grass Dance during the Hogwarts Ball, I award twenty points each to the students Rahewa Lightfoot and Damon Harker."

Harry was applauding wildly, certainly louder than he really felt. Once more, this hadn't changed anything between the two houses.

"And for her fearless courage, demonstrated during an event at the same evening, I award Miss Rahewa Lightfoot another twenty points."

And now hell broke loose at the Gryffindor table, drowning Dumbledore's words, while the decoration changed to the scarlet and gold of the Gryffindor colours. Seven hundred and nine versus seven hundred and six - far below last year's record, but they had beaten Ravenclaw by three points!

Harry saw Cho coming over, expected to receive her congratulations, but she only grinned at him, walked farther down the table, pushing aside some other students who blocked her path toward a girl whose coal-black eyes were shining in dark fire. Cho said, "You've thrashed our victory in the last instant, which is some boldness, really, although I remember something similar just a few days ago ..."

The other students stared at Cho, who was grinning into Rahewa's face, a face which hadn't moved yet at these words.

"... but you've won these points for protecting Harry, and that's why you deserve them, and the winning - I'm proud of you."

Harry watched as one black-haired girl was hugging the other, receiving another applause from the surrounding Gryffindors. A moment later, the older of the two girls came to him, and now it was his turn to be hugged.

He held her. "Thank you ... Although - a house cup is nice, but I'd like to discuss a few things with you that are more important. I'm trying for quite a while ..."

Cho smiled. "Fine with me - it's all settled now, so we can talk ... If you invite us to the Gryffindor party ... Don't worry, with all those students celebrating the house cup around us, there's enough privacy."

She was right. They found a corner, were talking mostly mouth to ear, which was only natural in the deafening noise around them.

"I met Fleur," Harry started. "She's pregnant, that's why she's going to drop her job here and go to Paris ... Nagini found out before she could tell me - and the sex too. A girl."

Cho grinned. "Quick work - and another Hogwarts teacher to be replaced."

"You mean Grubbly-Plank?"

Cho gasped. "Damn, Harry ... How did you know?"

"I don't know anything, she only made some remark. What does it have to do with you, or your plans?"

"Everything." Cho beamed. "Grubbly-Plank and Hooch and I - we're going to start a company for spector movies."

After a moment of speechlessness, Harry nodded. "Ron says it's the business of the future."

"He isn't the only one ... Harry, it was you who gave me the idea - with your wedding present for Fleur and Bill. I'm no technical expert, in contrast to Jesamine and Sylvie, but I know about business, and about money - in contrast to them. We're the perfect team."

Money was Harry's keyword, and he tried to deliver his own news, but there was no stopping Cho at this moment. She blurted, "We already have a name for that company - *Groucho Spectrals Limited*, isn't it a magnificent title?"

"Grudgo??"

"No, Groucho ... It's the first name of a famous comedy actor - Groucho Marx. We came across this name when we tried to find something in which our names are all reflected - Grubbly-Plank at the beginning, mine at the end, and Hooch somehow in the middle." Cho looked sympathetic. "We'll have to travel a lot, which means the two of us won't see each other very often in the next months."

"Once you've learned to apparate ..."

"Yes, yes, I know I'm late with that, and I'll do my best to finish it as quickly as possible. But more important for us is now to talk with people, to find contracts, and investors ..."

His second chance, and Harry went for it. "Investors - for what in particular?"

Cho looked impatient. "Everything - projects, equipment, staff ... Together we can muster about thirty grand. Just the equipment we have in mind is more expensive than that."

"How much do you need upfront?"

For a split second, Cho's glance was that of a businesswoman toward a schoolboy. "About hundred, meaning we're seventy short. The possible profits are gigantic, but ..."

"It's venture capital, no matter how to look at it, right?"

The businesswoman looked perplexed. "Hey - since when do you know about investment and financing?"

Harry did something he didn't do often toward Cho - he looked challenging. "I've hidden qualities ... Assume I find an investor for you - how far would you go for that?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well - I've heard a bit about movie business ... According to that, there are a lot of bedroom contracts. And just by coincidence, I know about an investor who'd be very interested to spend a night with you."

For a moment, Cho was speechless. Then she snapped, "You can't be serious!"

Harry tried to keep his expression, only next instant he was lost - laughed, laughed, laughed more when he saw Cho furious, stomping her feet, shaking him. "You damn fool! What do you think this is - a game?"

His chuckling faded. With the most solemn face he could muster, he said, "Miss Chang - if we could find a bedroom, I'd be able to make a very interesting offer."

"Stop joking! Your ..." Cho stopped herself, watching his face, which of course was spreading in a new grin. "You've got some money!"

"Yes, ma-am."

"From whom? *Magical Tours*?"

"The answer is no - assuming the last question is the one to be answered ..."

She was nearly strangling him. "FROM WHOM?"

"From your father."

Rarely having been as close to a beating as now, he hastened to explain. "But it wasn't his money - he made Crownshield pay a compensation, rather than - er, you know what."

Cho's fury was gone. She beamed. "Brilliant - that's my Dad, oh yes!" And then she remembered Harry's suggestion, suddenly considering the idea from a totally different perspective. "How much, Harry? What do I get for a night with you?"

"Which answer first this time?"

"Drop the second one - how much did he make him pay?"

"Five hundred grand."

Her eyes widening, Cho whistled. Then beamed. Then was up. "All right - let's go."

"Now? ... Where to?"

"How can one be so rich and stupid at the same time ... To find a bedroom, of course."

\* \* \*

The Entrance Hall was full of students and luggage, waiting for a cart to the Hogwarts Express platform, or for the service van of the Hogsmeade linkport. The latter was true for Katie and Alica to whom Harry had already said goodbye, receiving hugs, seeing some eyes

blink rapidly. The former was true for Rahewa, who looked up as Harry reached her and asked, "Can we have a short talk outside?"

She nodded, stood up, followed him.

What he had in mind was a last and desperate attempt to do the impossible. He saw little chances, but then, you never knew. "Rahewa," he began, "do you remember what I told you about the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Sure."

"The price I won - I didn't want that money, so I gave it to the Weasley twins, for starting their business in the Diagon Alley."

Rahewa kept silent.

"And now they paid back, and I have the same problem again ... I'm trying to find someone who's ready to take it, and I thought you'd be the right one."

"No." Flatly.

"I wasn't necessarily thinking of a present ... Maybe as a scholarship - once you're finished with Hogwarts ..."

Rahewa tried to stare reproachful at him, failed. "That's nonsense, Harry - I just happen to know that the twins are re-investing every sickle into their business, and that money wasn't a loan ... Shame on you, to tell me such lies - " Rahewa pointed at Nagini, "and on that snake, not hissing because the lies are yours."

Harry was dumbstruck. "How did you know?"

"From Ginny ... Have a nice vacation time."

And she turned to walk back into the building. Too embarrassed to follow, Harry watched her reaching the stairs, nodding to someone else coming out. This someone quickly gained the shape of Cho, who reached him, grinning. "Let me guess, Harry ... You tried to feed some money into Rahewa, only she stopped you cold and hard - am I right?"

He felt baffled. "Did she tell you?"

"No - but I saw something in her face." Cho had fun, watching him. "You know - especially since I know about that fortune of yours, for me it was never a question if you would try - only when."

Harry nodded sadly. "It's ridiculous how much money I have, while for her - I know how it feels, from Ron and from myself ..."

Cho was grinning madly.

"It's not funny! Poor and proud together ..."

"That's the stone to carve heroes, I know." Cho laughed into his face.

"Damn! Your parents are too rich ..."

"Hey - stop it!" Cho came closer. "Remember - I know well how it is, my father made his fortune *after* coming to England ... Aside from that, I wouldn't worry too much."

"What do you mean?"

"First - Rahewa has something to play with, because the two of us switched our Firebolts. For me it makes no difference any longer, while for her - now that her broomstick's state of the art, I want to see the Seeker who's going to beat her."

Harry smiled, and kissed her. "That's very kind of you. But ..."

"Wait, wait ... Before you think too good of me - it's not as unselfish as it looks." Cho grinned diabolically. "It saves money - yours of course, and you know what I mean. But what's more important - for the next years, people will say, 'That's Rahewa - the Seeker who's been beaten last by Cho Chang'."

Harry laughed. "Tricky Cho ... Very good, but even so - it makes Rahewa a poor girl with an expensive broomstick."

"I said wait - but of course, you cannot. So for the sake of your mind - I already signed a contract with Rahewa, that she and the others will do their Grass Dance for one of our first recordings - a piece for entertainment, and for do-it-yourself dance teaching ..."

"What - and you didn't ask me?"

A businesswoman stared at Harry, quite challenging. "What for? We'll do it in real prairie grass, of course."

"Ah, yes, of course. And to hell with copyright, huh?"

"Copyright? Don't tell me about copyright - because that was my second deal with her, so rest assured, Rahewa has some money to spend in vacation."

"And for what?"

Cho looked malicious. "For the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup Final - that'll be our very first movie ... I settled already with all Ravenclaw players, and with most of the Gryffindors, to buy the rights."

"You didn't buy mine yet."

"How right you are - you're the only one missing," grinned Cho, "after I told all the others not to say a word to you."

"Aha! ... Well then, what's your offer?"

"Oh - I'm not offering money ... Would be nonsense, wouldn't it?"

"Then what else?"

She smiled archly. "I guess we'll find something."

----- The End -----