

Harry Potter and the Thunderstruck Muggles

By

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01 - Waiting

A small island in the northern hemisphere, called England. A small town near the capital, called Ottery St. Watchpole. A small house of ridiculous dimensions, called *The Burrow*. A small garden at the backside, in dire need of water and a caring hand - here we find Harry Potter, sitting in the grass, a brilliant-green snake close to him but in full sunlight, while Harry prefers the shadow, watching some gnome holes in fair distance.

Every now and then, a quick movement at some hole, a head like a chestnut, on a body like a potato, comes up for a moment, glancing around.

And bang, comes a cannonball of water - from a gnome perspective, that is, while the thing isn't bigger than a hazelnut, splashes the head or misses, although very close.

The head disappears quickly, of course. After a hit, it is nicely coloured, because the water is saturated with a colouring ink - initially red, then Harry has changed to yellow, to blue, now he's trying a mix to produce the Gryffindor colours, scarlet and gold. Until tomorrow, the colours will be gone, since Harry doesn't really share Ma Weasley's feelings toward the gnomes. It's just a game.

A pretty stupid one. But if you're bored as much as Harry ...

At the beginning of vacation, the world looked great. The first major event was a family conference in which Harry, supported by Ron and Ginny, told Arthur and Molly Weasley that he had come across the better half of a slim million. Better than the other simply because it could be found in Harry's vault - only days ago, the money had arrived through a channel in which Mr. Chang, Harry's most likely future father-in-law, had played a nice game with a dark wizard.

A slightly censored version of this background was part of Harry's explanation toward the Weasleys. Then he expressed his strong determination to share with them as much as possible, and that - for starters - Mr. Weasley might go looking for a comfortable family car.

Ma Weasley took the shock quite well, showed an open mind when her children suggested a shopping day to celebrate the warm rain. In sharp contrast, however, stood her ironclad refusal to accept anything close to a direct money transfer. A shopping day - gladly so, presents - okay, but only so much. And she warned her husband not to have funny ideas, after all, who needed a Muggle car if there was chimney travel and Apparition and portkey links.

Arthur Weasley nodded, nodded again later when Ron and Harry informed him that they might look around by themselves, would then come to the Ministry to get his opinion about one model or the other. There wasn't a rule in the Weasley household which prevented Harry from buying a Muggle car, was it?

The next day, the Weasley-Potter gang, including Ma Weasley, spent most of the daylight hours in the city, and some money in some shops.

One of these shops was called *Swashbuckle Sweets*. The owners, Fred and George Weasley, were happy to hear the news, remarkably stubborn otherwise. Yes, they would accept a shopping tour sponsored by Harry - if they ever found the time, that was, while otherwise the

only effect Harry could achieve was a loan contract with him rather than with Gringotts, five grand, interest zero, to be paid back within the next five years.

At Gringotts, Harry made some transactions - five grand for the twins, the same for Ron, based on the agreement they had closed in the *Three Broomsticks*, the same for Ginny. Then they spent some time waiting until the newest invention for financial transactions in the wizarding world was prepared. One each for Harry, Ron, and Ginny - a GALA, a *Gringotts Account Liquidity Affirmation*.

To the unknowing eye, a GALA looked like a double-sided picture which could listen and answer. The picture on the front side showed the account owner, smiling friendly and saying his or her name. The picture on the back side showed a Goblin. When asked whether Gringotts would honour a bill of a certain sum, this Goblin answered "Yes" or "No", depending on the sum and on the current account balance.

A Muggle would have called this a credit card, missing the point entirely for several reasons. The card didn't offer a credit line. It couldn't be faked. And maybe the most significant difference - when losing or omitting the card in a shop, the Goblin started shouting with a high-pitched voice.

A GALA suited worlds better than walking around with a heavy bag of galleons. For Gringotts customers with an account above hundred grand, the thing came for free. For Gringotts customers in the company of Harry Potter, it also came free, no matter which account balance. For other people, receiving a GALA came shockingly expensive.

Then Harry visited the Ministry, to deliver the first pile of glossy brochures in Arthur Weasley's office, and to talk with his godfather about an Apparition license. Sirius looked sour. "Why can't you run the normal procedure like any good citizen?"

"Because it takes forever," explained Harry truthfully. "This ministry is a bunch of time thieves, some notable exceptions granted."

"And why do you come to me, who has sworn to fight corruption and nepotism ..."

"C'mon, Sirius ... do you know any license coach who's ready to do an Apparition contest with me?"

Harry's godfather had never before asked the question himself, felt nevertheless sure he wouldn't find any, and agreed grudgingly. Two days later, Harry's Apparition jumps showed an invisible though important improvement in quality - they were legal.

But a merciless God was sanctioning small sins immediately, and only this could be the reason why, suddenly, things started going awry.

With Cho nowhere in reach, running wild somewhere in the United States, Harry took measures to get the Haiti trip going - planned to look for werewolves, as test candidates for Hermione's Wolfsbane project. However, as it turned out - from Harry's perspective, the trip marked the first flop of these weeks, supposedly the best in the year.

Mrs. Benedict was a remarkable woman, much darker than Almyra. She welcomed Harry but made clear that he could forget about searching for Haitian werewolves by himself. Yes, once

the contact was closed, he would be introduced as a trusted person to run errands for Hermione. But to find them, Mrs. Benedict would contact a witch friend there - the only chance, as these *loup garous* had developed a deep mistrust against any foreigner, simply in favour of survival.

Remus and Almyra, on the other hand, were quite friendly in their way - making clear they could do perfectly well without Harry, in these best weeks of the year.

Then Ron said goodbye to fetch Janine for a three-weeks' trip to the Camargue, with some day tours to small, unremarkable towns - Cannes, Monte Carlo, Nice, San Remo, St. Tropez. The Camargue had been planned long before, while the day tours were a nice add-on, based on an increased level of liquidity.

Then Arthur and Molly Weasley went to a vacation trip also in France - a day or two with the Delacours, but mostly in and around Paris, with a magnificent house in the Goblin quarter as their operation base.

For several days, Harry and Ginny spent larger parts of the daytime hours around the public swimming pool, only to realize that, especially after returning home, they were the wrong company to each other. Not that they couldn't talk - they were talking a lot, only that was all they could do with each other. And from one day to the next, it struck both of them more and more unsatisfying.

Then Ginny took her GALA card, her linkport network ticket, Harry's knapsack filled with the most necessary things, and went for an adventure tour. First, however, she made him promise to tell nobody, particularly not Ma Weasley. Harry wasn't worried to know her travelling alone - a witch at the age of sixteen, knowing enough *aikido* to discourage anyone who wasn't her choice, and with enough built-in attributes to encourage the others, only Ma Weasley would have gone frantic.

And that left him alone in *The Burrow*.

Aside from his snake, of course. Only Nagini wasn't particularly talkative, as long as nobody was spreading lies or magic. Not knowing any better, Harry went to the swimming pool alone.

It was worse than before - suddenly, the place seemed full of girls with long legs, tight swimsuits, and inviting smiles. Some of them had even nice faces.

Still - Harry saw no reason for starting an adventure trip of his own.

It was so unfair - the first real vacation of his life, no Dursleys, no duty, free time en masse, and what was the effect? All revved up and nowhere to go ... He wanted company, fun, sex, with changing priorities along the hours of the day. Failing that, he wanted a task to kill the time, a hobby to enjoy, good enough to spend hour after hour until feeling tired enough to sleep.

Hobbies ... His hobby had been the hunt for Voldemort, now Harry felt a desperate need for some replacement. Which were the hobbies of other people his age? Sports - he had finished a Quidditch cup only recently. Cars - what a nonsense, if you could apparate, fly a broomstick, jump through linkport gates. Girls - in a way, this came closer to the point, but only so much. First, the plural seemed definitely overkill. Next, girls were nice, while women ... Damn, why

didn't Cho send a message, more precisely, an address and a time? Fool that he was, falling in love with a girl - woman, whatever - who was this one critical year older than he himself.

Marie-Christine crossed his mind. Several times, Harry was seriously tempted to go finding her. Only - he knew exactly what would happen, and so far away from her, his mind won the competition against his young, suntanned, unemployed body.

And this was why Harry could be found sitting in the garden, at a loss to come up with anything more intelligent than shooting water balls in gnome holes.

* * *

Another movement. Harry felt so bored, he missed by several inches. Time to think seriously. Hadn't he received a thorough education how to see humour in desperation?

Ways and goals ... *If your path is misted, move the steps you can see.* Except he couldn't see any step, maybe because there was no mist but brilliant sunlight. If this wasn't a Zen riddle, then he didn't know ... Moving to some place he knew, and to think again - well, maybe it was a help. Which place did he know? ... Big question, really.

Harry grabbed Nagini, put her around his chest. At the last instant, he remembered to fetch his swimsuit, then he stood at the Hogwarts Express platform. Maybe a hard exercise in the training hall, and then a diving tour through the lake, to clear his mind.

The school looked deserted. Nobody outside, nobody in the Entrance Hall. The Great Hall was empty too.

Harry passed the staircase to Dumbledore's office. A visit? - No, the Headmaster didn't cross him as the best mentor to overcome boredom. Most likely, this wizard didn't even know what it meant.

A voice behind him. "Freeze, buddy!"

He hadn't heard this voice before - not this broad accent. Funny as it sounded, there was some determination which made him stop, not moving - only checking with his *getsumai no michi*.

A figure behind him, unfamiliar ... A woman, for all he could sense, with a wand pointing at him. Now she moved closer, and now she was looking around ...

His chance. He was down, rolling around, way off the white flash that bounced into the walls, his arms pointing. "*Expelliarmus!*"

The wand whooshed through the hall, into his hands. Harry came up, stored the wand to have his arms free, stepped quickly toward the woman - not exactly the attack stance, however in perfect balance, arms ready to defend, to strike, to send a spell.

Big, broadshouldered, sun-tanned, light-blond, open face, not really thick, although with ten pounds less, nobody would have called her thin ... Watchful eyes, not looking scared, no fright either in what he sensed. Carefulness, of course ...

"You don't bother with a wand, do you?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no ... Who are you?"

"Funny question ... *You're* the intruder - who are *you*? What are you doing here, sneaking around this staircase? What about this snake?"

According to the rules, he had the wand, and she was supposed to answer. Maybe nobody had told her the rules. When in doubt ... "Last question first or in the sequence of asking?"

After a second, the face split in a broad grin. "Hey - that's good, sonny, hehe - really ..."

For such a large body, she was awfully fast, and there had been almost no fore-warning in his *haragei*. Her leg came up in a step-kick, aiming exactly toward his groin.

A bit too close for side-stepping the kick, too late for jumping back. In a light side-twist, Harry's own leg came up, hitting the woman's ankle hard, deflecting the kick away from him.

This would have been the moment for his counter-blow. Instead, he retreated a step. "Stop that nonsense! ... Who are you?"

The woman bent down, to rub her ankles - a perfect position for a jump. In a reflex, Harry retreated another step.

She glanced up. "You a kung fu champion, or what?"

He kept silent, for reasons of combat psychology as much as because he didn't know what she meant.

The woman came up again, the ankle was forgotten. So it had really been a preparation for a jump. Maybe *she* was a kung fu champion. And now she said, "Allright, mister ... The game's over - gimme that wand back!"

Some people could see no reason, not without a wand pointing at them. Harry drew his own, pointed. "For the last time - who are you?"

A mocking bow. "Samantha Sheridan ... Nice to meet you, sunnyboy."

"And what are you doing here in Hogwarts?"

"Guarding the school from intruders with snakes ... Sometimes with success, sometimes without - otherwise, I'm a teacher here, and I'm still waiting to get my own answers."

A teacher?? Uh-oh. "Which course?"

"Animals ... What's that crazy term - er, Care of Magical Animals, I guess that's it. And this was my last answer, now it's your turn."

"Care of Magical Creatures?"

"Yeah - I knew there was something wrong. You seem to ..."

"Can you prove it?"

She stared at him in disbelief, then her arms came akimbo. "Listen, sweetheart, I don't have to prove anything. Now either you turn me into a rabbit, or I'll come over you like an eagle out of the sun ... You've got one more chance to tell me who you are."

"Who hired you?"

The woman looked at Harry's unmoving wand. "A flagpole called Albie - and a lady with funny glasses ..."

Harry's giggle rose, unstoppable. He just had time to pull out her wand and to offer it back, this way avoiding a heavier attack, before he was twisting in a helpless laughter.

When he had sobered up sufficiently, the witch was standing there, her wand again pointing at him - but somehow, it seemed more a precaution than a serious threat. "There's nothing like a good joke, hon ... And now, you'll answer me in a hurry, before I turn *you* into a rabbit, just the right size for that snake ... It's beautiful, by the way."

"It's a she - her name's Nagini. I'm a student here, and I was on the way to the training hall ... My name's Harry Potter."

Samantha Sheridan grinned. "See, it works - very good, in perfect reverse order ... Can you prove it?"

Harry looked perplexed. His name hadn't raised any reaction, and his prominent scar didn't take her attention at all.

"Now?"

"You may ask someone ... Or I can describe the building from ground to top, or list the teachers. Maybe ..."

"Harry Potter, huh? ... I guess I heard that name before, except I don't remember in which context ..."

Only now, Harry remembered his GALA card. He took it out, with slow movements under the witches' watchful glance. "Here - that should be good enough."

She studied the picture. "Rich parent's kid? ... Great, just what I like ..."

He stared again, while the corners of her mouth dropped. "... either way, son, you better leave now. It's vacation, and I don't tolerate snakes in the building."

"You don't what??"

"Is there something with your ears, young man? ... Get lost!"

Ignoring her, Harry turned to Nagini's head on his shoulder. "Say - is she serious?"

"Yes, master. A bit upset, not very much. She doesn't like snakes, but in contrast to other people, she knows them - rattlesnakes, that is. Maybe she had some bad experience with them."

"Rattlesnakes - how do they look?"

"Brown, or sand-coloured ..."

The woman interrupted this conversation. "What's this, boy? Are you talking with that snake?"

Feeling his anger rise, Harry replied, "Yes - what else?"

"Now that's interesting ... Never heard of that before - what were you talking about?"

Didn't this woman know anything? "I asked her about you. Nagini says you know snakes, but only rattlesnakes, and that's why you don't like ..."

The woman looked delighted. "A mind reader - isn't that cute? ... Well, under these circumstances, I guess we can make an exception."

Calming down at once, and remembering some manners, Harry said, "I really hope so - Nagini's living with me for the last year. Although - she can read only emotions, maybe with snakes, her accuracy is higher than usual."

"That's okay, hon ... Where did you find her?"

"She was Voldemort's snake. He left her when escaping."

"Voldemort? ... Yeah, I heard that name before - actually, I guess together with yours. Some desperado wizard, huh?"

Harry wondered whether he could trust his ears. "Yes, in a way ... You're not from here, are you?"

Samantha Sheridan grinned. "Do I look like that? Hopefully not ... No, Texas's my home - you know, *Don't mess with Texas*."

Harry didn't know. "But I did already, didn't I? ... By the way - " he bowed, "I'm sorry, Prof."

The woman laughed. "Prof - that's good ..." She stopped, looking surprised. "I guess you're right, and I should get used to it ... Anyway, it's still vacation - call me Samantha, short version Sam."

"Sam??"

Samantha looked wondering. "Yes, sure ... Only if you call me Sammy, you're in trouble, son."

"Alright, er - Sam ... Please call me Harry."

The witch nodded. "Listen, Harry - you seem to know a lot more about this crazy school. I can offer a deal - I provide a few T-bone steaks, grilled of course, and some beer, and you'll give me a tour of the background here."

* * *

Samantha came from a small town near Abilene. Both parents Muggles, and farmers, had she lived on that farm until she felt the wide space narrowing around her, especially around her underemployed brain. Samantha's next station had been another farm, until she realized the horizon wasn't widening this way. Then she had taken the job of a deputy sheriff.

Around that time of their conversation, the first two steaks were ready. Harry took his own, admiring the size, the thickness, and the taste. Then he watched in astonishment as Samantha was putting two more steaks on the grid. He asked, "Do you expect more people?"

"No - why?"

"Then who's going to eat those?"

The question sounded pretty stupid to Samantha, only Texans seemed used to answer them. "Us, you dummy ... Don't tell me you'll stop after one small steak."

"Maybe not, but definitely after this wagon wheel."

Samantha didn't believe him; at any rate, she wasn't going to stop after hers.

All this took place in front of Hagrid's old hut. Samantha had adopted the place immediately, feeling more at home than ever since she had left Texas to widen her horizon.

Harry watched her rapidly diminishing the large chunk of meat. "Did you learn to fight there - as a deputy sheriff?"

"Some more tricks, yeah, but I didn't start at scratch ... On a farm in Texas, and probably other states too, a virgin is someone who can run faster and fight meaner than the boys."

"Oh ..." Harry was ready to take it for a bad joke, only Nagini kept silent. But maybe this had to do with Nagin's own piece of raw meat, still visible from the bulge in her body.

Sensing Harry's uneasiness, Samantha grinned. "It's another world ... Where did you learn your own kung fu?"

"Kung fu? Is this another technique?"

"Dunno - in Texas, you fight with guns, or with fists - you may use your head too, or a jack handle - anything else is called kung fu ... Far-east stuff."

"Mine is called *aikido* ... I learned it in Japan, but that's just where it started - for the last year, I trained here in Hogwarts. Mr. Kenzo is the teacher, a Japanese."

"No kidding? ... I figure I'd give it a try." Samantha glanced at him approvingly. "To be honest - it's quite a while since someone has blocked my kicking at such a short distance."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I was too close, and you can hide your intention quite well."

For some minutes, they discussed combat without weapons, and Harry explained the meaning of *haragei* as the sense to detect intentions, and *jaho* as the hiding art, in which Samantha seemed to be an untrained natural talent. Then Harry asked, "How was it, being a deputy sheriff?"

"Not bad, for a while. Then I dropped it."

"Why?"

Samantha grimaced. "Maybe I had seen all that could be seen there ... Like a sheriff who was on the payroll of the local fat cat - or some people who thought a woman deputy was for dessert *and* for free. Anyway - I moved into the city."

The city, that was Forth Worth, and from there to Houston, jobbing here and there, learning still more kung fu tricks, for interest as much as for sheer need.

"And how did you find your way here?"

Samantha smiled. "Pure luck, as the whore said ..."

At that time, Harry had some experience how to stare for just a split second, swearing to himself that he would find the courage to ask Samantha for this joke everybody seemed to know - obviously the one Charlie had mentioned some time ago at a Beauxbatons ball.

"... when I realized that I couldn't find my place there, I put an ad in some overseas newspapers, here and some other places where you get along with English ..." she interpreted his expression correctly, "or something close ... And then I got a mail, if I was interested in a job as a teacher, and I answered yes."

"What did you write in the ad?"

"Twas something like tough lady, gets along with animals, not afraid of work - that style ... And then I saw that man, Santa Claus after a long diet, and I had a feeling - well, here I am."

Harry chuckled. "Oh yes, he can do that with people - giving them a feeling."

"Tell me about him, Harry."

He beamed. "Dumbledore's the greatest wizard - that's what all students think. But he's more, especially for me ... If I give you the long version, I won't be finished until midnight."

"Go ahead ... I can listen, and tomorrow's another day to feed you with steak and beer while listening."

"Really? ... It's a deal."

And so Harry started to talk, about Dumbledore, about other teachers, about Hagrid who had built the hut and now was lying in a grave nearby, about the Battle of Hogwarts, about Giants, Goblins, keeping to an overall picture and avoiding too many details about his own role.

It was indeed near midnight when Samantha said, "Let's give it a break for today, Harry ... If you'll come tomorrow, you'll find me here as promised - except then I might squeeze you a bit harder - there were a few empty spots in your story, and I'll be damned if they don't fit exactly your shape ... By the way, how are you travelling?"

"Apparition - and a short walk because it works only outside the Hogwarts sphere. The train platform is the closest point for jumping."

"Apparition, huh? ... Quite a habit for sixth-years, and I better don't ask for your license ..."

Harry interrupted her with a beaming. "You may - it's two weeks old, signed by the Law Enforcement Squad chief personally."

"Then he must be a relative of yours."

Naturally, from a corrupt sheriff's deputy. "No," protested Harry, "but he's my godfather. Well, at least I'd stand any test or exam."

Samantha nodded. "No doubt ... See ya' tomorrow."

The next day Harry came back, early enough for a real training session in the hall. Samantha was interested to join, until she realized what it meant to go through the basics - walking, falling, *balance*. Then she said, "Come to think of it, Harry - if you find a shortcut to some nice kicks, gimme a call. Otherwise, you'll find me outside."

Harry had brought a large salad bowl - green food seemed a bit scarce on Samantha's table. He said, "Please don't tell Dobby - he'll be deeply insulted to hear I came to Hogwarts with food from outside."

"Dobby?"

And this was the opening for today's contribution of stories. For Harry, it felt strange how easily he could talk about his own roles in the encounters with Voldemort, with Lucius Malfoy, even his time in Privet Drive. There was something in Samantha which *understood*, and weighed, offering sympathy without pity, acknowledgment without admiration.

When he talked about the Dursleys, Samantha's eyes looked at him as if to say, *Tough, hon - at least, you weren't beaten up, or just a bit by Dudley and his scums*. When he talked about the fight deep down in the Hogwarts dungeons to rescue Ginny, the same eyes said, *Good job, buddy, they were relying on you, and you didn't let them hang - I hadn't expected less*.

Samantha looked far too young for appearing motherly, Harry didn't feel like confiding in her - just presenting the facts, trading a story or two for a T-bone steak, and if he didn't get two of them in return, then only because he was stuffed to the limit after the first.

These eyes ... They had seen the bad, and they had seen the worse, were able to recognize quality, could laugh while that big mouth didn't move.

When he told about the exam patrol and the scene with Firenze in the Forbidden Forest, Samantha's calmness was gone. "Centaur - and one of them is your pal? ... Harry, you just got yourself a job."

"Did I?"

"Yep - tomorrow evening, we'll go into that forest, and you'll get me around, and introduce me to that Firenze."

Harry looked at her, tasting the words as much as the intention. Had this been a plea? ... A command?

Samantha's mouth grinned. "If you do that, I'll pay back - no matter how the bill's looking."

A joke - except that Samantha took her jokes as seriously as her threats. Harry laughed. "Allright - and there isn't a bill ... Or if so, then it's paid already."

Now Samantha's mouth turned wry, although her eyes were laughing. "You didn't warm up much for the offer, sweetie, did you? ... Who's the girl that beats a Texan thoroughbred?"

"Her name's Cho, and she's the one who's responsible for the job offer, because she took two teachers with her to found a company ... But that's only part of the reason."

"Don't tell me you shy off from a teacher while school hasn't started yet."

Harry smiled. "Neither that, nor the opposite ... No - if there's a deal behind, I'm pretty sure Firenze would sense it, and we'd never see him ... Even so, I cannot guarantee anything."

"That's understood, but we'll meet him - trust me."

Somehow, Harry did, was nonetheless curious. "What makes you so sure?"

"Oh - I have a way with horses, and I have a way with men."

"I bet."

"And there's something else ... I'm around here for some days, was sitting outside into the night. And one evening, somebody was watching me from within the forest - for quite a while."

"What did you do?"

"Waiting, what else? ... Didn't show up." Samantha grinned. "A horse would have come looking - but men are shy animals."

"You think so - after all you've told me about your jobs?"

"Oh yes, Harry ... Only shithouse flies come swarming."

* * *

Sleeping late. Breakfast, though only after jumping to the next newsstand for buying a *Daily Prophet* - these people were too stupid to get a vacation address settled, and Harry's press contacts didn't help the least. Hanging around for a while in *The Burrow*, some reading, some cleaning up, and whoosh, was he back at the Hogwarts Express platform.

A thorough training session - alone, which limited the possibilities, but there was no end to honing your balance, in particular before and after kick jumps aiming as high as a standing man. Then a short flight to the place at the lake, who would walk in this heat, especially when sweaty from bends and kicks and jumps and blows? Swimming, diving - Harry decided to get himself some Gillyweed, diving for almost an hour would be fascinating, in particular since no hostages were waiting to be rescued.

And out of the water, drying, dressing, back to the school where Samantha was about to start the grill. He could settle to this rhythm. After all, his first real vacation was no total loss.

Except today the rhythm was changed. At dusk, they walked along the Forbidden Forest. The former dragons' camp was their first target. Harry pointed to the deserted hut. "Here - that's where Charlie and this O'Shea were living ... And over there, that was the first dragon nest - the others are a bit farther this way."

"Ain't herding well, dragons, huh?"

"Oh, they did, in a way ... It was like a firing battery, in the battle - they were side by side, blocked the dark wizards entirely, until ..." Harry's voice trailed off.

Samantha went into the hut, came out shortly afterwards, then walked toward the remnants of what had been the sleeping place of a Swedish Short-Snout. Harry watched her inspecting the place closely, checking the last traces - burn marks at the trees around, smaller growth of underbrush, maybe a horny scale in the grass.

Samantha came back. "Does the school have pictures of them?"

"Pictures? ... None that I knew of." After a moment, Harry clapped his forehead. "Baah - stupid me. Of course I have pictures, lots of them."

Samantha watched him. "Don't worry - even so, most people would take it for a head, and what's inside for a brain ... Where are the pictures, Harry?"

His finger touched his temple. "Here - ever seen a spector story?"

She hadn't, spectors and the parts of Texas Samantha had seen were two different worlds. Harry explained the principle of spectors in general and of the story translation in particular.

"Sounds good," agreed Samantha, "to show something that's difficult to explain, or that's just too beautiful to put in words ... Otherwise, my choice would be a normal tale ten times out of ten."

"Why?"

"To watch the storyteller. According to what you said, you can't do that with this movie globe."

"You could, only then of course you'd miss the story ..." Thinking her words over, Harry said, "But the last days, you were looking into the fire most of the time, when I was talking. Somehow that doesn't fit."

Samantha grinned. "I can look like a horse - my viewing angle stretches almost to my back ... But don't tell anyone."

About to laugh, Harry stopped, wishing he'd come with Nagini. It could only be a joke, except maybe it wasn't ... Either way, Samantha had made her point clear.

They wandered through the forest, roughly the direction Harry and Cho had taken with their broomsticks high above the trees. It was a bit eerie - sensing around, Harry felt presences, somewhere, in some distance. None of them felt like Firenze, he was sure of that - since they had met in a misty night, during his training for the *getsumai no michi*, Harry knew exactly how this centaur would appear in his *haragei*.

Walking ahead, he checked his companion - without turning of course, only through his inner senses. Samantha seemed fully occupied to inhale the forest with eyes and ears and nose and skin and whatever she could muster in addition - and there was more, he felt sure of that. Maybe it wasn't *haragei*, but then, this was just a name for a sensoric system not well represented in common language.

They reached a small opening. Maybe it had been here where Harry and Cho had paused, maybe not - either way, it looked like a good place to sit down and wait for a creature that would appear like a visitor, to behave like a host.

Harry sat down, took the lotus position. Samantha watched him doing so, then sat down in the campfire position - knees up, arms on them, head resting on the arms.

She kept as silent as he himself, very much what he had expected.

According to his feeling, half an hour had passed when he sensed a presence, familiar, not too far away. Focusing on it, Harry almost gasped - if he wasn't completely mistaken, his *haragei* had received something like an answer, and the meaning had been clear. *Back off* - the first remark he ever received this way.

He obeyed. His hand touched Samantha, made a circling movement to indicate that, somewhere around them, someone was waiting as silently as the two of them.

She nodded, otherwise motionless.

Firenze let them wait. With his *haragei* back in wide-angle mode, Harry could confirm that the centaur was neither moving away nor coming closer.

After ten minutes, Harry felt sure - this was a teasing game.

Fire had to be fought with fire. Harry's wand came out, pointing in the general direction where he suspected Firenze. He concentrated, recollected the picture at the graveyard. Then, just a whisper. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A golden cloud erupted, formed to a centaur which immediately pushed forward, ignoring bushes entirely, trees mostly.

Samantha hadn't gasped, for sheer self-control. He could feel how her mind jumped at the sight of this appearance.

Seconds later, the Patronus came back. "There's no harm, master - quite the opposite."

Harry bowed. "Thank you."

With a last graceful movement, the Patronus centaur disappeared. At the same moment, Harry could feel another centaur approaching - a real one. Then Firenze appeared between the trees, stepping closer.

Harry stood up. "Good evening, Firenze ... I'd like to introduce you to Samantha Sheridan. Samantha is the new Hogwarts teacher for Care of Magical Creatures."

Samantha was standing, too. "Howdy, Firenze. How are you doing?"

"Mostly without care, but this may change."

Samantha chuckled. "I'm from Texas - the horses there are less funny ... Come to think of it, the men too."

For an instant, Harry expected the centaur to disappear - he himself would never have talked that way with him. But then he remembered Cho's words. Here again, Firenze seemed to accept remarks of this style, provided they came from a woman.

Firenze turned to him. "Harry Potter, can't you find anything better in your vacation time than strolling around Hogwarts?"

"Yes, somehow ... The rest of my family's somewhere else - suddenly, I had spare time in excess. And then I met Samantha."

"You should enjoy the break - it'll be over soon."

Harry felt startled. "Are you talking about school, Firenze?"

The centaur looked up, toward the sky. "Mercury's nowhere seen, Venus lost in clouds ..."

Harry was waiting to hear that Mars was bright tonight.

"... while Saturn's ruling the sky. This is what the closer planets tell us - so much for a lesson, Harry Potter."

Provided you knew what it meant. At least, Harry knew better than to ask directly. He said, "It tells you more than me, Firenze."

"If my reading's right, you'll know soon by yourself - and many others too. You have faced an enemy, a single one, powerful, unique, and you have made predictions fail ... Can you do it again, when there are so many?"

"Enemies? ... I know only one, and this one's lying low, since the last time we've met."

"But alive ..." The centaur looked at Samantha. "Be careful in this forest, Samantha Sheridan. Not everybody living here may respond well to your caring ... Good night." Seconds later, Firenze was gone, from their view as well as from Harry's senses.

Walking back to the school buildings, Samantha asked, "So what did he tell us, Harry? I've heard statements before that were more to the point."

"Well - for a centaur, he's pretty direct. He's the only one I ever heard giving something like an explanation ... About the forest - the other centaurs avoid human contact, but they're not really hostile, while the giant spiders - I didn't tell you about them, did I?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not ... Anyway, at daylight, they won't come out - it must be really dark, and they live farther inside the forest."

"And what was this about the planets?" For the first time since Harry had met her, Samantha seemed a bit self-conscious. "Planet-reading's never been my strongest, so if you could translate it for me, Harry ..."

"Well - don't ask me for details, but Mercury stands for the quick mind, Venus for love, and Saturn - that's supposed to represent bad luck in big style."

"Aha ... In other words - there are only blockheads around, you may start singing *Bye, bye, love*, and because misery needs company, a similar fate expects the blockheads too ... Is this about what he was trying to say?"

"Dunno ..." Harry didn't go for the joke, Firenze's words kept running through his mind. "Something else is more interesting," he said. "So far, Firenze was more the action type, didn't bother much with looking into the sky and complaining about fate ... And now he's doing just that."

"Yeah, but it started only after you asked him for more information."

"I didn't ask him - I only said it was telling him more than me."

"No, sweetheart. Remember? He spoke about a break that'll be over soon, and then you asked what he was talking about. I mean - everybody knows when school's going to start again, so I figure it was quite obvious he meant something else."

"So I asked a stupid question. Well, that happens."

Samantha laughed. "Maybe that's what he meant when talking about Mercury - what do you think, Harry? ... Harry? ... Do you think?"

* * *

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter - six pieces is all we can offer ... We'll get a refill, of course, but don't expect it before the end of August. This is summertime, and since these linkports are around, lots of people go for vacation in places like Hawaii or the Maldives, and suddenly they all need it ... The supply has never been that big ..."

The witch from Dervish and Banges, the wizarding items store in Hogsmeade, looked inconsolable, not being able to provide the ten pieces of Gillyweed Harry had asked for. It was a bit strange - this behaviour would have fit a house elf, not a small-town saleswoman.

A moment later though, Harry knew why. When the witch said, "Hundred and thirty-two galleons, Mr. Potter."

He gasped. That expensive? So with ten, he'd scored as the customer of the month, probably did even so. He offered his GALA card.

"Oh, that's nice ... I heard of them, but you're the first customer who comes with such a thing." The witch spoke with the Goblin, who promised to honour the bill, while Harry was musing about old habits and new fortunes. Even with two diving tours a day, all year long, he would spend less than the return of investment per year.

At Hogwarts, he asked Samantha whether she was interested to join him in a diving tour. He showed the Gillyweed; then had to explain how it worked and that gill-breathing would last for about three quarters of an hour. But Samantha waved him off. "Naw, thanks ... Water's dangerous, Harry - look what it does to a good bourbon, then you know."

The water felt wonderful - less at the sun-heated surface, where Harry found it difficult to breathe sufficiently through his gills, more so at deeper levels where his eyesight quickly narrowed down to twenty feet, fifteen, ten. Nevertheless, his *getsumai no michi* provided him with a clear sight of this underwater landscape.

He was floating over a forest, stretching ahead, gently sloping downhill, a soft wave of dark green with no discernible end. It was only weed, but from his position six feet above, Harry could imagine a fantastic jungle of bizarre trees, hiding all kinds of creatures, up to the size of full-grown dragons.

For the small-form life underwater, it was probably a jungle. From Harry's own perspective, Grindylows were the only creatures in the weed he had to be careful about. He was swimming without his wand; however, it should be simple enough to keep them at bay with spells from his webbed hands, used only to balance out or to change direction - with his elongated feet alone, he was making sufficient speed for this idle journey beyond any particular task.

The green wave sloped deeper. Harry kept his level, letting it disappear below, out of eyesight. This was his first exploration, a waterspace patrol - he had no intention to meet merpeople today, was only interested in an effortless, weightless space travel.

The giant squid came to his mind. Would he sense it with his *haragei*? From its intellectual level, the answer was probably no, but then, *haragei* was an early-warning system for minds as much as for dangers. Anyway, the only presences he felt were deep below - greyish-green figures with shark-like teeth in their faces and spears in their hands. One of the following days, he would visit them, knew already what to talk about, if there was an opportunity. He would ask them whether there was any trace left of four dragon cadavers, and if so, he would inspect their skeletons, to save the image and to record it onto a sceptor cassette.

The air seemed thinner ... This was of course nonsense - just the first sign of the fading effect. Harry sped up, climbing rapidly toward daylight. When his head broke through the surface, he was already back to lung-breathing, had spent the last half minute without breathing - simple enough for him, who could keep his breath for almost two minutes.

The only nuisance - he found himself in the middle of the lake.

Twenty minutes later, he reached the lakeshore, not exactly powered out but feeling the strain in his arms and legs. In his next dives, he would be more careful about the time spent.

Samantha wanted to see the dragon *pictures* before the usual evening meal of grilled steaks, grilled potatoes, and salad - Harry's contribution. Once sitting outside, she didn't feel like walking through the school building again.

Reaching the spector room, they found it locked. Harry asked, "Do you have the key for that door?"

"No - but that won't stop us ... Wait a minute, I have to fetch my little collection of ..."

"Don't bother." He didn't even sit down - training was the key.

Click

Samantha's eyes had widened a bit. "That's neat, buddy ... I'm glad I met you *after* my time as a deputy - you'd give me headaches."

After some trial and error, Harry had the spector running in story translation mode. Samantha sat downstairs, close to the sphere, while he sat before the camera, collecting his thoughts, and telling his encounters with the dragons - the first task in the tournament, visits to Charlie, and finally the battle scenes. Thanks to a mental training not so long ago, in preparation for a wedding present, he knew how to fill the story quite literally with contours, colours, and depth.

On their way back to Hagrid's hut, Samantha looked thoughtful. When the steaks were broiling on the grid, she said, "I'm used to horses. These dragons ... Riding a dragon, that would be something, won't it? ... By the way - it was great. What an awful luck, that you didn't know what to do at home."

Staring at the grill, his mouth already watering after the long journey through the lake, Harry's only comment was, "That's how I see it too."

Coming home, he found a small sheet of paper glued to the door. It told him that there was a letter waiting in the box - both sheet and letter delivered by the *Magical Tours* postal service.

When opening the letter, Harry felt grateful for the reminder at the door. Without that, he would have found the letter only the next day, around noon, returning from the newsstand. And then, the time schedule would have been more than tight, according to what he was reading.

The letter came from Cho. She expected him for Saturday in the Palace Hotel of Santa Monica, California, USA - in spitting distance from Hollywood, the centre of Muggle movie business. As the letter revealed, it had to do with an invitation to a party, apparently very important for her own business. And she expected him early enough so they could go and buy a decent Californian Muggle dress for him - or maybe two or three, this might not be the last party.

And Saturday was tomorrow.

02 - Movieing

Apparition could certainly be called a nice method of travelling, pretty quick and easy. It showed just one slight drawback - you had to know your destination. Harry didn't know Santa Monica, which was not surprising since he didn't know California, and this because he simply didn't know the United States at all - well, with the exception of Miami Linkport.

Studying maps, the first thing Harry learned - even Saturday at noon would have been early enough to find Cho's letter. The time difference from London to Santa Monica spanned eight hours, in the positive direction - he would win this time, only the maps showed it with negative numbers, just to confuse the unexperienced traveller.

Leisurely breakfast in *The Burrow*, followed by a jump to Hogwarts. Harry had no real appointment with Samantha, on the other hand, she would expect him, so it felt too impolite not to tell her.

Samantha wasn't in her hut, once known as Hagrid's hut, until a living person had started to paint old memories over. Harry looked for a piece of parchment, paper, grocery bag - anything to leave a note. There wasn't any, and the hut too clean for writing in the dust.

About to walk into the school building, Harry's eyes fell onto an old plank in the corner, and he knew at once how to write the message - just what a Texas woman, raised on a ranch, would expect.

He grinned, remembering Flitwick's lessons about the practical spells for the household and otherwise. The tiny wizard, lying in a grave nearby, would have been proud of him:

"Flagracies."

The glowing tip of Harry's wand burned the writing into the dry wood as quickly as a pen would go over parchment.

I'm on tour in the USA. See you. Harry

He draped the plank over the grill - the only place he knew Samantha would meet for sure. Walking back to the train platform, in the full heat of the July sun, he was asking himself why he didn't deposit his Steel Wing there. It would reduce the travel between *The Burrow* and Hogwarts to an apparition jump and a very short broomstick flight.

Back in *The Burrow*, Harry said goodbye to Nagini, leaving her in the garden, with access to sunny places, water, mice to catch, and gnomes to tease. Then he clutched his bag and jumped to London Linkport.

The first connection from London to Los Angeles was four o'clock local time, and arriving half an hour earlier with a global network ticket should be sufficient.

It wasn't. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter - the four o'clock portal is booked out. You may sign on the waiting list ..."

"Wait a second - what do you mean, booked out? Just let me walk through last in row, that's all I'm asking for."

The service witch tried to smile, what came out was more of a sneering. "There's a time window for each jump - about ten minutes, so the number of passengers is limited. And the waiting list is already twenty people long ... It's vacation time, Mr. Potter."

That was indeed how it looked. The linkport crowded with people, pushing each other, glancing irritated, angry, fighting to start the best weeks of the year, or maybe to finish them as quickly as possible because they hadn't turned out as good as expected.

The service agent offered two choices. One was wild-jumping, which meant another target in the USA, hoping a connection from there to Los Angeles would offer a slot, while she warned Harry that this was probably the worst choice - it didn't look better anywhere, and American linkports were notorious for their bad treatment of passengers. The other was the six o'clock jump.

Harry accepted grudgingly. Arriving at ten o'clock US west coast time was probably early enough, except that he had to wait two more hours.

Jumping back to *The Burrow* and returning an hour later didn't make much sense to him. Looking around, he found all seats occupied, giving reason for a constant stream of little rows. He found a corner which offered the chance not to be tripped over every five minutes, sat down in the lotus position, to watch a fascinating spectacle - humanity at its meanest.

Couples, snarling at each other. Parents pulling their children forward, children trying their best to get lost. Passengers shouting at service clerks, uniformed figures moving through the crowd with faces having lost the barest trace of a smile. And guards - massive figures, always in pairs, one hand gripping their wands, their eyes scanning the crowd relentlessly. Without them, the next row would quickly escalate to a wizarding duel, in spite of the hefty fine - two hundred galleons for cursing another passenger in public, no matter why.

Some yards across, Harry saw a couple arriving. They dropped their luggage, tied their dog to a piece of metal at the wall. The man walked to a counter, came back after some minutes. Then the man and the woman took their luggage and walked forward, disappeared in the stream of passengers.

Harry looked at the dog, tried to see the couple, tried to reconsider what he had sensed, watching idly. For all he knew, the dog owners were gone, had used the linkport hall as a waste-basket for the dog.

He studied the dog. Middle-sized, golden-brown, muscular body, massive head, was it sitting there, hope and patience in its eyes which stared ahead, scanning, waiting.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry was sure. The dog had been dropped.

What now? Should he notify the guards? They would come to fetch the dog. For what Harry could see, the dog wouldn't respond well to any approach. So they would stun him, take him, stuff him into some shelter, or worse, into some room of the lost-and-found. The thought was unbearable.

Harry couldn't afford a dog, could he? No he couldn't, especially not now. But someone else could.

He moved closer to the dog. Almost within reach, he stopped. The dog's ears went flat, two unmoving, unblinking eyes watched him, waiting for the next movement.

"Hey, doggie-boy, I'm here to help you. Your people got rid of you - didn't you realize already? ... Stop waiting for them, they won't come back. I'm here to offer you a better place - so stop looking mean, and let me ..."

The dog was baring its teeth, the ears flat to the head. Two inches closer, and Harry would need a healing charm or two - *after* he had managed to come free.

Then what now?

Harry dropped his bag, exactly at the borderline of the dog's reach. "Take care of that - I'm back in a minute."

When he returned from the cafeteria, two meat balls were in his hands. He moved his bag aside, sat down just outside the dog's reach, started to eat - slowly, smacking as much as he could. The meat ball's taste was questionable - no, not at all, actually, but for a good purpose ...

He had the dog's full attention. And the ears were up again.

The first meat ball was gone - thank God.

Harry broke a piece from the second. Looking directly at the dog, he shoved it into his mouth, chewed, swallowed.

The dog swallowed too.

Harry broke another piece, moved it toward his mouth, stopped. His hand reached into the dog's range. "Wanna bite?"

Ears at half height, the dog moved closer, sniffing - at Harry's hand, at the meat. The large mouth opened, and the piece was gone. The dog hadn't even touched Harry's hand.

This was basically comforting, but right now a nuisance. Harry needed direct body contact to send his message. He ate another piece himself, a very small one.

The next piece was for the dog. It disappeared like the first.

Another one for Harry, not more than a greasy spot. The dog had caught the rhythm, was already waiting for its own.

For the dog's next piece, Harry curled his hand up. When the snout came to fetch it, his fingers trailed the flews.

Two pieces left.

Offering the next, Harry sent a first message through the contact. A slight twist in the dog's body, though no baring of teeth. Holding the last piece, Harry looked into the dog's eyes. "Sit down."

The dog obeyed.

Inching closer, Harry's left hand touched the nose, the flews, stroked over the dog's head, his mind all the while sending a message of comfort and trust. Then he offered the piece which was swallowed immediately.

He untied the leash, held it. "Come here, doggie."

His both hands were at the dog's head. "Now - I can offer you a good place, and someone who's not going to drop you for a vacation trip. So - ready to come with me?"

A fleeting moment of uncertainty, then the dog had accepted.

Jumping with a dog - it should work okay, provided the dog was as close to his body as Nagini at other occasions. Checking the time, Harry decided to leave his bag where it was. It contained only some clothes, and according to the letter, he would need others anyway.

He walked to a quiet passage, knelt down. "Now come close - we have to jump together."

A small reluctance, while Harry's mind was again sending a wave of calmness, then the dog relaxed. Harry put both arms around the dog. "Ready? Then let's go ..."

They were at the Hogwarts Express platform.

A twist in the dog's body, and a short yelp of surprise, fading quickly under Harry's stroking hands. He released the leash. "Now come hurrying - my jump is due soon."

The dog followed eagerly, as if knowing exactly that soon they would meet its new boss. But then, maybe it was that clever, after all, Harry had explained the situation more than once while establishing the relationship.

They reached the hut. Harry knocked, waited, opened the door. No sign of Samantha.

What now? He just couldn't tie the dog and leave, not after he'd promised to find a place where this would not happen again. He drew his wand. Just in time, he remembered that the dog might be a bit jumpy, and panic at the signals he was about to send. "Sit down ... Good dog - now just sit, and don't get afraid."

A ball shot into the sky, exploded with a bang loud enough to be heard from the other side of the lake.

Harry looked at the dog. It was sitting calmly, all attention at him. "That's the spirit ... The next one's not that noisy."

A second ball shot upward, exploded in a sparkling tree of red stars, faded. Harry repeated the sequence of sound and light once more. "Okay, doggie, that's it ... Now let's hope for my time schedule." He sat down, feeling like on burning coal while the time was ticking away. The dog moved around, sniffing, inspecting the new environment.

An eon later, more exactly after ten minutes, Samantha came around the corner. She stared at Harry, at the dog, at him again. "Back from your trip? And even with some company - didn't you like it over there?"

"I didn't even start yet. This dog - it was dropped by its people in the London Linkport. I just couldn't leave it like that - you know, er - I mean, this hut needs a dog, it's just incomplete without any ... With Hagrid, it was Fang, and now ..."

"Incomplete, huh? ... And I have to care, although there's nothing magical about this creature. Does it have a name?"

"Certainly, except I didn't hear it called ... Samantha, I'm really in a hurry, if it's not already too late. So, what's your comment - can I leave the dog with you?"

Samantha knelt down, grabbed the dog which responded open-heartedly - after all, this had to be its new boss, who else if not this woman?

The witch sighed, looked up at Harry. "Oh Lordy ... Alright, get lost - no, before I forget, Harry - I like horses, as you know, but still, if you see any, just leave them where they are, okay?"

Grinning, Harry gave her the thumbs-up, then sprinted toward the train platform.

Reaching the linkport again, he hurried to the corner where he had left his bag. It was gone. Well, small price for a dog. He ran to the gate.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter - when you didn't arrive in time, your slot was passed further to the next one at the waiting list."

Harry slumped back to his corner, to await the eight o'clock portal, swearing to himself - people might abandon dogs, or little girls, directly in front of him, he would just close his eyes.

* * *

The eight o'clock portal had no waiting list. Coming out in Los Angeles, noon local time, Harry became aware why - compared to this, England had been cool. He went to search for the linkport toward Santa Monica.

No linkport to that city which, apparently, was considered a suburb of Los Angeles, or maybe the better part of Hollywood. To be precise, this linkport was under construction.

No Knight Bus either, or the Californian equivalent. Wizards here had cars, used cars - oh, how many cars, as Harry realized quickly after taking a cab, to be stuck in the worst traffic jam of his life. It made clear why a linkport across a few miles would be profitable.

Until they reached the hotel, it was close to four o'clock local time, and around midnight according to Harry's sweat-soaked body. No problem yet - he had slept long. Now he felt like starving.

The Palace Hotel presented a large facade in shrill colours, the Californian equivalent of decent. The building behind the facade was considerably smaller. And it was cool inside, if not to say frosty. In contrast to the one in the cab, the air condition here wasn't broken.

Yes, rooms were booked for a Mr. Potter, and an envelope was waiting for him too. The clerk wanted to see money in advance, stared in disbelief when Harry presented green bills rather than a credit card, his behaviour changing to a perfect match of the air - cool, if not to say frosty. The absence of any luggage at Harry's side helped nothing to improve the atmosphere.

The suite - bedroom and salon - looked nice, still not decent in Harry's opinion. At least it didn't hurt the eyes. He opened the envelope to find a note from Cho.

- *Dear Harry,
I have arranged an appointment at "Gerry's Fashion" for you.
Gerry is expecting you any time. Please follow his advice, he
knows how Californians dress.
We will meet either there or afterwards in the hotel.*

Love, Cho

Harry stared at the letter, trying not to feel angry. So far, there was nothing in the movie business he found appealing - it had taken Cho away from him, it had earned him an invitation to a party, and he had travelled around the world only to find another letter.

The Californians were definitely crazy, but shopping in late Saturday afternoon was something at the bonus side - provided you were longing for a Californian suit, or maybe three of them.

Harry wasn't. He was hungry.

The cab driver knew where to find *Gerry's Fashion*, still better, he knew where to fetch something to eat. It was called *King Burger*, offered a taste slightly better than the meat ball in London Linkport, but it was large enough to fill a stomach.

And it leaked. When finished with the royal chunk, just in front of a building which made the Palace Hotel facade look pale, Harry detected spots of grease and dressing on his clothes.

So what - here was the place to get something better.

"Harry, my dear - how ab-so-lute-ly thrilling to meet you!!"

Harry stared at that man, who looked young and splendid, though only at a distance of four feet and more. Coming closer, you could see wrinkles, even under the make-up, and a pair of shimmery eyes, looking with admiration and longing at Harry.

"Er - hello, Gerry."

The eyes stopped inspecting Harry's body, were inspecting Harry's clothes instead. With a masterpiece of self-control, Gerry suppressed a grimace of ab-so-lute horror. "Dearest Harry! I hope nobody saw you arriving like that! Tell me where you've found these clothes, so I'll be able to stay off from such a nasty place!"

Gerry with the shimmering eyes started to fetch jackets, and trousers, stopped. "Darling, do me a favour and take a proper shirt first - I would just start crying if I had to look at this combination any longer!"

"Okay ... To ease the pain."

The first two samples were flatly refused. Frills and whatnot - no thanks. Not-so-young Gerry looked slightly hurt but offered some alternatives.

Checking them, Harry felt better. Finest quality, soft and thin as before, but at least they looked like shirts rather than night gowns. "Yes," he said, "that's more like it." With respect to Gerry's admiring looks, he preferred to change in the cabin.

Newly inspirited, Garry rushed through the rows, found a splendid piece here, a knocking item there, came back, his arms full with ab-so-lute showstoppers.

Harry studied the collection. Light green, rosy, cream-coloured with some glittery stuff to reflect the light in myriads of sparkles. He looked up. "Gerry, don't take it personal, but - please, just dress me like a heterosexual, because that's what I am."

The tailor giggled. "It's not your fault, mon chér, probably just the lack of opportunity. Alors ..."

The pieces of French didn't sound as if the communication would improve when changing to that language, were probably just the nice touch on top of Gerry's personal style.

The next collection offered no more pastel colours. None at all, really. Shouting blue was still a moderate member in this palette. Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to wear that, Gerry."

"But my dear Harry, you bad boy, you said I should dress you like the vintage macho, didn't you? ... That's how such people dress here around."

"Really? ... Do you like it?"

An expression of deep distaste crossed the man's suntanned face. "It's awful - these terrible colours, these ab-so-lute-ly deafening combinations ... But what can you do? That's the fashion, darling."

"Good, so we agree on that ... Now, let's try it again. Make it simple, Gerry - just perfect, no less. Like what you'd wear, if you weren't - er ..."

Another giggle. "Got it, Harry-dear ... The true challenge, the ab-so-lute dream customer. Give me a moment to re-adjust, it's quite a while since ..."

The next attempt struck the first success. Black trousers, a raw-linen, cream-coloured jacket, together with two alternatives - a dark-red shirt, slightly shimmering, to wear it openly, and a sand-coloured one with a dark-red tie, suiting formal occasions.

Gerry beamed. "You look gorgeous, Harry-baby ... People will eat you alive, with that outfit."

Harry grinned. "Which ones?"

"Oh - all of them, it's your choice, you naughty boy." Then Gerry stopped. "Your shoes - Harry, you need shoes, Heaven forbid you'll be seen in them while telling everybody where you got your dress!"

"You might be right - but at that time?"

"No sweat, honey - just a second ... What's your size?" The tailor started to dial numbers into a cell phone, was talking with someone, asking for a collection of shoes, slippers, loafers.

Harry interrupted him. "Do they have suitcases? I need something until we're finished here."

They hadn't, but this was no sweat either, someone would come with a few nice samples.

Harry's and Gerry's next agreement was about a light grey suit, just what you'd wear to discuss the next million, somewhere outside, maybe at a swimming-pool.

Looking for more, they were interrupted by a young woman with a pile of shoes, followed shortly afterwards by an older woman with suitcases. They were all smiling, found it perfectly normal to come along after five o'clock on a Saturday - an astonishing experience for someone used to English service, in particular since it couldn't be explained solely by Harry's habit of never asking for a price.

He selected a large, expensive-looking suitcase, four pairs of shoes, just to be prepared, and was discussing a third and last combination with Gerry when Cho entered the room.

Gerry hurried over, welcomed her with kisses at both cheeks. "Cho-darling, how ab-so-lute-ly splendid of you to come! You look stunning! This jacket - together with your hair! So magnificent, really! ... And your young friend - so daring! Where did you find him - are there still more like him? Please tell me - it's not nice to keep this secret from your devoted Gerry."

All smiling, Cho came closer.

Harry stared. She wore a deep-velvet jacket over a cream-coloured blouse, and a black skirt. Sparkling earrings, more sparkling at her neck, nails lacquered in a perfect match with the jacket, her lipstick a lighter shade of that. His Cho - a Californian businesswoman, department movies, sub-section spectators.

"Hi, Harry ... How are you?"

He kissed her. "You look - great."

She had noticed the short pause, showed a quick grin, inspected him. "Did you come to terms with Gerry?"

"About the clothes - yes."

Another grin. "That's enough ... Let's see, what's your choice for this evening? We're late, so please dress here, then we can go."

Moviemaker parties seemed to start early. Harry presented the first combination, earned an approving nod, went into the cabin to change while Cho walked to the cashier desk to settle

the financial aspect of this shopping tour. When Harry came out, his suitcase was ready, and Cho stood waiting.

Gerry smiled, maybe a bit enviously. "Ah, what a perfect couple! You'll be the event of the evening, you two ... Young love - it always makes me so sentimental! Cho, Harry - don't forget to tell where you've found these admirable dresses ... Bye."

Cho walked to a flat, silver-grey sports car. A Porsche - offering barely enough space for Harry's suitcase. He moved in, sat down in a comfortable leather seat while Cho entered the driver's seat and started the engine. He said, "I didn't know you can drive a car."

"I couldn't, but now I can ... Getting a driver's license takes less than a week here."

"Is it yours? Looks as if you're selling movies like crazy."

"It's all make-believe. The car's rented."

"Do you want your own? No problem - just tell me."

Cho's head was shaking, her eyes not leaving the street ahead.

"By the way," asked Harry, "how much was it together? The clothes, the shoes, and the ..."

"Don't ask - you don't want to know, and I'm not going to tell you."

It was only half true - he wanted to know, however thought better than asking again. There was some stress in Cho's voice, in her movements, still more in her mind. Harry asked, "How's your business going? ... No - tell me first about the party we're invited to. Which people are there?"

A short laugh. "The answer's the same in both cases. It's a tricky business, the meanest collection of bastards you can imagine ... And that's exactly where we're heading to."

"Charming ... And which bastard in particular has invited us?"

"It doesn't matter - Harry, these parties are different from anything you know. Anyway - the host is Samy Loewenstein, a producer ... He's screwing the female starlets, which is just fine with his wife who's doing the same with the male ones ... But don't get me wrong - money's still more important to him, so he's not sperm-blind at all when negotiating a deal."

What Harry heard sounded definitely English. Still, it was a new language, and he didn't like it. Less for the words Cho used ... Then he knew why - it came out without the slightest trace of humour. Somewhat more careful than before, he said, "Hmm ... Well, maybe the food is good."

Cho grimaced. "You're trained in close-range combat, so you may have a chance to get some of that. Expect more calories from the bottles - and you don't have to fight for a refill."

"What about your co-entrepreneurs? Will we meet them there?"

"Sylvie and Jesamine?" For the first time, Harry felt something of the Cho he'd known at Hogwarts. "No - they're working round the clock, and grateful to leave the entertainment to me."

Harry was looking forward to a really magnificent evening. At three o'clock in the morning, according to his inner clock. He suppressed a yawn. "What exactly's my role there? Anything to be careful about?"

A quick glance at him, then Cho's eyes were back at the street. Harry wondered about her hesitation - after all, his question was perfectly understandable, wasn't it?

She said, "It's a Muggles world, Harry ... You may meet a wizard or a witch, but then it's incognito. So don't start sending charms around, neither with nor without a wand."

"Okay."

"People will invite you to all kinds of events - lunches, dinners, parties, whatever. Just say yes - they don't mean it, it's only small talk. And don't be surprised if the average conversation is one and a half sentence."

It sounded exactly like the meeting Harry had dreamed of - after so many weeks without Cho. He was asking himself whether she would be interested to hear about news, for example about a new teacher from deep-down Texas, when they reached a bungalow that was clinging to the hill, and the car slowed down.

He climbed out, studied the flat building. "Looks pretty small for such a guy - if that's ..."

Cho laughed. "Wait till we're inside ... These residences are show-off pieces, the more expensive, the better. Either you build a sequence of single units halfway on top of each other, then it's called environmental style because it follows the slope of the hill, or the complete thing has to hang over a cliff, then it's called panorama style ... This one has three or four storeys downhill."

The door was open. Nobody stood inside to welcome arriving guests. It took Harry only a few minutes to realize that this was the most sensible thing the hosts could do. Whatever they did - with or without starlets of either sex, it was better than pretending any of the people he saw were welcome.

The crowd as a whole showed no reaction to newcomers. The first rule for the partygoer was to address someone, interrupt him or her in the current activity, and shout a trumpeting hello. Only for the very famous, the roles were switched.

Cho seemed somewhere in the middle. But only due to her *new toy in town* bonus, as she told him. Each novelty had a two weeks' grace period, and hers was running out.

Somehow, these people reminded Harry of that dog he'd saved hours ago. The same baring of teeth, the same strong reaction if anything edible came within view, only their ears weren't moving.

No - he'd been wrong, there were more differences. The dog had looked steady - ready to attack before, confident and trusting afterwards. People here looked anywhere except into

your eyes, attacks seemed possible only with words and from some distance, confidence was sparse, and trust an alienity. And the dog hadn't been so noisy.

The exchange of welcoming shouts suggested an encounter after several decades of separation between best friends. Listening to pieces of conversation here and there, Harry learned that most people had seen each other last time at yesterday's party. But still, it made sense - yesterday's party was the dearest thing, surpassed maybe only by yesterday's stars, except that some of them were walking around, trying their best not to look like zombies.

And friends - Harry had to learn a new terminology. A *best friend* was someone you'd met at such a party, to be addressed *my dearest friend*. A *good friend* was someone who might be ready to answer a phone call - unless he had something better to do. A *close friend* was someone to exchange gossip with, of course spiced with a generous dash of misinformation. A *young friend* was a rookie in the party scene, like he himself.

After a while, he knew that even this bunch of hyenas and chackals had friends, and the good sense to protect such rare animals. When referring to them, they never used names, didn't even specify the sex. *I know someone* meant there was somebody they had been able to trust once in the past, and it would be a thrilling experience to find out if it still worked that way.

The partygoer's rule number two dealt with shaking hands. Quite a complicated protocol, used to exchange the messages nobody dared to say aloud. Extending an arm and looking away meant, "Get lost." The same, combined with keeping the grabbing hand grabbed, meant, "Get lost, but not before I say so." Then there was the handshake trap. It started with extending an arm. When the hand was taken, the other arm snapped forward, closing the trap. This was followed by an endless pumping up and down while sending one smiling insult after the other. A milder version, using the same arm technique but a louder voice, came into play to announce news nobody wanted to hear. In this case, the trapped person had almost no meaning in the context.

And some people tried to be impressive through handshakes - toward men, that was. A soft grip, until the other hand was firmly caught, then the high pressure vice, while studying how the opponent could cope with that.

The first time someone did this to him, Harry simply waited. Being used to handle a *bokken* through a three hour's lesson, he had no trouble waiting the man out without feeling any pain. Hardening some muscles was enough to balance out.

When the next man tried the same, Harry was already fed up sufficiently to play along. In this league of glass-holders, he should have been kept out of competition. But he wasn't, and so his first response was a counter grip, until he felt the force balanced. Then he changed to a serious pressure.

And no doubt, the people surrounding them knew what was going on, had probably suffered from that trick before.

The man's grip broke, the moment where the real pain started - and only now, for what had to be agonizing five seconds, Harry put his full concentration into his handshake. Seeing the man's face pale, he let go.

The spectators turned back to their own conversation. Remarks would start only after both competitors were out of earshot.

Cho had watched, too. "Playing games, Harry?"

"I didn't start it ... I hope this guy's not important for your business."

"No - the important people come later."

"Then why did we arrive so early?"

"It's a question of pecking order," explained Cho. "If you came two hours earlier, they might talk with you. If you came five minutes earlier, they'll let you wait till the next party ... If you come after them, you may as well forget your business, since they'll never forgive you."

Until then, Harry had also figured out the rules about clothes. Stars, starlets, and other women of the employee class wore dresses, offering as much bare skin as they thought affordable, raising disapproval only from more fat than tolerable but never because one genital or the other was confronted with open air. In contrast, employers, columnists, and freelance contractors wore costumes like Cho. This left some totally unimportant women who presented themselves as if this was a party. They could be recognized easily because these were the only ones who having fun. Or looking annoyed, because they could afford it.

Walking around with Cho, Harry saw a lot of bare flesh, sometimes even attractive. Gerry's question - where Cho had found him - was repeated in all variations, with different add-ons. The women wanted to know where to look for themselves, or to be notified by Cho as soon as Harry was free, or they tried to negotiate with him directly and immediately.

Walking further, Harry could hear speculations of his whereabouts. Most women assumed he was a dancer, probably a result of his balanced gait, which grew more prominent with every minute in this terrain - for him more a combat field than a party scene. When asked, he declared himself a student, leaving open the details.

There were exceptions, however few. One woman simply said, "You two look like made for each other," and Harry's *haragei* confirmed that she wasn't referring to their dresses. As Cho told him, this woman ran a clinic for drug deprivation, the only reliable one which didn't leak to the press - a monopoly, so she could afford being genuinely nice.

And then the men. Again with a few exceptions, and ranging from questionable humour to open provocation, the basic message was that Cho should get rid of Harry, and follow them right now into some office, bathroom, or car to learn how a real f*** felt. Afterwards, she would have a different view of the world and never be the same as before.

It was getting to Harry's nerves, especially at that time of day which, for him, was four hours past midnight.

Another man. He kissed Cho's hand, looked deep into her eyes, and said, "You look wonderful. I'll dream of you." Harry was completely ignored.

He could live with that, although not here.

Another man, short-sleeved shirt open to the waist, showing sun-tanned muscles, at least shapes like that. "Cho-puppy, when will you stop wasting your time with these boys, to meet a real man?"

Cho was about to look around for a real man, but Harry had enough. "Is he important for your business, or can I teach him manners?"

"Claude? ... He isn't important for anyone - save your breath."

Harry didn't want to save his breath, just the opposite. And his hands were free, not holding a glass.

Claude hadn't taken well to Cho's remark, saw Harry as a welcome occasion to blast off some steam. He walked a step back, taking something vaguely similar to an attack-defense position. It looked beautiful, and slow, altogether very funny.

Staring at this performance, it dawned on Harry - this had to be an actor for the kung fu category, used to movements slow enough the camera as well as the spectators could follow. Well - the audience here wouldn't be able to follow his own movements, would only have time to watch the result.

Cho's hand at his sleeve. "Leave it, Harry - it's not worth the hassle."

"No - and it won't take long." He looked at this Claude, saw him making senseless movements with his arms.

A voice behind him. "I won't do it ... Since Claude has dropped doing movies, he sues people - he's just waiting to be touched, then you'll face a lawsuit of two millions."

Harry turned. A calm face, possibly Chinese, a warning glance in the eyes, and an aura in Harry's *haragei* which told him this man meant well.

"Suing? ... Well, then ..."

Remembering what he had trained hour after hour in the recent days, Harry fell into the *kokyu suru*, just long enough to make Claude the clown duck a bit lower. With his next movement, almost from the stand, Harry was up, his legs ahead - missing Claude completely, passing over the man's shoulders, turning in the air, coming to a stand in perfect balance.

Claude wheeled around, eyes popping.

Harry smiled. "You blocked my way to the bar, you - man."

Turning, he took a fresh glass from the table, all his senses on alert - although, this litigation expert knew better than to appear at the wrong side of a filed complaint.

Sneering laughter around, and admiring glances from the women. Gerry's dress looked impeccable, showing perfect cut now as during that moment through the air.

Claude mustered some grin, and something like a bow, and went for his own glass somewhere else.

The man who had warned Harry came closer, his movements quiet, unspectacular, balanced. "That was nice to watch, mister - and to listen."

Mister was something new. Harry said, "Thank you for the warning, er ..."

"Call me Tony ... Tony Chee - I was born as Chee Leung, but I had reason to accomodate a bit."

"I'm Harry - Harry Potter. Nice to meet you, Tony."

Two slight bows, rather than handshakes. Then Tony asked, "Where did you learn, Harry? I have to admit - I couldn't figure out the school, and I thought I knew all of them."

It was the first thing that sounded like a normal conversation, and Harry felt grateful for that, more so as this Tony apparently knew what he was talking about. He answered, "That's probably because it's no real school ... My first *sensei* was Matsuo Shigura."

"Never heard of ... In Japan?"

"Yes. He lives on a small island in the south."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, one of the true masters who give a damn for publicity ... But this must not be true for his pupil. Harry, are you looking for a role?"

"A role??"

"Yes, a role - like in a movie, like as if there was movie people around ... Ever heard that word - movie?"

Harry laughed, much more than this joke deserved, recovering from a world of pretense and gritting teeth that went for smiles.

"What I'm trying to say, Harry - I'm doing movies with that kind of action - the real stuff, not Claude's pirouettes ... And we have a problem there, because you can only find slitfaces with the necessary skill ..."

For an instant, Harry's eyes narrowed. Then he relaxed - if Tony himself wasn't supposed to call a Chinese a slitface, then who else?

Tony had registered Harry's expression. "That's Hollywood terminology, includes us Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans ... Anyway, people got a bit bored of this stuff - the good ones are always the eastern devils, while you'd be a real hit - the All-American dream boy who fights the slitfaces with their own weapons ... Since David, there wasn't anyone else who could play that, and he was never as good as what I saw a minute ago."

"David?"

"Yes, David - David Carradine ... Harry, where do you live?"

Suddenly, Cho stood at Harry's side. "Hello, Tony. Are you trying to get your feet in Harry's door?"

The man smiled. "Checking the ground, Cho ... He's the one I was looking for years - young, caucasian, and a true adept."

"He'd be burned - once kung fu, always kung fu."

Tony shook his head. "David Carradine wasn't ... Okay, we'll never win an Oscar, but it's movies, and it makes a living - I've seen worse burn marks," he looked at Cho, "and I'll see more of them."

Cho smiled. "It's a thought ... But for starters, Harry's under exclusive rights."

Tony nodded. "That's understood ... You know where to find me, if you change your mind." He walked off.

Harry stared at Cho. "Are you my agent?"

"Nonsense ... You cannot play in movies, Harry - you have to finish school first."

"Alright, then let me get back to school. Are we done here?"

Cho bit her lips. "A few more minutes. I had no chance yet to talk with Samy."

"Too busy with starlets, huh? ... Pity it's not his wife, then I might be able to help."

Cho glared at him. "That wasn't funny!"

"Maybe it wasn't thought as a joke ... How long?"

The answer came as a hissing. "Why don't you leave? Nobody's holding you back."

"I came with you, and I'll go with you - that's why."

A sneering. "That's not the standard here."

"But it's my standard ... You'll find me at the bar."

For the next hour, Harry was sitting in a corner - the company at the bar hadn't been to his taste, and there were a few things to think over. Even so, he was offered all kinds of sex - female, male, front or tail, a threesome, and an orgy. Looking mean didn't help, quite the contrary.

He saw Cho talking with a man who seemed to be the host. The man was laughing, shaking his head, saying something which looked very much like an offer to forget business and f*** instead.

Cho came over. "That's it ... Let's go."

"No luck?"

"He wasn't interested in a deal - not the one I had in mind."

"Yes, I saw the alternative offer ... Anyway, I can outnumber this kind of offer by far - had the full choice, really."

"I don't think so," replied Cho dryly, "because you don't know what's the full choice here."

In this case, Harry could live without this knowledge. He followed Cho to the car, sat in the passenger's seat silently, until they reached the hotel. The car came to a halt. Cho glanced at him. "What now?"

"We have to talk."

"Where?"

So she seemed to know the topic he had in mind. Still, her question sounded strange. "In that suite," he said, "where else? Were you planning to drive away?"

"I don't know what I was planning." Cho climbed out, took her bag, opened the trunk for Harry to get his suitcase.

In the suite, Harry went to the small fridge that was called mini bar, took his first hard drink of the evening - vodka with orange juice, sat down and waited until Cho was back from the bathroom, had her own drink, and her own seat. He looked at her, saw someone almost familiar, without that jacket, without the jewelry. "What's going on here?"

"I'm trying to sell spector technology, as a revolutionary concept of movie recording ... That's the bottom line."

"And - what do they say?"

"So far, they're not interested. Movies are made of stars and stories and fiction and imagination, but most of all they're made of marketing ... Nobody cares about technology - sensurround isn't selling a single ticket more, that's what they say."

Harry didn't know what sense-around was, didn't care either. A tired-looking Cho was something to care about, only he was at least as tired as herself, and he had some more questions. He asked, "And otherwise?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why am I here? To escort you to that party? ... I felt like your earring, only you had some already, and I'm not sparkling that much."

"That's not the only reason." Cho didn't look up.

"You've learned to know a lot of people ... Gerry, for instance."

Now she looked at him, sighed. "Yes."

He waited, watching her.

She swallowed. "I called you to ... to be seen with you in public, to make clear that ..." She didn't finish the sentence. Even so, it had been clear enough.

"The one who's dreaming of you?"

Cho's eyes widened. "How - yes of course, I almost forgot ... Yes, that's the one."

"Why?"

She held his stare. "Because ... I wanted to know how it is - with another man. As simple as that ... You had other women - four, if my counting's right, while for me, you've been the only one so far. And before ... I just wanted to have another bearing, that was the main reason. So I took my choice - and I got my bearing, oh yes, I did ... If you want to know - you scored well in that comparison."

"Strange, but I don't feel flattered at all ... By the way, me alone isn't quite correct, as you may remember."

A fleeting shade of a smile. "No, but I wasn't trying to come even - that wasn't the point. I wasn't looking for a teacher either ... What for, with you and ..." Cho's shoulders straightened. "I wanted to make an experience, and I did. It lasted two weeks, then I was cured ... Only he wasn't cured - didn't stop bothering me ..."

"Will he stop now? ... Will he manage to dream alone?"

"I guess so." A short laugh. "Your artistry will probably help a lot - his courage's a bit limited, as I had the opportunity to find out."

"I'm sorry to hear that ... I would've wished you more luck with your choice ..."

"Stop it!"

Harry shook his head. "I'm serious ... I'm still trying to get a handle on that thought, but - whatever I'm feeling now, or tomorrow, I won't feel better to know that it was a mistake ... Just the opposite - I for my part can say that none of the women I had was a ..."

"Please - no ... Don't start drawing parallels ..."

"Why not?" Anger was rising in Harry. "You call me to get rid of your lover, you tell me it's just to widen your horizon, and not anything else ..."

Cho's face showed a pained expression.

"... and then I'm not supposed to comment on that?? Am I more than just a tool to lock a door that went open by some accident?"

Cho looked extremely miserable. "Yes, you are ... I ..." She started to cry, stopped, angry at herself, looked up. "I love you, Harry."

He let it hang in the air.

"Do you still love me?"

Almost a shout. "Of course I do - what do you think why I'm ..." He stopped himself.

A small girl's voice. "Please - hold me, Harry."

He stepped over, sat down at the arm's rest, held her. "Gimme a minute, then it'll work better."

Her head was resting at his arm. "What do you think of me?"

"Right now, I'm just angry, and tired as death ... And I'm trying not to be jealous ..."

Something like hope in her voice. "Are you?"

"I don't know - probably ... Next moment, I'm trying to tell myself - you have no right, because ... Only these people make me feel sick, this Tony was the only one who felt like a normal human being ... If it had been him, I could separate one feeling from the other ..."

Cho tried to grin. "But it hadn't - I'm Chinese myself."

Harry couldn't respond the grin. "This discussion is crazy ... Let's go to bed - sleeping ... All I know for sure - this was the last movie business party I've seen."

Lying in the bed, Harry had a short moment of comfort, feeling Cho's body curled toward his own, holding her, too tired, and still too angry, for any other emotion. For a few seconds, it felt as if she was crying, then sleep caught him.

When he woke, he was alone.

03 - Coming to Terms

Harry was suffering from a bad case of jet lag, reinforced by a bad case of the blues. After waking up as late as alone in the hotel room, first he'd scanned the entire suite for a message left by Cho. Not finding any, he pestered the reception for a note, an address, any trace. By the time he gave up on that, it was past noon.

He ate something, with a taste he couldn't remember. Around two o'clock local time, he jumped home into *The Burrow*, arriving at ten o'clock. Of course, he couldn't sleep.

Sitting in his comfortable chair, the Christmas present from the Weasley parents, Harry reconsidered the disastrous evening again and again, after an initial phase of shock, numb and mindless for a long time. Then, slowly, he started a kind of single-member brainstorming - it just couldn't be called meditation, because he wasn't calm enough, not neutral enough, and because it was an afterthought rather than a preparation.

What had gone wrong? - Everything ... What had he done wrong? - Nothing he could put a finger on, only that, basically, he'd been mad as hell all the evening - a wonderful preparation to be told about another man, if only for two weeks in the past, really ... Then who had done wrong?

Harry's mind refused to answer, "Cho". She was trying to get her feet into some business, an awful business actually, so she was howling with the wolves, and he shouldn't be so touchy about a few people with bad manners and the social instincts of a piranha ... What had they done to him - nothing! If you don't like the offer, drop it. If you don't want a blowjob, just say no thanks. Was it that difficult?

Cho in bed with another man ... What did the thought do to him? Harry tried to be as honest as he could, always with the nagging feeling he couldn't much, but whatever he did, the result was the same. Cho with another man felt like something he could live with, could even think of as a challenge - in general, that was. While this man in particular, this dreamer with his arrogance toward Harry, raised a deep anger, mostly toward the man himself, less toward Cho for her misguided taste. That it hadn't worked out as a happy affair, short and nice, made Harry mad. And that the man seemed unable to accept a *No more*, according to Cho, made him furious.

For a while, Harry pondered the idea of contacting Tony Chee and signing a contract. This would make him a Hogwarts drop-out, but so what?

With some more sense, he checked the thought to the end, saw the problem. The worst that could happen was a big success, forcing Cho to face Harry Potter Superstar of Hollywood while she was still struggling with her little Groucho company, forever frustrated.

So she was trying to profile herself, to throw a shadow even at his side. Having rich parents wasn't enough. Having driven the sharp end of a broomstick through Lucius Malfoy's throat wasn't enough, was a mere footnote to the story how Harry had disempowered Voldemort and won his snake. And her best friend's great success in science and research, while fighting murderers like Warrington in her spare time, while changing her Animagus shape like other people their underwear, wasn't a help either. So, just for starters, Cho had profiled herself with a sex partner of her choice, quite a natural step in this business.

Damn ... If only Cho could apparate, then Harry would have known - she didn't come because she didn't want to.

They should have made love the previous night. Maybe it hadn't been the greatest success in their career, but it would have been sex. It would have smoothened some rough edges, and calmed a desire. Only they hadn't, lacking the mood as much as the mandatory state.

When the first crack of dawn appeared over the horizon, Harry jumped to Hogwarts, went to the lake. He swam into deeper water, dived several rounds, feeling weightless in a dark space - no longer endless as his *getsumai no michi* showed him the borders. Still, he could ignore that.

Back in *The Burrow*, after some sandwiches, Harry felt a light trace of the heaviness required for sleep. And after a while, the bird songs from outside faded to the silence of sleep.

* * *

Harry couldn't remember what had awakened him. In retrospective, he decided it was his *haragei* rather than a noise. Awake, he heard no unexpected sound, had only the memory of something urgent.

Stumbling downstairs, into the kitchen, he found Ginny. About to yawn and smile simultaneously, he finally registered the wave he'd sensed, and it brought him to full alert. "Ginny - what's wrong?"

"Hello, Harry." Almost tonelessly.

"I didn't expect you back that soon. What happened?"

"Nothing." Ginny had fixed a sandwich, started eating mechanically.

Harry sat down at the table. "C'mon - spit it out."

"Why? ... The taste's okay."

The joke fell to the floor and died, due to lack of smile from either side. Harry examined Ginny's face. "How was your trip?"

"Nice." As if referring to yesterday's newspaper.

"Why did you come back?"

"Because it was over."

"Met some people?"

Bingo! While Ginny could hold her face almost neutral, doing the same with her emotions was beyond her scope, not with Harry sensing at high-power level. He asked, "What did they do to you?"

He didn't receive an answer - not in words, that was. Even so, he could feel that something had been wrong in his question because he sensed some relief in Ginny, about him being off the track. So then ... Of course. "What's his name?"

Ginny bolted up. "Stop it! ... You and your damn *haragei* ..." A second later, all energy had lost her. In a moment, she would start crying.

Harry moved closer, put his arm around her shoulder. "It's okay ... You're back home, alive and unwell ... I'll sit here and wait until you can find the words."

"There's nothing to tell."

Harry shook his head. "I don't need Nagini to know it's not true."

"Maybe not, but ... Harry, please don't ask me, because I won't answer."

Examining Ginny's face again, Harry could see that at least this was true, and awfully wrong. He stood up. "I'm going to shower, and to dress."

When he entered the kitchen again, Ginny was still sitting at the table, looking ahead, the rest of a sandwich forgotten on the table. Harry, in contrast, had made progress, because he knew what to do. He started to cut slices of bread, to fix more sandwiches.

Ginny came a bit awake, stared at the pile. "Are you going to eat all that for breakfast?"

"Maybe not for breakfast alone - maybe not alone ... Wait and see."

With little interest, she watched him working. Some minutes later, he was done, had stored the sandwiches in a box. "Here we go ... Okay - move that nice ass of yours."

"What for?"

"Pity you can't apparate yet, pity I can't summon yet ... So it's the linkport."

"Not me ... Have a nice trip."

Harry's head came closer. "You know how you feel? ... Yes, you know, so I don't need to tell you. And we're going to change that. So, what do you prefer - coming with me on two legs or coming with me stunned and bundled?"

Ginny glanced at him. "Yes, you'd do it ... But you'd never get me through the gate, the guards would stop you."

Harry showed a hollow grin. "Me - with my connections to *Magical Tours*? ... You know they won't - so come up."

He certainly felt determined enough to try, only he wouldn't come through with that. He knew, Ginny knew, so this couldn't be her reason. Curiosity was maybe part of it, more likely the readiness to let someone else, someone trustworthy, take over control. At any rate, she followed him.

"Don't forget your swimsuit."

Ginny nodded, obeyed.

The next obstruction occurred in the linkport, when Ginny saw Harry steering toward the Hogsmeade gate. "Hogwarts? ... I'm not going to Hogwarts - there's nobody I want to meet."

"We're not going into the school ... Now c'mon." This was some kind of borderline truth, but the hut wasn't part of the school, was it?

Walking toward the buildings, Ginny stared at him. "Where are we going, if not to the school?"

"It's not the school - that's all I'm telling you."

Now she was really curious.

They were close to the hut when a small, light-brown figure appeared in the open door, standing there, motionless, watching them, leaving no doubt it would be a bad mistake to enter this defended area whose borders were visible only to a dog.

Harry stepped a bit closer, until he saw the ears go flat. He called, "Hey, doggie - don't you remember? Come here!"

His voice was enough - a tentative step, listening to his next words, and then there was no stopping. Like a cannonball, the dog shot toward him, yelping, the tail stump wagging, all excitement and happiness while Harry was kneeling, balancing himself for the welcome of this small but powerful dog.

Ginny watched the scene. "Who's dog is this? ... What's its name? ... Since when is the hut ..."

A voice from behind. "Of course ... Didn't I know? With this dog, nobody would ever dare to come close to my belongings, with the one great exception - Harry ... As if I hadn't been forewarned - the rule isn't made yet that'll hold for you."

Samantha came closer, smiling. "Howdy, sweetheart ... Wasn't God's own country to your taste? ... That's a real surprise, that is." She examined Ginny. "Except she's the reason you came back - or did you bring her with you?"

Harry looked up. "Hello, Sam ... That's Ginny, my sister since last year ... Ginny, this is Samantha, called Sam."

Ginny examined the woman, managed a smile. "Hello, Samantha, nice to meet you ... Did you rent the hut?"

Samantha laughed. "You could say that, honey - or just the other way around." Then she saw Harry's entreating look, understood well enough not to explain more.

Harry came up, while the girl and the woman were standing there, not knowing exactly what all this meant. He said, "Sam - Ginny's back from her own tour ... Something happened, only

she's not going to tell me. But she has to talk with someone - so I thought you were the right person."

Ginny stared at him. "Are you out of your mind?? ... What makes you think I'm going to talk to a complete stranger? You must be really thick to believe ..."

Harry made a calming gesture with his hand. "Wait a minute ... It had to do with a man, and what he did to you, so much's for sure ..."

Ginny's expression changed from disbelieving to furious, with him spilling such details in this kind of public.

"... and Samantha's an expert in bad treatment from men. I think you should give it a try."

Speechless, Ginny stared at him, at the woman.

Samantha's voice was neutral. "It's your decision, hon ... I know there are things you can tell a bartender and nobody else. There's no bar inside, but a drink's within reach." She turned. "Harry, get lost - and take your time."

He nodded. "Of course."

For the next two hours, Harry kept working in the training hall, harder than ever. His high kick-jump over the shoulder of that Claude had been the result of last week's exercises - now he intensified the training. Using a dummy in upright position, he placed an empty can on top of its head and trained kick-jumps that would hit this target without touching the dummy. Then, to relax a bit, and his mind more than his legs, Harry imagined the dummy as Cho's dreamer - just the right picture to jump less high than before, and to kick into the face with the full force of his leg.

The exercises were draining his madness, then his boiling anger, finally his own strength. At the end of the two hours, Harry felt calm enough to meet the dreamer again without getting over the fence. The unknown figure in Ginny's tour was a different story.

He showered and dressed, then went out and walked toward the hut. After a few steps, he already had company - the dog, spinning circles, racing forward, coming back, pure energy on four legs.

Samantha was sitting outside. Ginny nowhere in sight. Harry sat down. "I wouldn't mind something wet."

Samantha grinned. "Wet and cold, or ..."

Did he blush? "A drink - just that."

"A beer, or something poisonous like a soda?"

"Soda's fine, thanks."

The dog came along, a small leather ball between its fangs. The appeal was obvious - Harry should throw it.

He had a better idea. Holding the ball on his fingertips, he pointed his wand, shooting the ball flat upward, wider than he'd been able to throw.

The dog shot forward, seemingly faster than the ball. Its speed was incredible for these short legs.

Watching, Samantha said, "That would be still an idea how to play baseball, Harry. I mean, the rules say something else, but with you ..."

"What's baseball?"

"Ignorant Brit ... As a honest Texan, now I'd be supposed to stop talking with you. But I'm not, so let's go ahead."

The dog came racing, stopped - eyes shining, mouth panting, the ball to its legs.

Harry shot again. "Did you give it a name?"

"Sure thing - Lousy's his new name, and he already responds to it."

"Lousy?? ... What a name for a dog."

"He's not picky about that." Samantha grinned. "You know - I always had this dream, me shouting, *C'mon, you lousy bastard*, and it would work." She laughed. "And now it really does - thanks to you, Harry."

The dog was back, Harry had to shoot again. "So you two got along, huh?"

"Yep - didn't take long ... Either he's been trained, or he's a natural - when this Filch type came along, he made him stop. Then the guy found it appropriate to leave, except that Lousy didn't like this any better than him entering the hut ... He had to stay some minutes before I arrived."

Harry laughed, patted the dog, which was back again. "So you've got perfect instincts, huh? Took Filch right the first time you met ... Good dog - what, not enough yet? ... Okay, then." He shot again.

Samantha opened a beer for herself. "Ginny's at the lake. Said she'll come back in a while ... Nice girl, by the way."

"Did you tell her that?"

"No, I've been listening mostly, and what I said was more the pure and straight kind - I'm not good at sugar-coating, but she wasn't in the mood for that either."

"So she talked to you."

"Yes - after I authenticated myself with a few details from your stories, and after I qualified myself with a few details from my stories." Samantha grinned. "She only got shocked afterwards - when she heard I'm the new animals teacher ... Damn clever of you, not to tell her - she'd never opened up."

"Can you tell me?"

Samantha hesitated a moment. "Let's say, the outline ... She met a man, and they went on tour - on a sailboat, somewhere in the Irish Sea, to have sun, and fun, and a lot of sex ... Well, that man turned out to be a control freak, getting a kick from total control, and humiliation ... Basically, that's all - in a way, she was lucky."

"Lucky??"

"Yes, my sunshine, lucky ... He didn't really beat her, he didn't really rape her, she's still in one piece - where I come from, the victims of such cases are usually dead afterwards."

Harry stared at Samantha. "I don't get it, and I'd like to know a bit more how really is *not really* ... This outline's awfully thin."

Samantha waved impatiently. "After a promising start, that man suggested to put in some thrill in their games, with bondage and so. Well, and when Ginny was tied and helpless, suddenly the rules changed - then it was his decision whether to untie her or not ... And he took his time."

Seeing his disbelieving stare, Samantha asked, "Never tried that, Harry?"

"No - and it doesn't sound like a good idea."

Samantha's finger tipped at her temple. "It's all in the head, Harry - what you find deeper down are just tools. Well, some people do it with imagination, and others do it with ropes and handcuffs ... But you do that with a partner you can really trust, and that was her only mistake."

"And how did she come free?"

"He untied her - when he had enough, when the game started to get boring ... As I said, a control freak - killing her would've been sort of losing control, that's the lucky part."

"And while she was tied?"

Samantha looked expressionless. "No comment."

Harry didn't let go. "You said he didn't really rape her - what does it mean?"

"My God, Harry - you're lying there, tied, and all you want is to be freed, but instead the guy's having his fun ... Technically that's rape, except that in the beginning you agreed ... It's deeply humiliating, but rape is when the judge says it's rape ... Got the picture now?"

"Yes, I think so ... Did she tell you his name?"

Samantha grinned wryly. "No - she was afraid I'd tell you, and then you'd go and kill him."

Harry's voice was growling. "That's a realistic concern, and if Ron's ever going to hear about that, we'd be two - four, with the twins."

"But he isn't, nor are the twins - whoever they are." Samantha stared at him. "Is that understood, Harry?"

It took him a moment to realize - this had to be rated as a compliment, while at the same time Harry registered the familiar burden - knowing something not to be told anyone else. He nodded. "Yeah, you're right."

"Okay then ... I'd rather you'd have a look after her - now, while I'm getting some steaks ready ... You know how long they take - don't come back too late."

Harry remembered some sandwiches, told Samantha. She said, "That's good to know, Harry, really. In case the steaks evaporate, we won't starve - otherwise, maybe the dog's interested in them."

Harry grinned. "It was kind of better safe than sorry ... Mind if I take Lousy with me?"

Samantha smiled. "As if I had a saying in that - look at him, he knows exactly that he's in for a walk." She was right - the dog dancing and yelping since Harry had stood up.

He stored the ball in his pocket, knelt down, his arms outstretched. "C'mon, Lousy - time for a jump."

Next moment, he had the dog in his arms, and a second later, he stood in some distance from their usual place - far enough to give Ginny some time, for recognizing him, for settling her face, maybe her mood.

While walking the last part, he threw the ball into the lake - this time with his arms, and the dog jumped in, paddled out, fetched the ball, paddled back, to drop the ball for another throw, however only after a thorough shaking of its body, spreading drops all over Harry.

He reached Ginny, who had watched the tireless dog. He knelt down, hugged her. Not knowing what to say, he kept silent, which was good as well, the message was understood even so, as he could feel when she returned the hug.

The dog came along, ball in its fangs, to drop it, and to spread water over both of them.

Ginny squeaked, almost a normal sound.

Harry stripped down to his swimsuit and jumped into the water. Lousy found this still more exciting and joyful than ball catching, followed eagerly, looking worried only when Harry dived, so he stayed on the surface.

A moment later, Ginny joined them. Pack-swimming was not only Lousy's greatest delight, it seemed just addictive.

After having splashed and paddled long enough, they climbed out. Ginny had used a broomstick from the school stock, arrived at the hut seconds after Harry had returned with his clothes in one arm and Lousy in the other. They were just in time, the first two steaks due.

Two steaks versus three people and a dog. "Ladies first," said Harry.

"Guests first," said Samantha.

"Older people first," said Ginny.

"First suggestion first," said Harry, and the two women had the good sense to stop the competition and grab their steaks.

Harry saw the opportunity for clearing an issue. "Sam - I was trying to figure a way how to balance out ... I mean, you're feeding me for days already, and now it's two people ..."

Between bites of steak and gulps of beer, Samantha found the time to say, "Sorry, but the sandwiches didn't work out."

A giggle from Ginny.

"Of course not - " Harry was blushing, "they weren't planned ..." He was stopped by Samantha's grinning. "I mean ... er - you know what I mean."

Samantha looked serious. "Stop that bullshit, buddy ... I was facing some dreadful weeks until terms would start, and look what I got - a dog for company all day long, and people to join me in the evening, and to tell me fascinating stories ... So stop bickering about a few steaks and tell us about your trip to this wonderful land where it's your own fault if you don't come out millionaire."

"It was California, actually."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Oh my ... Poor Harry."

"Yeah, that's about the short version."

"How exciting ... And now the long one, please."

"It was in Santa Monica ... Did you ever meet movie people?"

Samantha, chewing, shook her head.

"Praise yourself lucky. Liberal's one thing, but their style, if you can call it style ... It started in a fashion shop where I got some fancy clothes for that occasion - Gerry's. He was very interested in me, though I not in him ... Well, we got along even so. But then ... I'd say, a nice offer for something that'd prevent them from talking was still the politest form of conversation."

Samantha asked, "Man or woman?"

"Both."

"Why do you complain? Doesn't sound too bad - from my perspective. So far, I found myself mostly at the other side of the offer." However, Samantha seemed not entirely serious, it sounded more like a reminder toward Ginny that sexual harassment came in all shades, at all places.

Harry said, "I got an offer to play in a movie." He described the scene with this Claude and Tony Lee, and how Cho had stepped in to cancel the negotiations.

Ginny asked, "How's Cho doing?"

"Well ..."

After a moment, in which he didn't continue, Samantha asked, "Has this been the short version, Harry?"

"Er - yes, in a way. She's trying to sell spector technology, except nobody's interested. I thought - when the three of them started this company, I figured it was to make spector movies. Now ... I guess she's trying to make the big step first. It's ..." He shook his head. "It was a horrible evening, and ..."

The unfinished sentence hung in the air.

After a moment, Samantha said, "And this seems to be an evening of outlines." She pointed to the grill. "But this steak's more than an outline, so go and get it."

Harry did - grateful for something to eat, as delicious as this piece, more grateful to have a full mouth which couldn't answer.

Samantha asked Ginny about the Weasley family, probably out of interest, however quite obviously the change of topic came on purpose. Ginny listed her brothers, whether dead or alive, from Bill, the oldest, to Ron, the youngest. She finished, "Well, and then came Harry - so in a way, he's my youngest brother."

"And the closest." Samantha's voice was matter-of-fact, rather than asking.

Ginny blushed.

Harry said, "Closest isn't the proper term. It's more ... well, we can talk with each other like with nobody else - about everything, no matter what ... Somehow, it developed like that."

Samantha kept her comment short. "That's rare."

Then it was time for Lousy's share, nominally left-overs, however with quite some meat still at the bones, and it was Ginny who wanted to feed the dog.

"Another hole in my security guard," said Samantha. "I wouldn't know why anyone wanted to break in here, but if it ever happens, I'll come to you two. Nobody else would come past Lousy alive."

The conversation went hovering for some more time, keeping to unsuspecting topics, then it was time to catch the last portal back to *The Burrow* - early for Harry's usual standard, just in time before some carefully avoided topics were growing too big.

At home, Ginny was lingering around for a while, maybe in search for a start to talk with him, maybe waiting for his questions, or explanations, then she said good night and went upstairs.

Harry tried to read, found his mind drifting off to events outside the book. He dropped the book, tried to think something positive, found his mind drifting off to images in which he had cornered a figure without a face, without a name, and himself ready to do whatever he felt suitable. Following this thought, he decided this figure would survive the encounter - to remember a lesson never to forget.

This thought felt very positive. Harry went to bed, to think leisurely about methods how to teach a control freak a lesson. Lying in the dark, he sensed through the house, more exactly toward Ginny's room. The result wasn't satisfying. He went out of the bed, out of his room, to Ginny's door, listening.

No sound.

He opened the door, tiptoed to her bed, found her awake, eyes open, wet from tears.

He sat down at the bedside, kept his voice low. "Hi ... It felt as though I should pass by, have a look at you."

"I must look terrible." In spite of her words, Ginny seemed very grateful for his visit.

Registering that, Harry knew what had to be done. "It's dark enough, and this'll have settled in a day or so. But I figure you want to feel normal again until the others come back ... There's no need for them to know, am I right?"

Ginny nodded, while Harry could sense how much the thought was frightening her. He said, "So we have to put you back in shape ... Move a bit."

She looked startled. "What for?"

"You'd never guessed - to make room for me, so I can come in."

She looked no longer startled, now she was terrified. "What do you have in mind??"

"I'm going to repair the damage you're suffering from. I don't know exactly how, but for starters, we'll talk a bit ... You're so jumpy, you'd go through the ceiling at the slightest touch, so that's the first thing we'll settle ... Now, what about a bit of bedspace?"

Ginny seemed to agree in the need, however not in the possibility, or in the method. At any rate, she retreated, almost to the other end.

Harry climbed in, inched a bit closer, to touch her. She didn't jump, felt stiff like a plank. "By the way," he said, "I didn't tell everything of my trip to California ... Cho - she told me about an affair with another man. The good news, it's over. The bad - obviously it was a mess."

He felt how Ginny was tensing more, this time from surprise. Then she relaxed a bit, although without turning. "Really?"

"Yep ... Said she wanted to find out how it is with someone else, before ... Well, she did."

"And now?"

"And now? Now she's wiser than before."

"No, I mean - what about you?"

"I'm still trying to figure out what it means to me ... What upsets me most is that it was such an unhappy affair. You know - if Cho would have said, I met a man, and we had fun, and now it's over - then I could compare it to Tamiko, and maybe I'd have a problem with it, but ..."

Ginny's voice was thoughtful. "Maybe she made the same mistake."

"Mistake?"

"I was stupid, Harry - so stupid. That's one of the things I've trouble to cope with ... How can one be so stupid?"

"In which sense?"

Rage was burning in her voice. "It didn't come entirely out of the blue - there were signs, small forewarnings - except clever me ignored them, clever Ginny was sure she could handle that ... Only she was wrong."

Harry pulled her closer, held her tighter. "So you've made a mistake - and now you're paying for it ... Okay, that happens - you're strong enough to store that lesson where it belongs."

"I thought I could get along with it ... I wanted - all I had in mind was having sex - day in, day out, hopefully till the end of vacation. And then ..."

She was tensing again in his arms, her voice a bare whisper. "You know what was the worst? ... I was lying there, and after some time I had to pee, but of course he didn't let me go. I could hold it for a while, but then ... And he was watching ... Then he cleaned up some, and cleaned me, and then he ..." She started to tremble. "And he didn't stop until ... I climaxed even then, and that's ..." Her whisper broke in a painful crying.

Harry waited until the sobbing had ebbed, all the while thinking that the lesson for this man definitely needed a careful planning. Then he said, "Ginny - you can't avoid peeing when the pressure's high enough, and you can't avoid an orgasm if the stimulation's strong enough."

"Yeah, sure, but - I feel dirty, of a kind that can never be cleaned away." She was crying again.

Selecting his words carefully, Harry said, "I know what - I mean, I didn't know in detail, but I could feel that it's something like that ... That's why I'm here, and together we'll find a way - to make sure you'll feel clean again ... I think I know what you're scared of most - you think you'll never again enjoy sex - am I right?"

He was, getting the answer more in his *haragei* than through anything else.

"You're wounded, Ginny - not outside, but it's a wound like any other ... Did I ever tell you how we handled Almyra's wounding when she was hit by that harpy on our owl patrol? ... It was an outside wound, simpler in a way, but it was heavy, and we had no way back with her in that state..."

Harry described how he and Cho were holding guard over a severely injured Almyra, from late in the evening till early in the morning, until the wound had closed sufficiently so that they could travel back to Hogwarts, two humans on broomsticks, each of them carrying an owl. He finished, "I'm not Madam Pomfrey, but for cases like this here, I'd say I'm better suited."

A little hope in Ginny's voice. "And how do you want to cure me?"

"Dunno yet ... For example, by telling you it's the intention that counts ... This man didn't want to give you joy, he just wanted to humiliate you ... And you didn't want to climax, you only couldn't avoid it."

"Yes, I know ... But knowing's one thing, and feeling's another."

"Of course. That's why the cure must give you back the proper feeling."

"And how?"

The sound of her voice made clear that Ginn's question had to be rated as rhetoric, rather than literal. After a moment, Harry said, "I'll do whatever it takes to settle that."

Ginny turned a bit, to look at him. "I know what you're thinking, and you know what I'm thinking ... Harry, I wanted this for quite some time - it's nothing new to you - but now that's the last thing I have in mind."

"Then we're complementing each other - It wasn't my intention ever before, while now - as I said, I'll do whatever it takes."

Ginny turned again, pressed her back against him. "But not tonight ... Hold me, send me your strength ... Harry - in Hogwarts, I'll pester you and Kenzo and whomever until my own *haragei* is up to the task, and until I can open locks with my mind."

Harry smiled in the dark. "It's okay - but you know what's needed to open a lock for the first time, don't you?"

Something like a giggle. "We'll find a way - and now let's sleep."

* * *

It was almost noon when Ginny's voice broke through the last remnants of his sleep. "Harry - get up, and get out - I want to dress in my own room."

Opening his eyes, Harry saw a figure in a bathrobe, looking somewhat embarrassed, while otherwise worlds better than the evening before. He giggled. "I have a few remarks about that, but all of them are better kept unsaid."

She came closer, bent down to plant a kiss at his nose, smelling of shower and shampoo and young, healthy skin. "Thank you ... And of course she was right."

"Huh?"

"Samantha ... You *are* my closest brother - only a bit sleepy."

"Sleepy? Okay, I slept long, but what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, basically." Ginny blushed. "Only - if you'd been awake a while ago ... But maybe it's better that way." And up she was, and out of the room.

At the breakfast table, she looked almost her normal self, while Harry read the *Daily Prophet*, which seemed to fill the most eventless time of the year with reports of funny encounters between wizards and Muggles.

Breakfast done, Ginny looked at him. "Okay, Harry - this is day one of my training, and you're my teacher. So what's on the schedule?"

He examined her. "Before we come to that, let me say something what's on my mind, and what you should know ... I'm going to think long and hard about how to teach someone a lesson - something never to forget, and maybe good enough not to play certain games ever again. Once I know what kind of lesson this'll be, I'll ask you for a name."

Ginny's lips tightened. "I won't tell ... I don't want to see him again, hear his name again ..."

"You don't have to see him again. Ginny - I just wanted to tell you that I'm not going to kill him, but to teach him ... There are other girls, or women, who might benefit."

"You cannot make the world better - isn't it enough to deal with Voldemort?"

Harry grinned. "I've got spare time, as you see - and besides, for my sister ..." Then, serious again, "But to answer your question, and as lesson number one for today - don't push it away. Go through it - okay, maybe not immediately, but scan it in time, to recognize what happened, where you made the wrong decision, and why ... That's extremely important, for mastering this experience, but still more as a basic principle."

Ginny swallowed. "Do I have to?"

Harry nodded vigorously. "As I said - take your time, but it's mandatory. Look - it's correct to call it training, but fundamentally it's just uncovering buried skill ... It's all inside you, and there's no doubt it's there ... *Haragei* means no more than listening to all signals, and taking all of them seriously. In a way, it's just a mind which is totally open, and totally balanced. How could you ever manage if you lock away some memory - in particular one that can tell you a lot?"

There was wondering in Ginny's voice. "I wasn't aware ... I always thought it's something like *aikido* - you can move and jump, but then you see how it has to be coordinated to greater effect."

"Sure, in a way it is ... Maybe - remember how it started with *aikido*? First we had to learn how to fall - knowing that, we were no longer afraid hurting ourselves in a jump - no matter how we come down. Well, with *haragei* it's similar - once you can be honest toward yourself, face your own emotions, you can do the same toward others."

"Totally honest? ... That sounds frightening."

"Only at the beginning ... I didn't say you have to walk around trumpeting the truth to people not wanting to hear, but stop pretending toward yourself ... By the way, it's surprising how often people know already, except they don't want to know that they know."

"Hmm ... Gimme an example."

Harry looked into her eyes. "Shall I?"

Ginny's eyes widened a bit. After a moment's hesitation, she had found the courage. "Yes."

"You love me. Most likely, you'll never stop doing that. You know. I know. Cho knows ..."

A gasp. "Does she?"

"Yes. We're not discussing it during the meals, but it's a known fact. Ma Weasley knows ..."

Ginny looked almost panic-stricken.

"... and now guess what Samantha had in mind with yesterday's remark?"

"Oh my God ..."

Harry smiled, somewhat sadly. "You see - it's new only for Samantha who never saw you before, while the others can live with that - why not, it's not their problem."

"And Ron?"

Harry shrugged. "He's not blind, not stupid, so he knows ... There's no reason for him to worry, and he has no solution for this problem, so he buries this knowledge somewhere inside - it's not on his to-do list - this is just an example how people know without wanting to know, thereby taking the risk of a wrong decision because they've pushed away some facts that might play a role ... Well, a functioning *haragei* is a high-speed mechanism to register facts and to take them into account."

Ginny exhaled deeply. "Whew ... Alright, got the message, although I'll have to chew on it still for a while."

Harry grinned. "Yeah - welcome to the club ... Now for today, what about a long training in the hall, and then - oh yes, a diving tour in the lake. Ever tried Gillyweed? ... I have enough for both of us. And then sitting with Samantha, talking - she's a good trainer in facing facts, isn't she?"

"Oh yes, she is."

"And her steaks - and Lousy ..."

Training together was considerably more fun. Responding to the actions of another individual - Harry became aware that Ginny was using the opportunity, and him, to work out accumulated rage and fury, and he restricted himself mostly to defenses, even when some inaccuracy opened chances for counter blows.

After a while, Ginny realized it. "Hey, lazybag - is this a training, or what?"

"I wanted to wait till your boiling has faded a bit."

A short grin. "Seems to be the day for missed opportunities - you've had your chance." And she was attacking with more concentration than before, forcing him to use his full skill.

When they finished for the day, Ginny wanted to go straight to the lake. Harry stopped her. "Not yet - shower, tub, and steam room."

"What?? ... On such a hot day?"

"Yes - there's a cold water tub too."

"But why?"

"For many reasons. One of them is - if we're going to dive now, it's very likely you'll get a cramp in the middle of the lake, and that's not a good place for it."

"And the others?"

"You said you feel dirty ... It's very difficult to feel dirty after five minutes in the steam room."

There was still another reason. As Harry had suspected, Ginny felt embarrassed from the simple presence of two naked bodies in the same room. He stopped her. "Why are we here?"

She understood immediately, presented a shy grin. "Yes, I know ... Allright - quite open-minded and honest - seeing you, I was thinking of something other than a dive in the lake." Then she quickly disappeared in the shower.

He called after her. "Now if that isn't progress, then I don't know."

The diving tour in the lake provided a thrilling experience for Ginny, in particular since she wanted to investigate the weed-covered ground closer, promptly running into a nest of Grindybows. After Harry's warnings before, she knew what to do, and he could watch idly as her spells shot streams of boiling water until the last angry water demon fell behind.

Ginny also wanted to see the Merpeople. However, after passing some of them, and after exchanging some friendly waves, this had been enough excitement for the day, leaving sufficient time to reach the lakeside close to the school before the gill-breathing faded out.

Lousy, beyond himself of joy, greeted them first, Samantha moments later. While Harry busied himself shooting balls for the dog, the woman inspected Ginny. "I knew a T-bone steak's healthy," she said, "but I didn't know it's *that* healthy ... Honey, you're almost in time for the next dose."

Ginny laughed. "That's what I had in mind - and maybe a beer, too."

"That's my girl - a reasonable drink, not this nose detergent Harry's always asking for."

Grinning, Ginny glanced at Harry. "Well, he once had a bad experience with alcohol - since then, he's very reluctant in that direction."

"What a nonsense - according to that logic, you had to live in chastity as of now ... Mistakes are there to be made, and to learn from."

Ginny's grin had narrowed a bit at these words, however without disappearing entirely. "Funny," she replied, "that's exactly what he told me ... Another proof that those who can't do teach - oops, present people always excluded, of course - erm, no, I mean present women excluded."

Samantha laughed joyfully, maybe a bit more than the joke was worth, maybe delighted more from seeing a young girl recover so quickly. She looked at Harry. "So - what can you say to your defence, defendant?"

Harry shot the next ball before responding. "Maybe I can live without alcohol."

Smiling, Samantha raised her can. "I'll drink to what you've said - and I'll drink to what you've left out."

Ginny raised her own can. "Me too."

Samantha said, "Since today I can have two opinions, I'd like to hear a bit more about the school, and the other students ... If they're all as tough as you two, then I'm in for a hard time."

Hearing that compliment, Ginny looked pleased. "Relax - Harry's an exception, the others are pretty normal."

Harry disagreed. "Normal, huh? ... Like Rahewa, for instance."

Samantha asked, "Who's Rahewa?"

Harry grinned. "A perfectly normal twelve-year-old, with a perfectly normal twin-blade knife of about four inches - the blade, not counting the handle ..."

Ginny cut in. "Yes, and you shouldn't talk bad about Harry in her presence, Sam, because otherwise you'll find her at your neck - I mean, with that knife in front."

Samantha looked from one to the other, decided they weren't kidding, sighed. "Okay, got the picture ... Some other unremarkable students I should know about?"

A moment later, they realized that Samantha was not yet fully aware of Hogwarts' most dominant organization structure - the four houses. And from then till the time of the last linkport jump, they were talking about Gryffindors and Slytherins, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, about the House Cup, the Quidditch Cup, and how teachers always had to be judged with respect to the houses they represented - like Snape, for example, even someone as straight as McGonagall.

It had been a splendid evening. Harry and Ginny told Samantha they would probably see each other only at the beginning of terms, since the rest of the Weasley family was expected tomorrow or day after tomorrow, then they hurried to the Hogsmeade linkport.

In *The Burrow*, Harry expected to finish the evening with a more private conversation. Ginny however, here in the house more self-conscious than at Hogwarts, soon disappeared to her own room. After checking some books, not finding anything worth the time, Harry went to bed.

Terms would start in a few days. Time to clear his mind about what he planned to do in this last year. What he needed was a goal - something to carry him forward, to prevent the feeling that his year was wasted, that he'd be better off playing the All-American Dream Boy for Tony Chee, always in the hope he might meet Cho around the next corner.

Where was a goal waiting for him? ... Not in Charms - Apparition done, summoning still open, and portkey programming, but there was nothing exciting in that ... Not in Potions either - fuming poison balls was a topic good to fill the year - not to forget travels to Haiti - but not more. Not in Defence against the Dark Arts either - not for him who could have challenged the teacher's role in this course. Maybe ...

The door of his bedroom opened. Tapping of bare feet on the rug. And there stood Ginny - outlined by the light from the window behind, a light which fell on angles and curves of a body as bare as her feet.

"Okay, doctor," she said, "... here I am - er, and already undressed." Her voice a bit unsteady, her nervousness palpable.

Harry inched aside, making room for her. "Come in."

Ginny hesitated. "Are you ..."

He wasn't sure, not at all. Rather than answering, he opened the bedcover, and she slid under it.

He moved one arm under her neck. When his other hand came to rest on her stomach, he felt her twist, felt the tension in her. He whispered, "Take it easy ... We have all the time of the world, and what's going to happen won't happen fast."

Her voice was small. "No, we don't have all the time - only till tomorrow morning, right?"

"Yes."

"That's why I came now - although, I'm sure, even if we had ten days, I'd have come only in the last possible instant ... I'm a bit ... no, I have to be honest - I'm scared, it's much worse than the first time ..."

His hand didn't move. "Why?"

"Because ... Because I don't know what'll happen - I mean, how I react ... And because it's you - could be I'm going to panic in the middle of ... and I don't want to panic - not with you."

A smile in his voice, Harry asked, "You mean, panicking with someone else isn't that bad?"

A nervous giggle. "No, it's not ... But - you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know. Still - please tell me."

Ginny started to speak, stopped, swallowed, started again. "I ... I had this picture in my mind - often enough ... How I come into your room, naked, and you're awake, and you look at me, and ... I didn't think it would ever happen, and suddenly ... But now it's coming true, except ... I don't want to spoil it - this is the last chance, so ..."

He moved a bit closer. "We're not going to spoil it - I promise you."

"Harry - how is it for you?"

"Well, I'm a bit nervous too ... You're my first girl, so-to-speak."

"You're not doing this just for curing me, do you?" There was a deep plea in her voice.

"No ... Curing you - that's the justification that I can do it, while otherwise ... I'm not loving you like I love Cho, or like you love me, but my feelings for you are deep enough ... And besides - I'm trying to keep my hand quiet, until ... What I'm feeling there is very inviting - you know, I'm not used to young girls, so that's all new to me."

A short giggle. "Then maybe you shouldn't keep that hand so quiet."

But as soon as his hand touched her more intimately, Harry felt her freeze. His mouth was on her ear. "I know what's wrong - we're unbalanced."

"What??" Startled.

"I'm still dressed, and you're not ... We have to change that." After a moment in which neither was moving, he added, "*You* have to change that."

At her first movements, Ginny's hands were trembling. Until she had freed him from his night dress, the panic was gone. She looked at him, not knowing how to proceed further.

"Put yourself onto me ... And now keep still."

He was feeling her weight. After a while, he could feel a slight change in her mood, something like intimacy - just a closeness, far from arousal. Ginny looked up. "Doesn't work ... I'm sorry." He could hear the tears rise in her voice.

"Wait - wait ... No need to hurry ... Come to my side." He held her close to him. "This morning - was it true, if I'd been awake?"

"Yes, I think so ... No, I'm sure."

"Well, then ... Let's talk for a while."

"About what?"

"Stories ... I know a story about a wet dream. Interested?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"It had to do with someone who was scared too, and in some kind of shock, and when the dream was over, this someone had recovered enough to go through the day, and to fight, until the terrible days ended."

Ginny looked at him, seemed to have an idea where this story had happened, was suddenly very interested. So Harry told her about the dream which had been dreamed by Deborah, and by himself.

For a moment, Ginny seemed stunned. Then she asked, "Does Cho know?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Well - it didn't exactly make her day, but she wasn't furious."

"If ... if we - if this here ever leads to something, would you tell her?"

"I'm not going to lie to her. If she would ask ..."

Ginny examined his face. "You ain't scared of anything, are you?"

"Sure I am - but not of the truth ... I've stopped that some time ago - especially if I can stand to what I did, and would do the same again."

She exhaled. "Okay ... Let's give it another try."

"Oh my ..." He chuckled. "This sounds as though we have to do an O.W.L. in sex - how shall I ever get ready, if you know what ..."

She was angry. "Stop it! ... It's not funny."

His hand, ever so lightly, was caressing her breasts. "Maybe not, but laughing's better than crying ... Alright, let's get serious - what can I offer, madam? Missionary position - a tergo ..."

Giggling. "Harry, you're impossible! ... You sound like a used car salesman, not like someone who's supposed to seduce me."

"In this case, let's try a brand-new model ... Tell me - what do you want me to do? Something new, not charged with a bad memory?"

After a moment of silence, even her whisper sounded self-conscious. "Yes, there's something ..."

Harry felt first responses to his stroking. "Then tell me."

"It's ... no, I cannot."

He had an idea, was actually pretty sure. He pushed off the bedcover, exposing her full body. His mouth was caressing, sucking, licking - her nipples, moving along her chest, stomach,

downward, reaching her thighs. Changing position, he started a new journey from her thighs upward. He felt no protest, only a growing expectation, a rising thrill.

When his lips touched her core for the first time, he heard a deep sigh, felt how the last tension was fading from her, replaced by devotion, opening to a new pleasure.

His lips trailed around, across, resting for a moment, to inhale the faint scent of musk, to feel a slight tremble in her, his own body responding with growing arousal. Then his tongue ploughed through the furrow, opening her lips, raising a moan, went further upward, circling a tiny spot - and again, and again.

Her arms were lying to her side, powerless, hands fluttering in tiny movements.

His hands inside her thighs, he parted her wider. His mouth inches away from her wet, open center, he sent his breath, as though blowing out a candle light, only this flame was burning stronger and stronger, Ginny's own breath in ragged gasps when his tongue resumed its tender work.

Close to the peak, he stopped again, for a torturing moment, let his finger circle around, gently tabbing a tiny piece of rapid pulsing, coming down again, trailing to the other end.

She was racing through the last steps, her hoarse groans growing deeper, longer. His arms around her thighs, his mouth covering her open core, alternately licking and sucking, he felt her reach the summit, explode in a long moment of an almost motionless crescendo, interrupted by sharp twists racking through her body, then she went slack.

Next moment, her arms were waiting for him. "Come ... Come inside me."

He pushed through coolness into heat, a heat which was burning him in a firestorm, while her arms were pulling him as tight as they could, her mouth close to his ear issuing sighs of satisfaction, as a response to his moaning, his thrusting which quickly culminated in his own moment of eternity, his last sharp twists before tensing in the final shot.

Then he was lying at her side again, held her in his arms, her head at his chest, some tears in her eyes, this time no reason to worry, quite the opposite.

He stroked her hair, not used to its lightness, shortness. "Was it what you had in mind?"

"Yes ... It was so wonderful - I ..." She stopped.

"Say it."

"I love you."

He pressed her against him. "If I'd say the same to you, it would be the truth, only these words are reserved for ..."

"I know - it's okay."

It wasn't - not quite, but this was the best they could achieve.

Her fingers were playing over his skin. "This wasn't a dream. I'm fully awake - but it's what I have dreamed of ... Is this shameful, Harry?"

"You ask the wrong person for that ... But even so, think twice before asking someone else."

He felt her chuckle. "I won't - although, I'd know someone I could ask that."

"And I'd know two."

"Two? ... I was thinking of Samantha - who's the second?"

"Remember your sister-in-law?"

"Oh ... Yes, you're right, only I never talked with her about such things. But you did, didn't you?"

"Yes - I don't dare to think what I would've done without her advice."

She hugged him again. "And I don't know what I would've done without your - er, cure ... Thank you, Harry."

He smiled. "It was a pleasure - oh yes, it was."

She looked at him. "Was it?"

"Yes - didn't you feel it? I cannot fake ..."

She smiled. "No - that's not what I mean. This is our first and our last night together, right?"

"Yes."

"But the night isn't over yet." Suddenly, she was up, and then she was on top of him. "Doctor, I feel there a terrible pain - and what's more, right now I feel something else that might hurt - we should do another treatment, just to be on the safe side ..."

04 - First Signs

Dumbledore was speaking for a while now, only what he said reached Harry's ear through a filter. This filter - could it be offered for sale - would have made Harry rich, considerably richer than he already was. Because it let the information pass, stored it somewhere in Harry's mind, while the words just bounced off. Although the filter seemed temporarily, had been implemented a while ago, around the time when Dumbledore addressed one of the changes in Hogwarts.

The news were certainly interesting enough. They had to do with new teachers for old courses, and old teachers for new courses - probably the reason why the filter let them through.

An old teacher, going to cover a new course, was Remus Lupin - Remus in private conversations, Lupin in public, Prof in classes to come, and these classes would be Charms. Lupin had given up Transfiguration.

Considering how he had mastered the challenge in the previous year, how he had managed to become an Animagus under his own control, this abandoning seemed strange. Something new just when he had settled? - Yes, because even these admirable efforts were insufficient to cope with the well-known skill of the new Transfiguration teacher.

Almyra Benedict.

Almyra replaced Lupin, and Lupin replaced Madam Hooch, now known as Sylvie and, according to Cho, working around the clock for an uncertain future of *Groucho Spectors Ltd*. When the Headmaster announced Almyra, Harry applauded enthusiastically, still listening to Dumbledore's every word, watching the Headmaster's smile toward a beaming couple, some seats farther down the teachers' table.

Harry still was listening, and applauding as frenetically as before, when Dumbledore announced Samantha Sheridan, the new teacher for Care of Magical Creatures, replacing Jesamine Grubbly-Plank. With two exceptions - Ron and Ginny, the other students had looked surprised, seeing Harry welcome Samantha that way.

Samantha took the opportunity for a few words of her own. "Howdy, ladies and gents, boys and girls ... As this big guy just told you, I come from Texas, and you can blame him for getting me across the big water. He said to me, there's a bunch of little wizards and witches, called students, all of them incredibly well educated, and just waiting to hear what you've to say ... You know, that's how they sell insurances in Texas, so for myself I translated it to something more realistic, like - er, well, you know what I'm trying not to say. And then I come here this evening, to see you all for the first time, and guess what - he's right."

Laughter, protest, applause.

"Yes, I agree with you - it has to be pretense, just to smoothen the culture shock. That's understood, naturally, I'd do the same in your position ... But by pure luck, as the - erm, as someone said, I've got insider information, so it won't be quite that simple for you when trying to drag my feet. Sure, I'd be disappointed if you wouldn't try, but ... Well, folks, what I'm

trying to say - for someone from outside like me, 'specially from an outside like Texas, you just don't know what a gentle people you are, so I thought I should tell you ... Thanks."

This was followed by roaring applause. Hermione, quick as ever, drew the conclusion from Harry's unexpected enthusiasm to Samantha's remark about insider information. Her look promised Harry a thorough interview about recent conversations.

Then Dumbledore announced the third new teacher for dance lessons, also the new liaison officer with Beauxbatons, and a moment later this teacher appeared, and since then, Harry's mind was busy with something else.

And not only his mind. Because the new teacher was Marie-Christine Thérout.

What he was thinking would be badly suited for admitting in public, and what he was feeling - a thrill in his entire body, a tension in his groin, sent a message surprising even himself. He wanted her.

Maybe this was cheating, maybe what filled his mind were unfaithful thoughts. If so, then for the first time. Nothing before had counted seriously - not in his opinion and, to some degree, not in Cho's either - as far as she knew, that was, but his night with Ginny didn't count much differently from a previous encounter in a similar situation.

Well - not from his side.

Only that this night had broken a dam. He knew it, knew which factors had played together to let it crash, and he was ready to take his share of guilt, if guilt was involved. This moralic weight felt easy to carry since he saw it in perfect balance with the other share - Cho's.

It wasn't even Cho's affair with another man. Harry felt neglected, quite simply. All through vacation, there had been just one night ... And not even on selfish purpose. Okay, truth to be told, he had welcomed the opp - er, obligation, and the night had been long - or short, depending on how to count. The next morning, in full daylight while still alone in the house, there had been a short discussion whether the night was over. They had come to an agreement quickly - the night was over when the blinds were up.

But that was it, while other people ... Two weeks, Cho had said, which meant fourteen nights, and if they hadn't used them, they could blame only themselves. Four weeks for Ron and Janine - as Ron had explained, the trip had come cheaper than expected, which left just one conclusion, and Harry only wished he and Cho had been together four weeks in a row.

What's more, he wasn't indiscriminate, not at all, actually. He felt no desire to gather a collection of experiences. What did he care about other women? Well, okay, a bit more than about other girls, but ... He just felt a deep longing in general, with a specific focus in particular. Was this what people called sperm-blind? - Maybe, since his vision seemed strangely narrowed down to one spot, but there was still his *getsumai no michi* to watch, hehe.

His desire was growing by the minute. Almost painful, though not unpleasant.

Had someone near him mustered a *haragei* like his own, the scandal would have been perfect. But there wasn't anyone. Harry's eyes had met Marie-Christine's only for a short moment - enough to make her look somewhere else. Even across the distance, she had recognized it, and

Harry had received an answer as clear as his message. Maybe this had been the moment for that filter to start working.

"... seem to know this Texan woman quite well."

"Huh?"

Hermione looked indignant. "I said, you seem to know that new Care teacher quite well, Harry ... Have you been the source of the insider information?"

"You mean Sam? ... Yes, she was feeding me T-bone steaks, and I was feeding her stories."

A wicked grin. "Sam, huh? ... That's all - just stories and steaks?"

This would be easy play. "No, there was something else."

Hermione nodded. "That's what I thought - alone in this big, deserted school ..."

Harry grinned. "Not the school, dummy - Hagrid's hut."

Calling Hermione dummy had been a mistake. He knew it - a second too late, realizing that he better concentrated on this conversation, otherwise he could as well stand up and declare in public what was really on his mind. Hermione looked a bit mean. "And how's Cho doing? ... Far away, that's for sure."

"Right you are - in California, to be precise. And when I visited her, I found an abandoned dog in London Linkport, and took it to Sam, said this hut *must* hold a dog ... That's all - I haven't been in that hut once."

"Doesn't mean anything - with the warm air outside, and the nice grass ..."

Ron stared at Hermione, about to protest, about to mention that another member of the Potter-Weasley gang had joined the evenings.

Harry was quicker, for example with respect to Ron's inaccurate view about the number of days Ginny had joined them. As this view wasn't inaccurate by accident, he hurried to say, "Okay, Cho's far away most of the time, which means I wasn't as clever as some other people, picking me a Hogwarts teacher who's always so nicely at hand - but it doesn't mean I take the next opportunity to correct that mistake."

No - only the second.

Before Hermione could say out aloud what he was thinking, Harry added. "While on the subject - how was the weather in Bulgaria?"

"Sunny - during the days, I mean." Hermione smiled, sufficiently put off track by Harry's hinting that she, Keeper of the Rules, was frivolously violating one of them constantly, for more reasons than sheer tradition. "And here?"

"Hot ... I got me some Gillyweed, for diving tours in the lake. It's awfully expensive, by the way - twenty-two galleons a-piece."

Ron glanced at Harry, kept silent, not knowing how to comment on that in the presence of Hermione, who didn't know about Harry's fortune.

Hermione turned to Ron. "And how was the weather in France?"

"Almost too hot to be outside." Seeing Harry's and Hermione's grin, Ron grinned in return - with everybody aware of the conversation between the lines, it was nearly impossible to find a harmless formulation, and there was no need to make bad jokes about someone keeping inside.

Then Hermione wanted to know if Harry had managed to find some Haitian werewolves. Funny as it seemed, for such a diligent student and researcher, had she spent no thought whatsoever at her project while in vacation. Yes, Harry had agreed to be her agent, but it was so untypical of Hermione, biding her time until someone else would deliver results.

Harry told her what Mrs. Benedict had said, that they had to talk with Almyra, that this had been a major disappointment in his planning for vacation, and how it finally had led to his first encounter with a teacher from Texas.

Hermione was baffled. "A deputy sheriff? ... Now that'll be interesting to see how she's running the job here. Since Mad-Eye Moody, we haven't seen a student dance in the air as a rabbit."

Ron grinned. "And for her this would be even appropriate - such a rabbit would definitely count as a magical creature."

With the latest news exchanged - that was to say, the public ones, Harry checked whether there'd be a chance for reaching the teachers' table unnoticed. With the start of his last term in Hogwarts, suddenly the Ravenclaw table was unimportant, while there were many people at the teachers' table with whom he would like a chat after meals. One, in particular.

But someone else caught him first - Ginny. Having been quite content and relaxed during the last days, was she now looking a bit worried. "Harry, did you already talk with Rahewa?"

"No - why?"

"There's something on her mind - something serious." Ginny sent a quick smile. "You know - I'm trying to train my *haragei* all the time, and so I did with her. I'm not that far yet, but just by watching her - she's not herself."

This was reason enough to let Harry sober up a bit, to change priorities for the moment. He took the next opportunity for a casual stroll along his own table, to address the youngest member in the Gryffindor Quidditch team. "Hi, Rahewa. How was your vacation?"

"Fine, thanks."

Like some days before, Harry sensed enough to feel deeply worried. There hadn't been anything fine in the girl's vacation, certainly not in the recent days.

"In the mood for a walk?"

Rahewa didn't look at all like that. But next moment, her lips tightened, her head nodded, and she followed Harry outside. Having left the building behind, Harry said, "I heard from Cho about some - er, transactions, actually right after the last conversation I had with you. So you've switched Firebolts, huh? ... Did Cho tell you about her very personal motive for that?"

"No." As if Quidditch was something to be mentioned in a footnote, after the really important items were out of the way.

"Well, she's pretty sure that for the next years, she can walk around saying, I was the last one to beat this Gryffindor Seeker ... She could be right in that, couldn't she?"

"Yeah, could be."

Had Cho traded her old Comet for Rahewa's Firebolt One, the answer could have been hardly more dismissive. Harry waited a moment to see whether Rahewa had something on her own agenda, but no such luck. He continued, "She also told me about your contracts. Of course, I felt a bit excluded at first, but how can you compete against real prairie grass? ... Anyway, I was glad to hear you'll be a movie star."

This time, he had hit a string, only it felt strange - something like guilt, disappointment, desperation. "Say ..." He stopped - Rahewa was about to speak.

"Harry - what I said the last time ..."

"Yes?"

"About ... What you said about a scholarship ... Can we ..."

He tried to help. "You're interested?"

"Erm - yes."

"Sure - of course, any time."

Rahewa was struggling with every single word. "Then ... I'd need it soon ..." The prospect of thousand galleons wasn't cheering her up - quite the opposite, she was fighting tears more than words.

Harry stopped, took her shoulders. "Rahewa, tell me - what's wrong? You didn't gamble your salary from Cho, did you?"

The girl was at a loss to speak, and she was losing the fight against her tears. Harry took her, put her head against his chest, and held her while violent sobs were shaking the thin body. After a while, he sat down, tapped the grass at his side. "Come here, let's sit and talk."

The tears had cleared the way for words, haltingly still, not surprisingly at Rahewa's story. No, she hadn't gambled, although the money had been spent in a desperate bid of a different kind. Her mother was ill, seriously so, and every galleon within reach had been invested in an attempt to find a better treatment than the public offer. Worse, Mrs. Lightfoot had been the source of the sparse money in this household, and this source had of course dried out first.

"What about your father?"

The flow of words came to a standstill. After a moment, burning shame in her voice, Rahewa confessed that her father was unemployed, had an alcohol problem, always good to drain the last sickle off the small Lightfoot purse.

"I see ..." Harry exhaled. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm glad you told me, so we know exactly where we stand."

No answer, still - Rahewa obviously had the same thought.

"Now ..." Harry was selecting his words carefully. "Let me explain something ... Mr. Chang - Cho's father, that is - has found a way to deal with this Mr. Crownshield, I mean rather than killing him. As a result, I've got more money than I can spend ever - I don't even know what to do with the interest per year. That means - there's a lot of money waiting to be used for something ... By the way, that's the reason why I came to you with that silly story ... Anyway - if you allow me to help, I'd be more than glad to take over the cost for the medical treatment."

No - just the scholarship, nothing else.

"Rahewa - since your mother is so seriously ill, don't you want to try everything, no matter what it takes? Assume there's a chance, only it's so expensive you couldn't afford it - thousand isn't much for doctors and clinics - I think you'd never forgive yourself, not to have tried."

"But ..."

"You think you'll never be able to pay back, not in a lifetime - am I right?"

He was right indeed.

"Let me make a suggestion ... First, I'll talk with Gringotts, or that lawyer, that Spinbottle, to make sure that all bills from the treatment are directly routed to Gringotts, and they know how to handle them ... Then, for your own living, you get the scholarship, with your own Gringotts account nobody else has access to ..."

Rahewa's head was shaking.

"Hear me out ... This scholarship is exactly what it says, so you'll have to pay back after you've finished Hogwarts - or before, if that movie business turns out more profitable than expected. While the treatment covering ..."

"You must tell them to do a full bookkeeping!"

So the offer was settling in her mind, thank God. Harry nodded, "They'll do it anyway, but for us - let's assume it's really as expensive as what I'll get in interest for one year. Then, at the end of the year, hopefully your mother's doing better, and I'm still as rich as before - Rahewa, take it into proportion ... It'll give me an ob on you, and that's it."

Still some reluctance.

"As I said - in the worst case, I'll have just as much money as before - anything more than an ob would be inappropriate. I mean - you've protected me against Gérard, and for this alone I'd say it's me to balance out, but - yes, I know that you'd never agree, that's why you have to live with that ob, until I come to claim it ... Now - do we have a deal?"

Yes, they had.

"Then what about your father? ... There are places to dry out people, to give them a new start. What do you think?"

Rahewa didn't think so, because her father wouldn't go to such a place, and even if, he'd fall back to his old habits immediately - as soon as a galleon could be seen within reach.

"Well, then ... Can you handle him?"

"Yes." With a fierce expression.

"Allright ... Listen - at breakfast tomorrow morning, I need a sheet with address, data, everything to establish this arrangement. Some time during the day, I'll jump to London and settle it - and I'll inform this Spinbottle that he's going to talk with the doctors, to make clear your mother's a patient whose welfare is followed up by people outside - we know what a difference it makes, don't we?"

For the first time in this conversation, Rahewa's mind issued something other than dark despair. After a moment, she said, "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"This obligation - it'll never end."

He smiled. "In the Japanese tradition, it would be unfair - but I guess in the Indian tradition, it has to be that way, so it's okay ... And of course - " he looked solemn, "it establishes a bond between us - still more than before."

Walking back to the school building, Harry wondered if this side effect was really a spin-off that had come by accident. Somehow, he had his doubts. Of course, Rahewa would never use the illness of her mother for any purposeful manoeuver. Every step in this conversation had been inevitable, the obvious consequence of the previous one, and at the end, Rahewa's devotion to him was suddenly framed by an official bond.

Then he remembered Cho's words, about him collecting family in many ways. So his own sub-conscious apparently had played a role. Well, that was just fine.

Entering the hall, he found the teachers' table deserted.

* * *

First school day in Hogwarts. A breakfast served by house elves was a good thing, much more convenient than doing everything by yourself, and the food beyond any criticism. Not so the time when it was served - awfully early, after weeks of sleeping till noon.

Of course Harry was late, had to shove down the stuff as fast as he could.

Then Rahewa came to deliver the sheet, these two black eyes looking into the world with a bit of hope. Then Ginny caught Harry to ask about Rahewa, and which miracle he had performed that the girl could smile at Ginny. From her own experience, Ginny felt of course worried that Rahewa had encountered something of a similar category.

"No," assured Harry. "It's about her mother. She's ill, sort of pretty bad, and we agreed that I'll take care of the financial aspect."

Ginny looked relieved, and pleased - to be honest, she looked somewhat more, and Harry asked her whether he had to come with a lemon, to bite into, before other students might have their own thoughts.

By the time this was settled, the first class was due, and Harry still hadn't found his way to the teachers' table.

Potions came first, with McGonagall full of elan to give the new year and her students a jump start, while the students would have preferred a more careful approach toward hard work. And sure enough, the Headmistress remembered her conversation with Harry, nominally ranked as an end-of-year exam. "Mr. Potter," she asked, "what about your project? Are you going to do it?"

"Er - yes, Prof. Except I don't know where to start."

"I spoke with Mr. Dumbledore about that. He's pretty sure the deadly agent was sulphuric acid, and only the ball, its rotating, speed and so forth were driven by magic. In other words - you're in for some basic chemistry, which means a thorough scan through the library." Seeing Harry nod, without moving further, McGonagall asked, "Then what are you waiting for? ... The library's reached by walking, I'm afraid." But it came with a smile.

Ron had listened. "What kind of project is this, Harry?"

"It's about these yellow-fuming balls Voldemort used in the Battle of Hogwarts. He used the same balls to guard Sirius' prison on that island - and I want to figure out how to fight them."

"One of these balls ..." Ron stopped, even so, Harry knew what his friend had left out - one of these balls had killed Charlie, while Hagrid had escaped the yellow fume, to die an instant later under a Killing Curse.

"Harry ... Can this project afford someone else?"

Harry examined the tight-lipped face of his step-brother. "I was already wondering how to handle the phase when it's time to shoot balls and counter-balls ... But it's a lot of work, so don't you ever complain about me dragging you into this."

Ron still didn't smile. "If you see me coming with earmuffs, you know what's up."

McGonagall found it a good idea, running the project in a twin team, and minutes later, Harry and Ron were scanning through large volumes in the library.

Ron stopped reading. "What did she say - sulphuric acid? ... Here, I found something. There's sulphuric acid, sulphurous acid, and sulphurated acid ... No - sulphurous and sulphurated seems to be the same."

A moment later, his voice sounded excited. "Hey - look at that! Atomic models of molecules ... Reminds me of astronomy - it's almost like planetary orbits." Ron glanced up. "Harry, what do you think - me doing the basic chemistry, and you figuring out the magic elements ... Is this a reasonable split?"

"We'll know afterwards ... For now, it sounds okay to me."

And this was the start of their Poison Ball project which, at some time, should play a key role in the events to come.

* * *

The next class was Transfiguration. The Gryffindors were already sitting in their rows when Almyra entered the class room, welcomed with hammering knuckles, stomping feet, and shouts of hooray - in particular from three students, sitting side by side.

Almyra beamed. "That's very kind - and the right thing against my nervousness ... This is my first class from the other side - " she blushed, "only weeks after we all have been students. I thought - my first class, please let it be first-years ... And now it's you."

"Yeah!" Seamus Finnigan, his arms raised, hands outstretched to claws, was shouting, "We're big, and mean, and dangerous!"

The rising laughter died in a gasp. Suddenly, a large black dog ducked on the table, baring its teeth, a deep growl in his throat. Seamus fell down to his seat like being shot, staring, his face gone pale.

The dog jumped behind the table, then Almyra was back, smiling maliciously. "I said I'm nervous - I didn't say I'm scared."

Harry's fist was pumping, his thumbs up, his face shining in admiration.

Almyra saw it, smiled at him. Then she turned to the class. "We have a little problem, but I know already how to solve it ... If you call me Prof, I'll start laughing. If I call you Mister and Miss, then *you'll* start laughing ... So - and this is a convention that applies to seventh-years, maybe sixth-years too - I'll call you as I did some weeks ago, and you'll do the same, calling me Almyra ... I'm sure we'll get along - and if you hear me addressing you by your family name, then you know you're in trouble."

Yes, the names were used as before, while at the same time there was this fine difference, established by Almyra within seconds, cleverly taking profit from Seamus' pantomime. In that, Almyra had beaten the Hogwarts speed record, previously held by Professor Drilencu, who had invented the title *Prof*.

It was interesting to see - the less formal a teacher acted in these superficial details, the better - and the quicker - seemed this no-nonsense atmosphere established. Harry was musing how it

would be with a teacher who suggested *Hey, old pumpkin* when the current teacher's tight grip caught him.

"Harry," said Almyra, "the class file is somewhat vague about your recent activities, but I just happen to know that you've been running a bit idle in Transfiguration, in favour of other issues. Now that they're settled - what's your goal? ... Wanna give it a try?"

Fascinated, and admiringly, Harry looked at his new teacher. "Yes, Prof - er, sorry, Almyra ... Yes, I'd like to master an Animagus."

Almyra nodded with appreciation. "Like the father, like the son ... And what do you have in mind? Something extravagant - your father was a prong, right? ... Or something handy?"

Harry remembered the conversation with Lupin. "No, I won't say it could be called handy."

The teacher, who happened to be his sister in spirit, showed pleased expectation. "What shall it be, Harry?"

"A dragon."

Next moment, the class was hanging in their seats, captured in a howling laughter - even Ron. Only Hermione, who could have quoted chapter and verse of the Transfiguration handbook stating that these animals were beyond reach, stared at Harry with widening eyes.

And someone else remained calm - Almyra. "In this case," she said, "you may contact the National Dragon Foundation, to visit a dragon camp. I think the closest is in Ellesmere - that's in Wales, near Shrewsbury. They have mostly Common Welsh Green, and some Hebridean Blacks ... I have a feeling none of them is your choice, but it's a start."

The class was still laughing, taking Almyra's answer for just the kind of joke you might expect from her, after Harry's answer. Ron shouted, "No, it's obvious what he'll do - a Chinese Fireball, just for a perfect fit."

The class was howling again. There wasn't anyone having trouble to understand Ron's joke.

Neither had Almyra. She looked very cool. "Ron Weasley, for someone who once had a brother devoted to dragons, this is a pretty stupid remark - and I don't remember having asked for your opinion."

And only now, staring into two flaring eyes, it dawned on Ron with the big mouth that his teacher was the best friend of this other Chinese fireball, the one in the human shape. He looked like hit in the face. "I ... sorry, I thought it was a joke."

Almyra's voice sounded a bit friendlier. "I don't think so." She glanced at Harry. "Was it?"

Harry had listened to the laughter, in particular Ron's, and to his remark which, for some reason Ron didn't know, kept burning like a sting, and Harry knew - this scene was to motivate him in the dark moments when the task would appear impossible to master. It would drive him like he'd been driven once, finally coming up with a Golden Patronus.

"No," he said. "It wasn't ... None at all."

* * *

The lunch break offered lunchtime only for the other students. Harry used the time for his trip to London, feeling grateful having mastered the fastest method of travelling - after you had left the Hogwarts protection sphere on your own legs.

Gringotts marked his first station. For once, it wasn't Mr. Morony who discussed the details with him. When Harry expressed his intention to cover all costs of Mrs. Lightfoot's treatment, the Goblin still saw a few problems - not within Gringotts, only from bitter experience with doctors and hospitals. When Harry informed him that this would be handled also with the help of Mr. Spinbottle, suddenly all problems vanished. There was nothing on earth to stop the combination of Goblins and a wizard lawyer of the cunning kind.

Establishing a vault of thousand galleons for Rahewa seemed simple, compared to the first issue. Still, Harry had a concern. "How secure is this vault from being accessed by other people?"

Was the Goblin indignant or amused? "What do you mean, Mr. Potter?"

"Well - Miss Lightfoot is a girl of twelve years, and her father has a tendency to spend all money within reach for liquor, that's why I'm asking."

"I see ... According to wizard law, Mr. Lightfoot would be entitled to take money from there, while Gringotts considers customers self-responsible from the age of ten. To prevent any trouble, I would suggest a personal password to protect the vault, Mr. Potter. Then, age no longer matters - regardless of who might come and with which argument."

"Yes, of course! ... Alright, let's do it."

"Very well. Which password shall we establish first?"

"Erm ... Prairie grass."

The Goblin wrote it down, his face unmoving. Probably, a password like Funkynoodle would have caused hardly more outburst of emotion, maybe except for the spelling.

Mr. Spinbottle's office came next. The lawyer wasn't there, only his secretary, who accepted the data sheet, listened to Harry's description what had to be done as quickly as possible, and offered him an appointment later the same day.

Harry agreed, sighing inwardly. So he would miss the third meal of the day as well, reason enough to look for something nutritious outside, before returning to Hogwarts. What he found was significantly better than expected - some people from South Europe had opened a fast food shop, were selling large rolls with grilled meat inside, quite delicious, really.

Some of the figures around looked strange - like tourists, not at all like wizards. Maybe they were on a round trip, travelling in Muggles disguise. Considering the average quality of the common English gastronomy, it was small wonder to find them gathering around this new shop.

Returning to Hogwarts, Harry just had time for passing the news to Rahewa before Social Ethics was due. Rahewa nodded at his description, her face as unmoving as that of the Goblin when hearing the password - only the results of Mr. Spinbottle's activity would be of interest for her.

Vacation hadn't left any mark in Boring Binns. For all the Gryffindors knew, the ghost had faded into the next wall six weeks ago, to reappear now and to resume his lessons exactly where they had stopped at the end of the previous term. Frustrating.

For compensation, the last class was Care of Magical Creatures, and Samantha's first action led the Gryffindors outside, to a spot under trees close to her hut. Some students eyed suspiciously toward Lousy, which was sitting calmly in front of the hut's door, whether ordered by Samantha or by self-nomination. It worked well - until the dog saw Harry.

Next moment, a light-brown cannonball shot through the group, ignoring the terrified squeaks of Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, to reach Harry, to jump, then racing back, returning with the small leather ball.

Samantha glared at the dog, at Harry. "Either you call your spells inaudibly, or that ball's goin' to be confiscated."

Silent spells - a totally new concept. According to the books, it wasn't supposed to work. With any other teacher, this would have been a trick offer, a teasing joke, while Harry had no doubt Samantha had been serious, not caring much about impossibilities.

Nor did he.

An expectant-looking dog before him, its hind legs already dancing in anticipation, Harry put his lips at his wand, to form the spell with mouth movements, kind of wizard Braille for the mute.

"Volitollite!"

The ball shot away, to the deep satisfaction of both dog and student. Maybe it didn't fly quite as far as usual, but who cared ...

Hermione, who had watched the scene, couldn't decide whether to look indignant for Harry not following the lesson, or approving for his silent wizardry. In the meantime, the other students checked in all directions, apparently waiting for some herd of magical creatures coming around the next corner.

"No," said Samantha, "first we have to talk. And then it's your job to fetch the animals - after all, you're old enough to wipe your asses by yourselves, aren't you?"

After a moment of gasping incredulosity, the students complained this was no place to talk, here in the full heat of the afternoon sun - ignoring the shadow of the overhanging tree in their argument.

"Forget it." Samantha almost spit the words. "We're not going to sit in some clammy classroom with such a nice weather outside ... And besides, you don't know really what heat is

- in the Dust Bowl, *there* you'd find it hot, while here ... Anyway, for good measure, today it's my treat - in the next lessons, this honour may be passed further from one to the other."

Her wand pointed toward the hut. "*Accio cervisia!*"

A muffled sound, like a fridge door banging against a wall, then the hut's door flew open, and a small squadron of beer cans came zooming through the air.

The students gasped, grinned - forgotten was the complaint about the heat.

Hermione's arm was up. "Prof - we're not supposed to drink alcohol during classes ... Actually, we're not supposed to drink at all during classes."

"Is that so?" Samantha's can popped open, while she studied Hermione. "I really appreciate your comment - horrible the thought I'd never wised up, me, and died dumb ... Except today, I'm just prepared for beer, and the only soda's reserved for Harry." While sipping from her can, Samantha's eyes kept fixed on the face of a sufferable know-it-all. "You won't rat out on us, would you?"

Hermione, shrugging, popped her own can open, to take a long gulp. She had no trouble at all with that, knowing well that even for her, by far the most important provider of Gryffindor points, there was a quick short cut to the position of the MUSIC - the Most Unpopular Shithead in Class.

While Harry continued shooting balls for Lousy, Samantha announced that, at the end of this lesson, the students should have won a clear perception of what they were going to do this year. The item on the official schedule were Merpeople - not Samantha's favourite, as she admitted. So, individual projects would take precedence - provided they offered something reasonable, give or take a bit.

Merpeople would have been a fascinating option, but Harry's mind was set - toward dragons, what else. He was discussing it with Ron when Samantha came along and said, "So that's the rest of the Potter-Weasley gang, and no doubt, by the looks of it ... Howdy, Ron - how was it in France? Hot and wet, for what I've heard - hot outside and ..." She stopped, grinning broadly.

Poor Ron, blushing, wasn't used to Texan small talk. "Er - yes, er - hello ..."

Harry felt pity, remembering his own first encounter with this woman. "Hey, Sam, give him a break ... By the way, how should I address you in class - I mean, maybe Sam isn't the proper form, after all."

Samantha looked surprised. "No? ... Frankly, I give a hammered shit for that - figure it out for yourself, Harry, you're more at home with the rules here." She snorted. "Or ask that Lady MacMess over there - she seems to know all the rules for what's really unimportant."

Samantha hadn't lowered her voice. This explained why Hermione froze in mid-step for an instant, before continuing, her cheeks slightly flushed.

Samantha had watched. "Uh-oh, I just made a friend for life." Now she lowered her voice. "Harry, tell me - how come you picked that girl as your friend? ... Such a pre-pubescent attitude - listening to her, you'd never believe she's getting laid regularly."

Ron looked as if not trusting his ears - an amateur bigmouth at his first encounter with a professional one.

Harry wondered how Hermione would react to Samantha's comment. It seemed even possible that she would consider it a compliment. At any rate, he wasn't going to tell her, while this seemed the right time for pulling a brake. "Hold it, Sam ... Hermione just wanted to help you. Okay, sometimes she's a bit rasping at your nerves, but she has her qualities, believe me. Our friendship's definitely more than Care of Rare Animals."

The witch laughed. "Got it, honey." She turned to Ron. "And you, young man with the beautiful eyes, do you think the same?"

Said eyes didn't know how to look. "Er, yes, er - Sam."

While Samantha walked away, Harry grinned at Ron. "Beautiful eyes - wow! Did you hear that before?"

His friend blushed deeper than a moment ago. "Erm - actually, yes, I did."

"Like - " Harry mimicked Gerry, "Oh, Ronnie chéri, ils sont beaux, tes yeux - something like that?"

Ron giggled. "Harry - I guess I have to be more careful, I didn't know you're carrying both ways."

"Well, since I met Gerry ..." Harry stopped, watching a scene not far away, pushing Ron to shift his friend's attention.

Samantha had approached a sour-looking girl with curly brown hair. "Hi, Hermione ... Harry just told me you've hidden qualities, so I thought I might give it another try."

Hermione's voice was frosty. "Don't bother, Prof ... They're *well* hidden."

"Then we're complementing each other." The words came with a thin smile.

Hermione looked incredulous, and detestful. "Really?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Because I have hidden flaws, except sometimes they're quite prominent."

Hermione didn't answer. Quick as ever, had she read enough messages in this remark to think it over, and maybe to gather some more impressions from this new teacher, before deciding how to react.

Harry turned back to Ron. "Well, it's love at first sight between those two ... Anyway, what do you think about the dragon project?"

Ron thought it was crazy, wasted efforts, not his cup of tea for sure. He had done an O.W.L. about dragons, but only so much, and since Charlie was dead, and Hagrid too, Ron could do without these dangerous beasts. He wasn't sure yet what he would do, but certainly not volunteering for oversized firebreathers of the flying kind.

Which meant Harry was at his own in this project, not surprisingly so - but only counting students, while he felt confident to find support from two teachers, Almyra and Samantha.

After classes, he just took the time to fetch his GALA from his dormitory, then he was on his way to the appointment with Mr. Spinbottle.

The lawyer studied the data sheet. "Mr. Potter, I understand that it's about the health and welfare of this Mrs. Lightfoot. But please tell me, whom do I represent in this issue?"

Harry felt a hot rush of impatience. "To quote a teacher of mine, Mr. Spinbottle, I give a hammered shit as long as it's going to help her, and quickly."

Used to this client's unconventional negotiations, the lawyer had a short smile - could have been a grin, if this wasn't impossible for members of his profession. "Let me explain to you ... I can represent only one client. If it's you, then we can agree upon the proceeding in a minute, only that I won't be authorized to speak in Mrs. Lightfoot's name - which will cause problems with these damned doctors ... If it's her, I can chase them in pairs, with the nurses as escort - but the big question is whether she'll agree, because you cannot instruct me to represent her ... If it's the girl, I can assume I'm representing you as well, and a daughter has more weight, but still, she's under age, and I may face the same problems as before on a minor scale."

Harry thought for a moment. "So, the best solution would be to represent Mrs. Lightfoot herself, right?"

"Definitely so. Then we only have to settle the financial aspect."

"Say - can I hire you to represent her, and to do whatever's necessary - toward her free of charge, and all cost at my side?"

Mr. Spinbottle smiled. "That'd be perfect - if she agrees."

"Then let's ask her ... Where is she?"

"In the East-End Hospital - that's why my first step should be to have her transferred to a better place."

"St. Mungo's?"

"Not necessarily. Depending on what it is, a specialized Muggle clinic might be the better choice ... Just for the record, Mr. Potter - is there any financial limit?"

"Er - yes. Half a million galleons."

This time Mr. Spinbottle really mustered a grin. "Which means none ... Alright, just a moment ..." The lawyer went to a wall safe, apparently to fetch a pile of money.

Harry asked wonderingly, "What do you have in mind with that money?"

"We're going to visit a clinic, and doctors, right? Probably outside any visitor's time ... That's the stuff to oil our path, Mr. Potter."

The lawyer was right. Half an hour later, after convincing several people on their way that this was in the mutual interest of all people involved, they were sitting in a dirty room, with battered chairs, a table showing traces of cigarette butts, carving knives, and greasy food, and a depressing gray-green paint at the walls.

The woman was undeniably Rahewa's mother, the similarity obvious. She had listened to Mr. Spinbottle's explanations, looked now at Harry. "Why do you want to do that, Mr. Potter?"

"Because ... I'm doing it for Rahewa, Mrs. Lightfoot - that's all I can say. I don't know how to explain ... I have a lot of money, and I was looking for a useful purpose, and then ... I could try to explain more details, but I'm not sure ... Well, it's just that - I want to help Rahewa."

"What is Rahewa for you?"

"She's - unique. She reminds me of my own situation, the first time in Hogwarts ... Cho said - er, Cho, that is ..."

The woman interrupted him. "I know her name, Mr. Potter - like yours, and that of some other people. I know what you mean for my daughter - to be honest, I wasn't too happy about that, and that's why I'd like to hear your own description."

"My own ... I feel sort of responsible, a kind of obligation. I don't know why."

"And what did your girlfriend say, this Cho?"

"She said - you know, it was a joke, but ... She said I'm collecting family, and Rahewa's my first daughter. It's of course nonsense ..."

"Is it? ... Could be this thought becomes more realistic than expected."

"No, Mrs. Lightfoot - we're here to make sure it stays as a joke."

"You cannot - not for sure." The woman smiled for the first time. "But I appreciate what you're doing, and - yes, I agree to be represented by you, Mr. Spinbottle ... Thank you, Mr. Potter."

About to leave, the woman stopped. "If ... Mr. Potter, if you ever see reason to make it come true, you should know that you'll do it with my approval - and that it's a comforting thought." She left the room, not looking back.

Mr. Spinbottle promised to get the transfer running first thing tomorrow, after talking with Mrs. Lightfoot's doctor, and after getting professional counsel about which medical centre was suited best for her treatment. They agreed to meet three days later, then Harry returned to Hogsmeade.

Walking toward the school, he realized that he wasn't in the mood to talk with Rahewa now, for example because there wasn't anything to tell yet. The visit in the clinic had done nothing to raise his mood - a hospital wasn't a good place for someone whose *haragei* sensed emotions so distinctly. Glancing across the lake, he knew what would help to clear his mind - a tour through waterspace, cool, clean, silent, dark.

The layer of food in his stomach felt awfully thin. Going into the school for his swimsuit and the Gillyweed would probably include a short visit of the house elves in the kitchen, because he would be unable to resist. Then his stomach would be full, and most likely he would meet someone ... He decided to do it without Gillyweed, and without swimsuit. It was almost dark, and this way, he saved time.

He turned to walk back, to reach the position outside the sphere from which he could jump to his favourite place at the lake. Sometimes this sphere was a real nuisance - now that dark wizards were no longer a threat, it would be a great help to restrict the protection to the school buildings only.

Darkness, calm and smooth. In his *getsumai no michi*, the contours of the ground below appeared like faint strokes of coal, drawn by a painter on a dark-grey canvas. Two minutes limit wasn't much, compared to gill-breathing, while the lack of speed, restricted to his normal human hands and feet, limited him even stronger.

Harry came up, to catch breath, and to dive down again. A third turn, and a fourth, then he felt better.

For a while, he was lying on his back in the water, motionless, balancing to keep on the surface, staring into the sky. There were only few stars at this time of the year, shortly after dusk, stars which seemed no farther away than, a moment ago, the lakeside from his underwater position.

He turned, inhaled deeply, dived down to shoot through the water, feet above ground, toward the lakeside. This method was faster than swimming at the surface.

He sensed her before he saw her. Marie-Christine was sitting on a blanket, spread just beneath his clothes.

"Salu, 'arry." She threw him a towel, watched him toweling.

He felt breathless, although not from diving. "How come you're here? Did we have the same thought at the same time?"

Marie-Christine's answer, about having the same thought, was given without words. Looking at him, she stretched herself at the blanket, her hand unfastening the swimsuit's strap around her neck. The view made him hardening instantly.

He fell on his knees, his hand pushing down the suit, exposing breasts with nipples as hard as his growing member. Grabbing them, caressing them with his lips, he felt her frantic movements under him to strip the swimsuit off. He was between her legs, felt gripped, guided inside, his path wet and ready. Pushing deep into her, feeling the tightness and heat on his flesh, still cool and wet from the previous dive, his mind was flooded with a desire that wiped

off any coordination, leaving only this animalistic rhythm of thrusting, gasping, groaning, her own body responding with the same rhythm, pushing herself against him as hard as she could.

He heard his own pained moan, felt his heat rise and erupt, felt her stiffen, heard her whimpering - none of which was going to stop him, not now, not as long as his hardness felt undiminished, ignoring what was supposed to be time for a break.

Her hands were at his back, clawing, nails digging into his muscles, ripping over his skin. He took her arms, pressed them down over her head, held her in that position while continuing, slower now, each thrust raising a hoarse gasp, each backward movement a tremble in her hips.

Her eyes were closed, opening only for a fleeting moment when his next push didn't come as expected, as awaited impatiently. The moment of numbness gone, his back burning from what had to be claw marks, he accelerated again, driving both of them uphill toward another peak to watch the clouds and the rain.

Lying at Marie-Christine's side, his hand wandering across a body who had calmed down, and dried in the warm night air, Harry said, "It cannot have been telepathy."

"What?"

"You coming here, to this place ... When I arrived, all I had in mind was swimming - probably the first time since we're back in Hogwarts that I was *not* thinking of your body."

Marie-Christine smiled. "This thought was back pretty quickly ... And it seems to be somewhat stubborn - obviously, you cannot keep your hands to yourself."

He trailed over a stomach, toward mounds which had softened too. "Should I?"

"Might be a good idea, so we can talk about what's on my mind. I saw you arriving, then I saw you walk back - and disappear. I thought I might find you at this place - so I came here to ask you about assistance in the dance lessons."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"It's true - that's what I want to talk with you about. Except - talking wasn't the first item on my agenda."

"No, definitely not."

"But it's now ... Are you ready to assist me?"

"Maybe in a few minutes."

Marie-Christine laughed. "Please, be serious for a moment ... So what's your answer?"

Harry's hand was wandering down her legs, his fingers playing like in dance figures. "Sure - as much as what fits in my own class schedule."

Marie-Christine looked pleased. "That's kind ... Thank you."

"Thank you?? ... Not so quick, mylady - we still have to talk about my - er, remuneration."

"Your ..." Marie-Christine stopped, her surprise replaced by a sensual smile. "Don't you worry, mon chevalier, your lady won't disappoint you."

For a moment, Harry felt startled. It seemed insane what they were doing, and planning. Looking at her again, his hand trailing back, up her thighs, his uneasiness was pushed away. "To be honest," he said, "I'm surprised you got the job. I mean - from Dumbledore's side ... I never expected him to accept your application, not with you and me at the same school."

"Maybe he had no choice."

Harry came up, propped on his elbow. "What do you mean - no choice?"

"It's Fleur's doing ... She asked me, and probably she did everything that nobody else would apply. Okay, it's not the most attractive job, but as far as I know, I was the only candidate, and that's a bit strange."

"What's wrong with the job?"

"Dance teacher at an English school - that must be French people's perception of hell on earth." Marie-Christine laughed. "But I had some insider information - and maybe I saw benefits no one else would see."

"Did you?" Harry's hand was playing not quite as aimlessly as before.

Marie-Christine's breath accelerated a bit. "Yes ... Which doesn't mean the benefits have to come in such a rapid succession, if you know what I mean."

She was right - still, although that might change soon. "What did Dumbledore say?"

Marie-Christine grinned. "He wished me luck to do the right steps - his actual words."

"Uh-oh ... Well, as long as you're not doing any step, rather lying quite still ..."

"Stop it! It's impossible to lie still while you're doing that ... To put your mind at something else - how's Cho doing?"

"Working hard in the movie business ... And widening her horizon - no, this task's already finished."

Something in his voice made Marie-Christine look at him. "How?"

"She had an affair with a man ... To find out how it is with someone else, as she said. And because he couldn't give up, she invited me to a party, to mark the end a bit more clearly ... It was awful."

"Mon Dieu ... Poor 'arry."

"No - yes, okay, but ..." He had a short laugh. "I'm not in the position to complain - I'm not lying here for revenge, not at all ... She wasn't happy with it, that's what's bothering me most. And she's not calling, or coming, that's still worse."

Marie-Christine watched his face. "You'd like to see her, and ..."

"Of course - what do you think? It's ... I didn't say *Get lost*, or anything like that. It was only this party - awful people, and then she was gone. If I had an address ..."

"I'd like to see her too, and ..."

His voice was teasing, like his hand. "Now?"

"Yes." Marie-Christine's voice sounded a bit strangled. "Truth to be told, 'arry - it's great to make love with you, but ... If I had to choose between you and her, I guess you'd score second place."

"Funny - I can say the same to you ... Although, when I said I wish she'd be here, I didn't think of a replacement."

"Satyr ... I was trying to figure out what I'd prefer more - with both of you or with her alone ..."

"And?"

"Since I don't know how it is, with her alone, I couldn't answer that question. In that, you're ahead of me, 'arry ... In the meantime, I've found out how it is with *you* alone, so it's obvious what I'd like next to satisfy my curiosity."

This discussion was sending a thrill through Harry's mind, and another one through his body. His hand started to wander anew. "Curiosity, huh? ... Right now, it's an academic question. You have to make do with what's at hand - by the way, I'm quite open-minded to alternative forms of - er, journeys."

Marie-Christine smiled. "I know, 'arry ... It's not this - er, not-so-small difference that's bothering me - there's nothing wrong with that. No, it's just that you are no woman."

Harry stopped for a moment. "Are you lesbian?"

"I don't know ... There's no other woman with whom I'd like to do that, while with Cho - her touching me is enough to make me feel powerless."

"While with me, you prefer being at the steering wheel, don't you?"

"Sometimes yes, for a change. But basically ..."

Two of his fingers slid inside her, pressing upward, raising a moan. "You want to be dominated?"

A trembling sigh. "Yes."

Harry's fingers retreated, returned to their previous location, harder this time. "A total surrender of your own will?"

Marie-Christine's answer came as a gasp rather than words, however unmistakable enough. Harry felt her shaking slightly, and a new rush of wetness on his fingers.

Not letting go, he commanded, "Turn onto your stomach."

She obeyed with another moan.

"Put your arms on your back."

Now she was outstretched in the position of total helplessness, her breath already coming in ragged gasps. Harry seized for his wand, touched Marie-Christine's wrists. "*Manobstringe*."

A ribbon appeared, soft and smooth, tying her wrists tightly together. Marie-Christine was trembling, a shudder ripping through her body, her breath now in pained sobs.

He parted her legs wide, knelt over her thigh, his hardness twisting and pulsing at the touch of her trembling flesh. One hand held the other thigh in a firm grip. "You're completely helpless, and I can do with you whatever suits me." His other hand caressed Marie-Christine's core, his fingers playing around, and up, and back, finding her soakingly wet.

His fingers parted her lips in a sharp movement, raising a small outcry and another shudder. Marie-Christine was twisting in the pre-stage of orgasm.

He moved between her legs, pulled her thighs over his own, and pushed himself into her waiting case, his moan drowned in her sobbing. With barely enough control to keep motionless inside her, he held her firmly against him, his other hand moving around her thigh, finding her most sensible spot, his fingers circling, caressing, tabbing.

A croaky gasp, followed by spasms rippling through her body, rippling him, pressing his flesh, loosening, pressing harder. He felt his own climax rise while his restless fingers didn't stop, sending waves of agonizing pleasure through her, until a moment later her shaking body sent him over the edge. Holding her with both hands, he kept on while his pulsing flesh calmed down, came to a rest.

Then Marie-Christine's arms were free again, and Harry was lying behind her, holding a body still recovering from the thrill. His own breath came as unsteady as hers. "That was ... I never before did something like that - I hope it wasn't too rough."

Marie-Christine's hand covered his own. "It was fine, not rough at all ... One day, I'll add the missing lesson in your education, Harry, and show you how to be rough in the right style - the one to drive me crazy ..."

05 - Caribbean Trip

First lessons of the new year continued in presenting perspectives of very individual schedules. This was true for Harry as much as for other students. Any idea, any project would be welcomed, as long as it halfways met the nominal category. More, the teachers appeared quite flexible in accepting integrated projects, spanning more than one course - however with the notable exception of Boring Binns. Not surprisingly so, this ghost failed to notice the didactic developments of the last two hundred years.

Hermione, for example, had little trouble convincing Snape that her Wolfsbane Potion project was an issue for Defence against the Dark Arts as much as for Potions. As a result, she could keep working almost regardless of the regular class schedule. She had done the same in Transfiguration, with Almyra who had even less objections than Snape.

Only Charms didn't fit in her pattern, simply because Hermione could not yet apparate. But there was no doubt - as soon as she had mastered that, Hermione would find a justification to extend her project into Charms. Small wonder, with Lupin as the teacher.

Harry's and Ron's Poison Ball project seemed a good candidate for the same kind of integration, as Snape pointed out. "The regular schedule is old news for you, Harry - you could replace me any time, should I fall sick ... And I'm very interested in that project - it's mostly new even for myself."

Harry didn't feel flattered, this way or the other. He said, "Hmm ... It's no problem to keep you informed about our progress, Prof, while for Defence - I was thinking more of Summoning, and of course how to prevent being summoned, or how to prevent someone from summoning another person."

"Summoning ..." Snape seemed not overly happy with that. "Isn't this something that would fit more to Charms?"

There was no doubt - Snape wanted to pass the burden to Lupin, which raised Harry's suspicion that the teacher could not summon by himself. But so what - Snape couldn't shoot poison balls either.

"Maybe," replied Harry, "but there's something else I want to place in Charms." At Snape's questioning look, Harry felt obliged to reveal more than he had planned. "It's portkey programming."

And sure enough, Snape went for his chance. "But that's exactly what I mean! ... Apparition, Apparition Pursuit, Summoning, and portkeys - Harry, these are all variations of the same theme. Now that you've mastered the first two, for me it's obvious that you should continue with the topic where it started - in Charms."

Except that it hadn't really started in Charms. Harry's skill originated mostly from his encounters with Voldemort. As crazy as the idea seemed, Harry couldn't help thinking that this dark wizard would be more successful a teacher than Snape and Lupin together.

Snape had an idea. "If you extend your Poison Ball project a bit, to correlated techniques ... For example, to balls with other effects - fireballs, or explosives, one ball good enough to blow a building ..."

Harry grinned, remembering a demolition team at the *Magical Tours* headquarters, consisting of him and Belinda. "I can blow a building even now - without explosives."

Snape shook his head. "You can damage it by sheer force - that's something totally different, crushing down rather than blowing up."

Ron, who had listened, joined Snape's side. "Let's give it a try, Harry ... Firecrackers big-style, that should be fun. And the basic techniques are the same."

"Alright, then ..."

It might indeed be fun, only that Harry gave a damn for demolishing balls. For him, the Poison Ball project was something to cover Potions, more or less the only reason. While summoning ... It would allow him to carry people who could not yet apparate. It would enable him to do more - in his mind, he was summoning Cho to ask her what the hell was going on ... Oh Lord, would she be mad, being summoned against her own will. Harry had to grin at the thought, while the others, seeing his grin, assumed he was finally getting a taste on the extended project.

Against her will ... Harry knew he would never do it, no matter how badly he wanted to see her, talk with her, touch her. In the meantime, there was someone else, someone to play games with in which will was a factor - to be dropped, abandoned in favour of subordination, until the game was over.

Since the scene at the lake, a fever kept racing through his veins, highly addictive as he knew - the same fever had caught Marie-Christine, or maybe she had infected him. It was under control as long as they were separated, almost under control with others around. It would erupt the moment they were alone.

First dance lesson for fourth-years, beginners. Harry and Marie-Christine were touching each other only for seconds, to demonstrate the basic steps in slow waltz, and some time later again, to show the basic steps in disco fox. For the rest of the lesson, both of them watched the students, and Harry had to hide a smile at the sight of these boys with their self-conscious movements, blushing, with difficulties to find a remark. He could almost imagine - if, by some accident, their hands were going to touch one of these young breasts, there'd be burn marks visible.

This was followed by the first lesson in the courses for fifth and sixth-years, refreshing steps taught long before, remembered quickly, after a few minutes of clumsiness. With them, the movements were no longer self-conscious. Harry could feel vibrations between couples here and there, although their glances toward each other told enough even for people without *haragei*.

Of course, during these lessons, Marie-Christine was the teacher, and Harry was the assistant. Just the natural state, what else - and then the lessons were over, and they were walking toward her office. Inside, looking at each other, the fever was back. "This is madness," said Marie-Christine. "You should go, 'arry - instantly."

"Then tell me to go."

"Didn't I, right now?"

"No - you only said it would be sensible, and reasonable, and for the better of us ... That's all I heard."

Marie-Christine didn't answer.

He moved closer. "You taught me a game - since then ..."

"I didn't - I only mentioned it, you started playing it all by yourself!"

"Did I? ... But the doing alone's meaningless to me - it becomes thrilling only from your response, and that's what makes it so irresistible." Marie-Christine's face, flushed, told him the fever pitch was rising in her like in himself. "Come here," he commanded.

"Are you going to tie me again?" But she came to him.

"No - that's not necessary. I thought about it - I figured it's just your own will to be helpless, and to follow my orders." Harry turned her against the wall. "Spread your arms."

Marie-Christine obeyed, her breath quickening.

His hands trailed from her temples to her ears, her shoulders, over her breasts. "There's nothing that holds you, except that your hands feel like glued to the wall, and you're waiting for my next command."

"If someone comes in ... the door's not locked."

There was no key in the lock. In Harry's state, it took him only a second until a faint *Click* gave proof that locks could also be closed by willpower. His hands trailed over Marie-Christine's hips, under her skirt, and upward again. "Spread your legs a bit more."

He followed the outline of her panties, moved over the silken fabric, came to a rest over her mound, slowly intensifying the pressure, releasing, stroking.

Suddenly he stopped. His hands retreated from under the skirt, pulled her gently away from the wall. "That's it ... You're free."

Marie-Christine wheeled around, glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's ... Nothing - just that the game's over for now."

Her voice was snarling. "Listen, 'arry - I'm not your sex toy! You've started the game, and now you'll damn finish it!" Her hands moved under her skirt, her body twisted shortly, then she had stripped off her panties. With her next step, she was at the desk, leaned against it. "Get moving!"

So the game of domination and subordination had its limits, and a few more rules than Harry had recognized in this short time. Which was fine with him - after all, the basic intention was

still the same, and if his original planning had been somewhat different, there was always room for flexibility. And besides, this switching of roles offered its own thrill - in addition to the basic purpose.

He obeyed.

* * *

Kenzo looked pleased to see that Harry hadn't lost any skill during vacation, had even gained new skill in jump-kicks aiming high. No - he didn't look pleased, as his face wasn't moving at all, he *felt* pleased.

Harry grinned. "This jump earned me an offer for a role in a movie." He told his *sensei* about the scene with that Claude, and the conversation with Tony Chee.

The Japanese smiled. "You would be badly surprised, Harry ... The Chinese have a long tradition to combine theater, dance, and their versions of *aikido* in an artful mix. There are a few directors whose movies are wonderful - but if you think *aikido* is stressing, have a look at how these people do their training ... And of course, at the end of these movies, all characters are dead."

"All??"

"Yes - a truly Chinese movie is a sad thing."

"Then Tony Chee must have adapted some of the western style, because in his plots, I'd be the winner, and alive, to fetch my princess or whatever."

Now the smile was only in Kenzo's eyes. "What's the sense in playing this in a movie? Isn't that exactly what you're doing in real life, Harry?"

No - not quite, because Harry's princess was still in the movie, while he himself had to stay here, fetching someone else in the meantime.

But he wasn't going to say that aloud, hurried to address another topic before Kenzo was reading too much in his mind. "*Sensei*, I started a training with Ginny to intensify her *haragei*. But I'm not the most qualified teacher for that - on the other side, I think she wasn't going to ask you by herself, that's why I wanted to tell you."

The teacher kept silent for a moment, then said, "So she has gained some experience, and now she wants to add the skill." He bowed. "There's a lesson in that, Harry."

Harry tried to see it, failed, confessing so in his expression.

"An enemy like Voldemort is not necessarily the most dangerous one ... There has never been a doubt of his intentions, right?"

* * *

When Lupin heard about Harry's planning for portkey programming plus summoning, and how Snape had transferred the task over to Charms, he smiled wryly. "Clever Severus - we're

both pretty weak in that corner, but it's me who has to confess to you, Harry ... A shameful moment, a Hogwarts teacher at a loss to guide his student in such a project."

Only that Harry felt more joy than shame in Lupin, giving him some pleasure because he himself was this advanced student. Although this pleasure mixed with indifference - wasn't he also a thief who had stolen his skill from a dark wizard? ... Maybe not on purpose, but it wasn't the result of hard work.

Still, Harry grinned. "And what now, er - Prof?"

Lupin chuckled. "As a first measure, we should agree that you'll be so impertinent only if nobody's around ... Second, I'll show you that there's nothing wrong being stupid as long as you can make do."

Impertinent, huh? "You've got all my attention, oh teacher mine."

After calming down from his laughter, Lupin showed a malicious expression. "I know a man, an expert in portkey programming ... I'll give you his address, and you'll visit him - isn't it just nice you can already apparate? ... Oh yes, before I forget, this is of course someone in the Transportation Department."

So much for impertinence. Lupin had paid back instantly, scoring twice as high as Harry - the name Harry Potter would raise the most friendly welcome in a member of this department, no question about that, after Harry's public - and not so public - actions and statements against the department, its former boss, and its reputation.

Harry sighed. "Great ... They'll like me at first sight, better than a troll in the kitchen."

"Shouldn't be a problem, Harry - you know, a little politeness does miracles." Whistling joyfully, like someone who had just completed an artful task - teaching, for example - Lupin went to collect the address.

So Harry was in for some travelling - to the Ministry for Charms, to that dragon station for Transfiguration and Care, to Haiti for Transfiguration and Potions, although not his own.

But his first journey had another destination.

Mr. Spinbottle passed him a sheet over the desk. "This is Mrs. Lightfoot's address for the next time - the Cambridge University Hospital. She moved yesterday, and the good news is that one can visit her any time of the day, or the evening."

Harry examined the paper, looked up. "And the bad news?"

The lawyer leaned back in its chair. "That's confidential patient information, Mr. Potter. I'm authorized by my client to inform you, but the authorization doesn't extend any further - to nobody else." He looked into Harry's eyes. "Nobody - not even ..."

"Yes - I know what it means!" Harry calmed down. "Sorry, Mr. Spinbottle ... Okay - what is it?"

"Leukaemia."

"Oh, no."

"Yes, unfortunately. Mr. Thorndyke, her physician in the East-End Hospital, said it's quite advanced, and the only chance would be a donation of bone marrow ... Even with that, it's an open question, but who'd be ready to give such a donation to a Canadian immigrant?"

"Bone marrow?" It didn't sound good, not like donating a few pints of blood.

"Yes ... It had to be the same blood group, at the least, and more similarities - I'm no doctor, don't ask me for the details. Probably the only candidate would be her daughter, except that Mrs. Lightfoot refused point blank to accept this kind of donation, and made very clear that it would be a breach of confidence to ask the girl ... Now you see, Mr. Potter, why I had reason to emphasize this point."

"Yes, of course ... Does her husband know?"

"I didn't tell him, I didn't see him, and I didn't ask my client about him ..." Mr. Spinbottle's expression changed from formal to informative. "I think he doesn't know."

"How ... What did the doctor say, how it'll continue?"

"They're very reluctant to give a prognosis. The chances for a healing are small, you can read that from the statistics ... Otherwise - something between three months and a year, and don't ask me which end should be called the worst case."

"Well ... At least, I'm grateful that you trust me enough, Mr. Spinbottle ..."

"You shouldn't thank me, Mr. Potter. I know what I'm doing to you - being at the same school with that girl, but I felt sure you wanted to know, for example to think ahead."

"Ahead?" Only after a second, Harry realized that the lawyer was referring to Harry's own remark, quoting Cho, and to what Mrs. Lightfoot had answered. What once had been a joke suddenly became a possibility with a bitter undertone. He asked, "Would it work?"

Mr. Spinbottle had the answer ready. "Not with you personally, Mr. Potter. Taking away Rahewa's custody from her father won't be a problem - assuming the girl agrees, but only in favour of someone over twenty-one ... Without trying to predict bad luck, you may start thinking of realistic alternatives, if that's your intention."

Harry nodded, in his mind scanning a list of possible candidates. He felt sure - if the question really came up, he would have an alternative, maybe even two. But this was a second-choice solution, nothing to be welcomed now.

The lawyer interrupted his thoughts. "There's another aspect, Mr. Potter. I've done a bit of homework, about my client's background. What I found is a possible explanation, and the possible basis for a lawsuit."

Harry looked blank.

"The Lightfoots lived in Canada, in Beaver Falls, a small town about hundred miles north of Ottawa. And Beaver Falls, that's the location of a nuclear power station, and a zone whose

cancer statistics are significantly higher than the Canadian average. Ironically, this was one of the reasons why they emigrated, although not the only one."

"You mean, the radioactivity of that nuclear plant has caused Mrs. Lightfoot's leukaemia?"

"You can get leukaemia anywhere on earth. But your chances are a thousandfold better - so-to-speak - when living in Beaver Falls, or in any other town that close to a nuclear reactor. This is especially true for American or Canadian reactors because the laws in these countries are not exactly suited to protect their citizens from toxic or radioactive waste ... I'm not predicting anything, Mr. Potter, least of all an unlucky outcome for my client, but - at the risk of appearing cruel as much as greedy, I have to tell you that a lawsuit against the company running the plant would offer good chances."

"How's that? If the statistics are that bad, there had to be dozens of lawsuits for similar reasons, or do I miss a detail?"

"There's indeed a detail which prevents most of these complaints, Mr. Potter ... It's money. Filing such a complaint and running it through the courts takes about twenty thousand galleons. The chances to win are three to one, and the average compensation, paid to the claiming party, is something about four-hundred thousand galleons."

"I see ... Thank you for the information, Mr. Spinbottle. No, I don't think you're greedy, and the cruelty isn't yours ... Before I can say anything to this idea, I'll have to talk with Rahewa - and before I can do that, something else must have happened, something which I still hope won't happen."

"Certainly, Mr. Potter." The lawyer's voice indicated that he shared Harry's feelings, while for him it was basically a question of time. Statistics and probabilities were his daily work, so he had stopped hoping against all odds long before.

* * *

Walking from the Hogsmeade linkport toward Hogwarts, Harry tried to settle his mind how to break the news to Rahewa. He found no good solution, other than to give her the sheet, and to make sure Rahewa's travelling back and forth, using the linkport services, didn't fail due to lack of money.

It turned out simpler than he had expected. He met Rahewa at her return from her last class of the day, still before supper, gave her the sheet, and asked her whether she had enough cash for linkport tickets - to reach the hospital, and to reach Gringotts for a refill.

Yes, she had.

It had been too simple. After supper, still lingering at the Gryffindor table, unsure whether he should work up the courage to ask Marie-Christine for a meeting at the lake, Harry saw Rahewa coming down a staircase, walking straight to his place. Her face was expressionless. Her mind wasn't. "Harry, can we have a walk?"

"Sure." He followed her to the exit. Outside, quite instinctively, he turned toward his favourite place - near Hagrid's grave - before realizing that the girl didn't follow. He asked "What's wrong with that place, Rahewa?"

"Er - nothing, only we have to pass the hut, and this dog ... He's mean."

"Lousy? ... C'mon, I'll show you what a mean dog this is."

Rahewa didn't look happy, but then, she hadn't looked happy inside. At least, she followed him. And yes, Lousy was lying before the hut. A moment later, he was sitting, with a motionless stare, and next second, he was racing toward them.

Rahewa had barely time to stiffen before the dog was there, ignoring her completely, jumping like a pinball to reach Harry's face, eager to deliver a few wet kisses.

Harry knelt down, smiling, patiently enduring the stormy welcome. This done, Lousy raced back to the hut, no doubt to return with the leather ball.

Rahewa had watched the scene. "He treats you totally different from us other students, Harry. If I'd been alone, he would already hang at my leg, or my neck, for all I know."

Harry laughed. "No - he just differentiates between people he knows and people he doesn't. In a minute, I'll introduce you to him." Walking to the place, shooting a ball once a minute, he told Rahewa the story how Lousy had found his new home in the hut.

They sat down in the grass, and Harry demonstrated the shooting spell. When the dog was back again, dropping the ball to the ground, he took the dog's large head between his hands. "Look, Lousy - that's Rahewa, a friend of mine."

Dog and girl looked at each other, examining what they saw, the reluctance mutual. At Harry's instruction, Rahewa's hand came forward, to be sniffed at, with the result that Lousy glanced at Harry as if to say, *So what?*

"She can shoot balls too ... Let's see."

The girl's hand seized for the ball. The dog's politeness was just good not to snap forward, and not to growl.

The ball was on Rahewa's fingertips, her wand pointing. "*Volitollite*."

The ball jumped up, its trajectory too steep, the power too weak - it fell down less than thirty feet away.

The dog looked at Harry, an expression in its face that said, *You're not serious, are you?* But Harry was. "Go - fetch the ball."

Had Lousy's head been shaking, Harry would have felt no surprise. The dog came up, gracefully, with all the time of the world, traipsing to the ball, a casual movement of the head to grab it, then it came back, stood there, waiting.

Rahewa's arm was outstretched.

The dog came a step closer. Just outside her reach, the ball dropped to the ground, and two brown eyes looked into black ones, sending a clear message. *Dare me!*

There was no challenge like a challenge - even from a dog. Rahewa's next ball went flat over ground, passing eighty feet before coming down, and a dog racing after it without waiting for an order.

Harry smiled. "That's settled ... Okay, what's the matter?"

Rahewa waited until she had shot the next ball. "I was in the library ... I looked up the Cambridge University Hospital."

Damn. Girls returning from the library - in Harry's experience, trained with Hermione, this meant trouble.

"They're rated quite high, and expensive too ..."

Was this the direction Rahewa was driving at? In this case ...

"... and the book said it's Great Britain's most famous treatment center for cancer."

"Really?"

"Leukaemia, in particular, and related forms of blood cancer."

"Related forms? ... Beats me."

"Me too," admitted Rahewa. "But the book said that what's publicly called leukaemia splits in a dozen or so different forms, with similar symptoms, and similar treatment, only that some of them respond well to treatment while others do not."

Harry tried to look surprised. "For a book about hospitals, this one seems to be quite detailed about leukaemia. How come?"

"Very simple." Rahewa's eyes were scanning his face. "It wasn't a book about hospitals - it was about leukaemia."

"And you read all that in the few minutes since ..."

The shaking of her head stopped him. "I read it already days ago. Today, I just went back to refresh my memory about the Cambridge University Hospital."

"And why did you look into that book, days ago?"

"To be ... For people from Beaver Falls, leukaemia is something you'd think of, if someone falls sick, and it's more than a flu ... There's a nuclear power station nearby. The town has a public swimming pool, with heated water all year long - cooling water from the reactor. They have sort of fountains - like a big mushroom, except it's a toadstool, painted like a fly agaric, and every five minutes or so the water's falling down from them. You can stand in the waterfall deep in December - all children in town do it ... Must be the cleanest bunch of kids in Canada." The joke came in a flat voice, lacking any joy.

"Did you do it yourself?"

"Of course - the water's clean, I mean it's not radiating, they check it once a month."

"Since when does that swimming pool exist?"

"Since before I was born. My mother used to do the same, as a girl ... Except in these times, they didn't check." Rahewa shot another ball.

After a moment of silence, Harry asked, "Why are you telling me all this?"

"You spoke with Mr. Spinbottle, who spoke with the doctor, I think. I went into the library. I just told you what I've learned, and what I knew before."

He was trapped - neatly, and completely. "Rahewa ... Whatever Mr. Spinbottle told me, I'm not authorized to tell further. Your mother would cancel the order immediately if she'd hear about him passing information further - even to you."

Rahewa wasn't surprised. "Yes, that's what I thought. She thinks I'm too young to know the truth, and she doesn't know that I know that much about leukaemia."

Harry was wondering himself. "How did you learn all that?"

"I once had a friend. She died at the age of eight. When I asked why, I was told from leukaemia. At that time, it didn't tell me anything. But since then, I paid attention whenever the word appeared somewhere - in newspapers, for example. I'm ... You don't need to breach your promise, Harry - you didn't lie to me either, like asking me why bother about leukaemia, so ..." The girl's head fell forward, to hide her face. A moment later, her silent crying changed to a violent sobbing.

Lousy was quicker than Harry, and less reluctant. He tried to lick Rahewa's face, was even successful with his comfort as she was grabbing him more than pushing him away.

Harry put his arm around the thin shoulders. "I'm sorry, Rahewa ... At least, there's still a chance."

"Yes I know - the book showed the statistics. One out of ten, if it's detected early. One out of fifty, if not." Rahewa wasn't asking him where her mother's case ranked in this scale, and Harry felt grateful for that.

Rahewa's sobbing had faded. She looked up, no longer caring of the tears which still trickled down. "Harry - when I heard about you, and heard that your parents died so early, I always tried to imagine how it is ... How is it, to have no parents?"

"I don't know how to answer that, because I don't know how it is to have parents. I have just two memories of my parents - I told you about one of them, when they appeared together during my fight with Voldemort, remember? ... Well, the other - I never told you, because ... Anyway, I think now's the right time."

Harry explained how he had relived the scene of his mother's death, during his encounters with Dementors. "That's why I went to Lupin, to find a protection against this scene in my mind ... And the result was the Patronus."

Rahewa listened quietly. It wasn't the answer to her question, but even so, she understood what he was trying to tell her.

Taking the opportunity, Harry said, "Coming back to your question ... I can tell you how it is to live with people who don't like you, who hate you, and curse the day you were brought to them. But I won't, because - Rahewa, I promise you - whatever'll happen, you won't have to live with people who don't like you. If ... There's nobody to replace a mother, but there are people who can come close. I found Ma Weasley, or maybe she found me ..."

A figure was approaching them. Lousy, seeing that figure, suddenly seemed guilty, like a culprit caught in the act.

The figure stopped. "I love it - leading young, innocent dogs astray, and as if that's not enough, Harry, you're doing it together with young, innocent girls." Samantha, arms akimbo, turned her attention to the dog. "And you - Lousy the guard, huh? ... Lousy the lousy guard, that's more to the point, that is."

At this moment, she recognized Rahewa's face.

Samantha knelt down. "Miss Lightfoot - also known as Rahewa, the girl in whose presence I shouldn't shout at Harry, because that's very dangerous, as I've been told ... Except that right now, it looks more the other way around - if I'd shout at you, I guess it'd be Harry at my throat. I mean, okay, he has no knife, but he knows other tricks."

Said Harry smiled. "Hello, Sam ... We took over the care of non-magical creatures, especially those bored of guarding a hut."

"You did an excellent job, really." The woman looked at the girl. "Okay, hon - what shall it be? Should I get lost, or are you going to tell me?"

No answer.

Samantha sat down. "You're right, there's a third option - to get my ass to the ground, and my mouth shut ... Alright, I'll keep it shut, at least afterwards, in particular because nobody would believe me. Imagine - me saying, 'I met Rahewa Lightfoot, and she was crying.' You know what people would say? They'd say, 'Impossible. Either you've met someone else, or you've been dreaming.' Since I can trust my eyes, this must be a dream - that's the only explanation." Samatha fell back into the grass, closing her eyes, giving a pretense of sleep.

This was the signal for Lousy with the bad conscience - to lick Samantha's face, doing what he could to make for good weather.

Samantha squeaked, and Rahewa couldn't avoid a smile, and Harry was wondering if he had to extend the list of possible candidates, would the dreaded day ever come - the time to look around for someone old enough, in the eyes of an inflexible law, to collect a daughter.

* * *

Harry's second tour carried him to Haiti. With just a week left before the next full moon, Hermione was pressing him to do it now - if anything went wrong, there would be still time for a second journey, without losing a complete month.

They spoke with Almyra, received the address of her mother's friend and sister in the spirit of voodoo. A Madame Dussolier, living in Saint Marc, a town north of Port-au-Prince, the only city with a linkport in Haiti. Madame Dussolier had located two *loup-garous* - to be precise, she had located more, but only two of them were ready to serve as test candidates, of course for money.

"Harry," said Almyra, "you should travel with your broomstick, because the traffic lines on that island are worse than bad ... And it should be the Steel Wing - not because you'll be attacked, just to make sure the broomstick doesn't get lost. Haiti is among the poorest countries on earth, stealing is a necessity for them."

After a moment's thinking, Almyra added, "And you should travel with Nagini. She'll warn you if someone has funny ideas about a rich tourist coming along, but what's more important, you'll look more like a voodoo priest than anything else - which means nobody will dare to attack you."

Suddenly, Harry's deal with Hermione seemed quite unbalanced - three weeks of coaching for an unknown number of journeys into hostile territory? Maybe, at the end of this year, he would find reason to ask for an upgrading. He glanced at Almyra. "Are you trying to make it a bit more thrilling, just to ease up my mind?"

Almyra's expression was serious. "These are the Caribbeans, Harry - sun, rum, black magic, and violent death. If something happens, it'll happen quickly."

Hermione handed him four flasks. "They have to drink one of them - the second one is just a backup, if they spill the first ... They should drink it one or two days before full moon. On the last day, it would be too late."

Harry studied the flasks. "Before breakfast, after meals, or how else?"

Hermione checked his face, somewhat suspiciously - was it a serious question or a teasing joke? She couldn't decide, because she was restricted to what her eyes told her. "Doesn't matter - it's only important that the body has assimilated the potion before the critical night."

The time difference to Port-au-Prince was five hours. Harry arrived at London Linkport in time for the six o'clock portal. Passing through, he stood in the linkport of Port-au-Prince - small, dirty, deserted, twenty degrees hotter, or so it seemed, and almost nobody in sight.

It was one o'clock local time - siesta time. Nobody called it like that, except life would stay in suspension for the next three hours.

The heat was unbearable. Harry looked around for a cafeteria, a shop, a soda stand - anything to get a drink. There were some, without exception closed till later in the afternoon.

Almyra had warned him of drinking anything outside a closed bottle. What now? Within the next sixty minutes, he would suffer a heat stroke, or fall down from dehydration.

Then his mind recovered from the first heat shock, started working again. Next moment, Harry was back in London Linkport, to buy a six-pack of coke cans, and seconds later, he stood again outside the Port-au-Prince linkport. Thank God for big favours like Apparition.

Waiting three hours was out of the question. Harry mounted his Steel Wing, to start a low-altitude flight at medium speed, low enough to recognize road signs, slow enough to read them. In spite of the heat, he wore the flight helmet that had come with the Steel Wing - the wind was cooling his body, but Almyra had warned him not to expose his head to the open sun.

When he arrived at Saint Marc, after something like seventy miles following roads without suffering from their bad state, through a magnificent landscape of forests alternating with fields of banana trees or sugar cane, it was three in the afternoon. Harry shot up in the air to get an overview.

Saint Marc was a small seaport. Harry saw a few fish trawlers, boats, however nothing that resembled a rich man's sailboat or cabin cruiser. Even so, the scene reminded him of a sailboat in the Irish Sea.

From high above, the water surface looked flat like a mirror, deep blue close to the borderline, more greenish farther outside. Harry dived down, realizing that the surface was indeed almost flat, and took the opportunity for a full-speed race, feet above the water, keeping course for several minutes. At the Hogwarts lake, it would have ended after seconds, not even reaching the Steel Wing's full speed. Here, aiming toward a shapeless horizon, nothing but water and sky in his view, he experienced another kind of endless space, not unlike his diving tours in the lake.

When he pushed upward to turn, feeling better than minutes before, Harry saw the trace he had left on the surface, already fading in the distance. Returning to the shoreline, he felt a presence - someone watching him.

Coming closer, he still couldn't see much of his spectator, however enough to give it a try. A small boy, probably less than ten, mostly hidden behind a boat lying upside down at the beach, only the upper part of the boy's head visible, two large eyes in the black face recognizable even from the distance.

According to the traveller's guide, green dollar bills were the means to start a conversation here. According to Almyra, Harry was better off behaving like a voodoo priest. Shouldn't be a problem, with a brilliant green snake around his body - in particular with nobody except himself knowing that Nagini still felt a bit seasick after this race across the water.

Harry touched down, feet at the ground, not dismounting. His right arm pointed toward the boy - slowly, then made an unmistakable gesture. *Come to me.*

The boy was pulled forward - arms slack, a horror-stricken face, a body which didn't dare to resist.

With some effort, Harry kept his face steady, suppressed pity as well as laughter. "Montre-moi la route vers Madame Dussolier." (*Show me the way to Madame Dussolier.*)

A fearful nod, then the boy walked ahead, his movements gaining security after a few steps - he knew the way, he could obey the command.

Harry followed, resting on his Steel Wing. He didn't know if there were many voodoo priests seen on a broomstick, but certainly more than walking through streets at siesta time.

Every now and then, the boy turned to see whether this terrifying figure was still following. Harry could feel how the boy was calming down with every step, then suddenly felt worried again.

Next moment, it was clear why. They had reached the destination, a house not different from the others, and the boy seemed deeply afraid what might happen to him, now that this voodoo demon no longer needed his assistance.

Harry seized in his pocket. The boy stood there, frozen.

Harry's hand came out, winked. The boy stepped forward.

Harry held a galleon between his fingers - maybe not the most common currency here, but dollar bills just didn't fit his hard-earned image. "C'est pour toi ... Tu étais très serviable." (*That's for you ... You've been very helpful.*)

A black hand grabbed the coin, careful not to touch him. Incredibly large eyes widening - Harry could swear this wasn't the first galleon the boy had seen.

"Allez."

A nod, a tentative step backward, another, then the boy was racing down the street. Reaching the corner, he looked back once, then he was gone.

It was probably still siesta time, only that Harry had lost patience with this sleepy town. He dismounted, knocked at the door.

Nothing.

He felt a temptation to blow the door inside, suppressed it in favour of a good first impression, remembering Lupin's remark. He took his wand, pointed toward the door.

The door rattled with a loud bang - to be heard halfway down the street, certainly enough to wake anybody's sleep inside that house.

The door opened. A young man, about Harry's age, looking startled.

The young man's name was Benoît. He did errands for Madame Dussolier - an obvious necessity, as Harry realized moments later. Madame Dussolier was the fattest creature he'd ever seen. He almost couldn't believe his eyes, seeing this obscenely engorged figure.

But he could believe his other senses, and they told him that this witch didn't like him, hadn't taken well to his knocking, seriously objected his lack of respect, and couldn't await the moment he was gone, simply because she was frightened of him, still more frightened that someone else might recognize this emotion.

The sooner the better - so far, Harry shared her feelings. As a result, only minutes later, skipping all the formalities between voodoo priests, he and Benoît were standing in the street. Harry asked, "Where does our first customer live?"

Benoît's answer didn't sound like French. After several attempts, they settled to a compromise - Harry would concentrate harder, and Benoît would speak slower, also a bit closer to French than his common French-Creole dialect.

The first *loup-garou* lived in Gros-Morne, a town in the north - about eighty miles away, more than the distance between Port-au-Prince and Saint Marc.

"How do we travel?"

What Harry understood sounded like a schedule for a two-weeks-safari. They would arrive maybe deep in the night, maybe next morning, maybe never. What Harry had in mind could only be rated as an impossibility - Benoît was ready to listen and to answer just because the alternative seemed still worse - entering the house again and admitting that he'd been unable to get rid of this English demon.

Harry sighed. "Can you ride a broomstick?"

Yes, his guide could.

No, his guide didn't have any.

A broomstick store? Benoît had heard about a store in Port-au-Prince, only he wasn't sure.

Harry saw a better solution, but first he wanted his guide placed safely away from that witch with the fat for two. "Let's go to the harbour."

Close to the beach, he extracted a coke from his six-pack, handed it to the young man. "Here ... I'll be back in ten minutes - don't move."

London, Diagon Alley, Quality Quidditch Supplies. Dammit - closed, eight o'clock in the evening local time. His anger rising, Harry let the door bang still louder than at the house in Saint Marc.

A face at a window. A moment later, the door came open - the face belonged to a young broomstick fanatic by the name of Ernest Galbraith, who once had visited Hogwarts to see a Steel Wing in flight.

Five minutes later, Harry left the shop with a smile and a brand new Firebolt Two. Being rich was nice when you had to solve problems.

Benoît stared at the broomstick, his black face shining in excitement. Harry saw his chance. "If we get along well in this task, you and me, it's yours afterwards."

And up they were, no longer restricted to road signs, and to low speed, taking course as the crow flies, at the full speed of a Firebolt Two. Forty minutes later, Gros-Morne appeared ahead and below.

They went down at an open place, next to a crossing, framed by a mix of palms and banana trees. Benoît told Harry to wait here, while he was going to fetch the man, and for God's sake to watch his Firebolt. Then he walked up the street.

He came back ten minutes later, accompanied by a young man, between twenty and thirty, wiry body, hollow eyes. His name was Caprien Marût, and Harry didn't understand a word he was saying. Benoît had to translate.

"He wants the money first."

Hermione's - and Almyra's - instructions had been quite clear in that point. Payment *after* the cure, and after the candidate had described the taste. Clever Hermione had mixed in a strong flavour - the same in all four flasks. If the candidate was unable to describe the taste, or if the description was wrong, there would be no money.

Harry explained the public part of that to Benoît, who translated into French-Creole, wiping off his appreciating grin before turning to Caprien Marût.

A sour-looking face, a nod, and a hand outstretched for the flasks. Taking them, Caprien Marût turned and walked off without another word.

Harry watched him leave, looked at Benoît. "Nice guy, huh?"

The answer was a shrugging, more French than anything else around, including the language.

"So where's our second candidate?" Harry no longer expected to find him around the next corner, and he was right. They jumped up, to reach Port-de-Paix, another small seaport forty miles to the north - but only as a navigation point. Crossing ten miles of water, they reached the Ile de la Tortue.

Benoît ignored the two small towns in sight, flew straight to the highest point of the island, touching down on a lawn in front of a building in colonial style.

Apart from the style, and the position on top of the hill, Harry was reminded of a house on a Japanese island, still more so when a young woman opened the door - although she was black, of course, good-looking, dressed classy enough to make clear this was no house maid.

Without surprise, Harry looked at their host, seeing very much what he'd expected after the woman at the door. Fabrice Armodéc was an older man, expensively dressed, his complexion as well as his manners almost incomparable with those of that Caprien.

The man's French was flawless. "Good afternoon, gentlemen ... Monsieur Pottère? Nice to meet you."

He offered drinks, and they accepted. From this moment on, Benoît - although still in full view, sitting in his chair - seemed to blend into the walls, probably a habit developed over years working with Madame Dussolier. He wasn't part of the conversation, only he couldn't be anywhere else because someone might need his services any second.

The host asked, "How was your journey, Monsieur Pottère?"

"Longer than the next ones will be, Monsieur Armodéc. Now that I've been here once, I'll be able to come directly."

"Apparition? You seem very young for that, but then, you seem quite young for the other things I read about you."

Harry looked at the man with astonishment.

"To be honest, Monsieur Pottère, it was your name which brought me into this - er, project."

If anything struck Harry more by surprise than this announcement, then Nagini keeping silent.

"Yes ... Of course, your name didn't come up in the conversations - but that of your school, Hogwarts, and I had a feeling that I might meet you in the course of these tests. And I was right."

Harry selected his words carefully. "That comes unexpected, Monsieur Armodéc."

"Certainly. By the way - if I understood you right, you'll apparate back, which means we could send your guide home, with compliments to Madame Dussolier."

So Benoît hadn't blended out of the host's view, while he now stood up, thanked for the drink - almost untouched - and was escorted out by the young woman. It made Harry curious - did this wealthy *loup-garou* just prefer a more private conversation, or was he trying to avoid an earwitness who'd be interviewed soon afterwards by that fat voodoo witch?

When in doubt, ask. "I was wondering, Monsieur Armodéc, how you came in touch with Madame Dussolier - across such a distance."

"The community of *loup-garous* is small, and to some degree, it binds people closer together than - er, social ranks. I'm not even sure whether this attempt of escaping is reasonable - but there are some tempting factors, and what's more, I don't believe it'll work."

"You like being a werewolf??"

The dark face smiled. "It's not a question of like or dislike. So far, it was a fate. But you must know, Monsieur Pottère, that even this cruel punishment of nature has its pay-offs. Once a month, I'm suffering terribly, while for the rest of the time, I'm rewarded with a virility that's absolutely unusual for my age, maybe even for much younger men ... Imagine - how disappointed my young flower of the night would be, should this change."

With some effort, Harry avoided an open stare. This was new to him, and it would be interesting as much as difficult to discuss the topic with Lupin. "Then why did you join this project, Monsieur Armodéc?"

"Oh, there are more desires - curiosity, for instance ... And besides, if it really works, I'm sure your people will manage a counter potion. No, it wasn't the money which caught my interest," the man laughed, making a gesture around to indicate a room full of expensive items, "it was the people. Monsieur Pottère, I felt the hope that my payment would be given in conversations - while it's pure luck beyond my highest expectations that it's you who'll do the visits."

He was hoping? And what if ... Harry felt confronted with the most polite form of blackmailing, and all that for three weeks of coaching.

Monsieur Armodéc seemed to follow his thoughts. "For compensation, I will not only do my duty, no, I can offer some benefits like excellent dinners, my own contributions to the conversation - and if you decide to stay overnight, Monsieur Pottère, you'll find any comfort and pleasure you might expect in a guest room."

Now Harry was really speechless.

"This is of course just an option. However, in this French part of the Carribeans, it's a very natural one, I can assure you. So I'm confident you don't feel shocked - which would be a surprise, unless the reports in the French newspapers were greatly exaggerating."

Harry cleared his throat. "Monsieur Armodéc, so far, my only comment is that your own contribution to the talking is definitely fascinating."

"Not more than anything else I could offer, that's for sure, Monsieur Pottère ... But to come back to our business, how's your involvement in this project?"

"It's run by a friend of mine - her name is Hermione Granger. I'm just the messenger, that's all."

"Hermione - what a wonderful name. I'd like to meet her." Seeing Harry's glance, the host laughed. "Rest assured, Monsieur Pottère, that I can adapt quite well to the conventions and standards of my guests ... If I'd appear offensive, then certainly not by accident."

Which allowed a few interesting conclusions. For example, that this man had something similar to Harry's *haragei* - the articles in French newspapers couldn't have been the only reason to offer him a guest room as well as company for the night, almost in the second sentence. And then of course his judgement of Harry, something to think about. "Monsieur Armodéc - today, I'm not prepared to stay longer. But the next time, I'll be ready to trade - er, stories for a dinner."

"Very well, Monsieur Pottère. I'm looking forward to it."

After delivering the flasks as well as the instructions, Harry said goodbye, was escorted to the door by this young woman. He smelled her perfume - had she been wearing it at his arrival?

Outside, he decided to fly a slow patrol over the island before jumping back to Hogwarts. It wasn't really for orientation - no, he just needed a few minutes to think, and up in the air was an excellent place to do that.

The project was running, and Harry could report the first task completed. Well, and what should he report in addition? ... Should he tell Hermione that she was invited to a dinner, and maybe more? ... Should he discuss the side-effects of werewolvism with her, or with Lupin? ... Or with Almyra??

Giving a full report would be sort of a safety belt, keeping him away from offers extending beyond a dinner, yes, definitely so. Only that this safety raised a very limited appeal.

06 - Manifestations

The next day, Harry had made up his mind what to tell about his Haitian trip. Also to whom - he would talk with Hermione, of course, and with nobody else. He would report everything - with one little exception, that was.

This problem solved, he was facing another - Hermione wanted to hear it right at the breakfast table.

Harry refused to reveal details, reported only that he'd delivered the flasks. For the rest of the story, he put Hermione off until after supper, claiming the need for a private conversation - outside, where else.

Hermione, who could sense exciting news even without *haragei*, agreed quicker than expected.

After supper, Harry wanted to use his favourite place for conversations, but no way. Hadn't he said private? ... Well, what was private at a place that close to a Texan bigmouth? The place at the lake was private, and they could combine it with a swimming - after talking, what with the food just gulped down, and especially because Hermione wasn't going to wait any longer before hearing the details.

Harry watched her strip down to her swimsuit, remembering the last time he'd seen Hermione like that, remembering also Samantha's remarks. Well, maybe the mentioned regularity didn't do much against Hermione's bossiness, but otherwise ... She looked great.

And she saw him watching. "If we had music, I could add the right movements to do a real striptease for you, Harry."

He grinned. "What's the sense in that if you stop with the swimsuit left?"

Challenging Hermione ... She made a step toward him, and another. Then, very slowly, she moved her hands up her body, came to rest on the knot that was holding the strip around her neck, started to work on it.

Harry stared up, seeing her expression, her half-open mouth, her prominent mons still closer in his view.

Voices, somewhere near.

Hermione stopped, sat down. "Some privacy ... Okay, Harry, let's talk. I darkly remember that's why we came here." Her voice was a bit breathless.

Harry's wasn't, for compensation, his mouth felt dry. "I met Madame Dussolier. She's so fat, she'd be enough for three witches. There's a young man, Benoît, who does the work. He guided me to the two candidates ... The first, Caprien Marût, is about twenty-five and a street rat. The other, Fabrice Armodéc, is an older man with a lot of money, a big house, a young woman who's not his wife, and with more than one desire - he wants to be paid with conversations, stories ... He was really happy to see me."

Hermione looked thunderstruck.

Harry grinned wryly. "I agreed - to stay for dinner the next times, and to do my part ... By the way, he'd like to meet you."

"Really? ... What for?"

"That's basically up to you." When Hermione's questioning look didn't fade, Harry decided to quote from memory. "He said he could adapt quite well to the - er, conventions of his guests."

"I see ..." This peculiar expression was back in Hermione's face. "Should I go?"

"Certainly - once you can apparate. He has style, that's for sure."

"Style, huh? ... And what if I don't want to wait until I can apparate? I mean, his place is really private, isn't it?"

"Definitely. It's the topmost point on the Ile de la Tortue, about two hundred miles north of Port-au-Prince."

Hermione dropped her sex-fever attitude - assuming it had been an attitude. "Two hundred - say, how did you travel?"

"With broomsticks." Harry had to describe the journey from Saint Marc to Gros-Morne, and from there to the Ile de la Tortue, and of course Hermione was asking more, and he had to confess that he'd bought a Firebolt Two.

A rare moment - Hermione staring at him, speechless.

Harry went for the opportunity to explain the background. "Well, er - you know, er - no, you don't know, but ... I've got some money. Actually, I'm rich, so-to-speak. That's why buying a Firebolt Two doesn't mean anything - it was just the quickest method to proceed further." He summarized the story of Mr. Chang and Mr. Crownshield. "I didn't intend to keep it a secret - I just didn't know how to tell."

His own embarrassment seemed nothing, compared to that of Hermione. "Harry, I didn't know that ... I thought these people could be found some streets away. This wasn't part of our deal - of course I'll pay that money back, except that I'm not sure ..."

"Stop it! ... As I said, I don't know what to do with so much money. If there's anything that exceeds the planned deal, it's me telling stories to that Armodéc. For this, don't be surprised if I'll come back to you for some more coaching at the end of the year."

Hermione looked at him. "I really would like to coach you a bit, Harry ... Not necessarily at the end of the year, that is."

Harry's stare wasn't exactly disbelieving, more the opposite. "What's wrong with you? Did Viktor swear some vow of chastity?"

"Not at all - and there's nothing wrong with me, that's what I'd like to show you." Hermione's expression lacked any seductive smile, and maybe this caused still a greater impact on Harry,

together with her next words. "I mean, you can feed a cat, and still she's going to hunt mice - in particular such a lonely one ..."

Except that this place couldn't be called lonely any longer - with people not too far away, laughing, splashing through the water. Harry wasn't sure whether he should be grateful for that, or disappointed. He said, "Maybe this isn't the best moment to discuss another issue that's nagging me, but ... Monsieur Armodéc wasn't sure whether he wanted to lose his werewolf state. He said there's a pay-off from that - an unusual virility for his age, as he put it."

Hermione smiled. "Maybe I really should visit him."

"Whatever - but can you tell me whether it's true?"

"Interested, Harry? ... I'm a bit surprised, after all I've heard, this ..."

"No thanks - maybe in twenty or thirty years, while now ..." Harry stopped, realizing that he'd fallen for Hermione's joke trap. "Just tell me what you know. I feel somewhat reluctant to ask Lupin, or Almyra."

Hermione laughed. "So we've found something you're scared of ... Allright - yes, there is a side effect, but maybe not quite as sensational as you'd expect. Werewolves are highly resistant against common illnesses, or weaknesses - but, to give you an example, if you'd continue your training year in, year out, the effect would be very much the same ... Lupin's just too young to be a reliable witness. This Armodéc must be past fifty, maybe sixty - for him, the benefit is more obvious, so he can play the game more often than you'd expect otherwise ... Good for him, and for his woman. How does she look, Harry?"

"He has taste, no denying."

"Maybe we should visit them both - you at full moon, me before or after. What do you think?"

With more determination than he felt, Harry answered, "I think you should go for a swim, or a dive, to cool down ... No, wait a second - there's something else I wanted to ask you."

"Ask away, Harry." This purring - was it really the same voice which had quoted Hogwarts rules about alcohol?

"It's about money - as boring as that." He earned a grin. "Well - erm, I was trying to spread a bit of my fortune among friends and relatives, and now that I've finally managed to tell you ... Erm, yes, er - would you mind accepting five thousand galleons? That was what Ron and Ginny settled to, you know."

Hermione's answer came immediately. "Minus the Firebolt, of course."

"You're not serious, are you?" Harry felt almost angry.

"Only joking." Hermione looked very pleased. "But you know me, I had to ask ... Thank you, Harry, that's very kind. No, I don't mind at all - it's not what I had in mind, but ..."

His opportunity to pay back. "More? Ten thousand?"

He had her - Hermione was blushing. "No - you took me wrong ..." She stopped, seeing his grin. "Okay, okay."

"And - I'd like to do the same with Viktor, only I don't know how ... If I ask him, he'll say no. Do you know a way?"

"You're right. Let me think it over - I'll find a way to persuade him."

Harry grinned. "Do that - better him than me, if you get my drift ... Now let's jump into the water."

Coming out, walking to their place, he lowered his voice. "Did you have a look at the other people? I don't think there's anyone from Hogwarts ... Who are they?"

"Maybe from Hogsmeade?"

"That's unlikely ... You know what - I think these are Muggles. How come they appear at this lake, all of a sudden? That's the last thing we need here."

Hermione, towelling herself, gasped. With a soft pop, the air closed into the space where, a second before, Harry had been.

He came back five minutes later. "I checked around. These are really Muggles."

"How do you know?"

"First - *haragei*. It's no proof, but ... Next - I didn't recognize anyone, and whatever they were talking about, the school and the teachers didn't come up in that. They're talking about other things - if they're talking, that is. But mostly - and that's the best proof - they're not talking much because they're quite busy with each other."

"That's the trademark of Muggles? ... Well, looking at us, you're right, but it's not too late. C'mon ..."

"Hermione - please! ... What's happening here?"

"They were looking for a place, and they found it - that's all." Only Hermione didn't believe her own words.

Harry didn't either. "They're looking for a place all year long, and they did so last year, and the year before. But they never appeared here ... Something must have changed."

When taking their broomsticks, suddenly they felt like thieves in the night, did it quietly, jumping straight upward, to be out of sight before flying back to Hogwarts, two questions working in Harry's mind.

The first - how to deal with Hermione, should they ever meet at a truly private place. More important was the second - what had made the Muggles appear at the lake?

* * *

Visiting dragons should be the next major item on Harry's agenda. He wasn't really looking forward to it, kept asking himself Ron's question - how thick had someone to be in order to volunteer for that? But he didn't say it aloud, not with such a clear memory of the scene in class.

Ellesmere - not to be confused with Ellesmere Port, which was considerably bigger - had no linkport of its own. The closest one could be found in Newcastle, leaving about forty miles to be travelled westward, somehow. This meant of course another broomstick ride, the Knight Bus would not respond to downflaggings that far away from the capital.

What might be a good time for visiting a dragon?

"Right after you've signed your last will," answered Samantha, "and just before you think better of it."

"Early evening," said Almyra, "after they're fed, when they're hanging around lazily like any other animal with a full stomach. Problem is, this might be too late in the day for visitors - after all, those people from the National Dragon Foundation are Ministry employees."

Harry decided to arrive in the early afternoon. It should give him time to talk with someone, to establish the contact before coming close to a dragon, otherwise these people might be a bit careless with unwelcome visitors.

Out of Newcastle, he followed the road westward, cutting short bends and slopes. An hour later, he saw the town appear which had to be Ellesmere. A dive down, checking the signs, confirmed it.

And now? Walking through the streets, asking for the direction toward a dragon camp didn't sound like a good idea - Muggles might not respond well to such a question.

Harry raced skyward, getting higher and higher until he had the town and the surrounding landscape in view. Studying the topology, he felt confident having found the location - a forest, climbing up a hill, seemed the only possible place for hiding a dragon camp.

Diving down, approaching the forest, he recognized a wire fence and signs every hundred yards. Coming closer, he could read the next sign.

• *Royal Air Force*
Flame-Thrower Test Area
No Trespassing

Harry grinned. The sign also showed a skull, however more impressive were the scorchmarks on the board and the post. It should be good enough to keep other people away.

Following a path uphill, he came to a deserted shack and a barrier, painted red and white, showing the same sign. He passed it at low speed, sensing around. Moments later, he reached a small stone building. Somebody had to be inside, according to his *haragei*.

When a man opened the door, Harry first thought a Goblin was standing in front of him. Small, thin, ageless face, a large mark from the forehead to the left ear that had to be a souvenir from a burning. Then Harry registered the normal-sized fingers and the finer bone

structure of a human. "Good afternoon," he said. "My name is Harry Potter, I'm a student at ..."

"Harry Potter?" The man glanced at Harry's forehead, recognized the scar. "By golly! You're really the one, ain't'cha?"

"Er - yes ..."

"Now that's the day - Harry Potter here at this place, the ass of Wales as people call it, except it's not true, because it's the ass of the whole damn United Kingdom ... Nice to meet you, Harry, Rex is my name, Rex Ballantine, only I'm *not* related to the scotch factory, ruddy shame, that is, call me Rex - my friends use to call me Tyrannosaurus Rex, and they still can laugh about that every day anew."

Harry knew why, suppressing his own laughter. He offered the letter written by Almyra and signed by Dumbledore.

Rex, the smallest king-size dinosaur, read it, looked up. "What a nice collection of long words - I could read it forever, without getting any wiser ... Harry, old boy, just tell me why you're here."

"Erm - to study dragons."

"Now isn't this the surprise of the year? Who'd guessed so, after all?" The human gnome still grinned, with eyes suddenly looking sharp. "Harry, old scum, you've seen dragons for months, and you've seen them die, in the Battle of Hogwarts. Stop playing around the bush with your old friend Rex, and tell me straight away!"

"I ... How do you know about me, and the Battle of Hogwarts?"

"If it's about dragons, I know. If it's about nosy young students who answer questions with counter questions, I won't rest until I know ... So then, noble boy, would'cha ..."

"Er - sorry - er, Rex. I'm here because ... Well, I want to do an Animagus for a dragon."

"Animagus, huh?" For some moments, Rex was really silent, while he moved Harry inside, let him sit down at a kitchen table. "Cup of tea?"

Harry accepted.

Rex was spooning sugar into his cup, seemingly lost in thoughts. Just when Harry felt sure he should wake him up before the sugared tea would change to tea'ed sugar, the man stopped.

"Yeah, that'd be something ... Has never been tried before, but it'd be the ideal dragon guard ..."

"Never been tried? ... The books say it's impossible - that means, someone must have tried, and failed, don't you think so?"

The man chuckled. "Harry, old bean, don't trust books you didn't write by yourself. Imagine - there's this problem, and you don't know how to solve it, and what's more, the only way of figuring out's scaring you like hell - then you wait till nobody's around, to arrange things so

that you can say it's impossible ... And the next one who's writing a book about that is facing the same problem, scared too, and he'll read what's written in the first book, and so on ... That's not what they teach at Hogwarts, I guess in order to save something you students have to find out by yourselves."

So this Rex Ballantine was the third person who believed it possible, or maybe the fourth, if Lupin could be counted, toward whom Harry had mentioned the idea for the first time. A promising sign. Harry asked the man which dragons he could offer.

"Not more than three, right now ... Since the Muggles have started making trouble, we've been moving dragons to more remote places - although you wouldn't think there'd be a place more remote than this one."

"Trouble? ... What kind of trouble?"

"Our cover doesn't work any longer - not as good as before. People come through ... Recently, we had a visit even from the Royal Air Force - " Rex chuckled, "an officer who wanted to see a flame-thrower, hehe."

Muggles coming to wizard places ... The same problem, here like at the Hogwarts lake. It was strange, only Harry had come to talk about dragons, not Muggles.

Resuming his answer, Rex said, "Yeah - three, two Common Welsh Green, both male, and a Hebridean Black, a female. I'd recommend the female, Harry, old potato."

"The female - as a preparation for transfiguring into a dragon?"

"Aah, that's still basic work, isn't it? But then again, won't it be a real surprise if you'd turn into a dragon girl, Harry? ... But seriously, the two males are a bit edgy - they can smell the female which is close to the heat, and at that time, dragon boys are a bit indiscriminate with other boys, hehe ... While the female is quite smoochy, which is a real luck, because ..."

They were walking into the forest, and this unfinished sentence seemed a good reason for Harry to stop cold. "Because?"

"Well - her name is Carrie ... Carrie, the devil's youngest daughter, that's her full name, hehe."

Harry wasn't inclined to move a step further.

"Ah, c'mon, relax, Harry, old pumpkin - okay, she's a bit crazy, that's why she's got that name. It's the title of a Muggle movie, that's all. Have you seen that movie?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Although Harry was more afraid not knowing why a female dragon would be named after it.

"Well, it's about a girl. She's not crazy, but her mother is, while the girl has it more with fire, hehe, you really can say that, Harry, old pumpnickel ... C'mon - that close to the heat, they don't burn you, which is the major difference between dragon girls and those with two legs, a real joke, isn't it, but then, dragon girls don't use their legs to burn you - although, at closer inspection, what the others burn you with is no longer called legs, what do you think, Harry, old butterfly ..."

Harry wasn't listening any longer to Chattopourus Rex, his attention caught by an enormous reptilian head, with two incredibly large eyes looking at him, greenish-yellow, the vertical pupils contrasting sharply ... An unblinking stare, from such beautiful eyes.

For a moment, he was completely transfixed. Then he walked forward, toward another serpent, a flying one, as the Chinese called it, hundred times larger than Nagini, a serpent with legs, and wings, and ears - incredibly small at this gigantic head, and soft, in contrast to the horny surface of that endless snout, as the touch of his fingers told him.

"Hello, Carrie ..."

From his mind through his body, through his hands on a calm body, one spirit made contact with another.

Strength ... A sense of heaviness, deepened by the memory of flying through the air on these mighty wings, powerful strokes, rapidly draining a force limited even in this body which was fearless against everything, with no natural enemy - except of course those small creatures to which this spirit was bound by affection ... Sort of loneliness, or sadness - maybe a feeling of being doomed, as a race rather than an individual ... A vague feeling of desire ...

Harry smiled. "Horny inside as much as outside, are you? ... Well, you'll have to talk with Rex about that, unless you take it in your own hands, which is more likely, I guess."

He walked along the body, inspected all details, the legs, as far as they were visible, halfway buried under a stomach on which the scales turned from deep black to light grey, touched the wings, feeling the skeleton structure with the skinny sails in-between, the long tail, powerful enough to blow a small house into pieces, and back the other side, reaching the nostrils which looked more like exhaust pipes than openings for recognizing scents.

"Say, Carrie, how good can you smell? ... Oops, sorry, how could I forget - of course, your tongue, like snake, like dragon, isn't it? ... Would you be so kind to open your mouth? Just for a moment, to let me have a look?"

Carrie wouldn't. What Harry felt was more a sort of amused stubbornness than indifference. She was lying, period.

"Okay, okay - if a girl doesn't want it, there's no way inside, isn't that so, Carrie? ... Someone told me, if a girl says no, then ... Yeah, okay, you didn't say anything, that's why."

Rex' voice interrupted this semi-conversation. "Harry, my boy, tell me - what are you hissing all the time? You know how you sound? - Like my old teapot, the one with the broken pipe."

Harry stared at him, then started to laugh, turned back to look into these big, beautiful eyes. "Hey, Carrie, did you get me? Is Parseltongue close enough to Dragonese?"

There was no answer - none as clear as a response from Nagini. Still, what he had done in the last half hour hadn't been a monologue.

Returning to Hogwarts, he met Hermione, who looked at him expectantly. "How was it, Harry?"

Intimate enough not to talk about in public, not even with a supporter of the dragon transfiguration project. "Well - I met a dinosaur. His name's Tyrannosaurus Rex."

Hermione eyed him, trying to decipher this message - knowing for sure it wasn't a simple, stupid joke. "Really? What did he say?"

"He said I shouldn't trust books."

And miraculously, the suspicion faded from Hermione's face. "He's right, definitely - you won't believe what a scrap I found in Potion books, from stupid mistakes to downright nonsense. They're too scared to give it a try, and then they write some bullshit, hoping nobody'll ever check it ..."

* * *

Lupin, somewhat tenaciously, reminded Harry that his visit to the Transportation Department was due. Lupin also expressed his concern that without this visit, Harry's portkey programming project might be unlikely to proceed.

Harry didn't feel like it. And because they were alone in Lupin's office, he just replied, "That's a lot of p's, Prof."

"Then call it triple-p, but get moving."

"If I had to pee, I'd get moving, rather than tripple around."

Lupin stared at him. "That's a funny way to ask for a rewriting of that recommendation letter. But I can do it, Harry, no sweat - although then, you'd be better off without the letter."

"Baah ... Blackmailing - quite typical for a werewolf, even for a cured one, exactly what's in the old saying - you can dress a wolf in sheepskin, or you can make him a Hogwarts teacher, but ..." Harry ducked, barely avoiding Lupin's tickling charm. "Stop it! You'll get trouble."

Playfully, Lupin shot more spells, inches too high. "Really? ... From you? From Dumbledore?"

"No - from Almyra."

Grinning, Lupin stored his wand. "You could be right - but you just gave me the keyword. I'll tell her, Harry's wetting his pants at the thought of visiting the Transportation Department - unless ..."

"Yeah, okay, you mobby ... May I have that letter?"

"Mobby?" Lupin weighed the letter in his hand. "First you tell me what this means."

"Erm ..." Harry smiled friendly. "Basically the same what I said before, er - it stands for *Master of bad blackmailing*."

Lupin watched his face, registered something. "Very clever ... And now tell me what it really means."

"You don't want to know, Prof."

"You don't want that letter, Harry?"

"Okay, okay ... Gimme the letter first - no, I won't cheat."

Holding the parchment, Harry said, "You mobby - that's short for *you moron, bloody blockhead, you*." He raced away, using his full *aikido* skill in ducking and jumping - Lupin's tickling charms were no longer aimed too high.

Mr. Clifford Caruthers, chief of the Technical Services team in the Transportation Department, differed in many ways from Dogan Defreak who held a comparable position at Gringotts. First, Mr. Caruthers was human, not Goblin. Second, his office was considerably larger, filled with many insignia of rank. Third, Mr. Caruthers saw no reason whatsoever to smile at Harry.

Which could be explained easily - he wasn't glad at all to meet Harry. "What do you need portkeys for, Mr. Potter? For what I've read, you prefer the linkports of *Magical Tours*, isn't that so?"

"Are there any others around?"

It was definitely the wrong answer from the perspective of Harry's project, Mr. Caruthers' reddening face told him that much. "This is just what to expect from someone who gave that interview - but I don't need to hear this in my office ... I'm afraid our experts are too busy right now to offer help in some childish project - maybe later in the year. Good after ..."

"Did Warrington do it all by himself?"

The face turned purplish. "What??"

Harry felt more than ready to explain. "I'd think there was a technical report involved when *Magical Tours* came along to find all doors open - for example about the frequency of the safety checks ... Pity it was just Warrington who had to suffer."

Mr. Caruthers was gasping. "You ... you ..."

"Or did you think this was some undercover investigation? ... No - just a childish project, but it might be a good idea, I mean an official one, with an article or two in the ..."

A trembling hand was pointing to the door. "Get out! ... Now!"

"It was a pleasure, Mr. Caruthers ... You're dirty, so much's for sure. I hope we'll see each other again."

Yes, the man was dirty - the feeling of guilt had been too strong in Harry's *haragei*. Only that it would be impossible to prove, only nobody cared any longer, least of all Harry himself, because something else was more important - he had messed up his project start thoroughly.

Lupin would roll over from laughing.

What now? Should he go to Sirius?

No. Sirius would listen to his description, would believe him that Caruthers had played some role in some plot, would tell him to forget it - and then he would roll over from laughing. Somehow, the nicest people could have fun seeing Harry steamrolled once in a while.

Arthur! ... Arthur Weasley had his own contacts, was an insider, certainly knew people with sufficient knowledge to give him a decent start. And he wouldn't laugh.

Walking down the corridor, another door sign caught Harry's attention - *Laboratory*. No names, not even a room number, the Ministry spent half of its time making sure no outsider could find his orientation in this maze. Even so, considering the location, this had to be the laboratory of the Transportation Department.

The door opened, almost by itself, and Harry was inside.

A large room, tables in the middle, workbenches along the walls, various power tools - a surprising lot of Muggle technology. Otherwise, the dusty quietness of a church, save for the smell.

A newspaper fell down, presenting a face which showed mild disinterest. "Lost your track?"

"Er - no, I think I'm right here ... I was told I'd find someone here who could tell me about portkey programming." Maybe it wasn't the truth, at least it wasn't a direct lie either.

"Portkey programming? You've found a great time to ask for that, young man, really, by all means."

"Why - er, what's wrong, sir? Are you too busy right now?"

"You joking? Did I look like that?" For a moment, the man looked suspicious, then relaxed, missing any sign of sneering in Harry's face. "I wish I was - only that right now it's dead season for portkeys."

"How's that, sir?"

"Damned Muggles! Appear everywhere, touch everything - and wham, off they go because it was a portkey. And along comes ole' Artie, giving us hell because his people have to clean up ... What a mess."

"Artie? ... You mean Arthur Weasley?"

"Himself personally, yep ... It takes a lot to upset him, but then - oh boy. You know him?"

Harry's slight flush came from amusement as much as from guilt. "Er - yes, I do, actually."

The man studied him. "You're no Weasley, so much I can tell - Arthur has a very characteristical fingerprint, if you'll pardon the expression ... Who are you?"

"I'm a Hogwarts student - my name's Harry Potter."

"I'll be damned ..." The man stared at him, at his forehead, showing a nod at recognizing the lightning-shaped scar.

Harry's mind was racing, desperate to find the remark which would save the situation. He couldn't find any.

The man was up, looked around, looked toward the door. "C'mon - this's no good place to talk." He walked to a small poster at the wall, showing the picture of a blonde woman in dire need of some clothes, waved impatiently. "Come here!"

Harry moved closer, not knowing what to think.

"Touch her left tit."

Suddenly it dawned on him. His hand touched the flat paper, and next moment, Harry stood in a dimly lit room, instinctively making a step forward, just in time before the man arrived.

"Okay, Harry Potter, have a seat ... By the way, I'm Ray, Ray Purcell, born in hell - call me Ray, that's okay."

Harry giggled, listening to this rhyme which came fluently, no doubt honed in phrasing over years. "Hello, Ray - er, call me Harry, that's my parry."

The man looked very pleased. "You've a quick mind, Harry - well, shouldn't be a surprise, after all I've heard ... Say, what's the real purpose of your visit? There wasn't anyone who's sent you, was there?"

"Well - I really came because of portkey programming. But I was sent to Mr. Caruthers, and I spoke with him, only - er, the conversation didn't go well. Then ..."

Ray chuckled. "Didn't go well - no sir, how could it? ... Say, Harry, why didn't you find a way to get rid of this asshole too? He and Warrington, that's two of a kind - or was, whatever's the right tense."

"I didn't know - until today. But it wasn't me who got rid of Warrington, it was Voldemort."

A nod. "After listening carefully to your report, huh? ... Say - did you really hear Warrington confess a murder?"

"Yes - together with two other people."

"The only surprising part for me is that he did confess - must have been some trick of yours, Harry ... Anyway, that's past, and now we're here to talk about portkeys. Although - " Ray looked admiringly, "Harry, I take myself for an expert in that, but this Voldemort - there's no doubt he still could teach me a lesson or two. Warrington's accident - for me that was a portkey trick."

"Really? ... Yes, you could be right - he likes portkeys to kidnap people, or to build death traps."

At Ray's insisting, Harry had to explain the trap in the Triwizard Tournament, also the manipulated mailbox which had sent Sirius into the hands of Voldemort.

"And now you're here to learn how to stop him? ... It's a tricky business, Harry, a portkey is an almost perfect trap."

"For people, yes," agreed Harry. "But I have a snake - she can sense portkeys. I mean, she can sense magic, and if she senses magic in a doorhandle, it's clear what it means."

"A snake, huh? ..." Not moving a muscle in his face, Ray added, "And a kangaroo as a shopping bag, and a penguin for the ice cubes in your whisky ..."

Harry giggled again. "Honestly! ... Her name's Nagini - she was Voldemort's snake, until we met. You know what Parseltongue is? ... Well, I know it, I'm a Parselmouth."

Ray studied his face. "Surprise, surprise ... Do you have still more surprises, Harry?"

"Dunno ... Well, to play as openly as possible - Arthur Weasley's my - er, step-father, in a way, because I live in the Weasley family, and Sirius Black's my godfather ... Now you know all about me, Ray."

"And when does your uncle become Minister of Magic?" Ray watched with interest as Harry was bending in a bad fit of laughter. "Save it, Harry - the joke wasn't that good, by all means."

"No - hehehe, you don't know, hehe, Uncle Vernon's a Muggle, and scared shitless of magic." Harry was roaring again.

Then he had calmed down, and Ray had his attention when he said, "To understand portkeys, Harry, you must know how to apparate."

"I know - I have a license. Go ahead."

"Yes of course - what else. But what's more, you need to know about Apparition Pursuit - now don't disappoint me, Harry ..."

He didn't.

"I have to admit - the one who sent you here knew what he was doing ... Alright, Harry - the rest is pretty simple. A portkey, that's an apparition jump, wrapped into a pursuit jump, and both together nicely placed in some boring item. Basically, that's all - give or take a detail or two."

Harry nodded. "Makes perfect sense, Ray ... And for the few minutes left, you'll give a detail or two, and I'll take them, okay?"

For the next hour, they were discussing the concept of suspending spells in objects, with Harry realizing that - to some degree - portkey programming wasn't really different from producing trick sweets like those of the Weasley twins. He would have to train this elementary technique before proceeding further to the specific aspects of portkeys.

In addition, he became aware that Ray would give him a hard time in a jump competition like the one he'd done with Madam Hooch. The outcome would be open, and definitely tight.

Then Harry thanked Ray for the information, promised to return once he had mastered the art of storing charms in objects, and - challenged by the environment - made an apparition jump directly into Sirius' ante-room.

Jessica had a jump start without broomstick. "Harry! ... Can't you knock at the door like other people?"

She was probably right, only that Harry remembered another woman who might have smiled at him, might have said how wonderful this idea was, if not for her boss - and lover - who might call any moment.

Sirius wasn't pleased either. "It's not improving things if you scare her, Harry."

"Is it then if I don't?"

"Maybe not, but right now I've got enough other trouble, so please be a good boy and try to behave like a perfectly normal wizard, okay?"

"Trouble? - What kind of trouble?"

"Muggles ... They appear everywhere, you won't believe what a nuisance they are."

"That's funny, because that's exactly why I'm here. They appear at the Hogwarts lake too, and I wanted to ask you if you know something that has changed ..." Getting excited, Harry added, "And what's more, I just spoke with a guy from the Transportation Department, and he said they cannot work properly because of Muggles ... Sirius, what's going on there?"

His godfather grimaced. "I don't know ... Harry, it's as if they've detected us."

07 - Detected

Full moon had passed, and Hermione wanted to know what had happened with her test candidates, how her first elixir had performed in their bodies. With mixed feelings, Harry started his second journey toward Haiti, to gather the results.

He jumped from Hogwarts in the early afternoon, arriving at Saint Marc an hour before noon local time. Visiting this Caprien Marût alone made no sense - not without a translator.

Seeing Harry, Benoît quickly closed the door behind him, to do the talking in the street. Madame Dussolier was still asleep, as he said, which indeed explained enough. The voodoo witch would be very unkind to be wakened prematurely, she would be terribly unkind to hear that Harry was the reason, and her unkindness would have just one target - Benoît.

The young man looked surprised, seeing Harry without a broomstick. Harry told him he would jump by Apparition, only to hear that Benoît could not apparate. So Benoît would use the Firebolt, which would take forty minutes - a time span Harry had to kill somehow, here or in Gros-Morne.

There was nothing that held him in this street, or anywhere else in Saint Marc. After watching Benoît disappear at the horizon, Harry jumped to Gros-Morne, to sit in the only cafeteria within sight, drinking coke - the only drink available that came in a closed bottle. Harry remembered Almyra's warning too well, had no intention to pay his debts toward Hermione with drinks and dinners in Haiti and diarrhoea in Hogwarts.

By the time Benoît arrived, Harry had company. Caprien was sitting across the table, talking rapidly and angrily. Harry had explained several times that he was waiting for Benoît's translating, to no avail. He couldn't even understand whether it was the money or the potion that made this test candidate so upset.

With Benoît's help, Harry learned quickly that it was both. The potion had shown a strong taste of vanilla, which was correct. The effect otherwise had been extremely unsatisfying, from Caprien's perspective. He had transfigured into a werewolf, very much as usual - only to lie helplessly on the ground, unable to do anything, defenseless against any attack that might have come. Still worse, Caprien had lacked the grandiose feeling of freedom, power, and invulnerability which for him granted the only pay-off in these nights. While describing this state, Caprien's voice sounded bitter and disappointed. Apparently, he had expected a full success with the very first sample.

Harry paid five galleons, rather than three as agreed before, and instructed Benoît to express his sympathy. It wasn't really true, but then it was no lie either, and mollifying a grumpy candidate seemed definitely better than searching for a new one, in particular when relying on the services of Madame Dussolier.

After Caprien had left, Harry said goodbye to Benoît, paid the drinks, and jumped to the Ile de la Tortue.

Monsieur Armodéc was pleasantly surprised, faked a small embarrassment to be found unprepared for a lunch guest, and hinted a faint disappointment that Harry hadn't come for an evening dinner. With a jovial voice, he mentioned that Harry, at his next visit, might find the

door closed until six o'clock in the evening. However, there was little doubt - this hadn't been joke, Monsieur Armodéc meant it, intended to play the game according to his own rules.

Harry was unable to detect any sign of a kitchen unprepared for a lunch guest. There was enough food for more than two people, served by the young woman whose name, as he learned, was Désirée - quite fitting in his opinion.

He listened to his host's description of the effects, according to which the potion had done nothing whatsoever. It made him very suspicious, although Monsieur Armodéc had identified the taste correctly. Harry decided to recommend a more complicated mix of control tastes to Hermione - maybe a first taste when drinking it, and an after-taste when it was gulped down.

Then he had to sing and dance for his supper, which was a lunch at local time. He spoke about Hogwarts, about himself, about other students. Monsieur Armodéc was a good listener, his questions indicated a sharp mind while the man avoided pressing any item. Altogether, Harry's contribution didn't feel unpleasant at all, certainly much more entertaining than he had expected.

Before he left, his host asked, "Did you inform Mademoiselle Hermione about my invitation, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, of course."

"And what was her answer?"

"She said she'll think it over ... As long as she cannot apparate yet, she's a bit reluctant."

Monsieur Armodéc smiled. "If it's just the discomfort of travelling, please tell her that I could arrange a portkey from Port-au-Prince to my place here any time ... If there's another reason for her reluctance - Mr. Potter, of course you're both welcome together. I hope there wasn't any misunderstanding."

"Certainly not. Aside from the state of her project, Hermione's only reason was the inconvenience of broomstick riding."

"Of course ... It's not really lady-like, is it, Mr. Potter?"

* * *

There was no sense in denying any longer. Sirius' words brought it to the point - the Muggles had detected the wizards, God only knew how. Occupying the lakeside in the evening turned out only the first step, although the one with the greatest initial impact. It prevented Harry from meeting with Marie-Christine, reason enough to be mad at these Muggles.

Harry wasn't sure whether his anger was justified, or targeted toward the right people. The lakeside in the evening - this should have been a perfect place, what with the other young people around, and their doing, unbelievable how openly they acted ... Still, this was no help, neither to himself nor to Marie-Christine, quite the opposite. And other places - her office wasn't really suited for that, and her bedroom ... They had used it once, both of them feeling a restraint strong enough not to repeat the experience, for example because Marie-Christine

didn't know how much these walls were keeping noises inside, didn't want to find out, didn't want to keep silent either ...

But the lakeside was only the beginning. One day, the first figures appeared before the school buildings, to linger around, to stare, to disappear after a while. Then they were back, or others, and more.

Then Samantha reported an encounter with some of them. Several young men, more or less drunk, had tried visiting her in the night - to meet Lousy first, with bad consequences for two of them, to be confronted afterwards with a furious Samantha who had awakened from the noise.

Harry asked, "What did you do with them?"

"I handcuffed them, and let them sit in the grass for the rest of the night, guarded by Lousy ... In the morning, I sent all but the two wounded ones off - only that, somehow, they'd lost their trousers, must've been some spell that slipped my mouth in the heat of the fight - er, morning, I mean." Samantha grinned. "They won't come back, Harry - I told them, if I ever was going to see them again, they'd find out what a nice little spell does with their dicks ... You should've seen their faces - scared dickless, hehe."

Harry didn't join the laughter. "And the other two?"

"Well, I couldn't leave them that way - some nasty bite wounds, Lousy's a hell of a fighter. So I took them to Madam Pomfrey ... It's almost a miracle they didn't wet their pants, or worse. Afterwards, I sent them off too."

However, it wasn't as funny as Samantha's description had sounded, not at all. Two days later, three young men walked into the building, apparently challenged by their friends. They tried to kidnap a second-year, probably just to drag him outside and to interrogate him about Hogwarts. However, the boy had called for help, with success - a moment later, his classmates were around, and until Professor McGonagall appeared as the first teacher at the scene, the three Muggles were suffering from tickling charms, hair across their faces, engorged ears, and other unpleasanties you might expect from second-years.

As a first measure, signs appeared around the school, reminding Harry of the signs he'd seen around the dragon camp, only that they were a bit closer to the truth.

• *Hogwarts School of
Wizardry and Witchcraft
Private Property
No Trespassing for Non-Magic People
Intruders are Cursed without Forewarning*

Closer to the truth didn't help, more to the contrary. Muggles started crossing the invisible borderline at all times of the day - young ones, of both sexes, to master this particular challenge. When some of them were caught, they had to suffer something harmless like a tickling charm, or the spell which made the feet dance for a few minutes. The number of intrusions was growing rather than fading.

Dumbledore gathered teachers and students in a school meeting.

"The situation here," explained the Headmaster, "is basically the same as anywhere else. The Muggles have - at bad last - found out that we exist. Your guess is as good as mine about how this could happen ... Currently, the official state is very unclear - there is no established relationship yet between the Muggle world and the wizarding world. For us, that means we have to take care of ourselves."

There were quite some suggestions how to take care, causing a sharp response from Dumbledore. "We must keep the Muggles out of our school - which doesn't mean we can treat them badly, quite the opposite. It is essential that we do everything to establish good relations between Muggles and wizards, of course without giving up our sovereignty, in particular without putting the order of Hogwarts at risk ..."

And then the Headmaster explained what it meant. "As a first measure, I'm afraid, we have to re-establish the Flying Squad - we need guards and patrols because that's the only way to keep the Muggles outside. I have no intention to build walls, or fences, around Hogwarts - most likely, the excitement about this school will fade soon enough, and then we'll have the area for us again."

In this, Dumbledore should be seriously wrong.

At least, he had the good sense to follow Samantha's suggestions - she was the only one with experience how to deal with large groups, with people who were basically good-natured but, thanks to human nature, with the potential to change into a howling mob within minutes, if not seconds.

As a consequence, there was a training seminar.

"You're cops," said Samantha to the audience - four Quidditch teams, in case of the Gryffindors quickly filled up by Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, because they were old enough for the job - there had been no time searching for a replacement of Katie and Alicia with the focus on Quidditch qualities. "You're cops, and you have to be nice cops - but always cops. And now I'm going to tell you what this means."

It meant, for example, they had to wear name tags at their chests.

"An anonymous cop - that's bad, very bad ... A nice cop has a name, first name, that is. That's rule number one ... Rule number two - that's your name, nothing else. If someone calls you, 'Hey, buddy,' this someone has to be sorry about that - in measures, of course. And now let's get a list of appropriate measures."

A good measure after a minor insult - like addressing a cop with something other than the correct name - was the *jitterbug*, the charm of the dancing feet. In contrast, the tickling charm was banned immediately. "Your measures must hurt," said Samantha. "Those people must stop laughing, and they must wish they hadn't been caught. Tickling - they're laughing no end, so at least the people around think it's fun ... Pain - up to a limit, that's the only solution."

This said, Samantha's expression changed. "You've heard the Headmaster - if any of you, ever, has the funny idea to use the Cruciatus, then you'll wish Dumbledore's the first to hear about, rather than myself ... I've seen my share of cops violating the rules, and if you're interested in seeing me mad, I mean really mad, just give them a Cruciatus."

Eugene Hammett, a Slytherin Chaser, had a comment. "Prof, I thought this is the Flying Squad, which means Viktor's our boss - but listening to you, it sounds as if you'd be the boss."

The question seemed reasonable enough, in contrast to Eugene's voice which had sounded as challenging as possible. The audience was waiting expectantly for Samantha's answer.

She walked to Eugene's seat. "Viktor and I, we agree in a few basic facts ... For example, we share the assumption that you can piss and shit without our help, that you don't need a boss for that ... Correct so far?"

Eugene, his face reddening, gave no answer.

Samantha's arm snapped forward, caught Eugene's collar, pulled him close to her face. "Say, *Yes sir, madam, sir.*"

"Yessir - madam, sir." Dropped from Samantha's hand, Eugene fell back into his seat.

"In questions of discipline, Viktor and I further agree that we'll work in close cooperation. If the question ever comes up, you can translate that to something like, one of us will watch while the other's going to bawl you out."

Samantha walked back, to address the full audience. "The squad's a voluntary service. The same goes for any additional guard service outside the squad. But don't be confused - it doesn't mean this is a show of joy and leisure. The Muggles here, that's like having caught a tiger at the tail - now we just can wheel it around."

Miranda Pincus, Ravenclaw Keeper, asked, "Prof - what's so dangerous in a few Muggles? Ain't you exaggerating a bit?"

Samantha's answer made more than one face thoughtful. "As you know, I come from Texas. That means, I know a bit more about racial differences and their possible effects than you people in merry old England ... There's one wizard or witch to a thousand Muggles - and we're different. We're a minority, much more so than black people in the United States, and what's worse, we're more powerful than Muggles. This situation's hot, and that's why you better listen how to behave like a good cop."

When Samantha asked for other useful charms of the non-serious but hurtful category, Harry offered water balls. Since his stupid game in front of the gnome holes, he and Ron had made quite some progress in their project.

Samantha looked pleased. "That's perfect, sweetheart - a water cannon is the ideal weapon against a mob, and that's the wizard equivalent."

Some others grinned, hearing Samantha call Harry *sweetheart*. They stopped grinning quickly when trying to shoot balls like Harry and Ron. As it turned out, nobody else was able to do it, not at short terms, without a lot of training.

Patrols should be run frequently, at irregular times so the Muggles couldn't settle to a rhythm, and in twin teams.

Ron looked at Harry. "What about the two of us?"

Hearing that, a twelve-year-old with coal-black eyes had trouble keeping her face straight. But next moment, she was saved. "Mixed teams," called Samantha. "There won't be a girls-only team."

"Why not?" asked Deirdre Redmond from the Hufflepuff team, somewhat upset.

"That's an invitation for gang-raping," was Samantha's answer, raising doubts in many minds whether this teacher and ex-deputy was still seeing things in the right proportion.

Harry turned to Ron. "That makes it clear, I think - a Weasley-Weasley gang, and a Potter-Lightfoot gang, right?"

Seamus and Dean were of course teaming together, and poor Wynton had to look somewhere else. What he had in mind was Miranda Pincus, but he moved too slow while some other people had the same idea. What he came up with was Simon Ryerson, the Slytherin Keeper.

Harry met a beaming Rahewa. "Hello, partner."

And of course, Rahewa wouldn't give it a rest until Harry showed her how to shoot water balls. She had trouble as soon as the projectile grew bigger than Lousy's leather ball, her bullets were dropping badly, therefore losing speed and force rapidly, suited well to raise laughter from a Muggles audience. This was why Harry saw her training this spell with a fierce energy during the next days.

Through his *Daily Prophet* subscription, he could follow up the large-scale development between Muggles and wizards, because this newspaper had started offering a full page - called *Daily Echo* - with quotations from Muggles newspapers. They were a day or two old, only it didn't matter.

In the press, it had started very much like the usual summer break nonsense, as a variation of the Loch Ness beast - that was how the Muggle press put it. Except that the reports did not fade, quite the contrary, were growing, and reader mail confirmed that other people had similar encounters.

Initially, they had been called *weird people*, classified by the press as with so many other groups and sects. Then, nobody knew how, the first articles appeared with descriptions of "supernatural" skills. Of course, the press had taken pains to present them as jokes, as something to be read with a smile. And then, little by little, the teasing formulations faded while the facts remained. Meanwhile, the tenor in the press was something like, 'It can't be true, can it, however, here's what we have found.'

In addition to the question how all this had started, Harry was asking himself what all these people around Hogwarts had in mind. It felt like a siege - of a friendly kind, so far without confirming Samantha's worries. Looking out a Hogwarts window, one could see long arrays of tents with campfires in the evenings, and one could hear a lot of music - from portable radios, still more from groups with guitar players and singers. These groups had quite some appeal for the students, creating a situation of mutual magnetism.

Harry spoke with Dumbledore.

"Harry, you know about Muggles as much as I," answered the Headmaster. "The people down there are young - your age, maybe a bit more. If you want to know what's driving them, go and ask."

Harry spoke with Samantha.

"Do that, Harry. And don't forget - whatever you're going to do there, or say, is public relations. You're our ambassador, so do me a favour and behave like that."

For his first serious contact, Harry selected an evening patrol. Before jumping off, he turned to Rahewa. "Today, I want to talk with them. What about you?"

He could have saved the question, knew the answer in advance - Rahewa's eyes were shining when she replied, "I'm with you, Harry."

Of course. Together straight into the lion's den - that was the picture in Rahewa's mind, in a way not even unrealistic. Harry smiled. "Well, then - let's go."

Scanning over the camp area, followed by glances from below, listening to his *haragei*, Harry picked a group of eight young men and women, sitting in a loose circle. Apparently, later in the evening, they would start a fire, to sit and drink, maybe to sing, while right now the group was just hanging around idly.

Harry touched down, dismounted. "Good evening."

Incredible stares.

He signaled Rahewa to touch down, and to join him.

A voice, awestruck. "I don't believe it ... The water cops."

Water cops? "My name's Harry ... That's Rahewa."

"Hey, man, cool, man ... That your broad? - A bit young, I'd say, but it's a matter of taste, isn't it?"

Harry's gaze fixed the young man. "That's my partner, and her name's Rahewa, as I said."

Arms came up in a gesture of surrender and pacification. "Is okay, man - be cool, okay? ... Nothing personal, just to say hello."

"Hello ... Please call me Harry."

"That's alright, man, Harry ... Have a seat, Harry, and that cool br ... er, young lady too ... A beer?"

Not his favourite, however Harry accepted, not seeing cokes around. Seeing a beer in Rahewa's hand made him still less happy, in sharp contrast to Rahewa herself. After a sip, he asked, "Water cop? ... What does it mean?"

"Keep cool, man - er, Harry - but you are the two, aint'cha?"

After a moment of embarrassment, and after Harry could make clear that no, he wasn't offended, just wanted to know, they had the first of several surprises in this conversation. He and Rahewa were sort of famous among the camp people.

Violating the trespassing rule, as Harry learned, was a sport. Passing the forbidden zone and reaching the building while a patrol was running in the air counted ten points. It was possible, with some luck. It was apparently impossible when the patrol consisted of Harry and Rahewa, recognized easily, in particular because none of the other patrols used these damned water balls.

A young man - Pete his name - said, "Man oh man, if you're hit by that water - hurts like hell ... At first, there was always a soft ball and a hard one, but now there isn't much of a difference."

Hearing that, Rahewa beamed.

The camp people had responded to the challenge. Being caught by another patrol still scored two points. Being caught by the water cops scored five, while the score for completing the task under their eyes would score fifty - should it ever happen.

Another young man, Art his name, asked, "Say, Harry, what's so special about you two? Day time, night time - it just doesn't matter. How do you manage?"

"It's called *haragei* ... It's nothing magical, I learned it from an old Japanese. And Rahewa's an Indian."

Mysterious combat arts of the far east, combined with the native skill of an Indian - the group agreed that the score should be raised to hundred. Then the broomsticks took the general attention. Pete asked, "That your air horse, Harry? Looks awfully cool ... Mind if I have a closer look?"

"Be careful! Don't touch it - it strikes back."

Pete grinned. "Yeah, of course - like my bike. Can nobody ride it but me."

There was no experience like bitter experience. Harry shrugged. "I've warned you. Do what you want, but don't complain, okay?"

"That's understood, man - er, Harry ... I won't - ouch!" A painful groan, and Pete was holding his right hand. He gasped, his face grimacing. "Dammit - whoa, does that hurt ..." The beaten wrist was swelling by the second.

Harry felt pity. "Gimme your hand ... Hold still, just relax."

Breathless silence around. Sitting in the lotus position, Harry held the young man's hand and wrist with his own hands, sending waves for the next minute. Then he said, "Alright, that should do ... Try it."

Pete flexed his fingers, an incredulous grin spreading his face. "Wow - cool, man, super cool - it's gone, Harry, that's the real stuff ... Great, thanks."

Other people gathered closer, looking, probing. "Harry, you're a healer?"

"No, not really ... Madam Pomfrey's our doctor witch, I can handle only bruises and wounds, but nothing serious."

"Maybe you can help Sally - Sally, come here ... Here, look, Sally's got a bad case of sunburn on her shoulders, which is kind of handicap for her because she cannot lie on her back, and for Sally that's almost worse than the sunburn, if you get my drift ..."

The remark didn't raise a particular echo in the round, least of all from Sally who just sat down, took off her T-shirt and nothing else because she wasn't wearing a bra.

It looked really bad, the skin dark red, partially covered by tiny bubbles. Nobody would have been able to endure shoulder straps on this, although Harry didn't expect Sally to endure them at other times.

"Hello, Sally ... Lie down, please, face on your arms, and try to relax." While sitting there in the lotus position, his hands on the shoulders of Sally who might have fit in his own class by her age, Harry was reminded of a similar scene, in some forest a year ago.

After a minute, low murmur started around them. After two more minutes, the murmur grew excited - there was no doubt, the skin had started smoothening, the bubbles fading.

Five minutes later, Harry took his hands off. "That's it, Sally - the skin's probably still a bit sensitive, but it'll be okay tomorrow morning."

Sally's head came up, her hands touched her shoulders, her eyes widening. Then she looked at him. "I'd like to give it a little stress test - with you, Harry."

Appreciative remarks in the round, and an offer for a tent.

Harry only could hope he wasn't blushing - but if so, then probably more with respect to Rahewa's presence. "Thanks, but ... And besides, it's a bit too public for my taste."

Someone said, "You should try the lakeside, Harry - lots of room, it's private enough."

"Really? I'd never guessed, without your advice."

Laughter. Pete called, "See, folks - the man knows what he's talking about."

Damn. Rahewa was listening attentively. Still worse - the group had found their main topic. "Say, Harry - how is it, er, between you magic people? You know, sex and so."

"How should it be? There's no difference."

"Really? ... It's hard to believe - you know, all people here would like to know how it is, with someone magical. Harry, you could have almost every girl here - Sally's no exception, maybe just a bit more straightforward, that's all."

Seeing Harry's nonplussed expression, the others confirmed that Pete had told the truth. To some degree, this camp was just like any other open-air gathering around the Muggle world,

for sun, fresh air, free love, drinks, dope, and music. But in addition, these were groupies - waiting for the chance to find out by themselves if there really was no difference.

"Say, Harry, ain't you using spells for that?"

Harry, who only recently had used a spell to great effect in that, made an astonished face. "What for?"

"Er - to help things a bit."

"Dunno - it never crossed my mind ... Maybe if I'm in need of a bit help ..."

Roaring laughter. A girl, glancing into the round, shouted, "If you guys would cut yourself a bit shorter at your joints, you won't need help either."

More laughter. Another girl asked, "And what about love potions?"

"Hmmm ... It's not out of the question, but I'm no expert in that."

Rahewa was grinning, with the effect that the girls were storming her with more questions about this issue. Watching this, Harry suddenly became aware that Rahewa didn't stop grinning, and that her speech came somewhat blurred. He grabbed her, shook her. "Rahewa - how much beer did you drink?"

The grin faded, was replaced by a miserable expression. "Too much, I'm afraid ... Harry, I'm sick."

Two girls took her, guided her aside. A moment later, Harry could hear how Rahewa was getting rid of that beer in reverse order of drinking.

Pete looked guilty. "Sorry, man - wasn't planned that way ... I thought you people could sober up with a spell, or so."

Harry felt anger, mostly toward himself. "No, we cannot - we cannot drink more alcohol, we cannot fuck more than other people, and if our boss ever hears about this here, she's going to give me hell ... You see, we're almost normal - except that we can shoot water balls."

Sally added, "And heal sunburns - while no other ones, unfortunately."

Rahewa was guided back, looking like death warmed over - maybe a bit more alive, what with her cheeks burning of shame. Harry asked, "Rahewa, can you fly?"

"Dunno ... Yessinkso."

He jumped first, ready to grab her, should it be necessary. However, although swaying from side to side, Rahewa kept on her broomstick. Harry waved. "Follow me."

"Thass' nodde 'rection to the showl, 'arry."

"No, it's not." Reaching an empty spot at the lakeside, he let Rahewa touch down, followed, unmounted. "Okay - time for a swimming, maybe two."

It sobered her up some. "I've gon'no swimsuit."

"Doesn't matter. I know how you look, and it's dark."

It sobered her up considerably, replacing dizziness by embarrassment. Harry had to look away while she was undressing, then Rahewa jumped into the water, presenting a bare backside for the shortest moment possible.

Sitting close to the waterline, Harry monitored her presence with his *haragei*, just in case her drunkenness proved worse than it seemed. But as far as he could judge, Rahewa was getting better. Well - probably she would be cured from beer, or other drinks with more alcohol than suitable for a twelve-year-old, which meant any.

Rahewa came out, looking almost normal, no longer embarrassed, only shameful. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"It's okay - it was my mistake more than yours."

She didn't think so.

"Whatever - shall I blow you dry with a hairdryer spell?"

Turning naked in front of him seemed a bit too much. "No thanks." Rahewa shat down at his side, curled like a ball.

"Rahewa, that's been your last alcohol for the next four years, right?"

"Yes."

Harry smiled. "Well, then ... Did I tell you the story of my first Beauxbatons ball, when I had my own encounter with more alcohol than was good for me, to wake up next day ..."

* * *

Dumbledore would ask him about his conversation with the Muggles - naturally so, after having recommended just that. This in mind, Harry wanted to prepare himself by talking with Samantha first. But once more, the Headmaster gave proof of his fine sense for timing - he caught him before Harry found a chance to see the Texan ex-deputy.

Feeling slightly trapped, with respect to what had to be the central part of his report, Harry said, "Prof, I'd prefer to have Samantha also in this discussion."

Dumbledore examined his face, nodded. "You're right - just a moment."

Entering the Headmaster's office, Samanta had an opportunity to watch the inverse of her own job - a magical creature, Fawkes of course, taking care of a wizard by sitting on Harry's shoulder. And Harry could do with the calming effect - in a way, this talk with Dumbledore seemed more difficult than any other he could remember. How to explain the concept of *groupies* to an age-old Headmaster?

When in doubt, begin at the beginning. "Yes, we spoke with them," said Harry. "For what we could see, they're nice - and they accept us as authorities. Rahewa and I, we're called the water cops." He explained the intrusion game and the scoring.

Samantha grinned.

Dumbledore looked at her. "What do you think - should we keep it that way? Or should we change our policy?"

Samantha stopped grinning. "It's like one of these festivals. Ever heard of Woodstock, Albus? - Or Monterey? ... It's what I said - a large number of people, that's a short-fused bomb. Woodstock was an example how things can go well, and Monterey an example how you can blow it ... It's crucial that we handle them with a long leash - I think we should train the squad a bit more."

Harry said, "There's something else ... We could offer medical services - I'm sure it would consolidate terms between them and us." He described his own doing with Pete and Sally.

Dumbledore said, "That's an excellent idea. Poppy always complains that our students are too healthy, she feels underemployed."

Samantha grinned again. "Girls with sunburns will ask for Harry, no doubt, except that these sunburns will suddenly appear at unusual parts of the body - unusual for sunburns, that is."

Dumbledore had a dry smile. "I'm only in charge of the official service, and that will be given by Poppy ... What else, Harry? What do these people want?"

When in doubt, make it short. "Well - erm, the bottom line is, they want sex with someone magical."

The Headmaster listened silently and without any expression in his face while Harry explained how the camp people would like to offer all they had - free beer, free dope, free love, free music.

Samantha was grinning more than ever. "What's the scoring for that, Harry? Twenty points for a quickie, and fifty if it's the water cop?"

Dumbledore looked a bit indignant. "Samantha, please ..."

But the mob and festival expert shook her head. "No, Albus, I'm serious. They want it, and they'll get it - if you'd try to prevent that, you might as well try to nail a drop of quicksilver to the wall ... All we can do is channelling it properly - if we'd try to keep them separate from each other, we'd be confronted with a steam pot on which someone closed the lid. It'd blow in our faces, at the worst possible moment."

The Headmaster looked unhappy. "Channel it? - How?"

"Visits in the camp only in pairs, or triples ... Students of the classes one to four need an older student as company ... Information campaigns - Poppy should make sure she has enough preservatives to cover the request ..."

Dumbledore almost gasped.

Samantha shrugged. "This school has been secluded, but that's over. You cannot stop it, Albus - so march ahead. A school like Hogwarts, a boarding school, is always a target for people from outside. So far, there haven't been any, but now ... We can praise ourselves lucky if they're as nice as Harry said."

Dumbledore looked at his scout. "Are they that nice, Harry?"

"Yes - but they behave according to their own standards. For example, alcohol will be a problem, because our students ain't used to that at all. Monsieur Delacour was right in his judgement ..."

"Monsieur Delacour??"

Harry explained how Fleur's father had given him a crash course in the basics of drinking alcohol. "The camp people know how to handle beer, but most of our students don't ... The teachers should put in a lesson or two about drinks."

Samantha nodded. "The modern times have caught us, Albus ... Just face it."

And the Headmaster faced it, following the given advice, in particular because reports from other places showed what could happen if the wizards were trying to isolate themselves. A school in Boston, USA, had tried the wrong approach - with bad results. A crowd had stormed the school, with nasty accidents on both sides. Since then, this school had to deal with Muggle school authorities at one side, claiming the right to supervise schools of any kind, and with lawyers on the other side, due to lawsuits filed against each other.

Madam Pomfrey started her medical service, using a large tent that had been erected at the borderline between camp and school area. For Harry, it was little surprise hearing that a good part of Madam Pomfrey's clientele seemed in perfect health, came only to ask for love potions and other boosters of sexual desire.

Then the doctor witch had a few serious cases. A Muggle, using an aqualung and armed with a rubber harpoon, had dived in the lake. Apparently, he had met a merman, and had used his harpoon. The merman responded with a spear into the chest. The Muggle had managed to escape, would have died nonetheless, if not for Madam Pomfrey's intensive care during the next hours.

Some others had come up with the crazy idea to hunt in the Forbidden Forest. They had returned with lots of bruises, a few broken ribs, and a broken arm - probably an encounter with centaurs.

As a consequence, a second, smaller tent was established, the *Witchcraft Information Desk*. Students, fifth-years and up, were doing service duty - not quite from dawn, however till dusk. The job was extremely popular, and Ron found himself caught in a schedule trap - assistant manager, squad team member, and student with his own set of projects was a bit too much.

Then, one evening, Harry and Rahewa were on patrol just in the first darkness of the evening, when Harry heard a high-pitched scream start in the camp, a scream which didn't stop. He waved Rahewa to follow, already accelerating.

Until Harry reached the scene, the scream had faded to the panic-stricken sobs of a girl. He pushed through the surrounding people, found the girl unhurt, except for the nameless terror in her face. He took her shoulders, sent a calming wave. "It's okay, we're here ... What happened?"

"A - a man ... He looked like - his head! His head was almost off, but ..." The girl shuddered. "He spoke with me!"

Harry exhaled with relief, suppressing a laughter. "That's okay - you've met Nearly Headless Nick ... He's our house ghost - his real name's Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington."

"Your house ghost??" The girl stared at him.

"Yes, of the Gryffindor house. There are some others - the Bloody Baron, the Fat Friar - and of course Moaning Myrtle. Yes, and then there's Peeves the Poltergeist - you can only hope he doesn't take to haunting the camp ..."

Harry's last remark had been a mistake - the girl seemed ready to scream again. Quickly, he said, "Now calm down ... What did Nearly Headless Nick say?"

"I don't remember. When he started to speak with that head - I was screaming, and screaming, and he disappeared."

"I guess he just wanted to say good evening." Harry tried to find something that would cheer up the girl. "You know, because his head's still hanging to his body, he's not accepted in the club of the truly decapitated ghosts ... It's bothering him no end, because he's not entitled in the yearly hunt of this club ..."

"Hunt? ... When??"

Harry felt like biting his tongue. "Relax! They're not hunting people, neither Muggles nor wizards. All they do is a polo game with their own heads ... It's funny, really, because the heads are commenting upon the game of their bodies ..."

The surrounding people were retreating from Harry.

"Okay, okay - listen, one of our teachers is a ghost. Binns - Boring Binns, we call him, because you just fall asleep in his classes."

A young man asked, "Harry - er, how do you call up a ghost?"

"Not at all - they come and go at their own will. But they show good manners - as I said, Nearly Headless Nick probably wanted to introduce himself, he likes socializing with people ... Once I was invited to his anniversary party, couldn't avoid it."

The surrounding people had come closer again, wanted to know how the party had been.

"Well, I'm no party freak - the only real problem was the food. Ghost food - you don't want to know, because when you see that, you're fed up for a day, believe me ... But otherwise, these are nice people - of course with the exception of Peeves. He's a real pest."

A timid voice. "Harry - er, what shall we do if this Peeves haunts the camp?"

Harry grinned. "Call the Bloody Baron - he's the only one Peeves is scared of."

This wasn't exactly what his audience had hoped to hear.

"Peeves's harmless - just a pain in the ass. If he starts zooming around, call for help."

Followed by Rahewa, Harry left a crowd of thoughtful Muggles, who tried to figure out whether a camp of tents was a better place for meeting a ghost than a building with walls, and who hoped this Peeves would keep to teasing students rather than themselves.

08 - Flying High

Between his new squad service and his encounters with the camp people, Harry tried to proceed further in his three projects. Dragon Animagus, Portkey Programming, and Poison Balls required an awful lot of time, while Harry took care not to neglect *aikido* and *kenjutsu*, not to forget about Ginny's training in *haragei* either. And every now and then, something to relax - Social Ethics with Boring Binns.

After the Muggles had appeared around Hogwarts, the students from one side and Dumbledore from the other side had put some pressure on the ghost - to talk about Muggles, about their ethics, their social structures, their beliefs. Binns first hesitated, then started with this topic, only to realize - and to confess - that his knowledge was somewhat outdated. And then a miracle happened.

Binns started to talk with the Muggles.

As soon as it was dark enough outside, the ghost floated into the camp to talk with the young people, to discuss modern concepts versus those of his own youth, or those of the wizards. For his first meeting, Binns had asked Harry for an introduction. Since then, he made his visits alone.

The ghost had no trouble finding audiences, quite the opposite. The young Muggles seemed fascinated. Even after the novelty of Binns' ghostly appearance had faded, the attraction didn't stop - someone who was ready to talk with them, to listen, someone who could refer to events of the last centuries, however without always pointing out how much better it had been then, such a person was rare.

Truth to be told, Binns was also popular for very practical reasons. He loved sitting at a campfire, and his particular choice for an evening would burn without a constant supply of wood. What's more, a touch of the ghost's hand did enough to refill the beer cans of his conversation partners. This could certainly be called the healthiest beer around - being the result of a ghost spell, it disappeared from within the stomachs rather quickly, without making drunk and without causing the need to pee twice per hour.

Even so, Muggle ethics were nothing new to Harry, and he could use these classes to think about his projects. The most significant progress manifested in the Poison Balls project, although Ron with his tight schedule was doing less than his planned share.

"It's alright," said Harry. "Listen, Ron - you're doing a hell of a work for the school, what with all these lists, and the basic chemistry seems settled ... The only time when I really need you is for shootings."

In a shooting session, Ron would send water balls, and Harry had to shoot a counter ball for intercepting Ron's bullet. They used water because it was harmless - once Harry had mastered the skill of catching nine out of ten balls, they would complete the task with the real stuff - sulphuric acid from Ron, a strong lye from Harry, for example sodium bicarbonate.

They worked near the lake, mostly with spectators. Of course, these Muggles thought it was a training for their squad service, without feeling objections - no, they were applauding Harry's every hit.

After some problems at the beginning, Harry realized that this task was no different from hitting Bludgers with a club, and hitting other Quidditch players with a Bludger. Only the time to react was shorter, which meant his built-in ballistic computer had to work faster. Speeding up these instinctive calculations was the real work, anything else just fun. Currently, Harry's hit ratio ranked somewhere around five out of ten.

One day, walking to their training spot, Harry heard a young man shout, "Hey, Sammy, come along - Clean Harry's doing another show."

Clean Harry?

He approached the young man. "Say - I thought I'm the water cop. Then what does that mean, Clean Harry?"

To his astonishment, the young man blushed deeply, seemed more than a bit scared. "Er - sorry, Harry, er - I didn't mean to offend you, it just slipped ..."

Harry had learned Mugglese. "Ey, is okay, man, be cool - nobody's getting his knickers in a twist, okay? ... Just tell me, that's all."

"Er - yes, Harry, sure thing ... You know, that's your name here - I mean, you're still the water cops, you and that girl, what's-her-name - Rahewa, yes, but you're Harry, and because it so fits, you're Clean Harry - got it?"

"I'm not sure - because of the water?"

"No - yes ... Say, don't you know Dirty Harry?"

"No - who's that?"

"Ahh, man, Harry, you kidding? - Dirty Harry, the cop with the forty-four magnum?" And suddenly, the whole group of spectators hurried to explain that this Harry was a movie character, a police officer in Los Angeles who didn't bother with rules, and with a habit of killing half a dozen bad guys per movie.

Harry had mixed feelings. "I'm not sure whether I should feel flattered."

"But of course, Harry - that's a hero, really, believe me. These are really bad guys he's killing. And every shot is a hit - like yours. And he's really cool - how he walks, and never moving a muscle ..."

"That's crap."

"Huh?" The audience was staring at him.

"That's unrealistic, totally unrealistic ... Killing someone, even a killer - you know what that does to ..." Harry stopped himself.

"Hey, it's just a movie - nobody wants to see realistic movies, stay cool, okay? ... Say, do you have a problem with that name, Clean Harry?"

"Er - no, it's okay. I'm just using water, and I don't kill people."

Harry's audience nodded with some relief, their faces clearly indicating that they would have liked to ask him something more, except they couldn't muster the courage, in particular because Harry's expression made clear how unwelcome these questions would be.

Even so, the news spread around. Some days later, he was in the camp with Rahewa, extending a patrol to a visit since they had to guide back a caught intruder anyway, when Rahewa said, "Harry, look - your groupies."

She smiled at her words, with unmistakable pride. Looking around, Harry saw three girls approaching them. He recognized his missed opportunity - Sally. He greeted her, smiling. "Hello Sally - how are your burns?"

The girl grinned back. "Under control - thanks for asking." Then Sally seemed to search for words, quite surprisingly with her. "Say, Harry - the boys haven't got balls enough to ask you, so I thought ... Is it true?"

"True? ... What?" As if he didn't know already.

"They say you're a real cop, and you have killed - how's it called, in the line of duty ... Is it true?"

"I'm a student, not a cop."

The girls were watching his face.

"Harry's not a cop - he's a warrior. And it's true."

Harry wheeled around, staring at Rahewa. She looked defiant. "Every wizard knows it. And you said yourself that we should be honest, and keep to the truth."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, sure ... I wasn't going to lie, I just tried to avoid an answer."

The girls looked at Rahewa, expectantly. "You know about, don't you? - Tell us."

Realizing what she had done, Rahewa seemed suddenly speechless, glanced at Harry. He took her shoulders. "It's okay, you're probably right." Then, toward the other girls, he said, "Yes ... There were two - one was a killer, and the other was about to kill a girl - I had no other choice."

Sally looked awestruck. "So you're really like Dirty Harry ..."

"No, I'm not!" Hearing himself almost shouting, Harry calmed down. "It's horrible - you're sick for days, and it's always good for a bad dream in the night ... Sorry, but it's nothing to - I'm not proud of it."

Sally, with her strong sense for straight moves, also seemed to have some feeling for the differences between movies and real life. "Yes," she said, "I can imagine - no, I cannot, but ... Harry, you're no normal student, are you? - I mean, it's not just by accident that you're around when - er ..."

Rahewa had found her speech. "Harry's the wizard who's going to destroy Voldemort."

The name told them nothing.

Harry glanced at Rahewa, sighed again. "Okay, tell them - the short version, please."

Almost bursting of pride, Rahewa started, "Voldemort, that's a dark wizard - the worst, he uses black magic, and kills people. When Harry was a baby, Voldemort killed his parents, and then tried to kill him. But the spell bounced back and crushed Voldemort himself - that's where Harry's got his scar ... It took Voldemort twelve years to recover enough for another try."

Rather than the ahs and ohs she might have expected by now, Rahewa earned mostly blank looks. Sobering up a bit, and maybe also realizing that a hero was made of public opinion rather than personal action, she said, "Well - er, Harry said the short version, so - since then, Voldemort tried several times to kill him, but Harry was always the winner - the last time, he had to let him live because Voldemort had a hostage, and this was the only way to rescue him alive. Er - yes, that's it."

And only now, Rahewa started blushing deeply.

Sally saw it, smiled at the girl. "He's your childhood hero, except that now he's real, right?"

Rahewa turned seriously red.

The Muggles girl had no teasing in her voice. "Good for you ... I wish my own hero would come alive."

* * *

In the meantime, Ron took pains to spread the name *Clean Harry* in the school, finding acclaim from most students, and from some teachers - witches, in particular. Samantha, for example, had settled to that. "Hey, Clean Harry, when are you going to visit your dragon the next time?"

Ron's answer came first. "When she'll invite him to California."

Next second, Ron was knocked flat - hit by a large water ball, and of course dripping wet. Harry glanced at his friend. "Pity your counter balls ain't as fast as your mouth - you should train that, Ronnie-chéri with the wet pants."

Ron looked furious, however kept silent, and for good reason - Harry standing there, almost in combat stance, his wand ready, his cheeks very tense.

Samantha stepped in. "Game's over, you squabblers - and you better pick yourself a groupie or two in the evening, because the next time I'm playing too - except I'll use some unfair tricks ... Got me??"

His face grumpy, Harry turned to her, muttered, "Now," and started to march off.

"Now what?"

"You asked me a question, if you darkly remember - that's the answer - Carrie's better company than the lot here ... Bye."

Samantha looked at Ron. "Honey, you better stop joking about that Cho, what do you think?"

Ron nodded. "Or hone my reflexes." Coming up, a painful groan escaped his throat.

"Does it hurt, Ronnie-boy?"

"Guess what, Sammie-girl?" Before something worse could happen, Ron raised his arms. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I forgot - but he's been using his full power with that ball ... Whew, that was a bad one."

Samantha watched the disappearing figure. "So it's true love, huh?"

* * *

In spite of his rage, Harry had the presence of mind to take his broomstick - what he intended today was inviting Carrie to a flight through the air. He took the Firebolt Two, clearly the better choice in case he would touch the dragon in mid-air.

Tyrannosaurus Rex looked pleased to have company, which meant someone listening to his chat. "Harry, old monkey, good to se ya'. Carrie's carrying - should be, that is. Heat's over, and she was quite busy - hope you can say the same about yourself, old plumcake, then it's true at least for one of us - what do you say?"

"Hello, Rex."

"Oh my, doesn't sound like that, does it, Harry-boy? What a shame, at your age - maybe you're doing something thoroughly wrong, what do you think? I tell you, when I was that young ..."

Harry had to grin. "Yeah, sure - the girls were queuing up, right? ... I guessed as much, knew it when I saw you the first time - the legendary Rex, nobody around who didn't hear about him and his - er, drive."

The human gnome chuckled. "Got it, Harry, old turnip ... Well, at these times ..." However, hearing about Harry's request, Rex had his doubts. "You'll have to wait for that till later in the afternoon - even then, Carrie might not be in the mood ... Maybe you should try it with Samuel - he's younger, likes flying more."

"Samuel?"

"Yes, one of the two males, named after the angel Samuel, you know, the one with the flaming sword, and guess why?"

"Wasn't it Gabriel?"

"Was it? ... Beats me, Harry, old choirboy, at least you should be careful with Samuel, he's a bit playful, he is ..."

After enduring the endless stream of words for a while, Harry walked to Carrie, was welcomed friendly and - thank God - silently. However, as predicted, Harry found no echo when dancing through the air on his Firebolt.

"Well then - let's see how it works with your lover, if you don't mind."

Samuel was smaller than Carrie, which seemed pretty meaningless, from the perspective of a broomstick flyer, and Samuel's skin was of course green - dark green on the back, light green at the underside. By far not as brilliant as Nagini's green, although with such a large body, the effect was quite impressive.

And Samuel was ready to fly - after some playful breathing, raising quite a few drops of sweat in Harry's face, not all of them from the sheer heat of the thundering flames. However, this teasing welcome made clear that the dragons knew exactly what they were doing with their firebreathing - since it was done for joy and fun, Harry came not even close to a real burning.

Up in the air, he realized quickly that Samuel wanted him in sight. Flying circles around the dragon was okay, as long as Harry did so in the dragon's viewing angle. Flying behind the dragon made Samuel uneasy, and approaching his underbelly wasn't a good idea at all.

Flying side by side with the large dragon head, Harry remembered Samantha's words. Riding a dragon ... He inched closer, until he could touch Samuel's head. "Mind if I'm riding you?"

No answer.

Careful not to break the body contact, more careful to send messages of fun and confidence, Harry inched still closer, and a little behind, until a large neck offered room, above the point where the sharp, horny comb rose. Then, ever so gently, he moved himself onto the neck, lowered the broomstick power, finally resting his full weight on the dragon's neck.

An incredible feeling. "Hey, Sammy, super - brilliant!"

The response came as a vibrato, followed by a roaring jet of flames, some feet ahead. Obviously a sign of joy from the dragon - still, at that speed, the airstream sent a wave of heat that Harry felt a hot rush over his face, could smell the stink of burned hair for a second.

"Be cool, man, okay?"

And dragons loved a steep dive like any other flyer. At the last second, Harry jumped up - he felt no intention finding out what the landing shock of a dragon body could do with a human rider.

He touched down, walked to the dragon. "Great, Sammy, thank you. Flying, huh? ... There's nothing like that - well, okay, with one exception, that is."

Rex was beyond himself. "Harry, old vulture, you've done it! ... Ruddy brilliant, really, I say. Riding a dragon - that's ..." The incredible happened - Rex was speechless.

Harry took the opportunity to thank him and to disappear quickly - there was still another visit he had in mind today.

* * *

It was Fred who opened the door, wearing a white apron and a white cap. "Harry - come in. How you're doing? Short of sweets?"

"Hello, Fred ... No, I didn't come for the end product."

"It can't be us, can it? ... Hello, Harry." George had appeared.

Harry laughed. "No - we've finally found a replacement for you two, someone who's as good at wisecracking as you've been."

"Really?" George looked doubtful. "I'd thought it impossible ... Who is it?"

"Her name's Samantha - the new teacher for Care. A woman from Texas, an ex-deputy sheriff." Remembering the scene before leaving, Harry added, "And Ron's filling the gaps, except I cannot always laugh."

Fred looked at George. "To make one thing clear - that Samantha's *my* replacement, okay?"

George asked, "A drink, Harry? ... You'll get only one - we're short in time, sorry."

"So much to do, or did I really find you on the way to a date with girls?"

Fred grimaced. "Just work, unfortunately - although, for you as our creditor, this should be good news."

"So your business is flourishing?"

"Flourishing - that's almost an understatement." George looked satisfied. "The Muggles, Harry. They cannot get enough - the simplest things, with the Star-Spangled Sugar Pearls alone, we could sell like crazy. We just can't satisfy the orders - literally."

"Orders? Do they send letters?"

"We're expanding, Harry. Mail order, retailer, wholesale - the full scale. There are orders from all over the world. The Muggles have something, it's called Internet - don't ask me for details, since here we work with contractors, but we're looking desperately for people, employees, I mean. House elves, wizards, students, housewives - we'd do with everything."

Remembering discussions with his possible future father-in-law, Harry said, "Expanding, huh? ... Remember the old rule - expanding by more than hundred percent in a year is a shortcut to bankruptcy."

"Hey, Harry?" Fred stared. "You're a businessman lately? I mean, okay, you're rich, but ..."

"But I know a Mr. Chang who teaches me trade every now and then. And what I hear tells me you need capital. Am I right?"

Fred and George looked at each other, turned to Harry simultaneously, nodded.

"Ten? ... Twenty?"

"Erm ..."

"Fifty?"

George explained. "We have two choices how to expand - small-scale and big-scale. The first requires about eight thousand, the other about thirty-five. We couldn't make up our mind yet - besides, this has been just planning so far. It wasn't as if we couldn't ask you, or the bank, but ..."

"I'm ready for both, that's okay. My only comment is a mix of Zen wisdom and quoting Mr. Chang - don't make the second step before the first."

"Yeah, we had the same feeling." Fred looked up. "So it's the small scale - eight grand."

"Make it ten, so you have a bit leeway."

"Good idea. But this time it must be a regular loan, Harry - okay, maybe not bank standard, which would be twelve percent interest, but ..."

"Ah - wait a minute." Harry grinned. "You know something what I need to know, that's why I came here ... Listen - you teach me how to do it, for these ten grand. How about that?"

"What do we know that's worth ten thousand galleons?"

"I've got a project about portkey programming. Part of it is storing spells in items. And that's exactly what you're doing, right? - Storing spells in sweets, basically the same technique ... So, what about this deal?"

George laughed. "Harry, that's ridiculous. If you want to learn that, come for a few days and work for us. It'll take you a day or so before the first spell sticks. It'll take you another day for the proper scaling - from then on, you're in production ... You're welcome any time as an apprentice, but this has nothing to do with a credit of ten thou."

"I thought it was a good idea."

Fred smiled. "Thanks for the offer, Harry. We appreciate it, but ... Call it pride, or whatever. We can afford it, you don't even ask for a guarantee, and we won't mind a few percent below bank standard, but only so much."

"Well, then - what about twelve percent below bank standard?"

"Six."

"Three percent - that's three more than what money in a vault's giving."

"Yeah, but not a realistic credit condition."

"Four - that's my last offer."

George laughed. "That's a crazy discussion. Okay, Harry, four - thank you."

"You're welcome ... And my learning, how can we do it?"

"Come in the morning - any day, weekends included. As I said - expect two days until you're fluent."

Harry left, not without accepting a large box of sweets, to be polite, also by habit, although his own taste was more with simple, straightforward sweets - chocoballs, for example, less with this trick stuff. Thinking about whom to pass it further, he realized that Samantha had no experience yet with them, at least not with those of the twins.

She wasn't in her hut, had left it open - why not, with Lousy guarding the door? The thought that he wasn't stealing anything, was delivering a box instead, made Harry grin - maybe at some point, Samantha might wish it had been the other way around. This time finding some paper, he left a short note with the box.

- *With greetings from the Weasley twins.
Be careful, this stuff is tricky.
Harry*

He had missed supper. Feeling more empty space in his stomach than comfortable, Harry tried to decide which way to go - house elves in the kitchen or Muggles outside, always ready to trade a grilled sausage or three for the company of Clean Harry. At this moment Ron entered the hall, apparently returning from his office, considering the tired look in his face.

Harry hesitated just a second. "Ron - greetings from Fred and George. Their business is booming."

Ron came closer. "So we're on talking terms, huh? ... That's good, because there's something I have to tell you. Our project partnership's over - I'm signing off."

"Now? ... Why?"

"Let's say I have too much work otherwise."

"Hmm ..." Registering the truth in these words as well as their careful choice, Harry adapted his reply to this style. "And what can we think between the lines?"

"Whatever ... Maybe I've been hit by one water ball too much."

"Ah, that's where the wind blows." Harry nodded. "Do you think your remarks should only be returned with other remarks?"

"Maybe not, but there was no need to do it with your goddamned super power - that's not what you'd expect from a friend, really."

"So it hurt more than expected?" Seeing his friend's expression tightening, Harry added quickly, "Then maybe it hurt more than planned - which is somehow funny, Ron, because that seems to happen here and there, lately."

No answer, maybe a glance with a bit more concern than before.

Calmer, Harry said, "I know that you have lots of work to do. I'll keep the partnership open, in case you change your mind ... And if I have a problem, then certainly not because of unbalanced shares. Besides, maybe Sam's advice wasn't that wrong."

"About Muggle groupies? ... I thought ..."

"What?"

"Nothing - forget it." Ron was in a hurry to change the subject. "How was your trip with the dragons? Your hair looks a bit burned."

"Carrie's carrying, which makes her lazy. But I had a flight with a male Common Welsh Green - Samuel. And then I was riding him."

"And then you got burned?"

"No - not on purpose, I mean. He was breathing fire from joy, only the airstream brought a bit too much."

Walking away, Harry felt Ron's stare in his back, sensed a feeling of frustration more than excitement, as if Harry had claimed to be the true successor of Charlie the dragon guard.

Well - he couldn't help. If Ron was frustrated, he might visit Janine. After all, she was just a linkport away.

* * *

The next full moon would be due soon. Hermione came along to remind Harry of that, and of the need for his next trip to Haiti. Harry nodded, avoiding a sigh in her presence. It would be unfair, and he had trouble enough with his friends. "By the way," he said, "this Armodéc told me he could establish a portkey from Port-au-Prince to his estate - and that we could come together."

Hermione smiled. "Did he? ... Tell you what - once you can program portkeys, you'll make one from Hogwarts to his house, and then we'll visit him together."

This suggestion seemed just the kind you might expect from Hermione - simple, practical, to the point. Only that Harry couldn't help wondering what exactly was the point, from her perspective.

He inspected the flasks. "What's the taste in them?"

"Strawberry."

"And the after-taste?"

Hermione looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't manage ... Harry, can you arrange it so that you can watch while this Armodéc's drinking?"

"Arrggh ... Okay, I'll try."

As if to set her own mind at peace, Hermione said, "Shouldn't be that bad - you'll get a dinner, and you said he's nice, didn't you?"

"He's interesting - nice isn't the term I'd use."

"But not as unpleasant as this Caprien, right?"

"No, he's not unpleasant ..." Harry stopped, saved his argument at realizing that for Hermione, the issue seemed already settled. Then another thought crossed his mind. "Say, how's Lupin doing in the test?"

Hermione looked indignant. "Harry - that's confidential information."

He stared at her, perplexed.

She blushed a bit. "It's true. Yes, you hear the case stories of the Haitians, it's unavoidable, but this doesn't justify me telling you Lupin's results ... Why don't you ask him? - Or Almyra?"

The hint was faint but obvious. Two years ago, Almyra had run a case study of Harry, and nobody had told Hermione, with the result that she encountered the worst blame of her lifetime, spinning around and shouting, "Voodoo."

Of course, her argument qualified as waterproof. And Hermione was savouring this moment, while Harry could do nothing ... Wrong - he could use Zen, or if not Zen, then the method of solving Zen riddles, by laughing them away.

He grinned at her, grinned and grinned, sending a clear message - yes, she had balanced out a bit, he acknowledged that, remembering the initial score well, oh so well ...

Hermione bit her lips, avoided his eyes, suddenly quite eager to resume her work.

* * *

Harry travelled after the last classes of the week, Friday afternoon. This choice left all options open, on a scale which went round and round in his thoughts while sitting in Gros-Morne and waiting for Benoit. What he had in mind was a dinner, period. Only - what he had in his bag, among some flasks, was a toothbrush and several other utensils.

He reached the house at the peak of the Ile de la Tortue long before six. At least, he arrived past lunchtime, even past siesta time. Monsieur Armodéc smiled. "Enchanté, Monsieur Pottère ... You're a bit early, which is just fine because it gives us the opportunity to prepare for the - dinner."

For a split second, Harry was wondering which preparations might be required in this household for another - dinner - guest. However, Hermione's order was lasting heavier on his mind. "Monsieur Armodéc, I'm afraid I have to be terribly impolite, although I'll try to wrap it a bit."

His host had obviously fun. "You have my full attention, Monsieur Pottère."

"Erm - I'd like to be present, er, when you'll drink the potion ... I'm sorry, but ..."

The black face split into a laughter, with sparkling eyes and rosy gums. "So Mademoiselle Hermione doesn't trust my honesty, maybe not at all ... I'm really looking forward to make her acquaintance, yes, I am."

"You know, there were some significant differences in the descriptions ..."

Monsieur Armodéc waved dismissively. "No problem, Monsieur Pottère. I'll drink it tomorrow at breakfast - it's the least important meal of the day, so it won't spoil anything ... You're welcome to join me, to be my guest until then."

Without any clicking, the trapdoor had closed. Harry was asking himself - had he stepped in voluntarily? ... Had Hermione pushed him, and if so, by accident or on purpose? He just didn't know.

"So this was the impoliteness, Monsieur Pottère - quite tolerable, as it turns out, given the circumstances ... Then what's the wrapping?"

"Er, yes ... Please call me Harry - it feels more comfortable, after all, we'll have a lot of conversation, so ..."

"Thank you for the offer - I'd be glad to follow, only I'm a bit reluctant to return the favour."

"Oh - sorry, it wasn't meant the other way around, Monsieur Armodéc - this would be totally out of proportion. Er, if we were talking English, I could address you with sir - funny how the French language leaves a gap here ..."

"You're right, Harry, it's indeed a gap ..."

Surprised, Harry stared at his host who just had pronounced this name which, so far, had made any other French speaker fail.

Monsieur Armodéc noticed. "It's the environment here, Harry - English, French, and Spanish ... But what I was going to say, it's indeed interesting - addressing me as Monsieur would lack the bluntness and impertinence of *Mister* in English, except that this title is already reserved, to be used by servants and waitresses ... Of course, there's almost an equivalent in French - Sire, except that it's much too humble for our situation, it's definitely not a translation of *sir*."

Harry had an idea. "But I could use it without this connotation - you know, saying *Sire* and thinking *sir*."

"A very elegant solution, Harry, the sign of a truly independent mind - keeping the etiquette while simultaneously stripping it of any formality. Your French is admirable, by the way, in particular for a native English."

Harry's grin indicated that he had registered the thick-layered flattery, and that they might as well drop it. Then he explained how he had encountered a similar problem with the Weasleys, had solved it by using *sir* for the one and *Ma Weasley* for the other, reduced to *Ma* if some barrier had to be broken.

He also told his host how two fairies, Céline and Muriel, had solved a language problem within a week. Then, referring back to the fine differences between etiquette and formality, he spoke about Zen and the differences between true and right.

This topic kept them engaged in a longer discussion, and Harry enjoyed it. If this had to be rated as a honey trap, then of first class in every detail, with the honey still nowhere in sight.

Eventually, the conversation turned to Muggles.

"So there are lots of people around Hogwarts," said Monsieur Armodéc, "and they're friendly, and the school people are friendly to them, and everything's very nice. What a wonderful picture ... It won't stay that way."

"Why not?"

"Because we're different, Harry. People don't like seeing differences in other people - actually, that's true for Muggles and wizards alike. If the difference becomes too big, a war will start."

"But the difference doesn't change - it's the same all the time."

"The objective difference, Harry - while the subjective one changes from day to day. Simply speaking, the Muggles haven't realized yet what we are. Sooner or later, something will happen at some place. And then ... I'm glad to have my place here, and I'm glad to be different already for decades - " the man smiled, "which doesn't mean I won't drink the potion, Harry."

"What if they get used to the differences - I mean before something happens?"

Monsieur Armodéc shook his head. "I'm talking from experience, Harry. I never hurt anyone seriously as a *loup-garou* - Haiti is a good place for them, people have experience, know how to handle such cases. And still ... After years of coexistence, suddenly the atmosphere changes - you've done nothing, but the others make clear you're no longer tolerated."

Harry could see disquieting parallels between this man's opinion and that of a Texan ex-deputy. "What do you think, Sire, how did it happen?"

"Living here, separated from Muggles as much as from other wizards, certainly disqualifies me as an expert for that question. On the other hand, it makes me a perfectly objective referee ... I thought about the possible reasons, eventually coming to my own conclusion - and what you've told me about the young people at your school, Harry, fits well to my analysis ... Do you want to hear the result, or do you want to reconsider the steps of my analysis?"

"I'd like to follow up your steps, Sire."

"That's what I thought. Very well, then ... Thinking about the possible causes, I found three which are basically different. At closer investigation, two of them split again, making five - or seven, depending on how to count. It could have been an event of nature, like the heating-up of the atmosphere. It could have been the work of Muggles, splitting into the alternatives single Muggle or group of Muggles, and simultaneous development at different locations - as it happened so often in the history of science. Finally, it could have been the work of wizards,

again splitting into single, group, and simultaneous development ... These were the possible causes I checked. Would you agree to this collection, Harry?"

"Hmm - comes a bit fast, the question ... What about a miracle?"

Monsieur Armodéc almost grimaced. "Which implies the existence of God - I could go along that far, Harry, but it also implies that God has an impulse to fool around with humankind every now and then - to play with us, if you don't like the other formulation ... I'm not ready to take that into account, I'm afraid. Are you?"

"Whether or not - at least I'd list it as a cause to be evaluated like the others."

"Why not?" Monsieur Armodéc shrugged. "So let's split the first possibility, event, into the alternatives natural and super-natural. It doesn't change my result ... I discarded a super-natural event for the said reasons, and I dropped the idea of a natural event because I couldn't imagine any ... We know how glacial epochs start and end, we know what makes the ozone disappear - what should be a natural cause that Muggles suddenly recognize us?"

"Beats me."

"They would have recognized us long before, if not for many efforts from the wizarding world to prevent that ... This is my main argument, and also the one which made me drop Muggles' work as the triggering factor. So I was left with the work of wizards as the origin."

"Why would some wizards do that?"

"Yes, why indeed? This question was helpful to exclude the remaining alternatives. If we assume that independent persons or groups, all around the globe, have started to reveal our world to the Muggles, then we must assume an impulse like the one that was driving scientists and engineers. The first aeroplanes were developed because people wanted to fly - almost simultaneously at all locations with a comparable level of technology. Now, what should have driven these wizards? - Actually, that's your question, Harry."

What a nice trick of semantics, or maybe rhetorics. "I asked because I didn't know the answer."

"Nor do I ... My answer is - there's no such impulse, and that's why I dropped this alternative too."

Harry had objections about this step - fully aware that Monsieur Armodéc had used the same technique as recommended in Zen. *If you don't know more, use what's at hand.* Only his host had done so for an analysis, while Harry saw it as a method for determining some action ... Well, maybe there was no difference at all, maybe analysis could be considered an action too.

"This left a wizard," continued the host, "or a single group of wizards, as the originators. Since a single wizard couldn't possibly do the work alone - if you trace back the first reports, Harry, you can see that it started around the world - my conclusion is that this was the work of a group. If a group is following the same target, there's always a single mind in the background."

"And who should that be?"

"To answer that, first we have to decide whether this wizard is well-minded or evil-minded. When assuming good reasons, I have two problems, Harry - I don't know any such person, never heard about any, and I cannot see any benefit in the results ... While, when assuming evil reasons, the answer isn't that difficult, is it?"

Voldemort?? Harry wasn't ready to accept this answer.

His face showed it. "Sire, it doesn't make sense to me yet. So far, there hasn't been anything evil. Quite the opposite, it looks like a great chance for both sides."

"So far, Harry - yes. But what made you think the plan's already completed?"

And right then, just when Harry remembered the conversation with Firenze, tried to remember the exact words, the dinner was ready.

Entering the dinner room, still working on this memory, Harry found himself caught off balance - registering a table set for four people. A second later, the other two appeared - Désirée and another young woman.

Monsieur Armodéc introduced this woman as Beatrice, not bothering with family names. Beatrice was placed directly opposite Harry's seat, giving him the opportunity to study her, and to realize that she was doing the same with him.

When he addressed her as "Mademoiselle Beatrice," she said, "Just Beatrice, 'arry." So the mastering of his name wasn't common in Haiti, or she came from somewhere else.

Beatrice was not as dark as Désirée, or Monsieur Armodéc. Black-haired, with an extremely short cut, covering head and neck like a tight fur. She wore a white dress, closing high at her throat while leaving arms and shoulders bare. The fabric looked soft, following the contours of her body so tightly that Harry had little doubt - the next layer underneath would be skin. Her slender figure, her small breasts, together with the pronunciation of his name, raised his suspicion that Beatrice was of Arabic origin, but then, nobody could call him an expert for the Carribeans.

Monsieur Armodéc hadn't missed Harry's widening eyes at the end of their previous conversation, hadn't forgotten either, and now asked for the reason. So Harry spoke about his encounter with Firenze, about former encounters, one in which he had been riding the centaur, and another in which it had been Cho. The conversation shifted to other magical creatures, and Harry confessed that he was currently dealing with dragons.

Désirée asked, "Isn't it extremely dangerous, Harry? One breathing in the wrong direction, and you'd burn to death alive."

"Oh no, they know what they're doing. At my last visit, I was flying with one of them - Samuel's his name. He let me even ride - it was great. For him, it was as much fun as for myself."

"I like riding too," said Beatrice, "though neither centaurs nor dragons."

Which left still more than one alternative, without even counting Hippogriffs.

Then Monsieur Armodéc shifted the discussion to lifestyles, confessing that he had dedicated his life to matters of taste and style. "Action, combat, violence - for me this always felt too close to my state as a *loup-garou*. So I decided to use my time - and my money - for the fine art of luxury. I studied the history of luxury, and I couldn't help noticing that the ultimate style still has to be reached."

Harry, definitely no expert in luxury, asked, "What would that be, the ultimate style?"

"I'm still looking for the answer myself," answered the host. "Avoiding decadence - that's a basic prerequisite. For example, look how the Roman emperors celebrated their orgies - terrible examples of decadence and bad taste." Monsieur Armodéc almost shuddered.

Harry grinned. "Could you explain, Sire? Our Professor Binns was a bit short in that topic - maybe because it was in the second year."

"They tried to do everything at the same time - eating, drinking, having sex, and as if that wasn't enough, watching murderous games. Imagine - you're eating, all around you people copulating, the most beautiful slaves walking around naked, and outside one gladiator killing another - that's barbarian. Still worse - they were saturating all senses, rather than satisfying."

Not knowing any better, Harry asked, "Then how should it be done?"

"Very simple - one after the other, with time in-between to savour the experience, and to store the memory. How could you concentrate on this dinner if Désirée and Beatrice would be sitting there naked?"

Truth to be told, even a dressed Beatrice was taking a lot of Harry's attention away from the delicious food. But then, maybe it had to do with the time lag.

"There's a time for everything," said the luxury expert, "for every single sense. Eating - watching a naked woman ..."

"Or man," said Désirée.

"... watching a couple, engaging yourself in a sex act, all these tasks require your undiminished attention. And afterwards, a tiny amount of desire must be left - gluttony's a crime against taste."

"Then I'm a criminal," said Beatrice.

Monsieur Armodéc smiled. "Are you?"

"Certainly. When watching a couple, all I have in mind is to join them. And when having sex, I won't stop before the last amount of desire has faded."

"And you, Harry?" Eyes were resting at him.

Harry felt like a team member nominated one league too high. "I agree that there's a time for everything," he said. "I don't think a Roman orgy would be my style ... Otherwise - er, you may ask me the question again some years from now."

Monsieur Armodéc laughed. "That's a facet in which you're ahead of me, Harry, and quite naturally so."

"Which?" Harry expected an answer referring to age.

"This very British style - understatement."

The time lag was giving Harry more trouble. According to his inner clock, he should be sound asleep. So he felt more relieved than startled when Monsieur Armodéc, quite suddenly at the end of the dinner, announced that it was time for a man his age, and disappeared together with Désirée.

Which left him alone with Beatrice.

He looked at her. "I'm afraid it's time for me too - my body says it's three o'clock in the morning. Unfortunately, Monsieur Armodéc missed to show me my room ..."

"I can show you - mine's across." She stood up. "Follow me, 'arry."

For a moment, he could watch a slim body moving in front of him, then they reached a room which reminded him of the large guest suite in Hogwarts. Not by accident, as Beatrice made clear, pointing to some doors. "That's your room, 'arry, and that's mine." She walked to a table with a jug and two goblets. "Let's have a nightcap." She filled the goblets.

Harry examined the dark-violet fluid, which seemed to sparkle. "I'm not sure whether that's a good idea ..."

"You've been extremely reluctant with drinking, 'arry, but this one's different. It's a nightbane potion."

"What's that?"

"It bans ghosts and demons. It bans yesterday and tomorrow, time and space. It leaves only the night, and ourselves." Beatrice's eyes met his'. "Drink, 'arry."

Seeing her emptying the goblet, he followed.

For a moment, he still could hold the thought that this might give Hermione a sample how to put taste and after-taste in a potion. The first sip tasted cool, smooth, smoky, inviting him to gulp it down, then a fire started to glow, down his throat, down his stomach, into his groin, burning away all tiresome feelings, blowing all his concerns to ashes, leaving empty space outside this room, outside this moment.

The same fire glowed in Beatrice's eyes, in her hands which pushed him backwards until he fell onto a chaise longue, which stripped off his clothes feverishly.

Still in her dress, she mounted him. "You're my dragon, and I'm your rider. Breathe your fire into me, 'arry."

09 - Cursing Items

Gliding on his Steel Wing over the school's restricted zone, Harry listened to the sounds from the campfires, wondering if Monsieur Armodéc was right - and if so, which steps in an evil plan were still missing. He couldn't think of any, maybe because he was tired, so tired.

The Muggles ... Today, Harry's answer might have been different, when asked about booster potions. Still no expert, was he nonetheless wiser than before. His first answer might be yes, there were some, except nothing comes for free - as with the dope from Lleyrin the Fist, eventually a body challenged beyond reason would claim its recovery.

Harry's second answer would be a warning - never ever trying a booster solo, without the partner using the same stuff. The thought alone, that he might have rejected the goblet after Beatrice had emptied her own, was sending a shudder along his spine. But he hadn't, finding himself prepared for an unforgettable experience.

Only the picture in Beatrice's remark had been wrong - the dragon wasn't Harry himself, no, this had been her role, dragon and rider at the same time. Well, not all the time, they had been riding each other, burning in a fire that refused being extinguished, bodies collapsing to ashes which, shortly afterwards, started to glow again, to drown in a new wave of ecstasy.

However, the potion hadn't made him a phoenix. In the morning, Harry cured the bruises on both of their bodies, and Beatrice returned the favour by offering another drink, "for stabilizing," as she said, seeing his suspicious glance. And now he was paying - with an aching body, with a numb mind, with trembling fingers.

Rahewa had noticed, of course. Seeing her amused glances, Harry could imagine what she was thinking. Be it - as long as Rahewa couldn't imagine the details. He didn't think he would repeat the experience ... Once had to be enough, Monsieur Armodéc was right, a tiny amount of desire should be left. At least this stuff seemed not addictive, although Harry would know for sure only in a week or so.

They were almost done with their patrol. Rahewa's glances hung at the campfires - she loved sitting at a fire, listening to songs, and to guitar players. The sympathy was mutual, Rahewa represented something like the good-luck charm of the camp, at least as popular as Harry himself, probably more. And she was safe there - Muggles of both sexes would make any molester pay dearly.

About to finish, having crossed their starting point, Harry sensed someone in the underbrush. Another intruder, trying to break the rules of the game by crossing at a point where the patrol had already checked. Well, fair play among Muggles wasn't Harry's problem. Silently, he motioned Rahewa to follow, dived down, approaching the spot. Now he could see a shape in his *getsumai no michi*.

"Come out," he called, "and get your showers."

The figure raised an arm. A tiny flash, a sharp report, and something wheezed past Harry's head, leaving a ringing in his ears.

"*Stupefy!*"

The figure collapsed on the ground.

Harry found exactly what he had expected, a young Muggle, the face unknown to him, the right hand holding a large piece of metal. And only now, Harry realized what had happened - the piece was a handgun, which meant the flash had been a shot, and the rush near his head had been the bullet, missing close.

This Muggle had shot at him! Harry looked at Rahewa. "Do you know how to handle guns?"

"Only from movies." Rahewa had a murderous expression in her face, seemed ready to pay back with a knife, not caring about the man's stunned state.

Harry pointed his wand. "*Enervate*."

With a moan, the man came awake, looked around, saw the two figures towering over him, presented a mix of fear and expectancy. Harry asked, "Why did you shoot at us?"

"Why? Because you're Dirty Harry - it was a showdown, man. You know, you with your wand, and I with my gun ... Okay, I missed - that's it. Make my day, Harry."

Blank Harry looked at Rahewa. "Do you know what he means?"

"He thinks you're going to kill him now." Rahewa's face didn't move. "Do him the favour, Harry."

"Certainly not." He looked at the man. "Get up."

"You'll shoot me when I'm standing, huh? But I'm not getting up, you'll have to do it this way ... C'mon, man, that's not bothering Dirty Harry, is it?"

Glancing toward his partner, Harry said, "He's crazy."

Rahewa agreed - for her still more reason to kill him now.

Not for Harry. He stupefied the man again, then used a first-aid charm for accident victims, trained long ago with Professor McGonagall, to carry the motionless bundle to Samantha's hut, and to call, "Sam, come out! ... Sheriff work's waiting for you."

Samantha agreed with Harry's opinion, while not with Rahewa's. She handcuffed the figure. "Leave him here. I'll talk with Dumbledore, but I guess we'll send him off tomorrow ... Who wants the hassle of a trial?"

Harry handed her the gun. "Here - you know better what to do."

Samantha examined the piece. "That's a collector's item, Harry - an old German world war gun, and still working."

"Does that tell us anything?"

"Yeah, I think so ... Seems to be a fanatic with weapons, and gunfights, and all that crap." Samantha sighed. "To be honest, Rahewa's more right than wrong ... Harry - if someone shoots at you the next time, just kill him, okay?"

Rahewa looked satisfied.

Not so Harry. "Are you out of your mind? Do you know what you just said?"

"Yes, I do." Samantha stared at him. "He'll come back, Harry, and no matter how you look at it - a bad dream every now and then means you're still alive, right?"

Yes, she was serious, something to think about while Harry marched into the camp, followed by Rahewa. He wanted to talk with some other Muggles about gunfighters.

Reaching their preferred group, with Pete, Sally, and the others, they were welcomed with hello - and with two cokes. Rahewa was quickest. "We just found a guy with a gun. He shot at us."

Surprise, consternation, followed by fury. "Shooting at you?? ... Where is he? If the others hear that he's been shooting at you, he's dead meat."

The group's full concern was directed toward Rahewa. Nobody could imagine Harry as the dead, or wounded, victim of a gun attack. And somehow, Rahewa couldn't find the time to clear the misunderstanding.

The news seemed to race through the camp. More figures were gathering, wanted to have a look at the water cops in their unhurt state.

Pete said, "I'm sorry, Harry. That's bad - not at all what we want to have here ... But some people are just crazy - you cannot look into their head, until's too late. I really hope it doesn't leave bad feelings - I mean against the others. You know, something like Muggles versus wizards ..."

"No, I'm not going to generalize - I'm here to talk with you about such people. He said it was a showdown, called me Dirty Harry ... Pete, what do you think - how many guns are in the camp?"

The young man shrugged. "Very few, I think ... Knives, yes - but this is England, Harry. Sure, in the States, you'd find lots of them, and many more maniacs like that shithead, but here ... I figure he couldn't get it straight, for him, wizards and movie figures seem to be the same."

Sally had listened. "Pity you didn't kill him, Harry."

"You too? Everybody's telling me that - what a crap!"

"But he'll come back, and try again."

"Maybe so ..." Thinking about the suggestion, Harry said, "On the other hand, imagine I'd come and say, I just killed an intruder because he was shooting at me - *that* would give bad feelings."

"You could be right. But by tomorrow, everybody knows that some dipshit has tried to kill a water cop - which means, the next time, you can kill him and they'll give you applause."

After some more discussion about armed lunatics, Harry left the round to find his bed before falling asleep upright. He also left behind a beaming Rahewa who relished the attention, and the opportunity to determine which songs to play. After all, according to the spreading rumour, she had barely survived an attack from half a dozen sub-machine guns, and one of them had been ready to throw handgrenades, hadn't he?

* * *

Professor McGonagall looked a bit suspicious. She knew Harry would not lie to her, however, she also knew about his very individual view of things. "You meet the Weasley twins, it takes all day long, and this has to be counted as classes? ... Harry, that sounds like the impossible trinity."

"But it's true, Prof - they can offer the best training place for putting charms into items ... By the way, you know them only from Hogwarts. They're businessmen now - you should visit *Swashbuckle Sweets* once, then you'd know."

After some more explanations, Harry's visit with the twins was settled. He informed his other teachers personally - for reasons of politeness as much as for his aversion to ask Ron, terms were a bit tense lately. Then, next morning after breakfast, he went for his training.

Walking toward the train platform, his standard jump spot, Harry swore to himself - the portkey for Hermione, from Hogwarts to the Ile de la Tortue, would only be his second. His first portkey would be his very personal one, from his dormitory to this platform.

For this, he would have to talk with Dumbledore - otherwise, the portkey would never work. The protective zone around Hogwarts relied on a kind of static wave charm, creating interferences with all Apparition and portkey charms. The two linkports in the school - toward Beauxbatons and toward Durmstrang - had been completed by the Headmaster himself, by synchronizing them with the magic wave. Dumbledore and McGonagall were the only ones who knew the specific pattern.

Would they tell him? ... This sounded very much like the Muggle technology of safes - a combination of numbers, one out of a billion, supposedly the only way to open the safe. But there were people who could open safes with a stethoscope and a pair of sharp ears, while others were using brute force, explosives or a cutting torch. Harry would talk with Ray ...

Swashbuckle Sweets had already opened, looked almost full, that early in the morning. George was selling, and Harry became aware that George's customers - adults without exception - were enjoying his constant stream of remarks as much as the goods they had come for.

"... half-pound of Funny-Talks, here you are, sir, so you can finally tell your boss what you really think of him, oh yes, without being present - although, what's the fun if you can't see his face - which means, you'll need someone else to tell you, I mean after he's stopped wetting his pants from laughing ... Helly Harry - Fred's in the rear room ... Galleons or pounds, sir?"

Harry had to wait a few minutes, then Fred found the time to give him first instructions. "Harry, your main problem is that you have to test your own results. If you had to eat every

sweet you've charmed, you'd be dead sick within twenty minutes - not taking into account any side effects from your charms, that is ... That's why we'll do a basic training first. Look here."

Harry looked at a box with pastilles - white, could have been peppermints, could also have been Go stones.

"That's raw material - light peppermint taste, nothing else. For starters, you'll colour them red. Now watch." Fred placed a handful of pills on the table, pointed his wand, said, "*Rubirate*", together with a smooth movement along the row.

The pills shimmered in fire engine red.

"That's it. If the pills remain red for five minutes, you know that it sticks. Don't bother with this multi-hit touch - you won't need it for portkeys - I mean, you're not going into mass production, are you? ... Okay, have fun - if you've managed, you'll find me next door."

A box of white pills and a wand. Harry felt like an idiot - grateful to be alone. But there was no doubt, Fred had been serious, and this elementary training was indeed a clever idea. Harry took a handful of pills, placed each of them separately on the table.

"Rubbirate."

The pill remained white, except it was no longer hard, felt more like a piece of rubber.

"Rupirate."

The pill turned dark, coppery - and flat, hard, with an imprint. It had turned into a Muggle coin of India. After a moment, it fell back to its original state.

"Rubbi-rate."

Like shredded in a mill, the piece crumpled to dust - without regaining its original shape. Harry counted this as progress.

"Ruptirate."

The pill broke in two halves. Well, not exactly as planned.

"Rubirattle."

The piece was banging against the table, in a rapid staccato, astonishingly loud, not stopping. After a moment, Fred appeared, stopped it with a movement of his wand and a grin. "You're very inventive, Harry, by all means."

Well, at least, now he knew how to undo his attempts.

"Rubirats."

A rodent with large red eyes was staring at Harry. He quickly made it disappear, however not before it could issue a last squeak.

Fred was there, grinning more than ever. "Harry, wanna tip?"

"Yes, of course."

"Speak it softly - keep your lips like a girl doing a blowjob - er, not necessarily a girl, that is - know what I mean?"

Harry himself was reddening, although this couldn't be counted as progress. He waited until his adopted brother had left. In Fred's presence, he just couldn't ...

"Rubirate."

Ahh - the pill changed colour! Brown, unfortunately, which wasn't good, returning to white after a few seconds, which wasn't better. Maybe it had to do with his giggle at the last syllable.

Half an hour later, Harry had gathered ten pills of equal colour. They weren't quite as shining as Fred's, but then, painting pills wasn't the goal, was it? At least, they were stable.

Fred nodded. "Okay, Harry - that's been step one, storing a spell in an object. The next step is to make the object work as a storage - so that the charm's kept only until someone uses that object, thereby becoming the target of the charm."

"But a portkey should work for all people touching it."

"One step after the other, okay? ... And besides, couldn't you think of a one-time portkey?"

Yes, Harry could indeed - Sirius' mailbox had been such a portkey, otherwise, he would have tracked him much earlier.

In his second training session, Harry had to charm the pills so that the red colour was given to the first fingers touching them. Then the colour had to stay inside until someone was biting into the pill, or licking it.

This someone was of course he himself. A fire-engine red tongue looked weird, really - scaring more than vampire teeth. Still, Harry accepted Fred's statement - such pills wouldn't sell.

Harry had intended to treat the twins in a restaurant. Only this wasn't realistic - not with *Swashbuckle Sweets* open all day long. So Harry went for those delicious meat rolls, of course buying more than they could eat. Fred and George assured him that the remaining rolls would still be fine in the evening - cooled out of course. If you didn't like it that way, a little heating charm would solve the problem.

The twins' shop provided an excellent training camp, as Harry became aware when Fred advanced to the next level - multi-layer charms. The Funny-Talks were multi-layered, with a layer for muting the person and another one to store the sentences in a bubble. This step turned out a real challenge.

Unfortunately, it meant he had to eat the sweets.

An hour later, Harry felt sick. By that time, he had managed to mute himself, and to store something in the bubbles. It had even some similarity to his test sentence - *The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*, only the words were mutilated, and Harry's delayed voice somewhere between squeaking and growling.

He stared hatefully at the tiny piece he just had charmed. The thought of its taste on his tongue was almost good to throw up. He found Fred next door. "Sorry - I'm fed up for today, in the literal sense of the word ... Anything else I could do?"

"Nothing I could show you, and you're not yet good enough for production work, Harry."

"Well, then ... I'll be back tomorrow morning. Thanks so far - bye."

Mid-afternoon. Returning to Hogwarts would mean joining classes - bah. This would be followed by supper - arrghh. Then Harry found an idea how to spend the time.

First he went to Mr. Spinbottle's office. The lawyer was out, would be back early evening.

Then Harry reached his preferred shop for the kind of present he had in mind - a single flower. Moments later, he stood in front of a house with an interesting mix of styles.

Mrs. Chang beamed. "A surprise at the right time, and such a nice one ... That's lovely, thank you, Harry."

Gratefully, he accepted tea - strong, bitter, easing up his sickness. The woman laughed, hearing about his training. "You should use magic sweets, which disappear after a few minutes."

"Yes, right - like Binn's beer." Harry explained how the ghost performed his Muggle studies in the evenings, described the situation with the camp around Hogwarts, and what was so attractive for the young people.

Mrs. Chang enjoyed this afternoon chat very much, abandoning all Chinese - or western - formality, as her question made clear. "Do these groupies reach their goal, Harry?"

"Erm - don't ask me, er, somehow, I wasn't in the mood to discuss it with the other students."

"I can't believe they're all too young for you. Since you're not the type for living in chastity, Harry, there must be another reason to keep you out of reach for them."

Harry felt as if today's training was showing late effects - his face reddening, his voice unable to speak.

"This conversation is just between the two of us, Harry. And I hope you're not suffering from a culture shock - monogamy isn't exactly a Chinese virtue, but for all I hear, it's not a British either ..." Mrs. Chang had the fine tact to look somewhere else when she added, "I know that you haven't seen Cho for quite some time, so - but maybe I'm really too curious ..."

"Did you hear from her?"

"She called several times, but she's very reluctant with details. So most of my knowledge is guesswork - as if that's something new for a mother. Over the years, I could develop some skill in that."

Harry had found his speech. For compensation, he didn't know what to say.

Mrs. Chang patted his hand. "My daughter's a devil in disguise, except that the disguise sometimes wears thin - I'm sure you've found out already by yourself, Harry. That's why I'm so glad she picked you - I wouldn't know anyone else who could get along without losing the fight within weeks ..."

He had to grin at that.

"... so my only concern is about - er, fundamental issues. Do you still love her, Harry?"

This answer could be given easily. "Oh yes, definitely. I miss her badly."

"That's all that really matters. In the meantime ..." Cho's mother didn't finish her sentence.

A thought made Harry grin again. "One of my projects is about portkeys, and summoning. Then I had this picture - me summoning Cho, to ask her what was going on. Can you imagine how she would look, summoned against her will?"

Mrs. Chang joined his laughter. "That would be a bad idea, Harry."

"Yes, I realized that much. I'd never do it - it was just this funny picture."

The woman poured more tea. "Since you're so reluctant about your social life, Harry - how's business? Does your money work for you?"

"Probably - as far as it's allowed to work."

"Some other individual project, aside from *Groucho Spectors*?"

"Erm - yes. But it's a non-profit case." Harry explained how he had come to support Mrs. Lightfoot, that it was only a question of time, as it seemed, and that - unless a small miracle happened - Cho's joke would become the most serious issue of the world.

Mrs. Chang looked sad. "What a terrible fate ... If ... Do you have an idea whom to ask, when - I mean if the time comes?"

"Yes, I have some candidates - of course, none of them has been asked yet. Anyway, the list isn't long."

The woman looked at him. "Would you mind adding an entry, Harry?"

* * *

The question was lingering in his mind when he met Mr. Spinbottle in the lawyer's office, to hear that Mrs. Lightfoot's state was unchanged. Unchanged, that meant - the treatment did not catch, at least not more than stabilizing her state for a while.

How long was a while?

"Shorter than what will follow, Mr. Potter ... I'm sorry that I cannot offer better news. You should think about your plan seriously - when the day comes, a quick reaction from our side will save a lot of hassle, particularly so for the girl. To avoid an assignment to a foster home, we should be ready with our application coming out from the funeral - sorry, that's lawyer talk, but it's true."

"Okay, Mr. Spinbottle. I'll talk with my candidates."

Why did this thought feel like stealing a child from a mother? Harry had to push himself forward mentally, made a first step the next day after his time in *Swashbuckle Sweets*, a time in which he had reached the point that Fred and George would be ready selling Funny Talks made by Harry.

His first candidates - where would he find them? In his house or in her apartment?

As if a failure would take more than a few seconds. Strange how your thinking kept to a habit of walking, or flying at the best, even after you had mastered Apparition. There were wizards arguing that this counted as proof for Apparition being an extremely unnatural art. But according to this logic, Muggle electricity had to be rated similarly unnatural. Proof - humans had no sense for recognizing current or voltage.

Harry tried Sirius' house first, striking gold. His godfather was at home, and Deborah with him. They asked Harry how he was doing, and he said fine. Then they asked how Cho was doing, and he said he didn't know, raising some eyebrows. Then they asked him how Hogwarts was doing, and he said there were a lot of Muggles around, waiting to - er, figure out how was sex with a wizard, or a witch, depending on the gender and the preferences.

Sirius nodded. "Yeah, the old pattern. Bring in something new, and that's what's bothering people more than anything else. For Muggles, it's wizards and witches. For the westerners, it's a slant eye, for the white man, it's a black woman ... Damn sex drive."

Harry was laughing.

Deborah too. "It's understandable, isn't it? Anyway, that's no problem for Harry - he has checked off the list more or less." She looked at him. "Isn't that so - slant eyes, in particular?"

"Well - erm, this groupie business isn't my taste, so the category Muggle is still open." Too late, Harry realized another category he hadn't excluded, which was correct, except ... And Deborah had noticed, as he could see from the curious sparkle in her eyes.

Time for changing the topic. "While on the subject, so-to-speak ... Are you two going to marry?"

A hit. They were staring at him, forgotten Deborah's question, at least for the moment. Sirius asked, "Since when's this your business, young man?"

"Since recently - all I can say so far is, I'm asking for a good reason."

Deborah had blushed sweetly. "You find us a bit unprepared for that question, Harry."

"Really? ... Are you talking for both of you? Would you say the same if I was here with Nagini?"

Deborah's cheeks were burning. She exchanged a glance with Sirius, who suddenly understood, his own face gaining colour, who swallowed and said, "Since my goddamn godchild has a goddamn sense too much for my taste - the thought has crossed my mind too - " he glanced at Deborah, back to Harry, "but I wasn't in a hurry with that. And for sure I had planned to discuss it without you, Harry ... Why do you ask?"

"Because ... Erm, could you imagine adopting a daughter?"

Sirius scored first in finding his speech. "Maybe so - just to see how very unusual a certain goldchild is ... Who is it?"

"Rahewa."

"Oh no - two of a kind, that's too much."

What Harry sensed in his godfather was surprise, shock, and something like fright, though no horror, while seeing Deborah's face was enough to know - there was no fright at all, apparently, she could warm up for the idea with astonishing speed. Her question confirmed it. "What about her natural parents?"

Harry described the situation. "I spoke with Spinbottle yesterday - he said I should get ready in time. Well - you're the first I'm asking."

Sirius' voice sounded hopeful. "So we're not your only candidates?"

"No - only those I wanted to check first."

Deborah asked, "Which are the others?"

Harry kept his face steady. "I think I shouldn't answer this question. You should find your decision without thinking about other people."

"Yes, you're probably right." Deborah smiled. "Although - I'd be ready to guess some candidates, with some children of their own."

Harry smiled back. "Sure - it's not that difficult. For them, I had to ask more people ... But the list is longer, that's all I'm saying."

"That's interesting ..." Deborah's mind seemed busy scanning possibilities, apparently with unsatisfying success.

Sirius had a more practical question. "How much time do we have, Harry?"

"Good question - no, it's not. Maybe two months, maybe a year. Maybe her mother comes around - but that's very unlikely."

After some more minutes, in which Deborah was imagining scenarios with an adopted daughter, disquieting her possible husband considerably, the conversation turned back to

Muggles. Sirius described how the Ministry of Magic and the Muggle authorities were trying to come together - at an agonizing speed, really, keeping like that, maybe in a century or so ...

Then Deborah was talking about contacts between wizarding press and Muggle press, and suddenly she started to grin. "Harry, you like being interviewed, don't you?"

"Like a pimple at the - where it hurts when sitting. Why do you ask?"

"We're in contact with a Muggle TV station. They have a talk show - you know what a talk show is?"

Harry didn't - not exactly, so Deborah explained it to him. Then she said, "They asked us for wizard guests. That means, they're looking for people who are somehow known, famous, popular in the wizarding world. Funny I didn't think of you first place, but you're the perfect candidate ... What do you say?"

"No thanks."

"Pity ... You'd be a good candidate, Harry - you're used to press, and TV isn't that much different. You'd be an ambassador of the wizards, better than many others - you know the Muggle world ..."

"No."

"They're paying well, Harry. For someone as famous as you ..."

"Forget it - I'm already rich." Only now, Harry became aware that the story of his money was news to Sirius and Deborah. Too late - he had to tell them.

In spite of the criminal facts involved, even the chief of wizard police looked pleased. "That's super, Harry - I'm glad you've earned something from all that, and this Crownshield can praise himself lucky to be alive."

"Somehow, I owe it to your involvement. Wanna half of it?"

"Are you mental? ... Besides, I still have the whole compensation for my time in Azkaban - wizards pay their cops better than the Muggles, believe me. No thanks."

Harry turned to Deborah. "And you?"

She grinned. "Thanks, but you know, I'm going to marry a rich man ... No, Harry, but if you could say yes to my idea ..."

"Deborah, I'd pay money if you'd stop talking about that."

"Think it over - by the way, would it help to say that for me, coming with such a talk show guest, this would be a big hit?"

"No - it would make it still more difficult."

"What a pity ..." Then Deborah's face turned to a malicious grin. "Harry - if you say yes, I promise you to change Sirius' mind, about Rahewa, that is."

Startled, Sirius glared at her. "That's a damned trick, so unfair ... I didn't even officially propose for you, and ..."

"Save it, Sirius." Harry smiled, not too happy. "We've lost already, can't you see?"

* * *

It was very funny. The people from *Seven-Eleven*, the Muggle TV station, wanted to call him - failing that, to send him a fax. Harry heard about it when talking the next time with Deborah, after she had sent him a letter in which she asked for his visit in her *Daily Prophet* office.

"What do they want, Deborah?"

"The usual stuff - casting, pre-arrangement, test recording, test make-up, things like that."

"For Heaven's sake - what have you put me into??"

Deborah grinned. "Why don't you ask your Cho - isn't she in the movie business now?"

"She isn't mine!!" Harry was almost shouting.

"No? ... Then whom else?" At this moment, Deborah registered Harry's face. "Sorry - it was thought as a joke, but somehow, I seem to have stepped into the greasepot. Wasn't my intention, Harry ..."

"It's okay - no, it's not, but I'm not mad at you - you were just the one I could shout at ... Well, if I cannot tell you - we've shared enough ..."

A quick grin at both faces.

"... but if you keep some facts to yourself when telling Sirius, I'd be grateful." Then Harry told Deborah about the current state between himself and Cho - as an outline, that was.

Deborah's sympathy seemed split, though not in the middle. "She's fighting for her place in the sun, Harry - I can understand that quite well. And besides - you seem to have found an - er, interim solution."

"Did I?"

Woman that she was, Deborah couldn't resist. "Who is it, Harry? Almyra?"

Harry laughed. "Heavens, no! What made you think so?"

"Erm ..." Suddenly, Deborah looked embarrassed. "Somehow, I ... Almyra's the only coloured women I know in your environment, and ..." Her voice trailed off.

"Ah, now I can follow up your thinking." Harry grinned. "Maybe you take things too literally ... Anyway, let's come back to this talk show."

Deborah didn't really believe that she had been wrong - except for her guess, obviously so, only the moment for asking was gone. "Okay - what can I tell them?"

"You're my agent in this thing - make an appointment, tell them that I'll come for the evening, early enough for some talk before, and that's it."

"They won't like it - normally, they prefer to fix every detail in advance ..."

"Didn't you say it's a live talk show? If I understood you right, that means we're talking, and they're broadcasting it."

"They hate surprises. Usually, there's almost no unplanned sentence spoken."

Feeling lightly at the burden put upon his agent, Harry said, "Well, this time they're in for a surprise."

Deborah sighed. "Okay, Harry - you're famous enough for such extravagancies ... And then, there's the question of your payment."

"Negotiate with them. It's all yours."

"That's ridiculous. Okay, you're rich, but ..."

"There's another reason," interrupted Harry. "I never told you." And then he explained how Mr. Spinbottle had made his offer, representing a dead client, at least a dead man's money.

Deborah listened in astonishment. "Hmm ... I think you took the right decision - in a way I'm glad you were asked first, because, to be honest, I'm not sure whether I could have resisted."

"At that time? I think you're guessing from today's state of mind. At any rate, do we agree now that the money from them is yours?"

Suddenly, Deborah looked very pleased. "Yes, okay - that's terribly kind of you, Harry ... I only don't know how to explain that to Sirius."

"Tell him the truth - he knows what happened with the fifty thousand."

"You told him?? Without telling me?"

Harry smiled. "No - he's never heard of that offer. But the fifty grand went into the Enforcement Squad's widow fund, and Sirius will make the connection by himself."

The pleasure was back in Deborah's voice, together with a refreshed curiosity. "Look there, our Harry - always full of surprises ... I'd like to treat you for a lunch, to celebrate my salary - er, I mean yours."

Harry examined her face. "Celebrate, huh? ... I know exactly what's on your mind."

Deborah smiled mischievously. "Yes, you're right, but show me a woman who could resist the temptation to squeeze you a bit. And you know that this conversation is just between the two of us, don't you?"

It sounded so familiar - women telling him this was a private conversation, before or after milking him for details of his social life. But then, these weren't lies. So Harry accepted - the invitation as well as conversation Deborah had in mind.

When he had finished his story about the night on the Ile de la Tortue, Deborah's face showed some signs of - well, excitement. "Harry, I'd like to know that recipe."

"Would you? I'm not sure - if I had a bottle of that stuff, I don't think I'd want to use it - with Cho, I mean. This experience was kind of once in a lifetime."

"Could be. But then - you made that experience, while I didn't. Aside from that - maybe Cho would think differently ... Would you be ready to predict her own choice?"

Harry thought it over. "I'm afraid so, yes."

* * *

When he saw Deborah again, she had the appointment settled. "Wednesday in a week, Harry. The show starts at ten in the evening, they expect you no later than seven."

"Three hours in advance??"

"Yes, unfortunately ... This guy looks very professional, he doesn't like accidents, or unplanned statements."

"Which guy?"

"The talkmaster, Harry." Deborah rolled her eyes for such ignorance. "His name's Winston Winslow, and the show's called *Late Listeners*. Starting after ten, that means sex talk is allowed."

"Allowed, huh? - Is it mandatory too?"

Deborah grinned. "That depends - you'll see, and you'll be part of it, won't you?"

"Winston Winslow - that must be a joke. Nobody has such a name."

"Maybe it's a pseudonym. But don't call him Lewis Losefast - he wouldn't take it well."

Harry chuckled. "Hey, that's good, Deborah."

"Not my invention - that's how they call him behind his back."

* * *

With the distinct feeling that he could await this evening, would not miss it afterwards, Harry jumped back to Hogwarts, only to grab his Steel Wing and to zoom off. He wanted to perform some experiments for his Poison ball project, needed a deserted place for that, and scanning on a broomstick high in the air was a better method than jumping around.

His project ... Until recently, it had been a twin project. Harry still hoped Ron would come back. He thought he saw a chance - during meals, Ron seemed more polite than hostile, more interested than indifferent. For all Harry knew, the real problem had to be Ron's administration work, eating up all time affordable, and more. The little grudge would have been cleaned away quickly, but Ron hated undeserved favours, for example a project in which he could not contribute his full share.

The former Giants' camp looked deserted enough. No Muggle in sight, none that could be sensed - if these people were still around in winter, this would change, as the huts were still good to protect against bad weather. While for now, they could serve as the perfect training area.

Harry grinned toward himself. Would there be some huts left, once he was done with explosive balls? But first, he wanted to know whether he could compete with a technology that seemed pretty simple - throwing small projectiles at high speed.

Muggles had guns, to shoot bullets weighing a few ounces at astonishing speed. From Samantha, Harry knew that a bullet's initial speed was about thousand feet per second. Compared to that, the leather balls shot for Lousy were miserably slow.

How fast were the bullets thrown with slings? Lleyrin's men had adapted this weapon of Bulgarian shepherds, with remarkable success. Certainly less than thousand feet per second, however fast enough to kill other Giants.

Of course, in a way, this was playing around. According to Samantha, Muggles used guns sometimes to kill, sometimes to wound, always at risk to hit the wrong spot, provided they could hit anything. In comparison, a stupefying spell or a killing curse were more to the task. And still ...

For starters, Harry made some tests with miniature water balls, very much like those he had used against the gnomes in *The Burrow*, only at higher speed. They splashed against the wall of Lleyrin's barn, his test target, to evaporate quickly in the heat, or to be sucked in by the dry wood.

He concentrated harder on the speed, invested his full power. The popping sound grew more impressive, and the wood showed dents where he had hit. Water was too soft.

Muggle bullets were made of lead - maximum weight in a small volume. The Giants had used steel. Conjuring up metal was hard work, stone simpler - granite, for example.

Yep! Weight had to be the key factor - up to a distance of hundred feet, Harry could shoot holes into the barn. In addition, he got a better understanding of the fascination that emanated from guns.

Hitting the target was something else. Harry marked a target circle at the barn wall with the glowing tip of his wand. Almost finished, he had to throw a medium-sized water ball - the wood was so dry, it had caught fire.

Then he shot ten bullets. Too low, all of them. Yes of course - gravity affected even high-speed bullets, the rules of ballistics applied here as for any other projectile made of matter. Aiming spells was simpler, they didn't raise the need for a sight that had to be adjusted

differently for varying distances. Suddenly Harry understood why the ballistics of water balls had been so much more complicated than those of Bludgers - a Bludger had magic power to compensate the impact from gravity, while a water ball was just water.

His next ten bullets were in and around the circle. Even so, Harry's accuracy was pretty bad, compared to a marking spell from the same distance. Either he had to mount a sight at his wand, or he'd never achieve precision. A wand with a sight? ... The thought felt too ridiculous, time for serious work - explosive balls.

Ron had provided the basics of explosive materials before leaving the project. Conceptually, an explosive was a material which turned to gas - so fast, with such a force that it could blow walls of stone. Muggles used special chemicals, they were called gelignite, TNT, C4, nitroglycerine, to name a few. And what, if you please, was TNT, or C4? Ron had said they should try nitroglycerine - a fluid, its chemical formula pretty simple, and the impact on the target would be enough to ignite the stuff.

And what if it was supposed to explode in the air?

Then Harry had to conjure a multi-layer projectile, with a nitroglycerine ball outside and a fuse charm inside.

That was something to be trained, now, with his hard-earned knowledge about multi-layer charms in objects. Except that Harry would keep to water - a heating-up charm would turn the water to steam, which was a gas alright, and if the heating occurred fast enough, he had a mild form of explosive, just good for training.

Heating up a water ball within fractions of a second turned out more difficult than expected. Eventually, Harry found the trick - the water ball had to be not greater than Lousy's ball, then he could blow it up to a nice cloud of steam.

Scanning through the barn, he selected a few test objects - a box, a large can, a bale of straw, placed them outside.

His steamballs pushed the box further away, without tearing it apart. Well, he would try it again another day with real nitroglycerine.

The bale of straw was the perfect target. The water ball hit, apparently getting into the bale before blowing up, with the result that a nice fountain of stray shot up into the air, slowly sailing down to the ground.

The can marked Harry's last target. It was lying at its side, with the opening toward him. The first water ball was a miss. The second one disappeared in the opening. Next moment, steam came hissing out, and the can was ringing like a church bell.

Great. Harry shot five more balls inside, grinning madly at each bang. His can bell had chimed six o'clock, almost correctly.

Done for the day. He stored his wand.

Coming around the corner, Harry saw the man standing near the Steel Wing, a gun in the right hand. The gun was pointing toward himself, freezing him in mid-step.

The lunatic.

Damn, why hadn't his *haragei* warned him? Had he been so absorbed in his training that he didn't notice, or had this crazy Muggle developed some *jaho*? Even now, Harry couldn't sense clear emotions - there was a significant difference between the wavering echo in his mind and this gun, aiming at him, held by an arm which didn't waver at all.

"Hello, Harry ... Did you spend a few training rounds? The noise you've made was certainly loud enough."

"Did you get your gun back, or is this another one?"

"I've got enough of them, don't you worry - okay, not a forty-four magnum, but I think it's overrated anyway."

"What do you want from me?"

"I told you already - a shoot-out, high noon in Hogwarts, or whatever this place here's called."

High noon? This guy was crazy, it was close to six. But telling him so might not improve things. Harry asked, "Do you have a name?"

"They called me hombre."

Mental, definitely. "And how do they call you now?"

For some reason, the question wiped off the smile from the man's face. "Very funny ... Draw your wand!"

"What for?"

There was spit flying from the man's mouth. "You stupid asshole, you motherfucker, get your wand out!"

Slowly, Harry brought his hands together, holding them close to his chest, as if wringing them, or praying. Now he was ready. He exhaled deeply. "No."

The gun moved down, pointing toward the ground, hanging in the man's grip. "That's your chance - draw your wand, you piece of shit!"

Slowly as before, Harry sat down, taking the lotus position, his hands always folded, pointing at this lunatic, except that - for any Muggle, and for most wizards - he looked as if praying for his life.

"No."

"What's this? You playing Mahatma Gandhi? ... Get up!"

Harry didn't move, all his attention at the man's movements, and at the unclear messages from his *haragei*. According to what he could sense, this was a game, with one player upset because the other didn't follow the rules.

The distorted face looked as if crying any second. The gun came up, Harry had his mouth already open to send the curse, to see, just in time, the muzzle aim toward something else. Three, four rapid shots, rage in the man's face, and frustration. "You coward - stand your man!"

"Thanks, but I'm sitting already."

And now the man really started crying. His shoulders slacked, his arm fell down. When the gun was almost pointing at the man's feet, his finger pulled the trigger, and again, and again - five times, until the empty gun locked. Then the figure turned around, walked away - slowly, head down, a forgotten gun still in its right hand.

Harry watched the figure disappear. Everybody had asked him to kill this lunatic, should he ever return. But Harry couldn't. Not as long as his own life wasn't really at stake. And it hadn't been for a second - his *haragei* seemed more reliable than his eye report, registering a deceptive appearance.

Unless *haragei* failed with someone insane, and he had made a bad mistake, not using the opportunity.

10 - Show Business

They were in Transfiguration, and Harry felt ready to make his first serious step in the process which - finally, eventually, hopefully - would turn him into a dragon.

He waited until his young teacher stood close enough - there was no need having the other students listening, not after they had laughed at him that way. Then he said, "Al - I think I have a feeling how a dragon's ticking. Now I'd like to figure out how to make a full-body transfiguration."

Almyra smiled. "Would be a small dragon, after all, wouldn't it?"

Harry smiled back - this kind of teasing felt totally different from the other students' reaction. "Why not, for starters? ... Can you tell me how it's done?"

"There are several approaches, Harry. One is to ..." Almyra stopped, lowering her voice still more than before. "This isn't the best place here ... Can you meet me at the old dragon camp - after supper?"

"That mysterious? ... Okay - no, make it half an hour later, I've got a patrol right after supper."

Almyra nodded, walked away toward other students, leaving Harry with time to think about the particular type of dragon he would prefer.

Truth be told, he didn't care much. Dealing first with Carrie the Hebridean Black, then with Samuel the Common Welsh Green, Harry had sensed little differences. Moreover, none of them originated from such outside details, rather than from sex, or mood. For all he knew, this question seemed as relevant as the opposite - assuming a dragon could turn into a human, would it ponder details like the colour of the skin, or the shape of the eyes?

Okay, a Hungarian Horntail looked slightly better armed than other dragons. But then, wasn't he dragon enough as a Hebridean Black? Or a Chinese Fireball - honestly, Harry didn't need the appearance of a fire engine with wings, except that this engine had a different approach toward fire. And then Ron's bad joke - no, black was beautiful.

How did a full-grown Norwegian Ridgeback look? Harry tried to remember Norbert, once Hagrid's pet animal, couldn't come up with any detail that might distinguish it from a Hebridean Black. Maybe not quite as dark, but at that time, the thought of coming close to a dragon had been too scaring.

The memory of his Hungarian Horntail in the Triwizard Tournament showed more details. Black too, except for the tail - no, the tail was black like the body, only the talons were brown, each of them looking like a little bronze sword. And the tail was longer, thinner, a whip with thorns rather than this muscular club of the Hebrideans.

Harry would take it as it came - if it came.

The patrol ran unremarkable - full daylight, and the camp people busy with their own food. Even so, Harry scanned with full concentration, no longer feeling himself as part of an

innocent game. Suddenly, a rising arm had a totally different meaning. Something to sense metal would be nice ...

Rahewa appeared quiet too - small wonder, she would go for another visit in the Cambridge University Hospital right after the patrol, knowing quite well what to expect. Harry knew already, from Spinbottle.

With the patrol done, he didn't even dismount, waved goodbye to Rahewa and went for the dragon camp. It was easier than walking, and maybe Almyra wanted to show him some tricks as a falcon, or eagle. Or owl.

If so, they would come later. She was sitting in front of the hut, watched him arrive.

He dismounted, sat down at her side. "Hi ... I appreciate this conversation out of earshot from the other students, but why this place here? What's wrong about the spot near Hagrid's grave - does Lousy bother you?"

"Not the least." Almyra grinned. "Sometimes, I play with him - as a dog, that is. He's funny, and very polite."

"Really?" Harry stared. "I never saw you there."

"Of course not - I'm not doing it as public entertainment, you know."

"Well then - is there anything special at this place here? Like, talking about dragons has to be done in a former dragon camp?"

"No, it's ..." Almyra hesitated, continued, "You'll see in a moment. Okay - Animagus techniques. They're all similar, of course, but you can distinguish three different approaches."

"Three? That's a lot."

"Yes. The first method is to change into the animal of your choice, and then to scale your size up or down, depending on what's required. The second is just the opposite - scaling your size first, and then to change your shape. Most often, it doesn't matter which sequence to take, but for a change as extreme as what you're planning, Harry, they're both a bit risky. Imagine - scaling yourself up to dragon size, I guess that'd be dangerous for your organs as much as for your bones."

"But there's a third, isn't it?"

"Yes, and that's what I'd recommend to you. It's the most advanced, in a way more complicated than the others, but safer - and I have reason to believe it's simpler for you, because ... you'll see in a moment."

"You really make it mysterious. What's your own method?"

"When I started, it was one of the other two - I tried both. But some time ago, I changed my technique - actually after your case study, after I heard your descriptions of these travels through the void. In a way, it's similar."

A thought crossed Harry's mind. "Al - did you invent this technique?"

"Erm - not really."

"Not really, huh? ... Yes, I didn't invent the Golden Patronus either."

Almyra looked pleased. "That's a good comparison ... And now I'm going to show you how it works." She stood up, then, to his astonishment, she started to undress.

"Hey, what do you have in mind?"

"You can't see it when I do it in clothes - you get the special treat, Harry, because it's you, and because the others were laughing that much ... If you tell anyone ..."

"I'm not stupid - well, not that stupid ... You have my full attention."

"I bet."

Then she stood before him, naked. "I'm going to change into a dog now - watch carefully, what I'm trying to show you will be visible only for the shortest instant."

"Okay - go ahead."

Before his eyes, the perfect, bronze-coloured body of a young woman changed to a dog. A moment later, Almyra was back in her own shape. "What did you see?"

"You disappeared, and you reappeared as a dog - at the same moment, I'd say."

"Not bad - but you missed the essential point. Watch again."

Harry concentrated, pushing aside details like breasts, hips, a black triangle, watched a human body disappear, and reappear.

"And now?"

"There was ... I've seen something, but don't ask me what it was."

"Shit ... It's so short, it's subliminal. I wish Cho was here with a high-speed spector camera, then we could watch it in slow motion."

"Yeah ..." Harry rolled his eyes. "Would be interesting to hear what she'd say, seeing us here."

Almyra grinned. "That's a lesson, nothing else."

"Sure - except that Cho had some trouble with lessons in the past, remember?"

"This is Transfiguration, and if you don't keep to the subject ..."

"I do - as much as I can." Honestly as ever, Harry added, "It's not that simple, I can tell you."

"Thanks for the compliment, but you better come up with an idea how to watch faster, Harry."

Watching faster - a funny idea. As if you could see, or hear, with different speed. Then he realized - there was indeed a method, not faster but slower. "I know! ... Wait a minute or so - when you see me motionless, do it again, okay?"

Harry took the lotus position, calmed down his mind, slowed down his body system, until he had stripped off all individual activity, had reduced himself to a sensor for external or internal perceptions, only that his mind kept idle.

"... come up, Harry ... Hey, do you hear me? - Harry!"

He returned from his trance, came awake. "Yes, I'm back."

"What did you see now?"

"Lemme see ..." He fetched a perfect recording from his memory, or maybe his unconscious. And there it was - very short indeed, but perfectly clear. "You disappear - you don't just fade, no, it's sort of becoming translucent, until the shape's gone. And then - there's a pulsing sphere, in the centre of your body. Then - the sphere changes shape, no, size, shrinks, and then it's gone, and a dog appears - translucent first, and then it gains substance, until it's real ... That's it."

Almyra beamed. "Excellent - you're the perfect high-speed camera, Harry."

"Am I?" He grinned, looking at her body. "As a low-speed camera, I'm not bad either."

"The show's over." A moment later, dressed again, Almyra was sitting at his side. "You've seen it, Harry - your description was accurate to the point ... That's what you have to do."

"I've seen it, yes, except I don't know what it means. What's happening in that time?"

"The essential trick is, you have to abandon your appearance, that means your human body, of course without abandoning your being. At the end of this step, you appear as a sphere. This done, you decide to appear in the shape of your choice ... And when returning, it's the same."

"How does it feel?"

Almyra looked at him. "How did it feel in the void, Harry? I think it's very similar, but you'll be the first to tell me - and I'm looking forward to that."

"Would it be possible to stay longer in the sphere state?"

"Guess what? - If I could keep a sphere for ten minutes, do you think I'd made this show here? No, we're beings who need a body and a shape to exist, that's why the sphere isn't stable."

"But what if you don't decide for another shape?"

"Then you fall back to your own body. That should be your first training goal, Harry - reaching the sphere state, and back ... The dragon comes later."

"How dangerous is this training?"

Almyra beamed. "That's the beauty of this method - it's almost safe. Failing simply means you don't reach the sphere state, or you don't reach the shape of your choice. But nobody keeps stuck in a sphere, because it's not stable ... With the other methods - Harry, there are horror stories about failed attempts, but that's not your problem."

"You said *almost* safe. Where's the risk - in creating a misshape, rather than the proper one?"

"No, that's extremely unlikely - seems as if the sphere can change only into a functioning shape, that's why this method is so great. I call it the *digital transfiguration* - there's no state between human, sphere, or animal."

"Then what else? Why doesn't everybody use it?"

Almyra laughed. "There's a tiny little problem, Harry - it's difficult to change that way. You've been in the void - okay, your body kept its shape and its position, but ... There's just one risk." Now she was looking solemn.

"Which is?"

"Could be you like the animal shape so much that you won't come back."

* * *

Deborah drove Harry to the *Seven-Eleven* building. It looked smaller than expected, with large satellite dishes on the flat rooftop. Harry wondered whether they were functional or just decoration, at any rate, they looked impressive and very technical.

Deborah found a parking lot. "I'm your press agent, Harry - what they call a public relations manager, okay?"

"Sure - what else?"

"I mean, if they start making suggestions - for anything outside this talk show, you'll tell them to deal with me, right?"

Harry grinned. "Yes, of course ... Calm down - I've been to a moviemaker party, I know how they do business. *'Wanna make a movie? No? - Then wanna fuck?'*"

Deborah twisted a bit. "That's not Hollywood here, but I think you've got the basics."

Harry grinned broader. "Why - do they talk only about movies - er, TV, I mean?"

"Sometimes you're ... Never mind, but from now on, expect microphones everywhere, Harry." Deborah opened the car, climbed out.

The lady at the reception desk was all smile. She spoke in her headset, called a young man who escorted them into an elevator and then into a visitor's room, all smile and attention, otherwise giving a damn, as Harry could recognize easily with his *haragei*.

They had to wait a minute, were offered champagne. Deborah sipped a bit, Harry didn't.

Then the machinery started chewing them through. Harry's contribution was a hello and a nod here and there - according to his standard, he offered smiles too, except they seemed pale compared to the wide open mouths, sparkling teeth, barking laughs they were greeted with.

Deborah did the talking. She also did the signing - of some papers which left them the right to breathe while present and to leave the building unmolested, as far as Harry could follow. However, Deborah did it only after a short negotiation. "We need a recording of the show," she said, "on a tape cassette."

"That's unusual, Miss Beckett."

"Well, we *are* unusual."

"Hmm ... You know that you're not entitled to use it for any commercial purpose, neither in your own name nor ..."

Deborah could present her own teeth as good as these Muggles. "Don't worry - it'll be used privately ... Or in court."

What for Harry had sounded like a menacing threat caused the opposite effect - settling the issue within moments. Then they seemed ready to show some talk, only that it would take two more hours until *Late Listeners* could begin.

They had to wait again for some minutes.

And, finally, the great moment - the maestro himself, Winston Winslow. Surprisingly young, slim, middle-sized, open face, a boyish grin, dark blonde, and a pony tail! Harry felt sure this man had more groupies of his own than Hogwarts together.

"Miss Beckett, hello ... Mr. Potter - nice to meet you." Winston Winslow examined Harry's appearance - wizard robes from scalp to toes, nodded appreciatingly. "Very good - perfect." He turned to Deborah, smiled. "It's a relief to work with a pro - imagine he'd come in jeans."

For a split second, Harry felt like a piece of furniture, delivered by a truck service which had come to the right place, and just in time. Then the moment was gone, though not before realizing that this hadn't been his own feeling.

"Then we can start with our preparations - if you'd follow me, Mr. Potter? ... See you later, Miss Beckett."

They reached another room - comfortable chairs, more champagne, declined as before. The man didn't drink either. "Well, then, Harry - may I call you Harry?"

"Yes, of course, Winston."

A thin smile. "Later, when we're on the air - during the show, I mean - please keep my name out of your answers, Harry. I'll use yours as often as possible, and those of the other guest, because the audience cannot remember these names longer than twenty seconds, except mine, of course ..."

"Of course."

An apologetic gesture. "That's TV - nothing personal. A name has magic - " Winston smiled, "and I'm just the moderator, the source of questions - that's all. A talk show is no real conversation."

"Who are the other guests?"

"Two more people - a man and a woman, that's all I can tell you now. It's a rule of *Late Listeners* - none of the guests know in advance whom they're going to meet. But I can tell you - you're today's star guest, and the other two are there to squeeze you ... They'll try what they can to give you hell - is this okay with you?"

Was the question more than rhetorical? "How should I know in advance?"

"Yes, how should you? ... Harry, it might happen their questions are aimed below the belt - actually, that's quite typical. It's part of the show, the audience's waiting for that - what I'm trying to say, don't expect the manners of some dinner guests ..."

After some dinner recently, this metaphor seemed totally out of place from Harry's perspective.

"... and don't confuse it with my style as a host. I'm not your host, Harry - I'm an evil-minded moderator. Okay?"

Open-minded cruelty - the words in perfect sync with what Harry could sense. "Okay, Winston."

"Good - you see, I apologize in advance, and I know what I'm doing ... Now, coming to general rules - you'll be getting upset, and it's okay to show it, but I can tell you - the calmer you can stay, the higher's your scoring in the eyes of the audience."

"Yes, I see the picture."

A grin - boy to boy. "Harry, just from this casting, I know you'll be perfect - you're so self-assured, not at all what you'd expect from a school boy."

Harry didn't think of himself as a school boy, wondered if this slip, wrapped into thick flattery, had come by accident.

"Then - no bad language, Harry."

"What's bad language?"

"No swearing. If you want to insult someone, do it politely. A dick's a penis, and a pussy's a vagina. That's the rough picture."

"And a stupid jerk is a person with limited intellect, right?"

Winston Winslow laughed. "Wonderful - this is really your first talk show, Harry?"

"Oh yes - and maybe the last."

If Harry had planned his reply as a polite insult, he failed miserably. With a shining face, the talkmaster said, "That's fine with me - *Late Listeners*, the only talk show which managed having the famous Harry Potter as guest ... There'd be nothing wrong with that, really."

Then Harry was informed what to expect from his moderator. He would be asked why he was famous, how it was to be a wizard, how it was for a wizard to meet Muggles, and so on, and so on. Winston Winslow didn't like leaving any detail to the mercy of fate, had to defend a hard-earned reputation as well as viewing figures his competition could only dream of.

Harry felt like a cat, permanently stroked against the fur. He reminded himself that he did that for the wizarding world in general and for Rahewa in particular - Sirius and Deborah were only one alternative, however an important one.

Finally, the man was done with his coaching. He escorted Harry to a technician who looked friendly without showing rows of teeth - a relief after so much heart-warming excitement.

Sitting test. Lighting test. Recording test - camera only, microphones only, both together. Harry got his own microphone - astonishingly small, fixed at his robe. Another microphone test.

The technician looked satisfied. "Allright, young man - don't play with it, and don't curse it - okay?"

It came with a nice smile, and Harry couldn't help feeling this remark was given to each guest, which was interesting - Muggle technicians seemed ready to believe in hexed microphones without having heard about wizards.

Make-up turned out the next station. An older woman powdered Harry's face, doing something with his eyebrows, even with his lips. Then she started to work at his scar. He asked, "Are you trying to make it disappear?"

"No, sweetie. All I'm doing is to make you appear in the camera as always. Without that, you'd look like death warmed over - if I wouldn't dampen this scar a bit, people would think you'd escaped a car accident, or Dr. Frankenstein's surgery."

"Who is Dr. Frankenstein?"

"Never mind, honey ... Okay, done."

Some more minutes to wait. Some more champagne offered, although this time, they had mineral water ready. Then someone held him, pushed him forward when a signal light came on, sent him on stage.

Applause - from people sitting in rows, the studio audience. As Deborah had told him, the camera would show these spectators and their reaction after statements of the three guests, to keep those watching at home informed about when to laugh, to smile, to be upset, or terrified.

"... Harry Potter! - Good evening, Harry - may I call you Harry?"

"Yes, sure."

So the casting had really been a necessity. Without that, his answer would have been very different.

"And here, ladies and gentlemen, comes our next guest - Dr. Stanislav Humperdinck!"

Under another applause, an elderly man entered the stage and sat down in the chair to Harry's left. The only appropriate term was multi-coloured - suntanned face, white hair, similarly white goatee, but a coal-black moustache. Harry came to the conclusion that white and black were both artificial colours.

"Dr. Humperdinck is professor of psychology at the Westham University. Dr. Humperdinck has specialized in what's commonly called *esper* - people who claim some extra-sensoric perception, and our guest has a reputation for uncovering hoaxes and frauds ... Dr. Humperdinck, what do you prefer? - Stan - Stanislav - Doc - Doctor?"

"Well, mostly I'd prefer my name - Dr. Humperdinck."

The man's surprise and uneasiness was palpable - no doubt, this hadn't been part of Dr. Humperdinck's own casting, which left only the conclusion that smarty Winslow had trapped him on purpose. A low murmur in the audience indicated that this formality ranked quite unpopular.

"Fine, Dr. Humperdinck, we'll keep to that. Then we come to our third guest of the evening - Mrs. Eleanor Goodridge."

A woman with a plump figure and a better-looking face entered the stage, sat down to Harry's right. She was expensively dressed, Harry could smell her perfume. The woman's hair shimmered in a light brown, at least as curly as Hermione's.

"Mrs. Goodridge is undersecretary of the Science and Education ministry - she's been one of the first voices who made suggestions how to incorporate Harry's people into our community ... How may I call you, Mrs. Goodridge ..."

"Doesn't matter - as long as you don't call me Elly ... Eleanor's fine."

She was scoring remarkably better. Then Harry realized how it worked - if the moderator beamed, like now, the audience applauded wildly. If Winslow didn't move a face, the audience kept silent, and if he dropped the edge of his mouth, the audience would probably moan in protest.

Was there anyone with an independent mind? Certainly not in the rows Harry could see slightly better, now that he'd adapted to the spotlights. Maybe in the Muggle homes.

"So we're complete for this evening - but before we really start, a short break for the commercials ... Stay tuned!"

Attendants appeared with drinks - mineral water was the only kind asked for. The woman used the time to say hello to the professor and to Harry - keeping in her seat, although with some effort. If the guests hadn't been instructed for that, she would have walked around, bursting of energy. In Harry's perception, the parallels with Hermione were growing.

After two more endless minutes, the break was over.

Winston Winslow's face looked neutral. "Harry, I introduced you as a student of the Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, but I'm sure many spectators would like an explanation. What does that mean?"

"Yes. Hogwarts - that's the wizard school of Great Britain. Students attend that school at the age of eleven, after elementary school, that is. There are seven classes - I'm in the seventh ... I think it's perfectly normal."

"Normal, yes ..."

The audience took it for a joke, laughed.

"... for wizards. These terms, Harry - wizards, witches - is this the official terminology for your people?"

"Yes, sure."

"So a woman with magical power is a witch, right?"

"Yes." Harry's expression made clear that these questions sounded pretty stupid in his ears.

"Calling a woman a witch's normally pretty insulting. How do you deal with that?"

"For us it's a neutral term. Witch - that means it's a woman, or a girl, and it's no Muggle. That's all."

"Yes, right - Muggles ... Is this term also neutral?"

"Yes."

"Really? ... It sounds a bit - er, contemptuous."

"No, it's not. There is another term, a very insulting one, but Muggle just means non-magical."

"Would you tell us this other term?"

"No."

"Why not, Harry?"

"Because it's very insulting."

"Is it correct to say Mudblood is this term, Harry? ... Mudblood?"

With some effort, Harry kept his face steady, and his mouth shut. This Winston had trapped him too! Well, that guy had warned him in advance, still ... Harry's silence was his own genuine reaction after this blow, as much as the result of Deborah's instructions. *"You're our ambassador, Harry - keep that in mind."*

"No comment, Harry?"

None indeed.

"Well, no answer's as good as an answer, I'd say ... Then let's come to your role, Harry. You're famous, we've been told. Is it true?"

"In the wizarding world, yes."

"Of course. Would you explain to our spectators why you're famous?"

"Yes. For that, first I have to explain what's a dark wizard. You'd call it a criminal, but it's more - I mean, every wizard can become a criminal without being a dark wizard. It implies dark magic - black magic ... For what I know, the term's common here too, so I think it's clear ..."

"Black magic - does it mean forbidden magic?"

"Not really - there's some forbidden magic, but it's not necessarily black. I'd say, the main difference is in ethics - black magic is evil, has an evil purpose, and is always destructive ... Anyway, there's a very powerful dark wizard, his name's Voldemort. He ..."

"Voldemort?"

"Yes - it's a pseudonym, his real name's Tom Riddle. When I was one year old, this Voldemort killed my parents, and then tried to kill me. Only it didn't work - all I got was this scar here," Harry pointed to his forehead, "while Voldemort's spell fired back and almost destroyed him ... That's my - er, fame."

Winslow's face seemed fascinated. "You say this powerful - er, dark wizard could kill your parents, but he couldn't kill you - a baby of one year. Did I get that right?"

"Yes."

"And what happened to that Voldemort?"

"He wasn't dead, but no longer alive either - I mean, he no longer had a body of his own. Took him twelve years to recover from that."

The moderator turned to the multi-coloured professor. "Dr. Humperdinck, would you like to comment on that, or ask some questions?"

"Well, not really. Mr. Potter has lost his parents, we can take that as a given, and this experience - not at that age, of course, the experience of not having parents like the other children - obviously traumatized him. For compensation, he has invented a story which explains why he's so special, which provides a benefit for this severe disadvantage."

The moderator's question fell into Harry's disbelief. "What's your answer, Harry?"

"I'm - well, baffled, to say the least ... He's right in one point - if you have no parents, the other children can really traumatize you. But otherwise - no, I have an answer. I was eleven

when I heard about my fame for the first time. Until then, I didn't even know that I'm a wizard."

The woman asked. "What happened with you after the attack, Mr. Potter?"

"I was raised by relatives. They're so scared of magic, they didn't tell me anything - the invitation to Hogwarts was the first time I heard about myself."

The woman smiled. "They're not the only ones. Our Dr. Humperdinck here doesn't believe in wizards - this might explain why he has to work with traumatizing and compensating."

"What??"

A maliciously looking undersecretary turned to the man at Harry's left. "Dr. Humperdinck, I think you can explain your own position better."

"Yes, thanks." The professor looked at Harry. "Mr. Potter, for me the so-called wizards are perfectly normal people. The only special thing is - they're either the victims of a mass psychosis, or maybe mass hypnosis, or they have caused it by themselves. But one's for sure - there's no such thing like magical power. It's nonsense."

Harry couldn't help - he was giggling. The response from the audience came strongly, with laughs and similar giggles, although the moderator hadn't followed Harry's example.

The professor recognized it, looked detestful. "Modern science - physics, for example - has examined questions of cause and effect well enough. There are atoms and molecules, and still smaller particles, as we know, but there's no place left between them for magical charms."

This explanation had given Harry time for recovering. He wasn't ready to perform a discussion about sub-atomic particles, no sir, but he didn't think this doctor was. "Is there place left between them for God?"

The woman caught the thread. "Maybe Dr. Humperdinck doesn't believe in God either. Maybe for him, Christianity is a mass psychosis too, and why not, it's hard to prove that God exists. When ..."

Winston Winslow had little mood for a conversation - at such a critical point - in which he wasn't steering. "That's our keyword - giving proof. Harry, could you give proof of magical power, of your magical power?"

"Certainly, but ..." Harry turned to his left. "Dr. Humperdinck, can you give me an example which kind of proof you'd accept?"

The man looked satisfied, as if seeing his expectations confirmed. "No, I cannot - simply because it's impossible. Sure, you could demonstrate some tricks here, and without the proper equipment, I'd be unable to reveal their true nature, but it wouldn't mean anything. Every illusionist could do that."

The moderator looked into the camera. "Our spectators might be not quite as unbelieving, so we should do a test anyway. But first," he turned back, "you do magic with a wand, isn't that so, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Would you please show your wand?"

Harry drew his wand, held it up, until a sign from the camera man indicated that the close zoom was done.

"Harry - what would happen if one of us would take the wand?"

"Nothing - here, look." Harry passed the wand to the woman who passed it further to the moderator, but only after inspecting it by herself.

Winston Winslow held the wand, moved it, murmured something, of course not causing any effect. He examined the piece with these exaggerated movements that seemed mandatory for the slow spectator's mind, then said, "Can you explain how it's built, Harry?"

"Sure ... It's made of wood, with a magical core. Mine is holly, and the core's a tail feather from a phoenix. Actually, I know the phoenix from which it came, its name is Fawkes ..."

The professor started to laugh.

Harry suppressed the urge to give him a pair of flap ears. "There are other types too, of course ... All kinds of wood, and other cores - unicorn hair, for example."

The moderator still held the wand. "This black top - does it have a meaning?"

"Er, yes. Two years ago, I had a fight with Voldemort. Our wands melted into each other - the black top's all that's left from his wand."

The professor was grinning. "Brilliant, really ... Absolutely fascinating, the story's perfect, by all means."

The moderator seemed to have the same thoughts as Harry, and probably as most spectators. He passed the wand back. "Harry - could you do a spell toward Dr. Humperdinck? Maybe he won't be convinced, but for us ..."

Harry resisted the immediate temptation. "Cursing another person is impolite, to say the least, or insulting - some spells are even criminal. I mean, imagine I'd be a gunfighter, would I have to shoot him just to give proof? Maybe something ..."

The professor smiled. "No problem, Mr. Potter, none at all ... Go ahead."

"You're sure, Dr. Humperdinck?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Just for the record, sir - you allow me to do a harmless spell toward you, something that can be reversed easily?"

A fleeting instant of uncertainty flicked through Harry's *haragei*, then he was told, "You have my permission, young man."

"Well, then ..." Harry pointed.

A moment later, the scientist's hair looked fire engine red - easy work, after Harry's training in *Swashbuckle Sweets*. The goatee was black, only the moustache remained unchanged - in colour, that was, while it had grown in size so that Dr. Humperdinck looked like a Chinese, or Tatar, after a failed treatment in a hair saloon.

Some gasps, then the audience roared in applause.

Dr. Humperdinck, due to lack of a mirror, wasn't impressed at all. To change that, the moderator asked him to walk to a control monitor, asked the control center to provide a camera shot that showed this guest his new appearance.

The professor's eyes widened. His hands touched his moustache, felt the strand that was hanging down below his chin. Watching him, Harry sensed surprise, uneasiness, a second later replaced by a determined effort to stabilize.

Dr. Humperdinck walked back, sat down. "Very clever, I must say. Of course ... that's ... well, better than I thought."

Harry asked. "Shall I reverse it, sir?"

"What? ... Oh - don't bother, Mr. Potter, I'm sure I'll be my old self in a minute or so."

"No, unfortunately not. Please let me correct it, Dr. Humperdinck, I didn't mean to ..."

"No!" An impatient wave. "I'm sure my hair's still okay - leave it."

Winston Winslow's voice cut in. "He likes it that way - and we like it too ..."

Laughter, applause.

"... so maybe we can have a more neutral example. Harry, any idea for something impressive? You know, something no stage magician could do, while the camera can follow?"

"Hmm ..." Harry looked around, had an idea. "See that empty seat over there - in the last row? Maybe if a camera could ..."

He waited for the sign from the camera man, then he apparated to the seat. The woman next to him squeaked, almost jumping into the lap of her left neighbour.

Harry smiled. "Relax - I'll be gone in a second." He stood up, waved, then he jumped back.

Moderator and co-guests were staring at him.

"It's called apparition."

The moderator swallowed. "I think we have sufficiently demonstrated that there's something a wizard can do, what we normal people cannot - the rest's for scientists ... Harry, what can magic do?"

"Well, how should I answer that? It can ... Wizards use magic the way Muggles use tools - engines, in particular."

"Can magic do everything?"

"No, there are limits. If someone's dead, he's dead - there's no magic to make him alive again ... And there are lots of Muggles techniques which are more efficient than magic, while ..."

"Really? Which, for example?"

"Which? ... Erm, a copier, for example. I wish we had a normal Muggles copier in Hogwarts. It's such a nuisance if you have to duplicate your own writing."

Heads shaking in disbelief, and pleased looks. Technology beats magic - apparently this message raised quite some spirits.

"What can magic do against people, Harry?"

"Almost everything - of course with the said limits."

"Is there a spell that can kill people?"

Harry was fully aware of this question's critical nature. "There is such a spell. It's the wizard equivalent to a gun, and the rules are pretty much the same. The spell is forbidden, except for self-defense, and using it always causes a trial."

"Can every wizard do this spell, Harry?"

"No. That's one difference between tools and magic - everybody with a gun can kill, but learning the Killing Curse is very difficult."

"Can you do the spell?"

Harry had awaited this question, had the answer ready since Deborah's coaching, smiled. "A wizard's skill is a very private issue, I'm afraid."

"Hmm ... Our spectators would be very interested to hear this answer, Harry."

"Yes, I bet."

"Are you a good student, Harry?"

"No, I don't think so. I get along alright, but ..." Harry shrugged, feeling how this answer won him back sympathies lost a moment ago.

"That seems to be understatement, Harry. Would you say that the average student can do the things you did, or seem to know? Then what can the excellent students do?"

"Erm, well, I have a few special skills - each time I have an encounter with Voldemort, I seem to inherit something else. But it doesn't make me a good student in the sense of a school, you know?"

Winston Winslow turned to the woman. "Eleanor, you're the expert in that. How would you scale Harry in our system?"

The undersecretary of Science and Education seemed more than ready to do that. "Mr. Potter, is your knowledge in school issues private information too?"

Harry grinned. "No, madam ... Please call me Harry, so it feels more like school."

Laughter, applause. These spectators were easily entertained, really. The woman looked pleased too. "At your age, Harry, the teacher should call you Mr. Potter - that's the rule in our schools."

"Oh, they do - except, hearing me addressed like that, I know I'm in trouble."

More laughter.

Mrs. Goodridge smiled. "So the system of teachers and students is the same across all cultures - well, that's little surprise ... Now, Harry, what was the topic of your last essay?"

"The last ... Oh yes - it was a five-parchment piece in Divination, about a Tarot picture. My friend and I, we had played sixty-six rather than working on it."

Thundering applause, and shouts of excitement.

The woman was politician enough for the proper timing of her next sentence, easily on a par with the moderator. "Another similarity - good to hear that, although - Divination's not exactly what I'd expected."

Harry nodded. "You're not alone in that - most wizards don't believe in it, and I dropped this course later."

"What about English Literature?"

"What should be? I read a lot."

This time, the woman had a fit of laughter. "No, I mean the course."

"There's no such course in Hogwarts. The students can read and write - otherwise, they're on their own. Okay, there's Study of Ancient Runes, but that's rather weird."

"Is it? I'd never guessed." The woman sobered up. "What about Math?"

"Yes, and Astronomy too. I attended Astronomy for some time."

"Sciences? ... Physics, chemistry, biology?"

"Physics - that's not a course of its own. It's represented in others, mostly Astronomy. Chemistry, that's Potions, and biology has even two - Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures."

An approving nod. "What about foreign languages?"

"For that, you're on your own - Hogwarts doesn't offer courses for that. But it's no problem to learn them."

"Is it? ... Which languages do you speak, Harry - in addition to English?"

"French, and Parseltongue."

"Pathel what?"

"Parseltongue - snake language."

"Ah yes - er ..." The woman looked suspicious. "Could you say something in - er, that language?"

"I need a snake for that - it doesn't work toward humans." Seeing the woman's face, Harry added, "Seriously - I'm not joking, madam."

She seemed a bit mollified. "How did you learn these languages, if they're not offered in school?"

"For Parseltongue, I'm not sure - for all I know, I inherited it from Voldemort, as a result of this attack. Well, and French - I hired two fairies for a week, as a preparation for a visit in France ... They used full-time techniques, deep-sleep training, all that stuff."

He had her attention - suddenly, Mrs. Goodridge looked greedy. "One week? And then you were fluent?"

"Yes - if a fairy talks into your dream, and she's talking French, you learn pretty fast, believe me."

The undersecretary rattled something in French, violating the rule about not using bad language.

Harry rattled an answer, matching her style.

The woman grinned. "Just a little test, Harry - you've passed, really. What about social sciences?"

"Sure - History, Social Ethics - it's a bit dry, but maybe that's because the teacher's a ghost."

Dr. Humperdinck started to giggle, almost hysterically.

After a glance to the red-haired figure, Mrs. Goodridge was back at Harry. "So then, which courses are on your schedule, Harry, in this last year for you at school - and what are your topics in them?"

"The topics are very individual, because in the last year, you're doing projects, integrated projects which can span several courses. For me, that is ... Charms is the most fundamental course for wizards, my project there is portkey programming ..."

Harry had to explain what a portkey was, could do it easily after his demonstration before.

"Then, in Potions and Defence against the Dark Arts together, my project is about some poison balls - one of Voldemort's weapons. It has to do with sulphuric acid, but we're still training with water - my friend and I, that is, because we work together there." And if it wasn't true currently, then maybe again in the near future.

"Then there's Transfiguration and Care for Magical Creatures, which for me is one project - a transfiguration into an animal."

"A transfiguration into ..." Mrs. Goodridge's voice faded for a moment. "What's that good for, Harry?"

"Well, what's school stuff good for?" Harry waited until the laughter had faded. "At any rate, it might come in handy - if you have to walk, doing it as a dog's easier than on two legs, that's for sure."

"Yeah, probably ... And what's your animal, Harry?"

He smiled. "I'm still working on it - until then, I'd like to keep it to myself."

"Understandably ... And what else?"

"What else ... Yes, there's sports, and dance. That's it."

Winston Winslow hurried to regain control. "Isn't that a fascinating portfolio, my dear spectators? ... So, Eleanor, what do you make of it?"

"Well, it's not as bad as expected - these people are quite advanced in their methods. Working in projects, team orientation, integrating different classes - these methods can only be approved, no denying ... But otherwise, it's a mess. Once we've taken over authority, we'll have to restructure it from scratch. Imagine - no ..."

Harry wheeled around. "Once you've what? - As if we had waited all this time to be ruled by Muggles! No thanks, madam."

The undersecretary showed a fine smile. "Maybe this won't be your decision, my dear Harry."

The moderator was quick to catch the steering wheel. "What would you do, Eleanor, to consolidate these people into our system?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The woman looked astonished. "Apply our system to them - as simple as that. Education system, school system, police, administration - everything. Our government is there, and it works ... Those few wizards more won't make a difference."

"They have a Ministry of Magic. What about that?"

"Well - if that's required to make them happy, why not? There have been ministry jobs for lesser issues ... But of course, such a ministry won't keep authorities which belong into one of the established departments. To talk about my own - there's just one Ministry of Education, and it's in charge of *all* children in this country, no matter which colour, race, skill, and origin. Segregation - that's the last thing we need, really. The United States of America used that system, and what ..."

The moderator, expert in dealing with politicians, turned to the professor with the many colours. "Dr. Humperdinck, what's your opinion?"

Then man twisted, apparently disturbed in thoughts. "Huh? ... Oh, I don't see a need for any action, as there's nothing special - which doesn't mean there won't be a lot of politicians who take the opportunity to profile themselves, as we're about to witness." The direction of his glance left no doubt whom he had addressed with this remark.

"Well, Harry - are you looking forward to this prospect?" Winston Winslow's expression was friendly, questioning, in some contrast to the waves Harry could receive.

He tempered himself. "I'm looking forward to a cooperation, a system in which a school like Hogwarts can have a copier, and phones - even TV. Otherwise ... I don't think Mrs. Goodridge knows what she's talking about - she's starting from the wrong premises ... After all, we're no immigrants."

The woman's head jerked up, very much to the moderator's pleasure. Before she could give a sharp reply, Winston Winslow said, "Okay, you're no immigrants, but why should our constitution, and our government, not apply to all British citizens?"

"Because some of them are different - a difference which goes deeper than the colour of the skin, or the shape of the eyes. Our own system's been stable for thousands of years - we've been there all the time, knew about you. New is only that you know about us."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"For a beginning, we should find out what happened - why suddenly the wizarding world is in the focus of the Muggles. Once we know, we might have a bearing how to proceed further."

Winston Winslow nodded. "Yes, this question might be the right topic after the next break. But before coming to that, Harry, what if our government in its eternal wisdom finds it appropriate to enforce our own system? You see, there's less than one wizard in thousand Muggles."

Harry smiled humourlessly. "If the result is that we have to learn English Literature, in addition to our own courses - that's something you can live with ... If it's more, if our system's at risk - well, thousand Muggles might find it difficult to put force on a wizard."

* * *

Deborah was angry with him. "Harry, you've been the perfect representative - until you had to threaten them. Was it really necessary?"

"Threaten? ... I thought I was polite."

She mimicked him. "Thousand Muggles might find it difficult ... Of course they might find it difficult, but you just don't say it. I'm disappointed, really - macho talk from you, of all people!"

Harry twisted up. "That's unfair! All I said was it won't be as simple as this woman tried to make it look. Imagine - if they'd really try it, with sheer force, we'd see a civil war ... Compared to that, I'd say my remark was very moderate."

"Yeah, maybe ..." Deborah sighed, then smiled. "Okay, Harry - for someone with as little experience in public relations as you, it was very good."

Harry grimaced. "Stop flattering me - it's even worse than shouting at me ... Say, I'd like to see the recording, and maybe I'd know some people who'd like seeing it too. How can we arrange that?"

"Very simple." Deborah's eyes were shining. "Sirius has a TV, and a video recorder. Come to visit - say, Saturday afternoon?"

Harry grinned. "Are you entitled for invitations to that house?"

She pushed him playfully. "That's not your problem, young man ... Whom can we expect?"

Suddenly Harry knew what Deborah had in mind, apparently hoping to meet someone about whom she knew very little - only that this person was female, and closely related to himself. He smiled. "I'm not sure yet - could be I have to disappoint you again ..."

"Bah - Harry, you're just too clever."

"I didn't say I won't try - I'm playing openly, as you know, I'm fed up with hide and seek. But it's not my decision alone."

Deborah looked startled. "Openly? ... Say, how openly are you playing, Harry?"

"You mean who knows about a certain dream?"

She nodded.

"Cho, for example. I wasn't singing it around, but I'm not going to lie when I'm asked."

"Oh no ..." Deborah looked very unhappy. "Harry - er, is this the reason why ..."

"No. If you feel better - Cho and I, we - er, we've been together *after* this dream."

Deborah looked so relieved, she didn't even tease him for his careful selection of words. Harry grinned. "So, the talkshow's over, and you owe me something ... By the way, I think this invitation is a good opportunity to show you the girl - but for God's sake, don't mention it toward her."

Deborah glared at him. "Maybe I'm a journalist, but I'm not heartless!"

As it turned out, only Ron, Ginny, and Rahewa followed the invitation. There were more people interested to see the recording, except that Dumbledore had promised to get a TV plus recorder installed as soon as possible - a simple necessity, now that the Muggle world was breaking in. With this alternative in view, other people could wait a few more days - Hermione for example, or Almyra, or Marie-Christine.

Rahewa's presence offered enough excitement for Deborah. True, she didn't mention illnesses, or adoption, while no neutral spectator would have rated her behaviour normal and innocent. But then, there was no neutral spectator.

For Harry, this visit provided the first opportunity to watch the beginning - but only for a moment, until the header faded and Winston Winslow entered the stage to welcome the spectators. At the same moment, a red alert went up in Harry's mind.

Ginny, with a choking sound, jumped up and left the room.

Neither Ron nor Rahewa had noticed. Deborah looked wondering as Harry left the room to follow his step-sister. He found her in the kitchen, leaning against the table, trembling, a tissue between her hands, which were balled to fists.

"Ginny - what's wrong?"

"This ... I can't watch it, Harry. It's too ... He's the one - except he didn't call himself Winston Winslow."

11 - A Rare Guest

Hearing Ginny's words - here in Sirius' kitchen, Harry's first reaction was to grab her, to hold her tight, sending waves of reassuring and comfort. When Ginny's trembling faded, he asked, "Did you come with a bag or so?"

"No, why?"

"Because I'm going to take you back to Hogwarts - right away."

"But I ..." Then Ginny became aware of the alternatives. "You don't have to do that, Harry - I can travel alone."

"Probably, but I'll certainly feel better coming with you ... And I can be back in a second."

Ginny looked grateful. "I'd feel better too." A moment later, they were out of the house. So far, nobody had paid attention.

Sitting in London Linkport, waiting for the gate to Hogsmeade, Ginny asked, "What are you going to tell the others?"

"That you were sick. That you couldn't stand the sight of this man. That you met him once, and that he humiliated you."

Ginny looked almost green. "No - please, Harry ..."

"I'm not going to tell details, Ginny. That's buried with you and Samantha - and some of them with me. But I have to tell them that much - and afterwards, it's no longer eating you up ... Besides, there's nobody who'd tell Ma Weasley, or your father."

"Can't you find another way to explain them?"

"None that would be convincing. Believe me, Ginny - it's better that way. When you know that some other people know, you don't have to carry it alone. It's only the first moment that's bad, but afterwards, you're going to win back some freedom that's been lost before."

Ginny nodded, sighed. "You're totally right - only that moment ... I don't know how to look Ron into the eyes, when he comes back."

"But it's getting more difficult, the longer it takes ... He'll come to you, and he'll hug you ... And he'll be angry with me because I didn't tell him."

Ginny looked like crying any moment. "I'm sorry."

"Nonsense - I said it only to give you something else to worry about ... Besides, we had a little row recently, Ron and I, so he has more than one reason being angry."

Ginny had recovered a bit. "That's good to know - I wouldn't have noticed by myself, never, it looked all so normal between you two."

Harry smiled. "That's better."

"Just for my comfort - what was the reason?"

"Comfort, huh? Like c - u - r - i - o - s?"

Ginny tried looking innocent. "Does it spell that way?"

"Yes, I think so ... Allright, then - he made a bad joke about me and Cho, only it was the wrong moment. So I blew him a water ball, only I did it with full force."

"Uh-oh ..." Ginny presented an almost genuine expression of wondering. "Say, are you really seventh-years - those students who're supposed to be adults at the end of the year?"

"Yes ... You know, could be worse - in most other criteria, we qualify quite well."

Reaching Hogwarts, Harry made Ginny promise to have a chat with Samantha, then he jumped back.

Deborah opened the door, asked him where he had been, and Harry was forced to explain for the first time. And of course, Deborah had her own pictures of what the details might have been, looked startled.

Harry kept his voice low. "No, it wasn't rape, not much better either. He was playing psycho games with her."

Deborah didn't ask for more, and Harry felt grateful for that, grateful also that Sirius still wasn't there, would meet them later, or maybe not at all - Sirius attended a meeting with his Muggle colleagues.

Then Rahewa asked Harry where Ginny was, and finally, Ron's attention was drawn away from the screen for a moment. So Harry explained again.

The talk show was forgotten - reduced to pictures of a single man with a boyish grin. Ron stared at Harry. "Since when do you know?"

"That this is the one? Since a few minutes."

"No, I mean the other - what he did."

"Since it happened, or a day later."

"Why did she tell you, and not me?"

"She didn't tell me. But she felt horrible, so I took her to Samantha ... Sam has quite some experience with bad treatment from men. And afterwards, I heard enough to know the outline. Then I had to promise Ginny not to tell anyone. And some minutes ago, I could convince her that it's better to tell you at least that much."

Ron was breathing deeply. "I'm mad, Harry - at you, and although that's nonsense, because you're not the one to blame ..."

Rahewa's eyes were fixed at Ron, her body at full alert.

Harry nodded. "I know. I had the same feeling some weeks ago, didn't even have a name then, or a face ... It's okay." He touched Rahewa's shoulder. "Don't - it won't make things better if you'd stab him."

Ron twisted a bit, blushed - as much as Harry's words had sounded like a joke, a look into Rahewa's face made clear - she wasn't joking. Ron turned to Harry. "I'm ... just gimme a minute ..."

"It's okay, Ron - really, I'm glad you know, and we can talk about it."

"Harry, was it ..." Ron stopped, looked at Rahewa.

Even so, Harry recognized the question. "No, it wasn't rape - that's why Mr. Winston Winslow will live to remember."

"What are you going to do?"

"Dunno yet ... You know, until today, there was just a - a figure, and I kept saying to myself, this man should be taught a lesson never to forget, only Ginny wouldn't tell me anything, no name, nothing. And then, by some accident ... I guess she'll be mad, but now I have a name, and a face - now it's only a question of time until I know what to do with him."

"What *us* will do with him," said Ron pointedly.

"Exactly," said Rahewa.

Three people were staring at her. Two of them, Ron and Harry, said almost unison, "No."

Rahewa looked at them. "Is this a family feud? Ginny's a friend of mine, and a team member ... If you try cutting me out, you ought to be fast with your own plan, if you know what I mean - otherwise, maybe you'll have trouble finding him."

Ron looked at Harry, more desperate than disbelieving.

Harry grabbed the girl by the shoulders. "Rule number one - you're in ... Rule number two - no solo action ... Rule number three - he'll survive to remember ... Do we agree on that?"

A grim nod. "Yes."

Suddenly, Harry became aware of something he had forgotten. "Rule number four, that man's keeping *all* his parts, okay?"

This time, it took a moment longer, then Rahewa nodded, although with some disappointment.

With the basics settled so far, the rest of the video cassette was watched by a very attentive audience. Even so, it seemed as if none of Harry's remarks in the talk show could raise any emotion.

A while later, Harry had a moment with Deborah alone. He said, "Well, you've seen her, and heard her - more than what I'd planned. Still interested?"

"She was serious, wasn't she? Without your intervention, she would have cut his ..."

"Yes, and with a smile."

"In a way, I was thinking the same, but - I just thought it, knowing I'd never be able to do that."

"She's a very serious girl ... So what do you say?"

Deborah exhaled. "Yes, still interested - under one condition."

"Which is?"

"You come to visit often enough for establishing some rules. She listens to you - at least in the issues a twelve-year-old shouldn't know."

* * *

They were sitting at Harry's favourite place near Hagrid's grave - Harry himself, Ron, and Rahewa. It looked very innocent, in particular since Lousy was with them, stretched down in the grass after having zoomed around for leather balls. This time, Lousy had selected a spot near Rahewa, whose hands were caressing the dog's ears, cropped long ago for a barbaric, senseless fashion.

But their topic had little to do with innocence.

"Here's what I got from Deborah," said Harry. "Winston Winslow - a pseudonym for his public appearance, his real name's Fitzgerald Fraenkel. He has a house in London - under his real name. Then he has a weekend house in Burnham on Sea, also under his name ..."

"Where's that?" asked Ron.

"It's near Weston-super-Mare, at the Bristol Channel - which is no surprise because he has a sailboat, likes sailing trips, in some company."

"A sailboat, huh?" Ron's question was more than rhetorical.

"Yep ... It's quite roomy - I checked it. I also checked his weekend house, and how to travel. The next linkport is Bristol - you'll need broomsticks."

"Hey - wait a minute! That sounds as if you know already what we're going to do, and we're here just to listen to your instructions." Ron stared angrily at Harry.

"I have an idea, that's right." Harry was much concerned to keep terms with Ron as good as possible - delicate as they were, and with such a critical project. "And we have a few restraints, that's why this weekend house is the most likely place."

An assistant administrator could be as stubborn as a sufferable plan-it-all. "Why? What's wrong with his house in London?"

"Neighbourhood's too close. Cries will be heard next door."

Rahewa said, "Then it's out of the question." Her voice sounded matter-of-fact.

Ron glanced at her, back to Harry. "Why does it have to be at his home? For example, doing it in public, so that all people can watch - imagine, you'd visit him again for another talk show, and then you'd tell the story in full view of the camera ..."

"No. Ginny isn't going to be an object of public pity."

"We can leave out her name."

"Certainly. But he has to know which particular girl's the one who's paying back - okay, not personally, but that's unimportant. In this regard, it's just nice that the - er, Weasley fingerprint is so characteristical." Before Ron could twist up, Harry added, "And in my idea, you'd appear as her brother, and he'd know it allright, no question about that, with this hair ..."

Rahewa grinned, seemed very expectant to hear Harry's plan, however had the good sense to let Ron catch the hook.

Who did so, with sinker and all. "I'm her brother, huh? ... Comes to avenge her, and really does, right?"

"Well - almost."

Realizing how neatly he'd been trapped, and wrapped, Ron grinned. "Okay, Harry - you're ahead of me in nasty little tricks ... Tell us."

This compliment showed some thorns. Even so, Harry didn't lose time explaining what he had come up with. It took a while, and Ron had some questions, doubts, concerns because of some technical problems involved.

Rahewa had no worries, saw no problem, just beamed.

Harry looked at her. "You're the only twelve-year-old I know whom I could ask for that - and I can justify it to myself only because your own idea was still worse ..."

Rahewa grinned. "Your version's better, Harry."

"Is it? This seems to be the day of compliments I might as well do without ... Anyway - if Dumbledore ever hears about that, I'm expelled, and you too."

Rahewa knew, didn't blink. "He won't."

Ron asked, "What about a few anonymous letters in advance, to remind him, and to let him cook in his own sweat a bit?"

"Hmm ... I wonder if he's the type to get scared from something like that - I don't think so ... But you're right, we should revive his memory. One letter, with a picture of Ginny, so he'll recognize you when it's time. I mean, who knows, maybe he does this kind of trip twice a month ..."

Ron looked fierce. "Yeah ... Harry, that's not enough. He needs a few reminders afterwards, just good to shit his pants."

"And what?"

"Yes, what?" After a moment, Ron's face lighted up. "I know whom to ask for help."

Harry was startled. "For Heaven's sake, Ron, you cannot ..."

"Don't - er, calm down, I mean." Ron grinned, apparently equally careful to avoid sharp remarks. "It's a girlfriend, and she won't tell anyone."

"Janine??"

Ron beamed. "No, sir - I've come to know some other girls too."

When Ron had explained his idea, Harry felt relieved - this teammate really could keep a secret. About Ron's idea itself, he was full of admiration. "That's brilliant - if you can persuade her."

"You think that's a problem? No, not at all."

Rahewa looked not quite as admiringly as Harry, however, Ron had obviously scored in her opinion, enough to climb a rank or two in her scale.

"Okay - " Harry looked at the others, mostly at Ron. "And no word to Ginny, no hint, no ..."

A short moment of a glare, than Ron nodded. "Don't worry - if I cannot keep my mouth shut, I'll let it out on you." Then he grinned. "A fair deal, isn't it?"

In Harry's opinion, it was, while Rahewa seemed to scale Ron's freshly earned rank down again, maybe to a final position.

If Ginny had seen the three of them together, they could have told her as well everything. So Rahewa left first, reason enough for Lousy to get up, to stretch, presenting two impressive rows of teeth - which next moment grabbed the leather ball, to drop it in front of Harry. Time for another shot.

Harry obeyed, turned to Ron. "While on the subject - of shooting balls, I mean ... Does it make sense to talk about the project?"

Ron seemed busy with his fingernails. "Er - yes, only it'd be a short talk, I'm afraid ... Harry, I just have no time - if I'd say yes now, I would do you no favour."

"Well, hm ... And a sleeping partnership?"

"Thanks for the offer." Ron looked up. "I really appreciate it - you know, now that we have a plan what to do with that guy, I can think straight, and ... Harry, I promise - as soon as I can breathe easier with my office work, I'll be back."

Harry felt better. "That's a deal."

And Ron felt better too. "How's your progress?"

"I was training explosives - only water so far, steamed up as fast as I could manage. But that's still too slow, a bale of straw was all I could blast."

Ron laughed. "Yeah, the expansion speed of nitroglycerine's a bit higher." He stood up to leave. "I'm looking forward to that."

* * *

Five minutes difference between Ron and himself seemed about right in Harry's opinion, should Ginny see them coming from the same direction. At the end of this time, he added some more minutes for the sake of a dog which couldn't get enough. When Lousy's panting started sounding really hazardous, Harry denied another shot, headed toward the building. Entering the Great Hall, he stopped dead, staring in disbelief.

Cho.

She was sitting with Almyra, talking. It looked almost as in past times, only they were sitting at the teachers' table.

Had Cho developed her own *haragei*? She was looking up the moment Harry came in. Seeing him, she turned to Almyra, who looked up too. Then Almyra said something to Cho, rose, and left. And if it wasn't *haragei*, Cho had been waiting for him. Harry preferred this explanation, approaching her.

Cho's face showed a half-smile. "Hello, Harry."

He took the chair Almyra had been sitting on, stared at Cho. Like driven by themselves, his hands moved forward to grab her, his head bent forward to kiss her.

Her response struck him as convincingly as her smile. She felt restrained, as if holding herself behind a barrier. Harry tilted back, straightened. "What's wrong? Remember - it's me ..."

A grin, uncomplete as well. "Yes, I remember, and if not, your name tag would have told me ... Can we talk?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Outside - walk and talk."

"But it's full of Muggles."

Cho nodded. "That's fine with me - I'm walking under Muggles quite a lot, lately, and it's surprising how you can have private conversations in a crowded room."

They wandered along the lake, as so often before. Harry would have liked to put his arm around Cho's shoulders, or take her hand in his', or ... Instead, he kept at her side, waiting for her first words.

Cho seemed having trouble to find the beginning, or the right words. Finally, she came to a halt, turned to him. "Harry ... It's - it's about business."

He felt startled, seeing her stance, her pained expression, her hands balled to fists, knuckles almost white. "What is it?? Did something happen?"

"Yes, something ..." Cho's shoulders sagged. "I'm ... Harry, we're broke - there's nothing left. Your investment ... I'm afraid it's lost - I don't know if I'll ever be able to pay it back."

That was all? ... Just in time, Harry had the presence of mind not to ask the question aloud. "What happened?"

"A burglary - they took everything, our complete equipment, our cuts, our copies. And then they put fire in the building, probably to destroy the traces."

"What about the other two - Sylvie, Jesamine?"

"They're okay ... They've been in a restaurant, and when they came back - must have been planned carefully, they knew the routine, that it would take more than an hour before Sylvie and Jesamine would be back ... Well, that's it."

"That's all?" Harry took care keeping his voice neutral.

"Maybe not quite, but for business, that's all, yes ... I'm ..." Cho's face was a mask, to hold her expression, to hold back rage, and despair, maybe tears.

Except Harry couldn't hold back himself any longer, took her with both arms, hugged her. "No - you're not broke ... Your investor has a lot of staying power, and he's not going to give up on you. Are you ready to start again?"

She still felt tense, at least, she didn't push him off. "You should be more careful with your investment, Harry, and ..."

"Allright, so we'll hire guards, and whatnot - it's just ridiculous to think a few wizards cannot protect a building against Muggles."

Cho tensed more. "Before you make your offer - there's something else. Not business - it's, er, more private."

He held her tighter. "So there is - something I don't know, something you don't know. But there's something that hasn't changed - you know what?"

Cho pushed herself off. "No, I don't know what's the same as before - and there's nothing you don't know, but maybe there's really something I don't know yet - although I've heard some news, or maybe something old, whatever ..."

"What did you hear?"

"Guess what?" The words were almost spit out. "I had a conversation with Marie-Christine. It just so happened that I met her first."

Wonderful. "And what did she tell you?"

"That you were sleeping together, and probably will do it again as soon as ..." Cho's voice broke.

"That's all she told you?"

Cho's head snapped up. "What else could there be? - Are you keeping her informed - maybe about your groupies?"

For Harry, this question felt like a short break in a battle. "So you've heard about our Muggles ... Anyway, I have no groupies."

"I heard it differently."

He shook his head. "If I have groupies, then they're not particularly successful in their efforts - that's what I'm trying to say."

"Are you telling me Marie-Christine's the only one?"

Harry swallowed. "No ... All I'm saying is I'm not going for a trophy hunt every evening."

"Then maybe every second."

"No."

"Then who ... No, don't tell me, I don't want to know. Does Marie-Christine know?"

"No."

"So you're cheating her too - what a ..."

"No I'm not!" Calmer, Harry added, "I'm not cheating her - and if I'm cheating you, then only with her."

"Now that's an interesting scale - can you explain ..." Cho stopped. "Then what is it Marie-Christine could tell me?"

Suddenly Harry realized that Marie-Christine's confession perhaps wasn't meant as public as he had thought. "Ask her."

"I will ... That's it?"

"No. What I said before still holds true - about a new investment, about something that hasn't changed."

"I don't want your investment, and I don't want to hear old stories - I'm too busy with new ones."

"So it's all my fault, huh?"

Cho looked startled, blushed a bit. "I didn't say that ... No, it's not."

"I still ..." Harry stopped, rephrasing in his mind. "I still desire you, and I was waiting for you, while all the world had fun and sex - or if not fun, then ... Anyway - I tried to keep it within acceptable limits."

"Only that somehow you couldn't, huh? ... Who are the others?"

"I thought you didn't want to know?"

"Maybe I've changed my mind."

While cleaning up, two more dirty dishes shouldn't make a difference, only that Harry's mind couldn't find the mood, or the time, to draw this parallel. He said, "There were two - er, cases. For both of them, I claim myself innocent in the sense of the accusation - if you want to know details, we have to find a more private place, and a bit more time. These weren't simply one-night stands."

Cho bit her lips - Harry even knew why. There was still an unspoken agreement that hadn't changed, both of them fully aware of it - he didn't lie to her. So if he wasn't right, at least he had a story, or two, and curiosity had gripped Cho. "We really should do that ... Your investment ..."

What was the sense in a parry if not striking back? "You're not in the position to reject it, Cho - it's the only way to save the original one. And there are two other shareholders of *Groucho Spectors* - I'm pretty sure they'll accept it."

"Aahh - that's what's been missing. Blackmailing."

Harry grinned. "Show me someone who'll agree that investing hundred grand is some new kind of blackmailing - you might as well say replacing the equipment is another burg ..." The thought made him stop in the middle of the word.

Cho noticed his widening eyes, his grin. "What's so funny? - I could do with a laugh."

"This burglary ... You're trying to sell spector technology, right? And now they've stolen your equipment - don't you see what it means?" Harry's voice grew more urgent with every word. "There's someone very interested - only they're trying to get it without paying." He laughed. "Cho - they'll fail, because Muggles cannot do the magic ... You've won, Cho, there's business waiting - we only have to find them, or maybe they come by themselves."

Cho stared at him, a tentative grin spreading her face ... Then it stopped. "Harry, each time I'm ready to kill you, you come up with a goddamn story, and what's worse, it's always true ... I hate you."

He smiled. "That's close enough - for now, I mean ... I love you."

This confession didn't twist a muscle on Cho's face. Before Harry could figure out whether this was a good sign or just the opposite, she started thinking loudly. "It's still a hell of work -

we don't know who's interested enough to hire thieves - we don't know if they are the only ones ..."

"But we can find out - pretty quickly."

"Yeah, sure - we'll visit them, and ask ..." Cho looked up, suspicion and glare in her face.

"How come you're talking about *we*, and how come I'm doing the same?"

Harry could feel it - he was gaining ground, this glare wasn't directed entirely toward himself.

"I can tell you only why I said *we* - simply because it's true. But we're not visiting them, because we don't know who it is - no, they'll come to us!"

"Definitely so - first thing tomorrow." Cho nodded, mimicking an acknowledgment of the obvious.

"Maybe not just tomorrow, but a few days from now ... You'll invite all of them to a party, and you'll invite me too ..."

Harry saw how it dawned on her.

"... and I'll come, together with Nagini. When this party's over, all that's left is a nice talk with certain people."

Cho examined his face. "You'd do that?"

"Sure."

"The last time you said you'd never attend another movie business party."

"Then I was a bit premature ..." Next moment, Harry found an answer he liked better.

"Besides, this is no party for me, it's detective's work - that's something else."

He could feel how Cho was suppressing a smile. "You and your classifications - a party's not a party, a fuck's not a fuck ..."

"It's true, and you know it! ... It's the intention that counts."

Cho came closer. "So you were doing it on purpose only with Marie-Christine?"

"Yes ... We were second choice to each other, but - well, ..."

These words seemed pouring some balm on some wounds. Regaining a bit of her own self, Cho asked, "Wouldn't it be interesting to see what happens if the two first choices would meet?"

It was out before Harry could stop himself. "Meet? - It's the same person in both cases."

Cho grinned. "What does that mean? Are you ..." Her voice trailed off, while Harry could watch in her face how the nickel was dropping. She gasped. "Really?"

"Ask her."

"I'm not sure whether I'll do that." Cho looked thoughtful.

He waited silently.

After a moment, she looked at him. "We still have to talk a lot, I'd say - business and otherwise. I'd like to invite you to a dinner in the *Three Broomsticks* - I rented a room there." Seeing his expression, she added, "And don't start having funny ideas."

"Well - thoughts are free, right? And maybe *funny's* not the right term in this ..." Harry stopped, seeing Cho's murderous glare, hurried to say, "Yes, I'd like to come - although it's not the food, as I know for sure since my lunch with Deborah."

"I'm sorry - I can't apparate yet."

If Cho was really sorry, then not at this moment, so much for sure. "Okay, then ... Want to see the camp?"

Yes, she wanted to see, or maybe Cho just wanted to wander through together with him, or maybe she wanted herself to be seen in his company, or himself in hers ... All Harry knew for sure was that Cho nodded, followed him.

While heading toward his preferred group, he was busy saying hello here and there, seeing appreciating smiles, admiring glances, hearing some whistles. Cho watched with interest. "You're popular here, huh?"

"Rahewa and I - we're the water cops."

"Of course - who else ... And when will you adopt her?"

"I won't, because I'm too young. But I'm looking for someone, because her mother's dying, and her father's a drunkyard."

"Oh ..." After a quick glance in his face, seeing confirmed that this was no joke, Cho said, "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't know."

"Of course not - I'll tell you later, under the topic *otherwise*." Harry smiled to show that it wasn't meant as a sharp reply.

Pete saw them first. "Hey, Harry - wow, that your girl? ... Great, man, super - well, that explains a lot."

Harry grinned. "Hello, Pete - that's Cho ... Cho, that's Pete, something like my Muggle partner."

Pete looked pleased to hear himself addressed that way. "Nice to meet you, Cho ... Where you've been hiding?"

Cho smiled. "In California."

"Yeah, that's the right place, isn't it? Only a bit far away - although, you people can jump around the world, for what I've heard. I wish I could do that, if only to the next beer shop."

A voice from behind, female. "Harry, did you change your mind?"

Only a step later, Sally saw that he wasn't alone. "Oh, sorry - well, I think I've got my answer." Even so, she seemed in no hurry to leave - not Sally.

Harry grinned broader. "Hello Sally - that's Cho ... Cho, that's Sally - she had a sunburn, that's how we met."

The two girls greeted each other, with some more friendliness at the Muggle side, however with mutual interest. Then Sally nodded. "Yeah, I don't need magic to predict - I can save my breath with Harry ... A pair of eyes's enough to see that." She shrugged. "So what - you cannot always win."

Cho said, "Things can change."

"Sure, and pigs can fly - Cho, you just don't look that stupid, so save that bullshit, okay? ... No offense intended."

Cho's face showed a smirk. "None taken."

* * *

The food seemed better than Harry remembered. Since his own taste could not possibly suffer - not with the house elves as the rule and Monsieur Armodéc's dinners as the exception - the only explanation Harry could think of was that Madam Rosmerta had improved with the grown number of guests. The *Three Broomsticks* were busy, with more Muggles than wizards at the tables.

"Which topic first?" asked Cho.

"Business ... Money business, then party business."

"Money money money money - money makes the world go round, the world go round." Cho had been singing loud enough to turn some heads - and with a clarity that took Harry by surprise.

"Hey," he said admiringly, "I didn't know you're a singer."

She smiled. "I didn't know you're an expert."

"We get a lot of music recently, from the camp people. Guitars, singers ... Rahewa's crazy about them." Harry giggled. "On our first visit, she got drunk - from beer."

"And then?"

"Well, some of the girls helped her to get rid of the beer. Then I took her to the lake for sobering up in the water." He giggled again. "I'm not sure what's been more efficient - the water or her embarrassment, to be seen drunk like her father or to be seen naked."

"So there's at least one girl who's embarrassed to be naked in your presence, huh?"

Remembering another scene, Harry giggled again. "Right - but she's the only one, really."

A fire started glowing in Cho's eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Erm - a certain Transfiguration teacher gave me a lesson in advanced techniques of Animagus transformation - a special one, so-to-speak." Seeing Cho's face, Harry felt in a haste to explain the dry facts of this juicy lesson.

Cho looked partly amused, still more upset. "Can you imagine - your best friend, and then ... It's no wonder ..." She stopped.

"It's no wonder - what?"

"Er - nothing. We said business first, right? ... No, something else - what's with Rahewa's mother?"

"Well, in a way, it's business too." Harry described the situation, and how he was looking around for candidates.

"What a sad story ... I wasn't aware of me qualifying for divination." Cho's face showed concern, further something which - quite easily - could have been confused with love. "But it's in the best hands I can imagine. What about other candidates?"

"Well, there's an obvious one, of course - although I didn't ask in that direction yet ... And then there's a very surprising one."

"Surprising? ... Beats me."

"Let me quote - not literally, only the meaning ... First a devil in disguise, then a devil without disguise, there's nothing wrong in that combination ... Now can you guess?"

Cho couldn't, for a few seconds. Then her eyes started to widen. "Are you ... you're not saying ..."

Harry smiled. "Yes, I am. I was baffled too. But then ... What do you think of it?"

Cho had a short laugh of surprise. "Well - she never discussed this ... Yes, of course ... It comes so unexpected, I don't know ..."

"I hope it's not upsetting you. You're the only one I told about, and I'd like to keep it that way - but I thought you're entitled to know ... Anyway, it's still entirely open, and maybe there's a miracle which makes this idea obsolete."

Cho nodded. "I appreciate that, Harry ... No, I'm not upset - the more I think about ..." She smiled. "Devil in disguise, huh? I bet those were her actual words." Seeing Harry's expression, her smile turned to beaming. "What else did she say?"

Harry grinned. "The rest's confidential, sorry."

"Is it? Then let me guess - as if I didn't know my mother that well ... Erm - something like - you're the right man for me, with anybody else, it would be a disaster ... Am I right?"

Just good that he was grinning anyway. "I'm listening to you."

Suddenly some fury was back in Cho's face. "Then listen to that ... It's the same the other way around - there's no girl but me who'd get along with you in the long run, so much's for sure."

Attack, parry, counter attack. "And what about the short run?"

"That's ..." Cho exhaled. "Let's talk about business."

"Okay ... You need hundred grand, right? Then let's say hundred and twenty, so there's enough for guards, security, insurance, whatever ... That's the sum. The conditions ..."

Harry had learned from Japanese teachers about attack and defense, from a Chinese teacher about business, and from another Chinese teacher about blows out of nowhere. "It's no loan. I'm going to buy twenty-six percent of *Groucho Spectors Ltd.*"

"No."

"This is a blocking minority, plus one percent more. Whenever I don't see a reason to block a decision, you'll be the one to represent this share."

In Cho's eyes, Harry could see numbers clicking - just as his own mind had done in preparation for this dinner, only that Cho's calculator might run a bit faster. With his share of twenty-six percent, Cho's own - a third of what was left - would be twenty-four and two thirds of a percent. Representing both shares together, which summed up to fifty and two thirds, Cho would control the enterprise with the smallest possible majority of votes.

And Harry would be able to prevent any action, should this ever be necessary. It was the deadly strike in this negotiation - he knew it, and she knew it.

Except for the noise. "You dirty ... You're blackmailing me, and you're corrupting me at the same time! It's disgusting! This is our company, not yours. Isn't it enough that you're the world-class hero in fighting dark wizards? Why do you have to mess around in my business?"

"I'm not messing around in your business. I'm not telling you what to do - okay, except for that party. My name doesn't appear anywhere, except for some ledger ... I have just two reasons, and they're legitimate."

"Which are?"

"It's a perfectly normal offer. This money included, I'll have invested almost a quarter of a million, about half of my fortune. Okay, I owe it to your father, but he'd be the first to agree that it's only reasonable. Even so, that's not my prime reason."

"No, of course not. What you have in mind ..."

Harry interrupted her. "What I have in mind is very simple. If there's an important decision - and there'll be quite some the next time - the result is that the two of us will meet. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yep."

"It won't stay that way. You'll start to make suggestions, to have a saying, to ..."

"No. These meetings will split in two parts. In the first part, about business, all you'll ever hear from me is *Yes* or *No*. That's a promise."

Cho calmed down. "Really?"

"Yes. Maybe I'll be disappointed because you're going to start some porn movie business. Maybe I'll be disappointed because you're not. Whatever - you'll hear no more than *Yes* or *No*." With some growling, Harry added, "And that's the last time I'm going to confirm a promise of mine."

Cho twisted a bit. "Sorry - I didn't mean ... I know you keep your promises, it was just - maybe I didn't trust my ears ... Okay, so that's part one of these meetings. And the other?"

"Part one's business. Part two's - er, miscellaneous."

"Miscellaneous or mischievous?"

"Whatever - I'm not that good in spelling."

Cho seemed still suspicious. "Do I have to sing and dance for my supper in that part?"

"Funny you're asking - you treat me here, you're singing voluntarily ..."

"You know exactly what I mean!"

Harry became aware - for dealing with a devil, you needed a long spoon and a long wind. "I listed my conditions already - there ain't no others."

He saw how Cho was stopping herself before asking once more for a confirmation. Had to be something developed while dealing with Muggles in the movie business. Then she nodded.

"Okay, Harry - we have a deal."

"Fine. Now to that party ..." They agreed to invite all people which might have an interest, and which might qualify as the driving force behind the burglary. Cho would rent a house for this occasion, there was a woman who made a living from offering a large house for parties and other social events - Cho's grimace told Harry enough about their kind. Harry would come with his snake, and they would prepare a nice set of questions.

"There are just three possible candidates," said Cho, "plus two more that have to be checked, if only for the sake of completeness ... I hope they'll send people who know what's going on - I mean what happened."

"Then announce the party as something at the eve of your breakthrough. You know - at midnight, some deadline's running out, and then you can announce with whom *Groucho SPECTORS* will do business. That'll make sure they'll send someone who's informed. Until midnight, we'll have figured out - and then, you announce them as your business partner."

Harry beamed. "You can say they've already got a sample set, are preparing for the mass production."

Cho stared at him. "It's a brilliant idea, Harry, but that was a lot more than *Yes* and *No*."

"Dammit - I'm talking about fighting with a bunch of criminals, and that's indeed my specialty. I didn't try to tell you how to run the business, or how to negotiate with them once they're detected."

"Fighting? Criminals? ... Harry, where's the borderline between fight and business, between criminals and high-finance business people?"

"Dunno."

"There isn't any."

Harry sighed. "Yes, you're probably right ... Okay, from now on, I'll restrict myself to *Yes* and *No*."

Cho's head was turning left and right. "Oh no, young Potter - just when the business part's settled, huh, and when I'm waiting for some detailed explanations, without even knowing how to ask ..." She leaned forward. "You're telling, and I'm listening."

"You're sure that's senseful?"

"You said there are two cases in which you - how was it, didn't do it on purpose? Sounds like a physical impossibility, doesn't it? ... I want to judge by myself, to say the least."

"Alright, then ..." Harry told Cho what had happened with Ginny, what he had done afterwards, not leaving out any detail he knew. He finished, "So, in a way, of course it was on purpose, but the intention was something else."

Emotions were fighting in Cho's face. "That's hard to swallow - Ginny, of all people ... Somehow, your curing methods are questionable, from my perspective - it wasn't that hard with Deborah."

"Why?" Genuinely astonished, Harry asked, "What's so different?"

"What's so different? Ginny's competition - that's different ... And a very tight one."

"No - she's not. Not from my standpoint ... There's no competition."

"Ha! How reassuring - so God help me if there's ever competition, huh?"

Harry met Cho's eyes. "I truly believe it was mandatory - at least the only method I could imagine. Not knowing better, I'd do it again."

"The noble hero! Do I have to expect that whenever there's some traumatized girl? Would you do it also if Rahewa'd be raped?"

He stared at her. "Is this a serious question?"

"Of course it is!" Cho's voice came loud enough to make some heads turn again - unknown ones, thank God.

Harry sighed. "I don't know ... For the next four years, certainly not - I cannot imagine that it would cure anything. For all I know, it wouldn't help either afterwards."

"Would be interesting to hear the other side, what do you think? Shall I ask her?"

With considerable effort, Harry held his own fury under control. "No."

"And what's the second case?"

He felt no longer interested in tailoring his words. "I'm running these errands for Hermione, as you know. One of them's a Monsieur Armodéc - old, rich, young woman - werewolves seem to gain virility. I have to pay him with stories - and he tried to get me into sex games from the very first moment. Then I had to stay overnight because I should watch him drink that potion - for some reason, it looked as if he wasn't using it at all, his interest in a healing seems limited. And of course there was another woman ... Well, I said good night, but she offered me a last drink. It - it was some stuff, worse than the Giants' dope, and different ... Switches off your brain, switches on your body - all night long ... Afterwards, you're dead for almost a week."

Cho's face kept working. "Then you must be looking forward, for the next visit - I mean, the week's over, you should be recovered sufficiently ..."

"Stop it! I'm not looking forward, and it won't happen again - I'm not going to fall for the same trap twice. If I'm looking forward to something, then it's ..."

"Forget it!!" Cho tempered herself, if only for the sake of the people at the neighbour tables. "It was a very interesting evening, Harry - thank you for your company ... You better leave now."

"What?"

"You heard me ... Whatever you had in mind - maybe it would work with that dope, but otherwise ..."

Somehow, Harry managed to come up without shooting his chair across the room. "You asked me," he snarled, "so I told you. Don't ask me again, because that's been the last time I answered ... Our deal remains unchanged - good night."

His rage still felt undiminished when reaching the lake. He jumped to his favourite place, walked a bit further not to disturb some people, envy boiling in his blood. He stripped naked, jumped into the water.

Anger made for short wind. After several attempts, Harry felt calm enough to pump air into his lungs for a real dive. When he burst through the surface again, his chest was hammering.

Three dives later, he had himself under control again. Edgy like a burned cat, yes, but his muscles no longer trembling. He climbed out, dried himself with a hot-air spell, dressed, and jumped to the point closest to the school buildings.

A figure rose from the stairs outside. "You look so upset, Harry."

Marie-Christine.

Was it his decision? If so, it wasn't a conscious one. "Yes I am - just in the mood to be rough and violent. You promised me a lesson - now I'm ready."

Marie-Christine held something up. "Then come, my savage student."

Harry recognized it instantly - the picture card, opening a small guest suite, in fair distance from the next dormitory.

12 - *Stealth*

Fitzgerald Fraenkel, publicly better known as Winston Winslow and as the moderator of the popular show *Late Listeners*, creased his forehead when he heard the doorbell ringing. This damned girl arrived too early - it didn't really matter, only he just couldn't stand such irregularities. But she looked very promising, was just the right age - as young as possible without raising a legal conflict ... Well, he would have the opportunity to teach her the rules.

Before walking to the door, he made an effort to smooth out the creases - they weren't helpful in the camera, and they weren't helpful with that girl either.

It was a girl alright, however not what Fitzgerald Fraenkel had expected, no resemblance with his new, promising acquaintance. Much too young, although ... And she looked as if jumped out of a western movie - very Indian, with a leather skirt, a leather shirt. A bit skinny ...

"Mr. Fraenkel?"

"Yes?" He examined the face, these coal-black eyes which could have been very disquieting, if you were prone to a bad conscience.

A hand came up. "I was asked to deliver this letter, and to wait for an answer."

"A letter?" Fitzgerald Fraenkel opened the envelope, found a single sheet inside - no, a picture. It showed a - damned, that girl, the same picture he'd received days ago, together with that letter which had caused some worries - if only for a short while.

He looked up, ready to shout, or maybe pull the girl inside first - totally unprepared for this piece of wood which was pointing at him.

She said something.

A tight jacket of velvet-coated iron was covering his body, his mind, blinding his sight, deafening his ears, blocking ...

* * *

Hardness - under his back, under his shoulders, under his aching head. Something tight at his wrists, also at his ankles, somehow locking him ... Then Fitzgerald Fraenkel came fully awake, to forget such minor unpleasanties instantly because something more urgent sent an icy thrill down his spine.

He was lying on the wooden planks of his own party room, in the basement of his weekend house - the same where any moment another girl might arrive - would arrive, and hopefully catch the situation well enough to call for help ... Because he was lying spread-eagled, his arms and legs tied to the floor.

And before him - no, between his legs, sat this girl, looking more Indian than ever with her crossed legs, her unblinking stare.

His voice sounded shrill even in his own ears. "What's this? - What do you want from me? - Where are you? ... Untie me, quickly!"

She just stared.

"What's that supposed to mean? - Is this a game or what? ... What do you want here?"

"I'm here to send greetings from a friend of mine. You know her - you saw her picture some minutes ago."

The icy thrill turned to a terrifying tingle in Fraenkel's entire body. With some effort, he gained his self-control - years of TV weren't lost on him. "Greetings? ... That's a weird kind of greetings - okay, tell them, then untie me and get lost."

"No, I'm afraid it takes longer." Suddenly, the girl's eyes flared, and a horrible giggle escaped her throat.

Was she insane? Dear God ... Pushing the thought aside, Fraenkel complained, "That's unbelievable! How long do I have to lie here, until you've managed this damned greeting?"

"Let's see ..." Suddenly, a mean-looking knife appeared in the girl's hand. "First - first, I'll cut off your left ball - or maybe the right?" Another giggle, and this questioning tone in her voice - as though this was a light conversation ...

Then Fitzgerald Fraenkel's mind caught the meaning in these words, and his strength turned to water.

"That'll be tomorrow morning - there's no sense in cutting off a ball if you don't have time to think about it." The girl giggled again. "Then you know how it feels, so you can appreciate the time until the other one is due - maybe in the evening?"

"You ... you're mad ..."

Suddenly, the knife was at his throat, and the girl's head above his own, a frightening expression in her face. "Don't say that ... don't say that ever again, or I'll show you what's madness!"

She was really insane - insane, and he was in her power, unable to ... "Okay, okay - I didn't mean it, you know, I was a bit upset - I mean, this situation here ... It's a bit scary, really ..."

She was sitting again, playing with that knife. "That's the purpose - but don't you worry, I'm not going to kill you ... The next day, you'll be free - after I've cut your pecker."

Into Fraenkel's agonized moan, the face appeared over him. "Unless you'd say that again ... Nobody's going to say that to me - nobody ... Hear me? Nobody!" The knife was dancing over his face, but the girl's high-pitched voice felt worse.

"No - I'm sorry, my mistake. You're a reasonable girl - I'm sure we'll get along."

"Oh yes, we will." Her smile, the sudden white in her eyes - the words were dying in Fraenkel's throat.

Somewhere upstairs, a doorbell.

The knife was back. "Who's that?"

"A ... a girl - I was expecting her."

"That's not good - she has to go."

"Yes - I'm sure she will - tell her ..."

This horrible smile again. "No - *I am sure* she will." The girl left the room, not making a noise.

Should he shout? Fitzgerald Fraenkel felt like stupefied, unable to catch a clear thought.

Voices upstairs, a door closing ... Steps, a squeak - some banging, then a cry. "... no, please, no ..." A scream, another, then a choked sound, horrible, like steam bubbles in boiling water ... Another banging.

Light steps ... Some shuffling ... Water running somewhere, then it stopped.

The girl appeared in his view - knife in one hand, a paper tissue polishing - no, drying it, in the other, dark stains all over her dress. "It's okay - she's not bothering us any longer ... I'll be back - now I have work to do." And she was gone.

He couldn't suppress a single sob. Pretty soon, he was going to wet himself ... Why not now? - Because there was some pride, and some hope, fading quickly at the bumping sounds from upstairs.

* * *

Fitzgerald Fraenkel came awake. In a former part of his life, he had been better known as Winston Winslow, but this part seemed long ago, and no matter how long it had lasted, regardless of how much it had brought fun and excitement, money and fame, it had been rather unimportant, compared to this time now, which had started yesterday.

Less than a day, and he had even slept for a while - surprisingly - but these few hours had delivered a new experience every minute.

How it was to be helpless, in the power of a lunatic. How it was to fight shrieking panic because this lunatic was an under-age girl, giving him the creeps worse than any grown man. How it was to lie motionless, hour after hour, until muscles started to cramp, sending unbearable pain through his limbs. How it was to be hungry, to long for a glass of water like never before. How it was to wet himself.

How it was to be scared shitless ... Except, unfortunately, it wasn't true - sooner or later, he would have to smell his own stink ... And before or afterwards, or most likely at the same time, he would learn how - how ... The thought made Fitzgerald lose control of his bladder again.

And suddenly she was standing there. These inaudible steps - he would have twisted, if not for his tying, would have trembled uncontrollably, if not for his stiff muscles.

And there was this knife, and this horrifying smile. "Alright, I figure it's time for a little knife-work, isn't it?" A giggle, then Fitzgerald felt the blade cut his trousers, not even bruising his skin. Another flash of the blade, and his underpants laid cut open. He could feel how his testicles were trying to hide in his body.

"Eeeek - you're dirty ... Maybe I should clean you first - my friend said you did that with her too, although that's not a seemly work for a girl my age, but ..." She left the room again.

Fitzgerald could hear water running upstairs.

She was back, a towel and a dish in her hands.

The ringing of the doorbell stopped her.

Knocking at the door, then he could hear the door opening. Had she left it open? Dear God ... A voice. "Hello? ... Is there somebody? ... Mr. Winslow?"

His mouth was too dry, he felt unable to choke a single sound.

"Mr. Winslow? ... Savannah? ... Savannah!"

The girl seemed to shrink, was curling down, her face turned toward the door.

"Savannah, where are you? - Come out, I know you're here!"

"Hchch." Fitzgerald Fraenkel tried to find some saliva. "Heeah."

For a terrible instant, the girl was staring at him, then she froze again, curling more. Then steps, a figure in the door frame. "Sav ... Oh my God!"

And now Fraenkel recognized him, remembered the voice - this young wizard, what's-his-name, Harry something ... Didn't matter, was even better - a wizard wouldn't ...

"Just a second, Mr. Winslow - I have to take care of Savannah, before ..." The young man was grabbing her shoulders. "You bad girl - what did you do? ... Now, now, it's okay, don't start crying - just come with me, everything's alright, c'mon ..."

His eyes almost popping out of their sockets, Fraenkel watched the young man guide a sobbing bunch of misery out of the room.

The young man came back a minute later. Next instant, Fitzgerald Fraenkel was released from his tying, although still unable to move.

The young man made efforts to help him. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Winslow ... Savannah - she's a bit - er ... And then she was gone, and all I knew, it had started after we'd been watching this video cassette - but she had mentioned your name, and fantasized a bit, weird stuff, really ... Here we are, just sit down, okay ... Yes, and when she was gone, I was really worried because - er, well, she's ... Anyway, I've found her before ... Are you okay?"

No, he wasn't. But yes of course he was, alive and complete.

"Mr. Winslow, can I leave you alone for a while? I have to take care of Savannah, before ... I'll be back in half an hour, and then we can go to the police, and ..."

"No!" A croaky shout.

"Er - what do you ... Wait a second, I'll get you a glass of water."

Aaah - water, wonderfully wet water, giving him back some of his speech. "Take her ... just take her and leave."

"Sure, Mr. Winslow, it won't happen again - I still don't know, maybe she had help from outside ... But shouldn't we report this accident? I mean ..."

"No - er, Harry, no ... Just go, okay? I'm alright - if the press ... No - just take her away and make sure she's not ... The sooner the better, and the less is said about ..."

"No, she's not going to escape again, and nobody would believe her anyway, so ... Are you sure, Mr. Winslow?"

"Harry, do me a favour and go - now. I've got an urgent ... You were just in time, nothing serious happened, and there's no sense in suing a ..." Fraenkel still couldn't muster the courage saying it aloud. "Thank you for your help, and now go."

"If you think so, Mr. Winslow - well, then ... Goodbye, sir."

Fitzgerald Fraenkel was alone. He couldn't really walk, every step another hell, but nature's pressure kept pushing him forward.

* * *

Forty minutes later, he was ready to face a new part of his life - showered, dressed, a gallon or so of water in his recovering body. In a while, he might be able to eat something.

Entering the living room, he froze - still too weak for more. A whimpering escaped his throat.

A figure in a chair - a young man, sneering smile, a wand pointing - amazing how quickly you could learn being scared from a pointing wand. But the worst - this hair, these freckles - he looked like ...

"Hello, Fitzgerald - here we meet at last ... Wasn't easy to find you - my sister won't tell me, but by some lucky accident - well, never mind, I'm here."

Fraenkel started to tremble. "What ..."

"Why I'm here? ... Now guess why, Fraenkel-boy - what do you think I came for? Can't you imagine?"

Yes he could, didn't dare.

The young man glanced around. "Say, have you seen a young girl? Looks pretty Indian - Savannah's her name ... She said she'd - well, maybe ... Oh, what's that?" The expression in the young man's face changed to disbelief. "She was here, wasn't she? And she tried to - but somehow you managed to turn the knife around, huh? ... Well, I think I have to be careful when it's time."

And then Fitzgerald saw it, following the young man's glances - stains, splashes, a puddle - dark red, almost black. He slumped down into a chair, his stare fixed at the bloody mess ... Lucille, or what was left of her.

The young man's voice made him turn. "Well - remarkable, really - I hadn't thought someone could ... You were lucky, because - you don't want to know what she had in mind, believe me ... While me, I'm going to do a quick and clean job - won't hurt much, for what I've been told, but you never know in advance, right?"

This wand was growing and growing in Fitzgerald's view.

"Well, then, Fraenkel, no sense in wasting time, right? ... A last prayer?"

"Please ..."

The young man looked angry. "Now take it like a man - I thought you were a control freak ... Won't take long, really. No prayer? ... Okay."

Something like a flash, and a cloud.

Fitzgerald still could see, was however unable to move. Was this death? ... Probably not, because he also could hear.

"... just to be safe, since this killing spell's a bit complicated, and I'm not that good at it. But let's see ..." The wand was pointing again, the young man murmuring something.

Nothing happened.

The young man was looking at his wand, held it up, turned it, inspected the top closely. At that moment, a flash burst out, a green cloud, hiding the figure ...

A terrible scream, fading.

When the cloud was gone, the chair was empty. Where a moment before a body had been sitting, the upholstery and the armrest were etched like from some acid, and a horrible scent hung in the air.

So Fitzgerald could smell too, only he couldn't move.

Would someone pass by? Or was he bound to die from this stupid spell, after surviving two attacks?

Half an hour later, he felt a tingling in his arms and legs. Soon afterwards, he could move enough to reach the bathroom and to throw up - only water, not much either, very painful.

He felt like a wreck. He was too weak. He couldn't eat. But he had to look where the rest of Lucille might be hidden.

Almost an hour later, Fitzgerald Fraenkel slumped down in the chair again, staring at the dark stains. He had found no body, no traces ... Maybe that girl had been a better - er, witch, had used a better spell, something which didn't leave traces.

If he could get rid of these stains, and this damaged chair ...

At dusk, Fraenkel gave up. No matter how much red he would wipe off, the stains seemed undiminished, as if burned into the floor and into the wall. He would need new wallpaper, and a new rug or whatever.

After a short meal, he fell down on his bed, was asleep minutes later, only to wake with a scream, his pyjama damp of sweat, the bedcover too. Was it only sweat?

* * *

Next day, Sunday, proved hell. The after-shock had set in - Fitzgerald was dropping things, couldn't hold his cup steady. When closing his eyes, he saw an Indian girl in his view, when opening them, he was imagining green clouds. And this smell in the air, not fading although the windows were wide open ...

Monday morning, he was trying to decide whether to return to the city when the doorbell rang. He lost his grip at the teacup - it shattered to pieces at the floor, splashing tea around.

A bobby outside. Fitzgerald steadied himself, opened the door.

"Mr. Fraenkel? ... Good morning, sir. We're looking for a young woman, Lucille Hearst. According to our information, we might find her here. Is this correct?"

"Er - no, constable - er, yes, we had planned to meet here, but she didn't appear."

"When did you expect her, sir?"

"Er - Friday evening, but she didn't come."

"And you weren't worried?" Two hard eyes staring at him.

"Er - no, constable. Well, you know, I thought she'd changed her mind, so - er, I saw no sense in calling after her like a schoolboy, you understand?"

"She's not inside?"

"No - I told you, she didn't come." Fitzgerald started regaining balance - police was something familiar, something he could handle.

"Mind if I have a look inside, sir?"

"Yes, indeed. She's not here, I didn't see her this weekend - that's all."

The man's eyes were like stones. "It's your right to say that, sir ... Another question is what it makes me thinking ... I'll be back, sir, with the required document. You're not going to leave, are you?"

"I have to drive back to London, pretty soon, actually."

"Then we need your car's sign, sir ... Please don't be afraid if you see a car following yours - it won't be criminals, sir, quite the opposite. And if you tell me where you hide your spare keys, we won't have to replace the doorlock, once you've left ... Good morning, sir."

Fitzgerald Fraenkel closed the door, leaning against the wall inside, out of sight from the street. These stains ... He needed a story, and he needed it quickly. There was no corpse - without that ... The stains were the leftovers from a movie scene, he hadn't found time to let them clean up. No, he didn't know what these movie people used to fake blood ... Awfully thin, that story, but good enough - and he would present someone who confirmed it.

Unless, of course, the police was more successful in finding the corpse. The thought made him tremble again - driving a car in this state, he was likely to find himself in the crash barrier. He had to calm down - control was mandatory now, only he couldn't muster enough control to stop shaking.

* * *

Not too far away from Mr. Fraenkel's destination - should he arrive unhurt - Sirius returned from his bedroom, after changing back into civil clothes - wizard clothes. He looked at Harry. "I can't help thinking that my performance was highly unlawful. This man looked like a wreck - had I been a real cop - er, I mean, had I been there on my own duty, I would have taken him with me."

Harry didn't grin. "Unlawful - you played a Muggle cop, you, a wizard cop. A petty crime, I think."

"Will I ever hear the rest of the story?"

"I don't know - it's not my decision alone ... All I can tell you - it was for a good reason, and a lot of Lucilles would have to thank you - believe me."

Sirius' expression hardened. "That's information enough, Harry - maybe I know already all I need to know ... Makes me think I'd like to know what happened with that man during the weekend."

A fire glowed in Harry's eyes. "Something he'll never, ever forget ... But we played by his own rules - no injury, nobody hurt - outside, that is."

"He looked haunted ... I wonder if he's going to continue as a talkmaster."

"Who cares? ... And haunted? Maybe by his own memory."

After jumping back to Hogwarts, Harry walked to Ron's office. He found his friend inside - together with Moaning Myrtle. She wasn't moaning at all, looked quite expectantly at him, except somehow the name stuck.

Ron asked, "Did it go alright?"

"Yes. Sirius squeezed him with these few sentences so much - I'll do a spectator recording for you and Rahewa ... There's just one thing - I think Myrtle should wait a few more days."

The ghost girl looked surprised. "Why? - I'm ready to play my role."

"No doubt about that ... No, if you haunt him now, he might be a bit close to suicide, or it might drive him over the edge ... That would go too far, and a breach of a promise."

Myrtle wasn't too disappointed. "Alright, then - it gives me time to study my role a bit longer ... Harry, I might find a taste in that."

Harry grinned. "But not more than two visits to this man, okay?"

* * *

So the fancy clothes from *Gerry's Fashion* hadn't been bought for nothing, this added one nice aspect in that party. And Harry was here for a purpose - one less than expected when suggesting the idea, but he had a task to perform, still one more than the last time.

Meeting Cho hadn't been the most pleasurable experience. Also, Harry didn't know what to expect from the other two women. They surprised him pleasantly. Sylvie grinned. "Hello, Harry - good to see you, and good to have you on board."

"Hello - er, Sylvie. You're not upset about your reduced share?"

Sylvie, once Madam Hooch for Harry, laughed. "Twenty-four and two thirds percent of a running company's a lot more than a third of nothing. It's still good to become obscenely rich, mark my words ... And besides - we've been blocking each other with our minorities so often ..." Sylvie stopped, registering a glaring flash from a pair of eyes.

Jesamine, formerly known as Professor Grubbly-Plank, hadn't noticed, or didn't care. "The same's true for me, Harry. A board of three women - I wonder if this has been the best idea. Two women and a man, or two men and a woman, that would be ideal. Now it's three to one - fine with me."

Harry felt pleased enough from this welcome, and prudent enough to keep his mouth shut while invisible smoke was fuming out of some nicely shaped ears. He wore his light-grey suit, perfectly prepared for his role. And he had been busy with some more preparations, thanks to his knowledge of Japanese culture, thanks to a conversation with Cho. It had taken place in his hotel suite.

"Harry - three of our five candidates are Japanese enterprises."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And the one we'd like to close the contract with is one of them, right?"

"Yes."

"People told me it would complicate the negotiations considerably if ..." Cho seemed choking at every word, "... if a woman's the spokesperson. I think you know this stupid habit, don't you?"

"Yes."

"So ... Erm, well - Sylvie and Jesamine suggested to let you take over that role. What do you think?"

"Yes."

"Yes what? Yes, you think the same? Or yes, you take over?"

"Yes. Yes."

For a very short moment, Harry expected to see a grin in Cho's face, only it didn't come. "Can you say a bit more?"

"Yes."

"Would you say a bit more?"

"Yes."

Cho's mouth opened to breathe some fire, closed again. She swallowed. "Then please do it."

"Their representatives are native Japanese, right? ... Then we need tea cans, tea cups, tea, and a geisha."

"Just one - for all of them??"

Harry controlled his face, his voice, his words. "She has to do the tea ceremony, that's all - nothing else, I mean, but she has to do it properly."

This was the land of the unlimited possibilities, and California the state which had brought it to perfection. An hour later, everything was settled.

Their prime candidate was *Narita Industries*, not quite the biggest of the three Japanese competitors, however the one with the best reputation for high-quality devices. The other two interested parties represented more the mass market, while spectors were planned as high-priced luxury systems - in the beginning, at least.

They could talk with *Narita* in first place, or last in row. Either position would imply no loss of face. Harry decided to take them first. It robbed him of a chance to test his own performance, but it would simplify the other talks.

He stood waiting in the room, Cho a step apart, when Sylvie guided the three men inside. Harry bowed, received bows in return.

He stripped off his shoes, sat down in the lotus position before the low table. The men did the same, recovering from the surprise - no chairs, just cushions, and a moment later, the geisha came in to perform the tea ceremony.

Strong, bitter, burning hot.

Their guests sipped in joyful excitement. For Harry, this was more a memory of an island in the south of Japan than a refreshing drink, while Cho, kneeling on her cushion - the only decent position with a business costume - seemed to suppress a grimace.

They exchanged polite pleasantries.

Mr. Nakajima, obviously their speaker, looked at Nagini. "A remarkable example, Potter-san."

"Her name is Nagini. She is my talisman in business conversations, Nakajima-san. Contrary to snakes' reputation, she reminds me to keep words and mind in harmony."

Maybe the man couldn't decipher the message to its full extent, however his reaction made clear that he had recognized it as such.

The cups were empty. The geisha filled them again, then left the room - the signal for the real beginning. Harry said, "Nakajima-san - at midnight, *Groucho Sectors* will announce the signing of a contract with a partner, a joint venture to start the market for spectator entertainment."

His opponent bowed.

"Until then, both sides are still entitled to change their mind."

Another bow.

"*Groucho Sectors* won't change their mind, since our perception is clear for quite some time. The same isn't true for the announcement ... This might be a situation in which words and mind have not yet reached the perfect harmony."

This message had been clear enough. Mr. Nakajima's eyes had been widening for an instant, now he looked expectantly.

"But then, it's not midnight yet."

The ball was in Mr. Nakajima's field, and he took it without hesitation. "*Narita Industries* has a strong interest in new and growing markets. It sees its natural role in a leading position, in particular with markets of advanced technology."

Harry bowed.

"By weighing chances and risks, and by looking for reliable partners, *Narita Industries* was pleased to see that *Groucho Sectors* can take a severe blow, and still is standing upright."

Harry showed the faintest hint of a smile. "For weighing his decision, a prudent man takes all the time given to him ..."

Mr. Nakajima responded with the tiniest bow.

"... while the warrior looks at his opponent's *wakizashi*, waiting for the *dai-katana*."

This time, Mr. Nakajima beamed. "Potter-san, you show an admirable knowledge of *bushido*. This gives me reason to assume you're also aware of the only possible way how *Narita Industries* and *Groucho Sectors* could join in a partnership."

Harry wasn't aware. However, reconsidering the words, he had little doubt what this Nakajima meant, and he didn't like it. He said, "History and mythology give us many examples how the most powerful giant was led by a small child through unknown territory - with great success."

Mr. Nakajima rewarded the parry with an appreciating smile. His next words made clear that the time of metaphors was over. "True, Potter-san ... But people treat modern business differently from myths, that's why *Narita Industries* can imagine a joint venture only with a share of fifty-one percent on their side."

Which could have been counted as a great success. Only that Cho would kill him. So Harry said, "New technologies open new horizons. They also may require a new flexibility."

Mr. Nakajima's smile grew somewhat sadly. "There are strong traditions in Japan, Potter-san - as you're obviously aware, considering this invitation. It would be too great a loss of face when returning to admit that *Narita Industries* will earn less than half of the profit."

Was this a signal?

When in doubt, suggest. "That's understood, Nakajima-san. For this reason, we offer a triple split. Forty-nine percent at both sides, with full entitlement - profit and vote. The remaining two percent are split again - profit at *Narita Industries*, vote at *Groucho Sectors*."

Mr. Nakajima exchanged glances with his two fellows. Harry could watch the wordless conversation easily - one of them was ready to agree, the other was not.

Mr. Nakajima looked at him. "The prudent man weighs his decision as long as there's time left, Potter-san. There's still some time until midnight."

Harry smiled. "Indeed. He also weighs one decision at a time - that's why this offer remains valid only for the next hour. Afterwards, we'll weigh our next decision, if it's still necessary."

When the men had left, Cho stood up, stretched herself, grimacing. "I should have come in a kimono, only that our other guests would confuse me with someone from the next hostess service."

Harry kept his face expressionless. "What an absurd thought."

Cho's eyes were flashing. "It's just a matter of location. Here - in contrast to the Carribeans ..." She stopped herself, with some effort. "Okay - they didn't steal our equipment, right?"

"No."

"And now we have to wait an hour before we can talk with the others?"

"No."

Cho glared at him, for a moment at a loss of words - at least of those she seemed ready to speak out. "What else? ... This is a question that cannot be answered with Yes or No!"

"They'll be back in half an hour."

In fact, it took forty minutes. One additional condition was that any public statement would keep to the version of fifty-one percent for *Narita Industries*, which was acceptable. Another was that the joint venture had to be run under the name *Narita Sectors*.

Harry looked at Cho, saw her nod, was grateful for this neutral name *Groucho*. If the name Chang had been in the company title ...

Anyway, the deal was settled.

The next two conversations, with the other two Japanese candidates, were short, polite, eventless. They hadn't sent the burglars.

Then some chairs were moved back into that room, adjustments to the expectations of western businessmen. The next company on the list was *Helix Inc.*, the only survivor of an US-American entertainment systems industry.

They had sent two men. Cho was about to ask the first trap question when one of them said, "Miss Chang, we can shorten things. Mr. Armstead's waiting for your visit - we'll drive you. To make sure you'll follow the invitation - Miss Grubbly-Plank's already there. So, if you want to have her back ... It's not too far away."

Both Cho and Harry were staring at the man. They had found the people behind the burglary, Nagini hadn't been required at all.

The man opened his jacket to show a gun in a holster. "Let's go - quietly. You just have to sign a contract, you'll be back within an hour."

Harry stood up. "Okay, then."

The man's head was shaking. "Only her. You stay here, and keep quiet, if you know what's good for her."

Cho said, "He's a shareholder with a blocking minority. If he doesn't agree, the signature's invalid."

The man hesitated. Apparently, he wasn't fluent enough in high finance math, was more at home with guns and errands. Then he nodded.

Reaching a large limousine, they were stopped, their bodies were scanned for weapons - quickly, professionally, while the other man held his own gun ready. The first man found their wands. "What's this? ... Are you wizards?"

Harry said quickly, "Yes."

"Doesn't matter - without your wands, you ain't but nothing." However, the two men were on full alert, as Harry could sense during the drive of fifteen minutes.

Mr. Armstead's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Miss Chang, you're going to announce a spectator deal with a partner at midnight. Is this correct?"

"Yes."

"Since you didn't talk with us, the partner must be someone else. That's not acceptable for *Helix*. We took measures to change your mind. And we have prepared a contract - here ... All you have to do is to sign this contract, and of course to announce us as your partner. Takes just a minute - then Edgar will drive you - and Miss Grubbly-Plank - back to your party."

Harry asked, "What are the conditions?"

Mr. Armstead looked at him, back to Cho. "Who's this clown?"

"A silent partner. He holds a blocking minority."

"Then he's better not blocking. The bottom line's that we have a sixty-forty split, and guess who's on which side?"

Cho said, "I want to see Jesamine before I'm going to sign."

"Why not?" Mr. Armstead turned to the second man. "Bring her in."

The man walked to another door, opened it, called something, waited. A moment later, Harry saw Jesamine appear - escorted by two other men, one at each side, holding her arms.

This was the moment ... Edgar alone, behind him. A triple group at the door, and Mr. Armstead, hopefully unarmed.

He wheeled around, his hands together like praying. Only it wasn't a prayer, left no time for any prayer - the Killing Curse disappeared in Edgar's head while Harry was already turning toward the group.

The other man was pretty fast, his gun coming up, almost aiming at Harry when the disarming spell pulled it out of his hands, sent it through the air. Harry caught it, to drop it in Cho's lap, his attention back at the group.

He lost a precious fraction of a second while registering the scene, lost another until he could trust his eyes.

Jesamine Grubbly-Plank was gone. But there was a skunk, ducking low, tail up in the air, shooting a fluid into the faces of the two escorts, raising shouts of surprise and pain.

Checking on Mr. Armstead, Harry saw the man's hand reach for a drawer in his desk. And Cho had the gun, seemed to know how to use it, which meant she would shoot next moment ...

Only they needed Mr. Armstead alive.

"No." Harry barely touched Cho's shoulders to make clear what he meant, then he was flying over the desk, legs first, kicking Mr. Armstead plus chair away from the drawer.

Harry landed, wheeled around. The gun in Cho's hand was aiming at three men, two of them busy to rub their eyes, their faces burning red. And a horrible smell in the room.

Harry stupefied all three of them. Then he walked over to the dead Edgar, to take his' and Cho's wand. Until he had reached Cho, and delivered her wand, Jesamine was back in her own shape.

The fight was over. Not so the negotiations.

Harry went to Mr. Armstead, who still was trying to come up. He helped him up. When the man was standing, Harry's flat hand hit the reddened face with his full force.

Mr. Armstead staggered, kept upright with some effort.

"You only survive," explained Harry, "because we need someone to tell your cronies, and because there's something to do ... At midnight, we'll announce our partnership with *Narita*. If you ever try that again, you'll have to deal with them as well."

The man's face, as bad as it looked, made clear that he knew what this meant.

"Until Tuesday evening, our equipment's back. Until then, you'll have transferred five hundred thousand dollars to *Groucho*, for compensation. If any of that's missing, I'll be back ... Say yes."

Silence.

Harry shot a water ball - medium size - into the face, waited until he was sure the man could hear again. "Say yes."

"Fuck you."

Harry's wand pointed at the glass wall with the magnificent view to the nightly downtown of Los Angeles. Next moment, with surprisingly little noise, the wall disappeared. Fresh air streamed in - a relief with this skunk smell.

Harry pointed his wand toward Mr. Armstead. "Either I hear a yes in three seconds, or you'll find yourself outside there in mid-air ... One ... two ..."

"Okay - okay."

"Your man will escort us downstairs, and your chauffeur will drive us back. If something else happens, something that's upsetting me the least bit, I'll come and play with that building. And

if that happens, you can only hope to have enough money for a repair, because no insurance will cover it - there's no policy covering damage by wizards. So think twice before having another funny idea."

Then Harry had time for Jesamine, beamed at her. "That was brilliant, really ... A skunk - for two years, I kept wondering which animal's your choice."

"Yes, a skunk - I just liked this shape, and the colours." Jesamine grinned. "But you can understand why I was so reluctant to admit - I mean, who'd appreciate a skunk?"

"I - a minute ago. Without that ... It was tight enough."

Driving back, Harry sat alone with Cho in the back compartment of the limousine. Jesamine was driving in her own car - the same in which she had been kidnapped. This was even better - as unlikely as another attack seemed, two independent cars were some kind of guarantee.

And it allowed a more private conversation.

Cho looked at him. "Why did you kill that man?"

"Stupefying would have taken too long, disarming even longer - the Killing Curse's the fastest by far, and with the others ... Besides, if these people do not really suffer, they just don't take you seriously."

"Do you think they'll deliver?"

"Oh yes ... Funny how it's always a detail - I could have tortured him, without any effect, but a missing wall in the twentieth floor, and him two steps away, was convincing more. I could feel how he was surrendering."

Cho looked thoughtful. "Half a million ... We could return your first investment."

"Not quite. Half a million dollars is less than hundred thousand galleons."

"Is this the reason why you didn't ask for more?"

Harry felt perplexed for a moment, thought about Cho's argument. "Maybe you're right - Ron says I'm always asking too little. But I didn't think of my investment at that moment."

"No - it was a joke ... Sort of." Only Cho couldn't laugh. "Harry the fighter, and Jesamine the Animagus, while I'm sitting there ..."

Harry's voice was sharp. "Stop it! ... You've brought me into the car, and you've brought Jesamine to us."

"Did I?" Cho looked wondering. "It wasn't anything planned - I was scared to be alone with them, and I really wanted to be sure about her ... You've saved me again, Harry, so I guess I should be thankful ..."

"Don't bother - I had perfectly egoistic motives, if that's some help."

Cho laughed, changed abruptly into sobbing.

Harry grabbed her in a reflex. "It's okay - it's over, we have won ... They won't come back, they're not going to mess with *Narita Sectors*."

Cho didn't resist, seemed to find comfort in his hugging. Which didn't mean anything - just an anti-climax after a terrifying situation, in a minute, she would sober up, angry at herself for crying in Harry's presence, angry at him for ... whatever.

Nothing was over. Not the party in which Harry had no more function. Not the battle between him and Cho. And the memory of the dead Edgar hadn't even begun.

13 - Confrontation

The summer was gone, had been replaced by an autumn with unfriendly days and cold nights. Gone with the good weather were the Muggles around Hogwarts - most of them, that was. Some tents still could be seen when looking out the windows, however not enough to keep the medical service and the *Witchcraft Information Centre* running.

The change had taken away Pete, Sally, and the others, as well as all the guitar players. No more music, no more fun ... Whatever motivated the few Muggles to stay in their tents, it wasn't the desire to exchange things with the wizards, or conversations, or emotions. Binns - temporarily re-baptized as Boasting Binns - was no longer seen outside in the evenings.

On the other hand, the change had brought Ron back into the Poison Balls project. The only schedules still to be administered were a patrol or two per day - across the Hogwarts territory and along the few remaining tents. The Muggles in them didn't play the game, they didn't greet, didn't smile - the idea to offer them medical treatment inside Hogwarts, should it be required, seemed ridiculous.

But there was something else on Ron's mind first. "I think it's high time to get our team settled and to start Quidditch training."

Harry said, "No, I don't think so."

"What??"

"I don't see us doing training sessions outside ... I don't see us running a Quidditch cup - not here outside, in full view of the Muggles."

"Why not?"

"Because ... I'm not sure, it's just a feeling, but I'm ready to bet ... I talked with a lot of people - Samantha, Armodéc - they all said we should watch out, and now - don't you read the newspapers? ... Something's coming."

Reading the newspapers, in particular the *Daily Echo* together with the original articles in the *Daily Prophet*, made clear that terms between Muggles and wizards were cooling rapidly. There hadn't been a summer at all - the initial spring, with excitement and hope at both sides, seemed to change straight into winter season. Negotiations between Muggle government and the Ministry of Magic were stuck in a deadlock, with no progress whatsoever.

Well, unsuccessful political meetings were hardly upsetting anyone.

But every politician without a saying of his own, every lobbyist, and many columnists in the Muggle press kept themselves busy pointing out that it was high time to get these people under control. To nobody's surprise, the same people had lots of suggestions how this should be done.

Wizards were using the same streets as anybody else, but did they pay taxes? No they didn't, bloody shame, that was. How long would the righteous citizens still tolerate such a parasitism?

The wizards refused to be treated by Muggle law. They claimed to be special. They payed taxes alright, oh yes, sir - to the Ministry of Magic, of course. No, they didn't know in detail what happened with that money.

The Taxpayer's Interest Group, one of these bigmouth congregations that could be found so richly among Muggles, apparently as large as unimportant, started a campaign to put pressure on the Ministry of Magic, claiming a percentage of that money to be delivered for public services. They never got an answer.

Encounters between Muggles and wizards started raising more and more conflicts. The number of complaints, filed from both sides, was growing every day. It seemed a dorado for lawyers, except that so far, all these lawsuits were piling up in some office, due to lack of applicable laws. Everybody and his uncle had a story to tell, while the press reported only the biggest cases, or the most bizarre ones.

A row between neighbours had escalated to a case of arson and bodily injury. A Muggle, mad for years that the dry leaves of his neighbour's tree always came to rest in his own garden, had found out that this neighbour was a wizard. Suspecting some spell which sent the leaves the other way each autumn, one night he had used the axe to solve the problem once and for all. The wizard had come to tell his neighbour what he thought of such a behaviour - through the chimney of course, disappearing the same way after shouting insults. Unfortunately, the fire used for his leaving had caught a pile of newspapers, which in turn had set the room on fire. In this turmoil, not only the Muggle had panicked but also his cat, leaving bruises and clawmarks in his face and neck.

A US citizen filed a complaint against a book store, about two million dollars, because he'd been bitten by a book, and there hadn't been a warning sign *Attention! This book may bite when touched*.

A group of real estate agents announced to sue the Ministry of Magic. They claimed to be the owners of the ground on which the ministry was built, presented old documents, and new ones, and announced to sue every shop in Diagon Alley as soon as this first lawsuit was won.

Maybe if the Muggles had seen immediate benefits for their own life ... But no such luck. *Magical Tours*, for example - a direct connection London - New York, travelling time just a few minutes in the linkport, this could have been the dream of businesspeople and tourists alike, good to raise a signal in the growing waves of upheaval.

Unfortunately, linkports didn't transport Muggles.

They didn't hurt them either, thank God - a Muggle just kept stuck in the gate cabin until the other passengers made room to let him walk out, with moans and shouts at both sides.

Magical Tours were working feverishly to find a solution. What a market, waiting to be opened!

It made Harry think about the problems in his Portkey Programming project. So far, he hadn't managed anything close to a portkey - not for wizards, that was. Wouldn't it be the biggest joke if, by some accident, one of his failures had been just what the *Magical Tours* engineers were searching so desperately?

Fat chance, really.

He visited Ray, who looked happy because he had nothing to do - literally, as the ministry was playing hide-don't-see in public appearance. Harry and his unofficial teacher spent an afternoon with Ray demonstrating how to turn a wooden stool into an ejector seat - okay, not into the air, just to the other end of a large workroom, while Harry tried watching with all his senses.

Ray said, "Don't get me wrong, Harry, but I'd be deeply frustrated if you had already managed - it took me an awful lot of time to become an expert."

"Yeah, sure - although, imagine it would work now, then I could explain why it won't be a surprise ... I can apparate, I can pursue - not my own work either, the credit goes to Voldemort."

"That's a comfort, really, that is ... Try it."

Harry tried, sat down on the stool. It shot forward - just a few feet, enough to let him heel over. Thank God for favours like *aikido* training - falling down from all positions without getting hurt.

He came up. "Well, a portkey's something else, but it might open a new technique - sending things rather than people. What do you think?"

Without answering, Ray moved to the stool, spread his arms for balancing, sat down.

The stool twisted a bit, was motionless again.

Ray stood up. "Not bad, Harry, not at all ... It doesn't stick yet, and your accuracy's poor. But still - you'll set a new speed record, no doubt."

Harry's other attempts were failures altogether. He couldn't even reproduce the initial effect. Maybe it had to be rated an improvement, in the sense of his true goal, at any rate, the frustration was entirely on his side.

He went to *Swashbuckle Sweets* - walking, to have a look at the street scene in the Diagon Alley. He saw nothing unusual, maybe less Muggles than recently.

The front room was empty.

"Yes," said George, "shop customers have dropped almost to zero - hardly a Muggle, few wizards." He grinned. "But don't you worry - mail order's booming. The Muggles don't want to be seen buying in a wizard shop, which doesn't mean they don't want wizard goods ... Sometimes we feel as though running a porn shop - all very secretly, no names, no faces."

They agreed that the small-scale investment had been a lucky decision, just the proper size, already paying off - mail order and wholesale business had exceeded the former shop business volume by far.

Harry wanted to know how the atmosphere felt with Muggle customers.

"There's almost none," said Fred, "no longer - those who still come give a damn for public opinion. And of course, the entire street is wizard territory, so any single Muggle, no matter how upset, would be careful how to behave."

George's face was sombre. "Unless they come in a mob."

* * *

The Poison Ball project offered a lot more fun with Ron. Since they had worked together in a weekend house near Burnham on Sea, with Ron as the visible part and Harry under his Invisibility Cloak, the air was clean between them. And Ron was careful with his remarks about dragons of either shape. Actually, he made none at all recently - about Cho, that was.

Maybe as a result of his tests with granite bullets, and his discovery of the gravity, Harry's score in hitting Ron's water balls jumped up to eight out of ten - good enough to try the real stuff, sulphuric acid from Ron and sodium bicarbonate from Harry.

It worked - provided Harry managed to conjure up real bicarbonate, which was not always the case.

"C'mon," said Ron, "concentrate a bit - sodium bicarbonate's really not the most complex combination, what are you going to do if we start with nitroglycerine?"

"Let's give it a try."

They did - blasting off huts and barns in the former Giants' camp, quickly learning to be very respectful with that stuff, and to size down the balls in order not to create deep craters in the ground.

Then they had to get rid of a squad patrol, sent by Viktor at Dumbledore's order - the explosions could be heard in the school, and nobody had announced this kind of training.

Yes, Harry had trouble with the chemical combination. Only every third ball or so was really explosive, the others did no more than wetting the target.

"Just imagine the molecular structure," said Ron.

"Listen, I do what I can - it just so happens that I'm better in physics than in chemistry."

Ron grinned. "Really? Then please tell me, what's so special in the orbit coordinates of Uranus?"

"I'm talking about power, gravity, impulse ... Ready for a longshot contest?"

"That's unfair."

"Why?"

And Ron was at a loss to argue convincingly why such a contest between him and Harry had to be rated unfair. Yes, Harry had of course inherited a very indecent amount of magical power from Voldemort, but Ron had inherited a clear understanding of planetary orbits,

electron orbits, molecular structures, and such. That's why each of his balls was explosive, only it didn't fly that far.

They were still discussing the issue at lunch. Ron had found his argument - inheriting from parents was okay, learning from teachers was okay, inheriting from Voldemort was unfair.

Hermione listened with little sympathy. "What a crap - you take it where you get it, and then you use it."

"That's your view!" Ron was arguing heatedly. "Mine's a bit more orderly, has a broader basis in ethics, if you get my bearing."

Challenging Hermione ... "What's so ethical in your five grand from Harry?"

Ron flushed. "That's ... Anyway, we were discussing skills, not personal favours."

"So you're better with the stuff, and Harry's better in shooting? Then why don't you combine your strengths - you making the balls, and Harry sending them off?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other, beaming. Their afternoon program was settled.

Harry smiled at Hermione. "Genius at work."

She looked satisfied. "Yes I am. And while on the subject - your next trip's due soon, so get your schedule settled."

The next trip to Haiti ... Harry had collected the results of the previous test pretty quickly, by telling Monsieur Armodéc that there would be only one dinner per test - when he brought the flasks, and that it would be a dinner, nothing else. The man had accepted with a smile, and a shrugging.

The results themselves had been different again. Caprien Marût reported some progress - the same effect as before, although considerably shorter. Monsieur Armodéc also reported the same effect as before, meaning none.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Know what I'm thinking - this Armodéc's drinking the potion, to figure out the taste, and then he's using something else to throw up again ... He never planned to lose his condition."

Hermione looked thoughtful. She knew that Harry wasn't going to watch the man again, knew that something had happened, had some idea, maybe, was clever enough not to stress the subject - fully aware that her deal with Harry ran totally out of proportion. Not that it made her feel guilty, no - just careful.

Then she grinned. "Doesn't matter. Gimme time, Harry - I'll come up with a mix that works instantly, or at least that's adapted instantly so the body has time to respond to it ... This man's not going to fool us all the time."

Of course not. Was nobody supposed to fool Hermione, least of all a tricky old *loup-garou*.

Next morning, sitting at the breakfast table and reading the *Daily Prophet*, Harry saw that the press - Muggles and wizards alike - had their first real sensation. Bank robbery at Gringotts!

Attempted bank robbery, to be precise. Twelve men had entered the building, had taken some hostages - customers in the hall - and had ordered the Goblins to fill the two waiting trucks with gold. The result was a bloodbath. Three hostages dead, two others seriously wounded. All twelve assailants dead, only four of the corpses complete enough to be identified. The number of dead - or wounded - Goblins was unknown.

Since then, as Harry learned a day later, the entrance to Gringotts was guarded by mean-looking Goblin warriors. They detected every Muggle who was trying to enter - nobody knew how - guided him into a room with a metal detector, and let him pass only after delivering everything that might be a weapon. Still worse, while inside, the Muggle was permanently escorted by an armed Goblin.

After the first shock, an outcry went through the Muggle press. Goblins! Mean, evil creatures, the wizards were responsible for them, didn't do their duty, a threat for every innocent citizen!

These news gave Harry reason enough to visit Mr. Morony as well as Mr. Chang. He learned that the traditional business between Goblins, wizards, and Muggles hadn't changed at all, was running as before, contrary to the uproar in public. Which didn't help a bit - the pot was boiling.

The failed bank robbery provided the main topic in the conversation between Harry and Monsieur Armodéc - this and the Goblins' way of handling things. They speculated how Goblins might get along with the Muggles in the future, and Harry told stories of former encounters with Goblins - however being very reluctant to reveal details of his bond with them. He wasn't aware of any rule preventing him to tell, except that Monsieur Armodéc didn't strike him as the trustworthy type either. Not dangerous, not evil, not mean, no real risk - just someone toward whom this topic felt too intimate.

Monsieur Armodéc asked, "What's your guess, how will it continue between the Muggles and the Goblins?"

"I asked some people. They do business as before - and with the other Muggles, I'd say that's it. They won't have another chance to rob a Goblin bank."

"What makes you think so?"

"I've seen them fight, and I've seen them taking measures. They won't allow this happening again."

Monsieur Armodéc looked doubtful. "The wizard currency is based on gold - nothing but gold. Yes, galleons are made of an alloy, but only because pure gold would be too soft for practical purposes. And gold has weird effects on people ... Some hundred years ago, not too far from here, several cultures were extinguished for the greed of gold - the Aztecs, for example. A few dozen warriors, and all they had were muskets ... And now? The Goblins have bows and arrows, like the Aztecs, but today the Muggles come with machine guns and grenades."

Harry shook his head. "No, Sire. The history of the Goblin wars shows what would happen if the Muggles tried. And the Goblins have more than bows."

"Such as?"

"They're not afraid of high technology - not at all. And they have us, the wizards."

* * *

Back in Hogwarts, Harry could read press articles, quoted in the *Daily Echo*, that wizards - for years and years - had made fun of Muggles. They were selling them keys which vanished at the next worst opportunity. They liked to throw items in their path to make them stumble and fall. Another popular game of them was to block wastewater pipes, preferably at weekends, when the repair service was not available or three times as expensive.

The next day, he found new reports of the same kind. Wizards were selling trash on purpose - furniture which broke during installation at home, gold watches which turned to some cheap metal over night, auto polish and other chemicals which etched the paint off, rather than protecting the surface.

Harry visited the dragon camp, to deepen his understanding of dragon minds as well as to hear how Rex might get along with the new atmosphere.

Rex wasn't even aware that the wind had started blowing harsher than ever - with the camp officially counted as Muggle territory, nobody was bothering them. Carrie presented herself friendly but uncooperative. Pretty soon, she would have to guard her eggs. Samuel was more cooperative and more excited - flying with Harry, he had fun with a few close misses of roaring firejets. At least, Harry could ride him again, taking the opportunity to watch the movements of wings, body, tail during the flight - after all, who said that dragons could fly by themselves?

A leading tire manufacturer had to call back more than hundred thousand cars, due to some dangerous failure. The company claimed *damage by wizards* as the reason, denying any responsibility for that.

A leading software manufacturer explained the disastrous state of their main product with sabotage by wizards, offering error fixes together with a disclaimer that they were not to blame for subsequent malevolent changes by the same wizards.

Harry had taken to inform his friends about the latest rumours, giving a summary at breakfast, after having finished with his *Daily Prophet*. Hearing his newest report, Hermione giggled. "My parents use it, in their offices and at home. They're cursing that thing about every other day ... What do you think, maybe they've rudimentary magic, enough for damaging computer programs?"

"Could be," replied Harry. "Technicians in TV stations are ready to believe that everybody can hex a microphone."

Ron grinned. "Hermione, if your parents have read that crap, they'll ask you to fix their softwear next time you're at home ... And why not, should be a piece of cake for a genius witch."

Strangely enough, Hermione couldn't join the laughter of Ron and Harry.

Harry couldn't laugh either - next morning, reading the newspaper, when Ron asked, "Say, what crime did we commit today? ... Switching road signs, so people get lost? ... Hexing alarm clocks, so people don't wake up? - That's what seems to happen with mine."

"No - worse. Today it's hexed toys - teddybears, puppets, that stuff."

Seeing his expression, Hermione stopped grinning. "And what's the effect?"

"They come awake at night, start moving, and frightening the kids ... And of course, the moment someone else comes into the room, one of the parents, they freeze."

Ron no longer had fun. "Uh-oh, that's bad ... I can remember how it was for me, in the dark room, and my toys weren't hexed, that's for sure."

Harry could remember his own fears as a child - real ones, of living people rather than toys, as he'd never possessed anything close to a teddybear. Even so, the thought of a loved toy turning into a threatening creature was enough to send a chill down his spine.

He travelled to Haiti for the new results. Caprien Marût looked friendlier than ever, the raised salary seemed to pay off, and the last potion had turned him back to human shape within fifteen minutes. Monsieur Armodéc - surprise - reported no effects at all, but he offered a drink to discuss the latest news. "Now you see, Harry, how the plot works. After the most secretive wizard has opened up, revealed himself, someone's spreading FUD."

"Fud?"

"Fear, uncertainty, disinformation - although one or the other details's true. But this is a controlled campaign to raise bad feelings among the Muggles. Pretty soon, they'll respond with some action ... Harry, your old friend has placed his worst strike expertly."

Monsieur Armodéc's words were echoing in Harry's mind. If he was right ... Harry spoke with Dumbledore.

"I'm not yet convinced," said the Headmaster. "So far, this so-called press campaign has revealed a few harmless details, and a lot of nonsense. People are jumping the bandwagon - Muggle companies which find this a good opportunity to blame someone else for their own mistakes ... I won't exclude the possibility, but there's more evil in the world than just Voldemort."

"If it's not him, then who else?"

"It's not a single person's doing, that much I'd agree with this Monsieur Armodéc. But why shouldn't there be different people behind, even different intentions? ... Imagine this - some people, with wizards as parents but without magical power of their own, are deeply frustrated, enough to undermine the efforts to keep us hidden. After the first reports, other wizards support the movement - with the best intentions, they want to bring the two worlds together. Then, when the first group realizes that the two sides are trying to come together, they spread rumours of the worst kind, and finally, Muggles start to blame us for everything."

"Erm - sorry, Prof, but it sounds a bit far-fetched for my taste."

Dumbledore nodded. "For mine too - but can you exclude it?"

"Certainly not - not more than I can prove Armodéc's theory."

"You may try another approach ... Don't try to find the culprit - exclude the alternatives which are definitely wrong, or totally unrealistic, and see what's left. For example, I would exclude the Goblins as the guilty ones instantly, and not only because they were the first to suffer."

"The Goblins??" Harry felt perplexed. "They weren't even on my list."

Dumbledore smiled. "Of course, but there are wizards who suspect them - indicating that during the Goblin wars, they used similarly treacherous methods ... It's just an example."

"What would be a proof that it's Voldemort's doing?"

The Headmaster laughed humourlessly. "If he'd appear in a talk show, to describe what the Death Eaters did with Muggles." More seriously, Dumbledore added, "I don't think this will happen - but if there'd be some articles revealing more truth about how wizards treated Muggles, then I might accept the theory."

Not any wiser, Harry spoke with Marie-Christine. "It's possible," she said. "It's even likely - that's all I know."

"Why is it likely for you?"

"For two reasons. A simple scientific principle says, if you don't know what's happening, take the simplest explanation and keep it until it's proven wrong - or right ... From Voldemort's perspective - he has tried everything to make himself the leading power of the wizarding world, and what's the result? - He's unimportant. And now he's trying to destroy this world, because that's all he still can do."

"And how would you prove that?"

Marie-Christine smiled. "Not at all, my dear 'arry."

"Why not? Ain't you interested to know the truth?"

"Sure, to some degree ... But the only proof I can imagine is sending you to him, together with your snake, to ask him - and that's the last thing I'd do. I know better methods to use your time."

"Do you?" But Harry's mind was fixed on the current topic. "Where should I look for him?"

Marie-Christine shrugged. "In some nice, comfortable castle - most likely here in England, after all, that's his home country."

Scanning all English castles, plus those estates which came close enough, was an impossible task - even with a high-speed broomstick like Harry's Steel Wing. Maybe with the help of the Goblins - even Voldemort would need money, had perhaps a need for exchanging galleons

into Muggle money ... He would use Wormtail for that, so the Goblins had to look for someone with a silvery hand ... Nonsense, Wormtail would wear gloves.

If Harry could travel through the void, and if he had a bearing that would mark Voldemort's position, or location ... The thought reminded him that the next step in his Dragon Animagus project, the spheric state, was waiting to be mastered, and he spent time on this.

Giving up your body shape - easier said than done.

Some days later, Harry found articles which described in detail how wizards were using memory spells after encounters in which Muggles had witnessed magical events.

The growling in the Muggle press grew louder and louder. It seemed like bitter irony - a large Muggle industry kept working day and night to invent lies and half-lies, as the only method selling stupid ideas and products, nobody seemed interested in the truth if another version would offer more excitement, or fancy - but memory spells?

The press called it brainwashing.

The initial reports were pretty realistic, describing scenes like Arthur Weasley's daily work. A garbage can couldn't fly - if it did, a watching Muggle was charmed to forget the scene. Then, naturally, thousands of Muggles claimed to be victims of such a brainwashing, after having witnessed something - from flying saucers to naked witches dancing around a cauldron.

Nobody cared about flying saucers, while naked witches made frontpage stories for magazines and TV stations.

Then the first report appeared which described how wizards maintained the habit of sacrificing Muggles for magic rituals.

Then a report appeared which described how wizards used to steal newborn babies, introducing a memory in the parents that the child had died, and sell the babies to the Goblins.

It was the spark to ignite the cloud of hate.

Wizards found themselves attacked in public places. Street gangs devastated wizard shops, with Muggle police watching idly. At night, Muggles came to known wizard homes to shout insults, to break windows, to throw fire bombs. It reminded Harry of the times when Dementors had done something similar.

He visited his step parents - *The Burrow* was undamaged, nobody had come so far. He visited the twins, saw the shop was okay - however, it had a new glass pane. The Diagon Alley appeared locked against Muggles - by wizards from inside, by Muggle police from outside.

Next morning, Harry read about uprising and street fights in the Goblin quarter of Paris. Muggle police had stopped it - but only after Goblin warriors had started shooting Muggles. Several Muggles dead, among them a policeman, many wounded, the casualties at the Goblins' side unknown as usual.

Harry dropped the newspaper, turned to Ron. "There was some fighting in the Goblin quarter of Paris. I'm going to check on Fleur and Bill - now. Please excuse me in classes - family business."

"Wait - wait a minute." Ron was scanning the article, his lips tightening, cheeks pale. He looked up. "Let me come with you."

"I'm not going through linkports - takes too long." Harry saw his friend's expression. "Ron - it's not a good idea to walk through Muggle territory now. I'll jump directly to the house."

"Shit - if I only could apparate." Ron seemed mad at Harry who could apparate, and mad at himself because he couldn't.

Harry touched Ron's arm. "I'll be back soon - most likely, they're okay. I'm sure Fleur was in the house and Bill at Gringotts when it happened."

"Hopefully." Ron nodded. "Okay - come back quickly."

Harry couldn't find the patience required to walk to the Hogwarts Express platform, took his Steel Wing instead. Diving down to the platform, he wondered if it was possible to apparate from mid-air, at full speed on a broomstick. Something to be tried, though not now.

He appeared in front of Fleur's and Bill's house. All blinds closed, probably as a protection against stones thrown by a howling mob. Had they been closed in time?

Walking to the entrance, Harry heard a shout from behind. Until he had turned, his wand was pointing, his body ducked low.

Two figures - Goblin warriors, crossbows ready, aiming at him. Then they seemed to recognize his wand - the bows dropped a bit.

He dropped his wand too, waited for them.

They reached him, examined him. One of them asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting relatives, to check if they're okay. Are you guarding the street?"

The answer was another question. "Who are you?"

"Harry Potter's my name - it's this house here," Harry pointed, "and my relatives are Bill and Fleur Weasley."

He saw the glances to his forehead, registered the change in the warrior's voice. "Harry Potter, you should go back where you came from. This is no good place currently ... The house is empty."

"Empty? - You sure? Do you know where they are?"

The Goblin didn't know.

"Mind if I have a look?"

A shrug - more French than Goblin style. The two warriors were already walking back to the street corner where Harry could see some more Goblins, and some barricades.

The door was closed. No response to his ringing. No echo in his scanning senses.

About to unlock the door with his mental power, Harry became aware that there was a simpler method. Next moment, he had jumped inside.

Some disarray, like from people leaving in a haste. Nothing that would tell him where they had gone. He scanned some more rooms. Nothing broken, no signs of intruders.

What now? The Gringotts residence seemed the most obvious place to check, except Harry had never been there, which meant he had to walk through Muggle streets. But where was Fleur?

The Delacour castle! He jumped from where he stood.

A mean-looking figure inside the stable, only its upper half visible behind the half-height door, a wand pointing at Harry. "Stop! One more step, and you're a fat cloud of smoke."

Harry raised his arms, slowly. "I'm a wizard, and a friend of the Delacours."

"Show your wand!"

He obeyed.

"Come closer - and don't ..."

Rather than walking, Harry apparated the few steps, right to the door, face to face with the man. "Is that proof enough?"

A gasp, and a half-step backward. "Hey - slowly, young man ..."

"Watch out for Muggles - I'm none." Harry turned, walked to the house.

Jean-Baptiste opened the door, his own wand in the other hand. "Oh - 'arry, come in."

"Salu, Jean-Baptiste. Please pardon my untidy arrival - is Fleur here?"

Monsieur Delacour wasn't smiling. "Yes, she's here." He had a strange expression in his face. "Upstairs, 'arry - Elienne's with her."

Harry felt his neck hair rising. "What's with her? Is she okay?"

"She's ..." Fleur's father bit his lips. "She lost her ... she had a miscarriage."

Fleur had been caught by a mob on her way back from shopping. Seeing her state, the men had done nothing, aside from shouting and waving their fists. Not so the women ... They had grabbed her, beaten her, with shouts like, "Now you'll learn what it means to have a baby robbed from the mother."

Harry was standing there, breathing deeply, to master a wave of murderous hate. It wouldn't be helpful to meet Fleur in such a mood. He found Elienne upstairs, felt grateful that she let him alone with Fleur. Steadying himself, he entered the room.

Fleur was lying in bed. Outside, she looked almost normal. Inside, Harry found sorrow, pain, a wordless wondering - and some determination. He stepped closer, took her hand. "Hello, Fleur ... I'm so sorry."

A tiny smile. "Salu, 'arry - good to see you."

"Are you okay? Some other damages?"

"No, I'll be fine, the doctor said ... We'll try it again, 'arry - when this madness is over."

That reminded him. "Where's Bill?"

"I sent him off, to the Goblins." Fleur smiled a bit more. "He was driving me crazy - either busying around me, or muttering dark curses against the Muggles."

The latter came pretty close to Harry's own feelings. "Would you recognize them?"

Fleur shook her head. "Even if I did, what's the sense - it won't bring my baby back. They believed the stories, and it was my bad luck that there were women too ... 'arry, be careful with women, they're not shying off from anything, but I think I told you so in the past, didn't I?"

The joke was too bitter, or none at all. "Fleur, can I do something for you?"

"Yes, 'arry. Find the one who's responsible for these horror stories." A sparkling was in Fleur's eyes. "And if possible, bring him to me. If not, kill him as slowly as you can."

"You're not serious, are you?"

Fleur grimaced. "Don't count on it ... Okay, 'arry, just kill him. What I had in mind would be asked too much - you're a man, you cannot be as cruel as a woman, in particular not as a Veela."

Harry swallowed. "You're probably right. Okay, I'll try ... Something else?"

"Er, could you find Gabrielle and send her - no, better you escort her on her way to the castle. It's completely within wizard territory, but I'd feel better."

"No problem. Er - should I tell her?"

"Yes - if you don't tell her why she should come home, she'll imagine still worse things until she's here. Can you do that? ... Thank you, 'arry."

Downstairs, he had a short conversation with Fleur's parents, learned that the situation around the castle looked quiet, and that the man in the stable was more a precaution, and more self-appointment than order from Monsieur Delacour.

Then Harry had to wait until lunch before he could meet Gabrielle - walking into Beauxbatons classes hadn't been his intention. Gabrielle took the news without losing much of her composure, in particular when hearing that Fleur herself was okay. It made Harry wonder if Gabrielle would have welcomed the baby as much as anybody else.

Ron looked consternated, Hermione still more. Harry told them about Fleur's request. Hermione said, "You know who'd be glad to help you in that, don't you? - Doing it slowly, I mean."

"You mean Rahewa?"

"Who else?"

"No thanks. She's just twelve - and besides, if Armodéc's right, she cannot do it."

"What do you mean?"

"He thinks it's Voldemort's doing."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, then at Harry. "And what do you think?"

"I'm not sure. But I'll follow Marie-Christine's advice."

For a short instant, the name raised a peculiar expression in the two faces looking at Harry. Then Hermione asked, "What did she say?"

"She said I should find him and ask him. That's exactly what I'll do - as soon as I have an idea how, and when."

* * *

Into the atmosphere of violent turmoil outside and tense quietness inside Hogwarts, Harry received an invitation to a shareholder meeting of *Groucho Spectors*. It came with the postal service of *Magical Tours*, the meeting would take place in their production building in Santa Monica, California, USA.

Travelling through Muggle territory ... Harry would wear his light-grey suit, common enough to look like an ordinary Muggle businessman. He hadn't seen yet this new building they had rented, bigger than the previous one, but he could jump to the hotel, take a cab from there. The only trick was to appear unnoticed in, or in front of, the hotel.

Harry remembered an esplanade, bordered by trees. Shouldn't be a problem, weren't the Californians famous for ignoring everything that happened in the streets, from killings, over robbery and rape, to figures appearing out of nowhere?

Safety first. Harry jumped under the protection of his Invisibility Cloak, took it off after checking around.

His suitcase made him look normal. Cash money, rather than a credit card, did the opposite. The reception clerk looked detestful. "You're a wizard?"

"Hey, man - looking for trouble?"

Mugglese was a helpful language. The clerk's attitude changed dramatically - Harry had the feeling now he was confused with a gangster, another social group which maintained the habit of paying cash.

What a world, in which a gangster seemed better off than a wizard.

The cab driver kept talking a lot, in an angry tone, which was fine with Harry since he didn't understand Spanish, although the word *magia* could be heard more than once, indicating the man's topic. When Harry paid him, the man smiled - probably a sign that the tip had been too high.

Sylvie smiled too, and Jesamine also. Three out of four ain't bad, thought Harry, and he was right in his calculation.

Cho Chang, chief executive officer of *Groucho Sectors Ltd.*, the company holding the majority of *Narita Sectors*, opened the meeting, tough businesswoman that she was. "Ladies and gentleman, today's meeting has two major topics on the agenda. First, there's the lawsuit from *Helix* - these bastards have filed an accusation of monopoly misuse, illegal usage of technology, violation of the Customs Technology Act, and violation of some patents they're holding. Then, we have to ..."

Jesamine turned to Harry. "Are you informed about the details?"

"No."

Jesamine looked at Cho. "Then maybe we should explain it to him - how could he express a useful opinion without that?"

Cho didn't think so, mostly because she wasn't waiting for Harry's opinion, useful or not. But she said, "We'll come to that ... Our second topic is the strategy paper from *Narita*, and the question they've asked us - how to deal with the current situation between Muggles and wizards ... Okay, let's start with *Helix* ..."

Cho turned to Harry. "They returned the stolen equipment - except that it was badly damaged, almost useless. Obviously, they tried some re-engineering, taking apart everything to figure out how it works ... They transferred a quarter of a million, announced as the first instalment, only the second never arrived. Well, since in the meantime that ..."

She stopped with a small gasp, almost inaudible in the soft pop with which Harry had disappeared from his seat, her initial surprise giving room to something for which *burning fury* seemed a pretty inadequate term.

Sylvie recovered first. "Where did he go?"

Jesamine grinned. "I'd say - Mr. Armstead can only hope he's not in his office - or maybe he can only hope he is, might be less expensive that way."

Cho tried to look undisturbed, suggested to continue anyway - with little success in the first, and none in the second attempt. The three women waited a few minutes, two of them with an

expression like children at Christmas morning, the third looking more like the Chinese version of Santa Claus, after someone had stolen the reindeers and all presents.

And pop - back he was, dropping a plastic bag on the table, pushing it wordlessly toward Cho.

Sylvie squeaked like a ten-year-old. "Harry, what's in there?"

No answer.

Jesamine looked a bit bewildered. "Harry, is this money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

No answer.

Jesamine turned to Cho. "Do you know what's up with him?"

Cho's cheeks were burning red. "We have an agreement ..." Every word came out as though from a high-pressure steam pot on which someone, only for instants, was opening a valve. "In business meetings, Harry's restricted to answering *Yes* or *No*, nothing else."

Jesamine stared at her, at Harry, back at Cho.

Sylvie steadied her face, wiping off a grin. "Okay - with respect to the latest developments, I demand a break in this meeting, a time-out." Without waiting for an answer, she turned to Harry. "Now it's unofficial, so we can talk ... Harry, what's in there?"

"About two hundred grand - that's all Armstead had in his safe. I said it's okay, and helped him a bit with a cover story."

"What cover story?"

"To explain how the money had disappeared. I placed some nitroglycerine in the safe - it's amazing what explosives can do in a narrow space, even if there's steel and stone around ... When I left, the remnants of his office were on fire, and this watering system from the ceiling had started."

Sylvie giggled. Jesamine asked, "Did you mention the lawsuit?"

"Er, yes, indirectly. I offered him a bid."

"That they'll lose? - That's risky, Harry, the courts here have crazy ideas about such nonsense accusations."

Harry shook his head. "Not about the outcome, and I didn't threaten him to drop it, you know, this would've been a direct intervention from my side in *Groucho* business, which I'm not supposed to do ...

Sylvie and Jesamine exchanged a glance, careful not to look at another member in this round.

"... No - I just said, *Helix* will need two dollars in damage repair, for every dollar they might win from *Groucho* in court."

"No direct intervention, huh?" Sylvie started to laugh, joined a moment later by Jesamine. Harry was careful to keep expressionless, while Cho didn't know how to look, was trying to hold her face neutral, without success.

Then Cho asked, "Can we resume our meeting?"

"Wait a minute." Jesamine turned to Harry. "The *Narita* people have a problem - two, actually ... One's the picture control unit - if they build it with Muggle technology, the picture's sometimes jerking, and has a tendency to tremble. The other's the luminous gas in the spector sphere - the best they can come up with is a black and white picture, except it's red rather than white and nothing instead of black. So the only realistic chance is to use magic."

Harry looked baffled. "So? - I thought that was clear, that was the idea from the very beginning."

Cho was talking with him! "Sure it was - only that things have changed. If they use magic now, spectors will have such a bad reputation that nobody's going to buy them ... At least, that's what they expect."

"I see."

Cho snapped, "It's still break - you can talk freely."

"Freely, yes ... What are you going to do?"

"We have no solution. The gas - nobody can distinguish our gas from theirs, but the control unit ... Their own is an electronic board with these tiny pieces, transistors, resistors, or whatnot, while ours is just a large crystal that emits the proper pulses - a look into the device is enough for an expert to know it's wizard technology."

Harry laughed.

"What's so funny?" Cho looked angry.

"Wizard technology - that sounds like a joke in itself, because ..." Harry stopped, remembering his own experiments with single and double-layered charms in items - stools, for example. "But I think that's the solution."

"Huh?"

"Wizard technology - that's the keyword." He beamed at Cho, maybe a bit more on purpose than he really felt. "*Narita* builds electronic boards, with some crap, as cheap as possible, just with a crystal somewhere. These boards are sold to some Muggle company. The company tunes them, then sells them back to *Narita* - except that this company has a sub-contractor at the wizard side which does the real tuning in the crystal. And publicly, *Narita* lets the message drop that their spies have found out how the wizards do it, and their scientists have found out how it can be reproduced with plain Muggle technology."

"Of course - there are lots of Muggle companies just waiting for such an order, especially now."

Harry grinned. "Maybe not, but it can be founded. I know a man who'd do it - actually, he lives in London - an immigrant, has made some fortune in trade, married, has a daughter ..." He stopped, seeing in some faces that there was no need to continue.

Sylvie and Jesamine, both fighting to steady their faces, had the good sense to keep quiet, waiting for Cho's response.

Cho was chewing her lips.

Harry said, "You've found the keyword, and your father will make it working. He's a master of deception, isn't he?"

The sarcasm in Cho's voice was heavy. "Oh yes, and he'll burst of pride that his daughter has inherited that ... Okay, break's over - let's resume."

For the rest of the meeting, Harry kept silent. It was no problem - fifteen minutes later, the shareholders of *Groucho Sectors* were officially dismissed by the CEO whose name was so similar to this title, not longer either.

Harry walked to Cho. "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

The answer came instantly. "Did you stop having affairs with other women?"

"No comment."

"Well, then ... Bye, Harry."

* * *

He would have liked to do something big, and violent, for example tearing apart the complete *Helix* building. But they had payed, so Harry simply returned to Hogwarts - jumping into his hotel room, paying the bill, walking around the corner until he was out of sight, and jumping from there to the train platform. His business suit was too light for the weather in England, he had to warm himself by walking faster and being angry.

Next morning, Harry's mood wasn't much better, thanks to a night shorter than usual - arriving late, not finding the bed first, not finding sleep then. But the headlines in the *Daily Prophet* wiped off his anger, to be replaced by deep concern.

It had a name already - the *Tyler Massacre*. Tyler, a town in Texas, USA, remarkable only for its wizarding school - one of four in the United States - and suddenly the topic in conversations around the world. Muggles had come to the school, so-called patriots, had declared it a place of evil and dark magic, and had demanded to inspect the buildings and everything inside. The school, currently hosting more than a few parents, had refused. The Muggles had come back - armed. In Texas like anywhere else in the USA, this meant the full range from a .22 pistol to a light machine gun, from a baseball bat to bazookas and handgrenades.

Of course, the people in the school had refused stronger than before, had ordered the Muggles to disappear, otherwise they would call the wizard police. Then someone had started to shoot. Then the other Muggles had joined the shooting.

Within seconds, about two dozen wizards were dead or seriously wounded. The others had retreated into the buildings, and from there, they had returned the fire with their own collection of spells.

Until the National Guard arrived, almost two hundred people were killed, most of them Muggles.

Their casualties resulted mainly from three types of spells. The Killing Curse turned out the rarest. More had been hit by rocks or other heavy items flying through the air, still more had died under projectiles similar to the explosive balls of Harry and Ron. And quite some had died from a broken neck - lifted high into the air by a spell, and then dropped.

It was a gruesome demonstration what to expect when an encounter between Muggles and wizards went out of control. Harry let the newspaper drop. "They have a new civil war in the States," he said.

As expected, Hermione was quicker to grab the newspaper, so Harry informed Ron what had happened in Tyler.

Hermione looked up. "Lunatics, all of them together. Texans ..." Her voice made clear that for her, there wasn't an exception from this rule.

Ron's head jerked up. "So? - What would you do if there'd be people here ..."

The rest of this angry remark was lost on Harry who had jumped up to talk with the only Texan he knew personally, the one who had been included in Hermione's statement so purposefully.

He found Samantha in the hut, together with Lousy which, today, had no luck with his leather ball. "Sam, did you read the newspaper?"

"No, why? - Did they find out that us wizards are responsible for this mess of a weather?"

Harry told her about the Tyler Massacre.

Strangely enough, Samantha's comment sounded almost like a duplicate of Hermione's.

"That's what you'd have to expect from them people, Harry. *Don't mess with Texas* - what a crap. It makes me sick just hearing it ... First shoot, then ask, that's been the rule there, and they're even proud of it. And of course, there's no difference between Muggles and wizards, they all think the same - except the ones use guns and the others their wands ... I was always wondering why I left, to come into a country where people call this icy wind good weather - I guess I've found an answer."

"Couldn't the same happen here? You were the first to point out that the situation could blow up any time, when the camp people were still around."

"But we managed, didn't we? ... I'm awfully glad the firearms regulations are so tight here. Harry. In the States, a sixteen-year-old can enter a store and buy an automatic rifle - all he needs is a pile of dollars. While here ... Someone with a double-barrel shotgun counts as heavily armed."

Harry had his doubts. Samantha was certainly right, from a statistical point of view, but someone had shot at him right here. Okay, he'd seen some guns in California too, but some gangsters in business were one thing, not their current problem, while a crowd of Muggles coming to Hogwarts ...

After lunch, Harry picked Rahewa for a patrol out of schedule, to scan the few survivors of the camp people. They saw nothing unusual - except some new tents. It was a bit disquieting.

Supper came with a little delay, because the Headmaster had an announcement. What he said was short and to the point. Upon further notice, the students had to keep inside the school area, of course with the exception of squad members. In addition, Dumbledore announced a meeting of teachers and squad members after supper.

Thinking about the Headmaster's instructions, Harry was fighting with a conflict of ethics. No - not ethics, they couldn't conflict, could they? Whatever - okay, it was a conflict between interests and ethics.

Students had to stay in the school - which meant, Harry wasn't supposed to jump through the world. Squad members were allowed to be outside, and he himself was a squad member. Did this mean he was authorized to do more outside than flying patrol?

Not according to the obvious meaning of what Dumbledore had said. But then, the Headmaster wasn't famous for selecting his words carelessly. Was this a hidden door for him?

Harry looked to the teachers' table, studying the faces he saw. Concern, worry, only Snape's expression showing something like bitter amusement. Of course - this man had been fighting dark wizards for so long, and now he was confronted with a totally unexpected danger.

Then Dumbledore looked up, met Harry's stare for a second, looked away. Had there been a very, very short smile?

When in doubt, assume yes.

The other students had left, the remaining audience gathered closer. Dumbledore kept seating. "My dear friends, our meeting has one topic - what to do, and how to proceed so that what happened in Tyler won't happen here at our school ... I used the time to talk with my colleagues in Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to hear how's the situation with them. Here's what I've found ..."

Beauxbatons was guarded tightly - from wizard police inside, from Muggle police outside. After the events in the Goblin quarter of Paris, the French governments - Muggles and wizards alike - had taken measures. Hordes of French citizens, marching through streets in some uproar, were nothing new. Sometimes university students, sometimes farmers, sometimes civil servants, always furious about this or the other. In the past, the issues had been money or tax laws, now it was magic, this seemed the only difference.

Durmstrang looked quiet. In a way, wizards were nothing new for Bulgarians - hadn't they always known they existed? And these horror stories, who would believe them? If you wanted to hear a real horror story, listen to vampire tales - and wizards were helpful against vampires.

"So back to ourselves," said Dumbledore. "How can we prevent a massacre at Hogwarts?"

Samantha said, "The Tyler statistics are about four dead Muggles on one dead wizard. That means, not shooting back reduces the casualties by eighty percent."

Some people looked at her with disbelief.

Samantha shrugged. "That's simple math."

Dumbledore asked, "And how to reduce the other twenty percent?"

Lupin said, "If we keep inside the buildings, just making sure nobody comes in, they have no targets ... Then we wait until they go."

McGonagall asked, "And if they don't go?"

"Then we notify the Muggle police, or army, or whatever, that they come to protect us."

Trelawney asked, "And if they don't come?"

It was Samantha who answered. "Then we have a civil war, reason enough for another meeting and new rules."

Binns surprised the audience. "If they come, I'll go to them and talk with them - they can shoot at me what they want, it doesn't matter."

Just doing nothing - this idea didn't find unanimous acclaim, in particular from the squad members. But the thick walls of Hogwarts were indeed the best shelter against an angry mob with shotguns, as Dumbledore pointed out. And this meeting was not planned as a council with one voice, one vote, so after a while, the Headmaster took his decision. "Alright, if they ever come, we'll just wait them out. Until then, squad patrols all day long - even at the cost of classes missed."

With this, he had the squad members at his side - until Viktor presented a schedule which made clear that they would miss very few classes. Two twin patrols alternating in the morning, two in the afternoon, two in the evening, and suddenly it was a lot of work, not at all the large pool of idle reserve teams they had expected.

For several days, all they recognized were a still growing number of tents, highly unusual at this time of the year, and very suspicious.

During that time, Harry read an article about a Muggle politician who demanded that all wizards should deliver their wands, and receive them back only after some examination, and signing of some papers - almost the same regulations as for firearms.

The next day, the *Daily Prophet* quoted a Muggle professor who had said, "According to this logic, all English citizens had to deliver their cars. The number of casualties from car accidents per year is higher than from all shootings and all magic together."

This professor had been very unwise to say that in public. As the press reported, since then he was exposed to harassments of all kinds.

Then Harry had a visitor.

It was Sally, the Muggle girl. "Harry, I'm here because you did me a favour, only one," she smiled, "but I pay my debts ... I've heard something - the weirdest people from the entire country are gathering ... They think this is the right place and the right time to play with guns - with real targets. They believe nobody'd care because you're wizards ... They could be right."

"What do you mean - the weirdest people?"

"Professional anarchists, scatterbrains, weapon fanatics, neo-nazis - that kind. It's not a bunch of farmers with shotguns - and they give a damn whether the stories about you wizards are true, it's just the right opportunity for them to make their worst dreams come true."

"But why just here - why Hogwarts?"

Sally shrugged. "Don't ask me what's driving these terrorists. Maybe some of them have been in the camp - probably so. It's pretty remote ... Harry, these neo-nazis play war every weekend in some forest, they're only waiting to do it with live ammunition."

Harry felt alarmed. "Sally, thank you for that - I really appreciate it ... Say, do you want to tell our Headmaster personally?"

No, she didn't want, not at all. "You may do that, Harry, and please leave out my name - if these maniacs would hear about my coming, I'd be in bad trouble ... No, I'll leave right now, and I'll use another way, before ... Harry, take them seriously, that's all I'm saying ... Bye."

Harry went straight to the Headmaster, told him what he'd learned from Sally, describing her as "a girl I once cured from a sunburn."

Dumbledore called in another meeting with the same round, let Harry report the news, then asked if their strategy was still valid.

Lupin said, "So it's probably a bit more than shotguns. But even so, the walls can protect us, as long as people stay off from windows."

Samantha said, "There's still another difference. Just in case it doesn't work out as planned - may nobody believe these are righteous citizens, misguided by some articles in the yellow press. If the information's correct, these are criminals, potential killers."

Dumbledore looked at her sharply. "What are you trying to imply, Samantha?"

"If there's a mob of so-called normal citizens - I never met such an animal, but never mind ... If there's such a mob, you can sometimes talk with them. And sometimes they see reason. But

these right-wings - every word with them is wasted." Samantha met Dumbledore's glance. "That's what I'm saying."

Two days later, the morning patrol returned with alarming news. Cars - quite a lot, approaching Hogwarts, most of them off-roaders, all of them full to the last seat.

Hogwarts responded. Heavy blinds appeared at the outside windows. Viktor gathered the complete squad on, or close to, the tower platform which had worked so well in the Battle of Hogwarts. The tactical staff, including Binns and Samantha, positioned themselves in the Entrance Hall.

For a while, nothing happened. Then the squad could watch how cars arrived around the tents outside the restricted zone. Viktor, armed with binoculars, reported that many of these figures looked like soldiers, except they weren't - fatigues or combat dresses, but all of them different. And firearms.

Then a large group walked toward Hogwarts. They stopped almost exactly at the borderline of the restricted zone, marked by the signs. Was this a good omen?

"Binns's going to talk with them," said Viktor. He couldn't see it yet, nor could anyone else here on the tower - but there was a considerable improvement over the situation a year before. Viktor - no, Hermione had bought some cellular phones, had taken pains to buy a sufficient supply of monocells for them. Now Hermione stood in the Entrance Hall, talking over the phone with Viktor.

Then Binns appeared below, floating toward the group. They watched him reach the people, apparently talking with them. Moments later, they saw how he turned to float back to the building.

Having listened to the phone report, Viktor said, "They want to talk with a living human ... They didn't accept him as a valid commissioner." In Viktor's face, amusement was fighting with concern.

Listening again, he kept silent for a moment. Obviously, the tactical staff downstairs was discussing the situation.

Then Viktor said, "Samantha's going."

The squad leader's lips tightened, expressing pretty much what Harry was feeling. He remembered Samantha's words, how it was a waste of time to talk with them ... And now she was going to do just that.

The figure of the Texan ex-deputy appeared below. She was walking straight toward the waiting group.

Then she had reached them.

Viktor, binoculars at his eyes, was reporting. "She's talking ... Seems as if there are several people with which - she's shaking her head ... Oh no ..."

In the broad daylight, Harry hadn't seen a flash. But he saw how Samantha fell down.

It was no slow movement - nothing of the collapsing when a body was hit by a stunning spell. Samantha fell like cut by an axe, was already lying on the ground when the report reached Harry's ears.

14 - Resistance

Into Viktor's agonized groan, Harry was already moving. Maybe it turned out useless, maybe the crumpled figure of Samantha was just a dead corpse, but you couldn't be sure, not with something as unprecise as gunshots.

Harry's hand grabbed his friend's shoulder. "Ron - I'm going to catch her. One nitro ball over their heads - not too big, for God's sake, nothing to hurt her ... And then smoke balls, clouds, everything - c'mon!"

Ron's ball came up.

Harry sent it forward, downward, feeling deeply grateful for the reliable quality of his friend's nitroglycerine balls, for the fact that they had trained multi-layer charms so hard, until Ron could master balls with a fuse inside ... The ball, smaller than Lousy's leather ball, shot away, raced toward the group, seemed almost too far behind when it blew up with a flash, the resonant bang reaching the tower more than a second later.

No, hadn't been too far behind, quite the opposite! The group down at the ground hadn't recognized yet the squad members high up on the tower, seemed to believe they were attacked from behind - they had gone down, seeking cover from an unknown attacker, were looking around.

"And now smoke balls - cover me!" Harry was about to jump upward.

Ron's face showed a desperate grimace. "I don't know how to make smoke balls! - I'll come with you - water and nitro's all I can offer." He was mounting his Firebolt.

No time to argue ...

"Harry - I can make smoke balls, if you can shoot them." Ginny's voice sounded strangled, her eyes wide open, her face - scared as hell, and still ...

"Okay - c'mon."

Jumping, Harry realized that Rahewa was already up, hadn't waited for an invitation - small wonder, there hadn't been any, never would have been. Too late.

"Now, Ginny."

It took her a second, in mid-air and busy with the accelerating Firebolt, then a black shape erupted from her wand, shot forward, barely faster than the speeding broomsticks.

Not round at all. Didn't matter ... Harry's spell grabbed it, sent it forward like kicked from a Giants' leg, right into the middle of the large spot in which figures were pressed to the ground, looking here and there, almost aiming toward each other.

Harry found the time for shooting a steam ball - water until it reached the ground, exploding in a cloud, soft compared to other means, but the steam kept hanging in the air for a few seconds, blocking the view, and this was all that counted now ... And if the heat would burn

some faces, if the steam was peeling skin from their cheeks, blinding some eyes, even better ...

Then Ginny's next pile of smoke came out, quickly slowing down in the air, and Harry sent it forward.

Ron wasn't bothering with water balls - he left this type completely to Rahewa, who kept sending one after the other onto the figures closest to Samantha's body, with astonishing speed and great accuracy. Ron was shooting nitro balls, small ones, aimed toward the air above the spot, keeping them flat, blowing up with impressive bangs, blasting the dark smoke across the area.

Harry dropped all thoughts of balls and guns. He dived down - a short glance along the closest figures in their army dresses, none of them an immediate threat, no gun aiming at him, not with the wet bullets that came every few seconds from Rahewa, then his attention was at Samantha.

Never before had he dismounted that fast. He was at her, sensing, finding a small, wavering flame of spirit in that motionless body. Blood on her chest, astonishingly little. He moved his hands under the bundle ...

Samantha opened her eyes. "Harry - you're really mental to come - too late, I'm afraid." A shadow of a smile.

"Shut up." Harry took her, praising every minute of hard training with Kenzo and others - Samantha was no lightweight, felt heavy, was lifted nonetheless, was over his shoulder - a step, and he was back at his Steel Wing ... And now jump! No matter if double weight and more, and this wonderful broomstick did, Harry was up, just enough to steer over ground, keeping low to use the cover from the whirling clouds ... Another bang behind him, and now sharper, lighter reports - so they had finally started shooting.

The small flame of life in the body on his shoulder seemed to flicker, was about to fade.

"STAY ALIVE!"

Harry was shouting with his mouth, with his mind, with all his senses, except those required to steer toward the entrance.

Something picked at his back, a moment of pain like from a piercing needle.

He ignored it - whatever it was, nothing serious, no part of his mind free to check, not while fighting to keep a weak spirit alive, and to reach the door - where a figure was watching, saw him coming, opened the door just at the right moment to let him pass, fly through, passing the Entrance Hall, reaching the Great Hall, passing it also, dismounting already close to the staircase leading to Madam Pomfrey's rooms.

"Don't you dare to die!" Harry stormed upstairs, his mind aching from a desperate grip at a small flame which would have been gone moments before, had it been on its own, his muscles unaware that they were working beyond their limit, somehow, somewhere mustering the strength for a few more seconds until ...

The door to Madam Pomfrey's territory, he was inside, the doctor witch there, had a table ready.

Harry bent forward, caught Samantha's weight in both arms, laid her on the table - not too gently, not when a head banging onto wood was less important than his mental grip around the tiny remnants of life in this body.

"... okay - leave her with me."

"Can't ... Sh'd die ... Have to keep her." He couldn't say more, and only with pauses in which his mind was too busy to speak.

It seemed enough. Madam Pomfrey lost no time, was tearing open the blouse.

Harry closed his eyes, hands around Samantha's head, fully concentrating on the task to keep this body alive, to hold caught of a tiny spirit which seemed to wait for the first instant of missing attention to disappear.

Someone pushed a chair under him. He sat down, then the world around him was gone.

The weak spirit seemed amused. *'Harry, why bother? There's a new world waiting on the other side.'*

'No.'

'Ah, c'mon - don't be so stubborn. You're violating the rules, you know that? I'm supposed to be gone, for quite a while now.'

'I don't know such a rule.'

"Of course you don't - you're alive. This rule isn't made for living people."

'You can tell me a lot.'

The spirit continued arguing more - its body had ceased to function, was no longer a base of existence, a space in which to live. Harry behaved obsessively, to no avail, sooner or later, he would have to admit ...

'Then use a sphere - it's bodiless.'

The spirit found this very funny, seemed to laugh, teasing him. In an inexplicable way, this spirit appeared totally different from Samantha, had its own perception of things. Later, thinking back at this episode, Harry's only explanation was - he hadn't talked with Samantha who was lying unconscious, her mind somewhere else, no, this animated dispute had been fought with a deeper layer. And this understanding would open a door ...

But here and now, Harry kept ignoring commands and pleas, arguments and jokes, desperately holding this little bit of life which was very ungraceful, not appreciating at all how he refused to let go.

'Harry, you just can't see reason.'

'I've heard that before.'

The spirit seemed to listen. *'Well, then, for the sake of peace, and because things are looking somewhat better now - I won't go, Harry, you can let it drop.'*

Was it a deception?

But a moment later, he felt a rush of power in his opponent - partner? - a wave of new energy, nothing to get excited about, just enough to be alive without his help.

'It's okay now - thanks anyway.'

Slowly, carefully, as though releasing cramps in his mind, Harry lowered his mental grip, to come awake, opening his eyes.

Madam Pomfrey, in a white overall, pretty blood-stained, working at Samantha's chest which also was bloodier than before, with an opening considerably larger than the small hole from the bullet.

Then she registered Harry's open eyes. "So you're back ... That just fits - she's back too."

"How's she?" With surprise, Harry noticed his trouble at speaking, his tongue feeling too heavy to be moved.

"The worst is done. I'm not really a surgeon, but I had to open the chest ... Normally it's impossible, because that's no high-pressure room here - the lung wings deflate instantly, and that's it, after a few seconds. But here - don't ask me how, but she made it through ... I've closed the chest a moment ago, and the rest's common business - don't worry about all that blood, looks worse than it is."

Harry nodded, too tired to speak.

Madam Pomfrey examined him closer. "Hold on, Harry - I'm with you in a minute, when this mess is cleaned a bit."

"Hm fine." Probably so, except he couldn't even come up from this chair.

Then Madam Pomfrey stood before him, a glass in her hand. "Drink that, Harry."

"Hs it?"

"Something to keep *you* alive - you have a magic burn-out syndrome, the worst I've ever seen, gives me some idea how Samantha managed."

Harry sipped a bit - enough to find the strength for more, to gulp it down. A taste like chocolate, only burning stronger, maybe like chocolate with brandy in a fifty-fifty mix, nothing he'd try voluntarily.

His tongue seemed to work again. "Hot stuff."

"I bet." Madam Pomfrey examined his back. "Okay, Harry, come over ... sit down here, drop your shirt."

"What? ... Why?"

The witch laughed. "In case you didn't notice - there are a few holes in your back - just birdshot, by the looks, but your shirt's done ... Can you manage, or shall I cut it from your back?"

Harry took off the shirt, examined it while Madam Pomfrey was busy in his back. He twisted when a short pain came through, to hear an angry, "Keep still!"

Clank ... Clank, and a third clank. Next moment, the witch showed him a surgical tray with three tiny pellets. "That's it - I closed the holes, it wasn't deep ... And now, Mr. Potter, you'll lie down for a while."

"No - no time." Harry tried to rise, suprised about his staggering feet.

Madam Pomfrey grabbed him, moved him into the next room, to a bed. "It's not because of your back, that's harmless, but a burn-out syndrome - I'd send you into your own bed, except you won't stay there. Lie down."

It wasn't a bad idea, just to lie down for a moment, on this wonderfully smooth ... Harry was off before finishing the thought.

* * *

He came awake from a gentle hand at his shoulder, and from Madam Pomfrey's voice. "Harry - get up, it's suppertime, and some food's more important for you now."

Suppertime? He had slept through lunch and through the afternoon. Then he was fully awake. "How is she?"

"She's fine ... No, she's sleeping now - try later ... Yes, I'll let you in." The witch smiled. "Get yourself something to eat."

Madam Pomfrey was right. Until Harry had reached his dormitory, to change into a new shirt, his stomach had already started groaning in protest. But something else felt more important, although the Gryffindor table was the right place for both. And there they were, alive, apparently unhurt, thank God - Ron, Ginny - where was Rahewa??

"She's okay, Harry, we reached the tower without being hit. How's Samantha? - Where have you been?"

"Samantha's alive - she'll be okay in a while. I had an - er, burn-out syndrome, whatever that is, from helping her ... Where's Rahewa?"

"I think she'll be here any minute - calm down, she's okay, really, nobody's hurt for all I know, except Samantha, of course ... Burn-out? What's that?"

Hermione answered. "Magic burn-out - something like a circulatory collapse, except it's the magical power, not the body ... Pretty dangerous, and highly unusual." She glanced toward Harry. "What did you do?"

"I told her not to die." Harry explained a bit more about Samantha's injury, and what Madam Pomfrey had done while he was holding this spirit, draining all his power.

Hermione looked at him, looked at the table. "I'm ... I'm glad she's going to make it ... She was crazy, walking out to these bastards. The others tried to stop her - Lupin, McGonagall, but she said - she said you never know, unless you've tried."

Ron made a solemn face, and his voice resonant. "A woman has to do, what a woman has to do."

Harry giggled. "Yes, that's her ... Tell me - what's going on now, how does it look outside?"

Ron explained that the Muggles had placed themselves in a ring around the school, keeping cover, shooting every now and then - it could be heard even from they were sitting, when a shot hit one of the steel blinds protecting the windows.

But the Muggles kept distance.

"At the beginning, they tried to come closer." Ron looked satisfied. "Then Lupin and Snape sent them a greeting, and I helped with a few nitro balls. Since then, they keep where they are ... It's a bunch of cowards, really - but of course, one step outside, and you'd be dead."

Harry wasn't listening with full concentration. Rahewa hadn't arrived yet, reason enough to feel worried. He interrupted his friend. "Say, when did you see ..." He stopped himself - here she came, indeed alive and unhurt, although not looking well. With any other girl, Harry would have sworn she had stopped crying a minute before, but Rahewa - impossible, except - no, there was no way it might have to do with her mother ...

And now she saw him - and twisted!

Harry dropped his fork, was up, reached her. "Rahewa - you're okay?"

"Harry ..." She had really cried, would do it again any second. "Lousy ... They shot Lousy - he's dead."

"How ..." He stopped, walked with Rahewa to the staircase, out of sight. "What happened?"

"After we were back in the school, I ..." Rahewa sobbed. "It took me a while until I remembered that nobody had taken care of him. Then I went into the Entrance Hall, but the teachers didn't allow me to open the door." She looked pleadingly. "I wanted to call him, Harry, but ... Then I went into the southern tower, to check from an embrasure. Professor Snape's holding guard there - he said ..."

Rahewa's voice broke, steadied again. "He saw it. Then I wanted to have a look, and he asked me if I'm sure, and I said yes, and he said but only a moment, before they start shooting at us ... I'm ... I just didn't think of him in time." She was crying again.

Harry took her. "Don't blame yourself. We've been too busy saving Samantha, and we did ... I think she forgot too, was too preoccupied with her job in the Entrance Hall."

They kept in the staircase for a while, none of them showing any intention to be seen in public with reddened eyes.

Then Harry gathered himself, which felt simpler from one second to the next while burning rage was superseding sorrow and misery. He cleared his own eyes, touched the girl. "C'mon, Rahewa ... Let me straighten your face."

Smoothing the swollen skin, he said, "When this is over, we'll bury him near Hagrid. That's the best company for a dead dog I can imagine."

Rahewa looked at him. "What are you going to do, Harry?"

"What do you mean?"

The dark eyes stared at him. Then she said it aloud. "You know what I mean."

Harry nodded. "I'm not sure yet."

"Let me come with you."

Harry took his time, to recheck what he had checked already before. "Not this time, Rahewa - mostly because you have no Invisibility Cloak, and without that, it would be a suicidal task, even if you'd paint your Firebolt as black as my Steel Wing ... And there's another reason - you'd kill them, but you're too young for that."

"No I'm not."

Harry didn't smile. "Not for doing it, I know. But for living with it."

They returned into the hall - Harry hadn't finished eating, and Rahewa hadn't started at all. When he sat down, Ginny asked, "What's with Rahewa?"

"Lousy's dead. He's been shot, and she was blaming herself for not thinking of him in time."

Ginny turned to her brother. "Ron - if you enter a tower and watch through the embrasures, I'm sure you'll find that they came a bit closer. Go and send them a big nitro ball - and if the size and the distance together is too much, wait till Harry's done here."

Ron nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, that has some appeal."

Hermione said, "There's a teacher in every tower, holding guard. And even if not - if they hear the explosion, everybody'll know whom to ask ... Ain't that many students who can throw nitro balls."

Ron looked at Harry. "She's right. We'll use acid, that's silent - the ball, I mean, not the Muggles where it comes down."

"Really?" Hermione was looking fierce. "Charlie didn't say much, when that ball came."

Ron's face turned white. He stared at Hermione, then, without a word, stood up and left.

Hermione looked at Harry. "What are you - hired killers?"

Before Harry could answer, Ginny hissed, "You should train your bearings, Hermione. The hired killers are outside - maybe you realize it when they've shot Viktor." She left, too.

Hermione's cheeks were burning. "Crazy, altogether ... The strategy works so well - one teacher wounded, that's all, and just because a dog was shot nobody will miss but ..." She stopped, suddenly remembering how this wounded teacher had come across that dog. Her entire face turned dark red. Next moment, the face was hidden behind her both hands.

Harry swallowed the remark he'd planned, took the time to sense a bit more. "You're scared, right?"

"And what if I am?" Hermione's voice sounded shrill. "If this here's getting out of hand, some people will go out and fight, and Viktor'll be in top front - only he's not as lucky as you ... If I had known what you were doing, you and Ron and Ginny and Rahewa, I'd still be screaming. It's a miracle you came back alive - such things only happen with you around, Harry."

"It's no miracle. We had the surprise on our side ... And besides, I was even hit."

"You were hit??" Hermione seemed ready to scream now.

"Just a bit of birdshot - three pellets, Madam Pomfrey took them out."

Hermione looked miserable. "Harry - please, please don't start a one-man war. One day more, or two, then they'll be gone - they have no standing, they're cowards ..."

"Cowards are the most dangerous ones. And what I'm going to do - I'll wait a while, and then I'll have a look at Samantha ... Hermione - go find Ron, and tell him you're scared as hell, and that this was the reason for your remark."

Hermione didn't protest, only her expression made clear that right now she was dreading this idea more than the lunatics outside.

"Try his office."

Hermione nodded, then looked alarmed, seeing Harry's head winking toward the staircase, and his encouraging smile. However, she rose, straightened her shoulders, and walked toward Canossa - to be found on the first floor left.

* * *

No, he wasn't going to start a one-man war. He wasn't going to sit idly either. But first of all, he was going to see Samantha.

"Come in, Harry." Madam Pomfrey smiled. "She's still asleep - if you want, you may wait here ... And if you don't mind, you could tell me what's going on outside."

"They're shooting every now and then, and we just keep hiding - that's all, in a way. You should know better - aren't there any other cases?"

"Remus got a few splinters in his face, from a bullet bouncing off the wall." Madam Pomfrey smiled. "Could have been more dangerous, but it was the right side - I mean only his glass eye was at risk."

Doctor talk - not Harry's favourite, but this doctor had saved Samantha, so he did some conversation with Madam Pomfrey for a while, part of his mind absent, watching, until this part stopped him in mid-sentence. "She's coming awake."

Madam Pomfrey grinned. "You should stay here, Harry - seems the best solution for you and my patients together ... Give me a minute, then you can talk with her." She left the room, was back shortly afterwards. "Alright - she's weak, but fine."

Samantha looked incredibly small - not at all like that broad-shouldered woman Harry remembered, and her blonde hair had darkened from sweat. She looked - vulnerable.

He stepped closer, sat down on a stool. "Hello, Sam - I'm awfully glad to see your eyes open."

A fleeting smile in her face. "Harry ... Poppy told me that you saved my life."

"Then she's confusing something. It was her who put you together again."

"Unlike Humpty Dumpty, huh? - Which means she's not a king's horse ... When I heard this rhyme the first time - I thought it was funny ... And now ..." Samantha spoke slowly, with pauses in-between to catch breath. "I've found out how Humpty Dumpty must have felt ... It's not funny at all."

"You'll be your old self in a day or two."

"Not quite, Harry ... You don't forget something like that ... And I remember a weird dream ..." Another short smile. "Someone was talking with you ... Wasn't me, somehow - but I was listening ... You're a very stubborn young man - I mean, thank you ..." Samantha looked as if ready to cry.

"Hey, Sam, don't shock me - you'll be okay, it's just your current weakness."

"Yeah, probably ... You were crazy, absolutely crazy ..."

He stopped her. "If so, then I'm in good company - just here in this room."

Something like wondering crept in Samantha's eyes. "Not really ... It should have worked, Harry ... Did almost, until ..."

"What happened, Sam?"

"We were talking ... They were playing soldiers - demanded that we surrender ... I said I'll tell inside ... Then this guy stepped forward and shot me."

"Which guy?"

"The one you caught - the same who had shot at you." Samantha grimaced. "Harry, I've got a lesson ... First shoot, then ask."

She saw something in his face, something that raised her concern. "Don't have funny ideas, Harry ... Poppy told me nobody's hurt ... Leave it like that."

Then she saw something else. "It's true, isn't it? ... Say - had you help? I could see only you."

"Yes, we were four, but relax - they're okay, all that happened were three pellets of birdshot in my back."

"Four ..." An expression of disbelief in Samantha's face. "They must be still crazier than you ... I can guess one, maybe two ... Who's the fourth?"

Harry smiled. "Ron, Ginny, and Rahewa ... Ron for the nitro balls - Ginny for the smoke balls, and Rahewa because nobody could stop her ... But without her shooting, we wouldn't sit here and talk, Sam."

"No." Samantha smiled too. "I always had a lucky hand in meeting the right people ... Well, with that exception, of course ... But that was your acquaintance, Harry."

Again, his expression worried her. "There's something else ... What's wrong, Harry? ... No, tell me right now, not knowing is worse than ..."

"It's Lousy ... They shot him before we could take him inside."

Samantha closed her eyes. It didn't help, some tears were welling up through the closed eyelids. Then she said, "I'm so sorry ... My fault, I didn't do it in time."

"Rahewa said the same ... Don't blame yourself, Sam ... The three people who would have done it were too busy - you were shot, Rahewa was fighting to save our back, and I was - er, keeping you."

After a moment of silence, Samantha asked, "How did you do it, Harry?"

"Very simple - I came, grabbed you, and ..."

"You know what I mean."

Yes, he knew. "I'm not sure. On the way back, I could feel how you ... So I shouted at you - I mean not in words - you know, I did it before, sending some mental energy to other people ... And - well, I knew, the moment I'd let go you would ... So I kept there while Madam Pomfrey was doing her work. It was ... I was talking with something - it wasn't you - er, I mean, not your mind ... At some point, I could feel fresh energy ... That's all."

The crying had apparently cleared away something in Samantha. There was a little sparkling in her eyes. "Harry, you've found the answer to the impossible question."

"The what?"

"The impossible question - never heard that? ... It goes, what's more intimate than sex?"

Harry blushed a bit.

Samantha smiled. "To be honest, sex is more fun ... But even so, I won't complain."

* * *

No, he wasn't starting a one-man war. It had been started already, and if this was no war, then it would be difficult to explain the difference. And one-man was wrong too, assuming these street rats outside could be called men. Except that now, the term field rats suited them better, hehe, because they were lying on the ground, or on a stripe of canvas, or they had dug holes in the ground in which they could sit or stand, covered from the school.

Lower than a house rooftop, Harry was gliding along the borderline which formed a ring around Hogwarts. Hidden under his Invisibility Cloak, which covered himself as well as most of the Steel Wing, leaving exposed only the tail fin. Altogether, Harry was practically invisible against a dark night sky.

His vague ideas about some action had culminated to a specific planning - the moment he heard from Samantha how she'd been shot. So the others had seemed surprised and angry? Well, he was more than angry, remembered a characteristic signature in his *haragei*, and if he would sense that signature somewhere down there, somebody was in for a surprise.

Provided this lunatic could feel surprise. Insane, that was the only explanation. Unpredictable - not even his fellow maniacs could rely on his behaviour, as Samantha's description had shown.

This insanity gave Harry some trouble. What if he found him? He couldn't kill him, not such a clear case for high-security psychiatry. In a way, it was nonsense, unlogical, but ... He couldn't, period.

Then what else?

Harry didn't know yet. Maybe the question wouldn't arise - maybe he wouldn't find him, because the lunatic was no longer part of the besieging people, or somewhere too far away from his ring-shaped course, or he was sleeping, and his mind pattern might feel totally normal during sleep.

Although Harry sensed not much of sleep down there. Excitement about doing the *real thing*, sobering up because it was cold and dirty and uncomfortable, frustration from a school which had - simply and literally - shut tight. Like a hedgehog curling to a ball, needle-sharp spines to the outside.

Like dogs, barking madly at such a tiny fortress, they had shot at window blinds and other prominent spots of the outer walls. This had been in the afternoon - and now it was night, and cold, and this war already lasting some hours.

At least it didn't rain.

Harry felt glad about the weather too, more glad about a night close to new moon, clouds covering most of the stars. And if really someone detected a moving tail fin - he would be

warned by somebody's startled mind. However, it was unlikely - at night, staring at the same spot for longer than a moment, you could imagine almost everything.

Low murmur, every now and then. And there - a group, discussing louder than the others. If they had a tank with a cannon, they'd show those damned wizards what it meant to hide in an old building, erected at times when arrows and spears were the weapons against which to protect, astonishingly well suited for this type of siege.

A tank, huh? ... But they hadn't.

For a moment, Harry was musing how wizards could fight against a tank - a large piece of metal, to some degree clumsy. Metal would be vulnerable, against spells, that was. A tank alone would be an easy target, while with people outside, it would look different ...

He almost missed the single source of anger and frustration, mixed with tiredness. But then it was unmistakable - this wavering, these quick changes of emotion ... The lunatic.

He had found him.

And the man was alone, not part of a group. Maybe because of his unthoughtful doing, maybe the others couldn't stand his company anyway, or he couldn't theirs ... Didn't matter why, important only that it would simplify a task that looked already difficult enough.

And now?

A stunning spell made quite some flash, unfortunately. Almost every spell gave a visible sign, come to think of it. So that was out of the question - and no sound either, would be carrying far in such a quiet night.

That left just one alternative. *Aikido* - the art of combat without weapons, without light, without a noise.

Harry memorized the vulnerable spots learned from Kenzo, where pressure would block the blood support to the brain, would cause unconsciousness within seconds ... Until then, he had to suppress every shout, every cough - but with direct contact, he could help a bit with his mind power.

No haste ...

Waiting in the air, silently, motionlessly, he caught the mood, the surrounding, his mind melting into the scene, his *getsumai no michi* registering contours, details, for more than fifteen minutes.

Then he moved downward, forward, like a falling leaf.

Only feet away, Harry touched down, dismounting in one long step forward, was at the man, his hand pressed over a mouth that was opening in surprise and horror, his other thumb finding the soft spot behind the ear, pressing hard, his mind forming a deafening, muting shockwave ... Holding - a choked cough all that came out ... The tension in the body faded, Harry felt the muscles slackening, then the body slumped down, his own body following.

Carefully, he draped his Invisibility Cloak over the figure and himself, then sent his "*Stupefy*", half a whisper, his lips touching the wand.

Done. The genuine unconsciousness could fade, would so within the next minute.

First-aid charms for transportation were too noisy, made too much light. But Harry had gained experience in carrying bodies over his shoulder, only hours ago.

The man felt lighter than Samantha, which was only good because Harry had to move him under the cloak.

Careful now ... if he'd step on dry wood at this moment - there was his broomstick, he had it, was up, was in the air.

Harry gained height behind the line of enemies - the safest method as none of them was checking behind, and if so, then just the ground, not the air. The man's weight on his shoulder caused him trouble while steering, his natural balance for climbing was out of reach - otherwise, he would have heeled over from the weight. Even so, climbing as slowly as possible, the muscles in his stomach were aching.

With sufficient height, Harry crossed the ring-shaped front line again, reached the tower, and spiraled down to the platform - empty at that time of the night.

Touch-down ... Dismounting ... Dropping the weight, slightly gentler than a bag of potatoes. Harry sat down behind the stone railing, for the first time since the last hour out of the firing range, stripped off his Invisibility Cloak.

Looking at the motionless bundle, he realized - his decision had been taken the moment when he'd shouldered the unconscious body to climb up. He would deliver the man to Samantha ... Maybe first to Lupin, as long as Samantha was still out of combat.

It made him feel better.

Would be interesting to hear their comments ... Of course had he violated a rule - okay, an unspoken one, nobody had explicitly said that it was forbidden to fly through the air in full view of a hundred guns, hehe, which was some excuse, should one be necessary ... But more important - he could deliver a result, and results had a way to justify the methods.

Harry manacled the man with a tying spell, moved him toward the wall near the door, then destunned him.

With a groan, the man came awake, looked around, saw Harry - sitting two steps apart. His eyes widened. "Dirty Harry?"

"Yes, it's me ... I found you, and caught you."

Another look around. "Where are we?"

"This is a tower of the school. If you'd look down, you could see your cronies - at daytime, I mean."

"They're not my cronies - a bunch of dirtbags, they are, stupid fuckheads ..."

"Whatever - for us, you're all the same, except that you're here now ... I could have picked any of them, but it was you who shot our teacher."

"Did I? ... Yes, right, that woman - stupid bitch, standing there and ..." The words drowned in a pained moan.

Harry stopped his spell. "Watch your language! In the morning, you'll meet her - and this time she'll have her wand, only that I forgot to catch your gun too ... It'll be a bit unbalanced, but that's just fine - and I'll watch, and I'll relish every second of it."

A sneering grimace. "You think you're great, huh? Think you've got me, and can tell me what to say, and not to say ... A wet fart you have, you." The man struggled to come upright.

Harry didn't move. "Keep down. If someone sees you from below, they'll think you're a wizard and will shoot you."

"They won't hit a barn door if it's banging in their face, them." The man walked to the railing, looked down. "Assholes ... Can't shoot, can't listen, can't get anything straight ..."

"Sit down! We don't need all attention at this platform."

"And what if I don't?"

The man's voice was mocking, reminding Harry of scenes between him and Draco Malfoy, except they had taken place when they were first and second-years.

Next moment, the man had jumped up onto the narrow railing, balancing with his hips, due to the tied arms, steadying. "See - I can do what I want."

"You bloody ..." Harry rose to catch the man - Viktor would give him hell if the Muggles realized that this spot was a good target.

"Fuck you, Dirty Harry ..." A sneering - the man's last, because he turned and jumped, headfirst, into the dark.

Harry suppressed the urge to come forward, to look down. Frozen in mid-step, he listened - with his ears, his *haragei* - until, after two endless seconds, he heard the muffled sound, felt the instant when a broken neck cut a pattern which would waver no more.

* * *

To some degree, it was like vacation, only that inside the school buildings there was a permanent nighttime, with the windows tight and candles providing light. But classes stayed cancelled, with all teachers positioned at some strategic place, should the Muggles start something other than lying in cover and shooting every now and then - probably more from boredom than with the hope to hit someone.

And - according to Dumbledore's principle in times of a crisis, there was food offered all the time.

So Harry had no trouble finding a late breakfast, after a night which had been short - first because of his hunt for a lunatic, then because he'd been sitting up at the tower platform, finally because he had done another flight under his cloak, this time not hunting a person, not hunting at all, actually, as his targets didn't move, didn't escape, wouldn't move soon either.

He was sitting almost alone at the Gryffindor table, which was just fine as it saved him from the decision what to tell, and whom.

Then he went to reach Madam Pomfrey's territory - still unsure how to handle the issue toward Samantha. All he knew - she should hear the story. Entering her room, he found Samantha chatting animatedly, with someone he'd never guessed, not in a thousand years.

Snape.

Samantha beamed at him. "Hello, Harry - say, have your ears been tingling?"

"Huh?"

"Severus was just telling me stories of Hogwarts - your father played a role in some of them."

Harry looked at Snape, perplexed. "That's funny - he never bothered to tell me."

Snape had a dry smile. "I'm very selective with my audience, Harry."

Harry turned back to Samantha. "You look an awful lot better than yesterday."

"Tell you a secret, Harry - that's because I feel an awful lot better."

"That must be the company."

Samantha laughed, while Snape, to Harry's astonishment, blushed a bit. Then Samantha said, "He's been shot too, Harry."

"What??"

Unbelievable - Snape turned red. "It's nothing - not more than a bruise, no comparison to Sam's injury."

Sam?? ... Very interesting.

And only now, Harry recognized Snape's left shoulder, looking swollen under the shirt, apparently from some bandage. He glanced at him questioningly.

"It's ridiculous, Harry, really ... Playing in the open with all the dark wizards for so long, and nothing happened. And here - hiding in a tower, watching through an embrasure, and guess what - didn't I catch me a lucky shot? ... Clean in, clean out - Poppy put it together in a minute, nothing serious, really."

Even so, Snape showed no intention to leave Madam Pomfrey's sanctuary. However, he moved his arm to show that he wasn't badly hurt.

Harry said, "So at least some of them can shoot."

Samantha looked less joyful than a moment before. "Maybe it was the same."

"No, it wasn't." And when two faces turned to him, Harry realized that this remark had been none of his brilliant ones.

"As you know for sure." Samantha's voice, not questioning at all.

"Erm - yes."

"Because you took care he won't do it again."

"Not quite - he did it by himself ... He jumped from the tower."

"Yeah, sure." Snape's voice was thick of sarcasm. "Got lost, somehow, what with the darkness, and the unknown territory, and made a wrong step - slip happens, every day again ..."

"He knew what he did." Harry explained how the lunatic had found his way up to the tower, and how he had found another way down to the ground.

Snape looked at Samantha. "That's our Harry, son of James - and Lily, not to forget, this stubbornness must come from her side, because even James was obedient in comparison."

Harry stared at him, a fire glowing in his eyes.

"Don't look at me that way," muttered Snape, with a slight hint of guilt in his voice. "I'm telling only the best of your parents - while you ... Dumbledore will be delighted, hearing that story."

"No he won't." Samantha's eyes met Snape's. "Because he won't hear that story, right?"

Snape shrugged, grinned. "My lips are sealed, but so what ... Sooner or later, someone finds a corpse outside, and then - you know, Albus doesn't even need to know that he was the one - he can count with his own fingers, really, he can."

"And?" Samantha smiled. "He's counting a lot, if nobody's around watching."

Somehow, for some reason, two faces were again glancing at Harry, reason enough for him to blush. Then Samantha asked, "What did you have in mind with him, Harry?"

"Well - I thought I'd bring him to you, I mean once you're up again."

"A present!" Samantha laughed. "I'm flattered, Harry, really, I am ... And what did you expect me to do with him?"

"I don't know - it was just ... He was insane, I mean literally, you could feel it - er, in his mind, I mean ... And somehow, I was blaming myself that you've been shot, that's why ..."

"What nonsense is this?" Samantha looked genuinely upset.

So Harry had to confess that he had met the man in the Giants' camp, without following her advice. "I just couldn't - not him, and yesterday night it was the same, so I thought maybe you know what to do - and then he was too quick for me."

Samantha waved dismissively. "Gone and off - for the better of all, I'd say ... Harry, this story isn't suited for public, but I'm really pleased - there must be some dark, vindictive streak inside me, a real surprise, that is ..." Her face showed little surprise, and considerable pleasure.

"Well, then ..." Harry stood up, to wave goodbye and to leave, after a visit that hadn't gone quite as expected.

Two faces followed him, as if waiting until he had closed the door.

* * *

In the late afternoon, a noise from outside gave reason enough to storm upstairs to the tower platform as fast as Harry's legs would carry him, to find Viktor with his binoculars, following the origin of that noise.

A helicopter.

The metal bird was flying low, had inspected the place with the tents and the cars, as Viktor reported, and was now turning a slow circle around Hogwarts - very much following the same course Harry had taken a night before.

"Dumbledore notified the Muggle government," said Viktor without dropping the binoculars, "I think that's the response."

Harry snorted. "Very impressive."

Viktor stared at him. "Some people have a look before they start acting ... Some of them are Muggles. If I was the commander of a task force, that's exactly what I'd do - sending an explorer to hear what's going on."

Harry eyed through a hole in the ornaments of the stone railing, clearly a better alternative than exposing a head into the visible range. "Viktor - there's movement, some Muggles are walking." He made room for Viktor who put his binocular toward the hole.

"Yep." Viktor grinned. "These bastards know exactly what's going on. The helicopter means, pretty soon they can expect some visitors - official ones, Muggles ... Harry, they're walking toward the camp - the rats are leaving the sinking ship."

Harry grinned maliciously. "They'll find a lot of water around."

Viktor hadn't listened, maybe because some other squad members were just arriving at the platform. He continued reporting. "Yes ... The first of them have reached the cars - they're packing ... No - they're standing around, looks as if they're discussing something ... It's strange, none of these cars has left so far - maybe they're waiting for the others."

Harry didn't think so.

For a while, nothing new was happening. More Muggles reached the camp, but neither would any of them drive away, nor could Viktor report the appearance of some official forces.

One after the other, the squad members left the platform, among them Harry, leaving back a Viktor who was staying for his own curiosity as much as for his official duty - in both aspects contrary to Harry's own situation.

Then it was supper time, and still no sign from the Muggle government.

Harry was discussing the situation with Ron and Hermione. "For what I can see," he said, "the Muggle government's reaction is even slower than that of our own ministry. Remember the Battle of Hogwarts - we've been waiting for help, only it never came."

Ron wasn't sure. "They've sent a helicopter ... Maybe it takes that much time, or there are other places where these troops are required - more urgently than here, the people in the helicopter could see that we're not at risk ... Or maybe something has stopped them."

The latter was a possibility, in a way a very realistic one, still - Harry didn't think so.

"There's yet another reason possible," said Hermione, "and that's the most likely one - the Muggles don't really want to catch them, all they want is to end the fight ... So they leave enough time that these people can get lost, before the cavalry appears at the scene."

Ron looked at her. "Is this your thought or Viktor's?"

It earned him a cool glance, telling Harry that his friends were on speaking terms, up to some point, and below a certain temperature. "Maybe we think the same - that happens sometimes, you know."

Harry couldn't suppress the remark. "Does it?"

Ron looked from one to the other, recognizing only that he'd just witnessed an exchange, fully aware of every word said, without registering the message. But something else worried him more. "Then why don't they leave? Until a few minutes ago, not a single car has left the area."

Hermione shrugged. "Could be they know quite well how the police or whatever they'll send is proceeding, and there's enough time. I guess the others will come in the morning, which leaves the entire night to disappear - unnoticed by anyone. That's how I'd do it."

Her assumption was pretty accurate. Next morning, sooner than planned, Harry had to get up - Viktor wanted the complete squad ready, should there be some action required from the Hogwarts side.

Although it didn't look that way.

A Muggle task force - anti-terror units, as they learned later that day - had arrived at dawn, with three helicopters, dropping figures in heavy combat dresses almost simultaneously all around Hogwarts, plus a convoy of trucks which appeared near the camp. The task force scanned the area, collected a few figures - the others had obviously used the time to disappear.

Without their cars, however.

Then, after a long while, some figures in combat dresses came to the building, to talk with the teachers inside. Meanwhile, Viktor had some trouble to keep his squad at bay - they wanted to fly around, watching the action, while Viktor considered this as the last thing on his mind.

Up on the platform, groaning every now and then, they could watch how the greater part of the task force left on trucks, taking with them the attackers they had found. They left behind about a dozen anti-terrorist fighters, with jeeps, tents, and two trucks, easily distinguished from the civil cars which still were standing at the same places as two days before.

Light streamed into the buildings - the blinds had disappeared. This alone raised the mood quicker and stronger than the events outside - there was no *haragei* needed to notice.

In the afternoon, Dumbledore called the entire school to a short meeting in the hall. "My dear friends," he said, "I'm glad to tell you that the time of fear and danger's over - Hogwarts is free again. Nobody from the school was killed, we had two injuries, both of them without permanent damage - obviously a confirmation that we had the proper strategy - " the Headmaster smiled, "regardless of the voices who had objections in the beginning ... As of tomorrow, we'll have regular classes again. In two days or so, the school will be open as before - which means you can walk outside at your convenience. Our Flying Squad will have to do patrol duty still for a while - just to be on the safe side, and as an early warning system - the same system which has saved us from serious casualties some days ago ... I thank you all for your efforts, for your courage, for your patience - I'm proud of you."

The applause would have been louder, and longer, hadn't there been quite some questions. "What about those people outside?"

"These are official forces, detached to protect us. Mr. Pritchard is their commander. He told me they will stay for the next two days, should some crazy soul have the idea to come back."

"How many of the lunatics did they catch?"

"About thirty, as Mr. Pritchard told me ... We assume this is less than a quarter of the number that had been surrounding our school."

"What will happen to them?"

Dumbledore had a short grin. "I didn't ask Mr. Pritchard this question because I know that he has no answer to that. The official situation between Muggles and wizards is still very unclear - and compared to some other places, what happened here was relatively harmless."

"Why did they leave their cars behind?"

"Very simple - they couldn't use them any longer. Mr. Pritchard told me that each of these cars is sitting on four perfectly flat tires, and that nearly every window pane has disappeared. He wanted to know how this could happen, but I couldn't give him an answer, because I don't know."

Surprised laughter, another applause.

Harry was busy watching Dumbledore's face, halfways expecting to meet his eyes, while the Headmaster kept looking somewhere else.

But two other faces had turned to him. Hermione said, "It's surprising how little this news has surprised you, Harry."

Ron said, "No, not at all ... Disappearing panes - for Harry, that's old stuff, he did it already at the age of eight ... er, I mean, he did it himself at the age of eight. Right, Harry?"

Before Harry could answer, Dumbledore's voice caught their attention. "Mr. Pritchard told me something else. They found a dead Muggle, just before the school. Apparently, this Muggle tried to climb the outer walls, to attack us from inside. At some point, he slipped and fell down, breaking his neck ... This is something like poetic justice - the only casualty in the entire story."

"That's not true." Harry felt reasonably upset.

Hermione watched his face. "So you know more?"

"It's not true that this was the only casualty - Lousy's dead, doesn't he count?"

It wasn't the answer Hermione had expected. Even so, she had the decency not to comment on that, and not to ask again.

Harry reached the teachers' table, to have a look at Samantha, who had been dismissed a while ago by Madam Pomfrey. "Hello, Sam - everything okay?"

"Yes, Harry, thanks for asking - only the weightlifting will have to wait."

"You're lifting weights??" Snape, sitting next place, stared at Samantha in disbelief.

"Not particularly, no ... Maybe Poppy had the impression, but as far as I'm concerned, the weights can wait forever."

Harry felt pleased, hearing the original Samantha sound for the first time after the shot. "Say - what about a new dog?"

"Well ..." Samantha looked a bit embarrassed. "Let me think it over, Harry. For now, it's not an option. The hut is inhabitable - they've shot so many holes through the walls, you might as well sleep under the open sky ... Besides, I wonder why they didn't burn it to the ground."

Snape said, "I'd guess they had no ammunition to set it on fire."

Samantha nodded. "Anyway, the hut's a mess."

Harry asked, "So you move inside?"

Samantha beamed. "Yup. Winter's coming soon - let's see next spring what to do with the hut."

Yes, the cold weather in this northern part of England was certainly one reason for a big Texan girl to look for a warm and cosy place inside the thick walls of Hogwarts. Harry wouldn't disagree with that, feeling sure that Snape, sitting at her side, wouldn't disagree either.

* * *

The next day, immediately after classes, with the last daylight fading, three people met outside for a final ceremony - Harry, Rahewa, and Samantha. The hole in the ground was ready, also the wooden crate - not a real coffin, however the surface neatly polished.

Rahewa protested, when coming to see that the crate was already closed.

Samantha shook her head. "It's better that way, honey ... He's been hit by more than one bullet - when he was dead already, I mean, probably because this was the only visible target. These bullets ... Keep him in memory as he was alive - complete, joyful, and so incredibly quick."

Rahewa nodded, her eyes already brimming with tears.

Using two ropes, Samantha and Harry let the crate sink down into the ground. Then Samantha looked down. "You've been left behind by your former people, and you've been left behind by me ... I'm sorry, doggie-boy. I was your boss, Lousy's boss, and I did a lousy job - please forgive me."

With an angry movement, she turned aside, her back toward Harry and Rahewa.

Harry touched Rahewa's shoulder, indicating that it was her turn.

The girl stepped forward, her voice thick with tears. "Farewell, Lousy. If nobody takes care of you there, don't give up, just hold on ... I know someone - in a little while, who'll check whether you're okay ... Bye, Lousy."

Samantha had turned, looking sharply at the girl, relaxed a bit at registering Harry's signal, no longer caring whether two students could see her tear-stained face.

Then Harry looked down at the small crate. "Lousy, we didn't have much time together - my only comfort is, you've been the happiest dog I ever saw ... If you meet Hagrid, say hello from me ... And now, watch - that's my goodbye for you."

He held the leather ball on his fingertips, had his wand pointing, concentrating, inhaling deeply, to gather his full force ...

"VOLITOLLITE!"

He felt the pain in the fingertips while the ball shot up, up - up into the evening sky, a slight bend toward the Magic Forest, without sloping more, until even the sharpest pair of eyes had lost contact.

Rahewa left, not wanting to see how the soil was falling onto the crate, how the hole was filling.

When a small pile of earth marked the dog's grave, Samantha turned to Harry. "Say, what did she mean? For a moment I thought ... I was quite worried, she'd do something ..."

Harry explained whom Rahewa had in mind with her goodbye, and that she had been realistic - for the earthly side of things.

"So that's why ... It's horrible - Harry, a shot's more merciful than that, dying for months and months ... By some accident, I know what I'm talking about."

Harry took the joke for what it was - Samantha's way to cheer up. Then he took his courage. "Sam, when the time comes ... I'm looking for a new place for her, spoke with my lawyer. I'm talking about adoption - I cannot do it myself because I'm too young, according to the law."

"Did you find someone?"

"There are some candidates."

Then Samantha saw his face, saw how Harry's eyes met hers, understood - and gasped. "My God, Harry - it's quite a step from a dog to a girl ... Although, I wouldn't know anyone who'd match Lousy's character that much ... He didn't know what's fright, nor does she."

"I'm just asking, you know ... Spinbottle said, it should be settled beforehand, it would simplify the legal proceeding."

"What makes you think I'd qualify for that?"

"Remember the day when you found us here? It was ... the way how you talked with her ... Sam, you're not the only candidate - if that's nothing for you, just say it. It's just - you know, she's not suited well for the faint-hearted, so ..."

Samantha glanced at him. "You're not for the faint-hearted either, Harry ... Hmm ... Can I have some days before answering?"

"Sure." Harry grinned. "To be honest - I feel easier, now that I've asked you."

"Yeah - only, somehow, the burden's moved to the other side, huh?"

They walked back to the building. Reaching the entrance, Samantha stopped. "Harry - I have to think it over, and maybe I have to check something. But if bad comes to worse - if your other candidates would shy off, I won't let her stay out in the rain ... That's all I can promise for now."

"That's a lot, Sam - I'm grateful for that." Harry smiled. "By the way - I wouldn't be surprised the hear that your checks turn out promising - er, that's just a guess ..." His voice trailed off, fading under a hard stare.

Samantha cleared her throat. "You won't, huh? ... Awfully good to know."

Harry grinned. "I thought as much - that's why I said it."

"Yes, I bet ... This is none of your business, young man, and besides, you didn't strike me as the most objective guy in this context, so just keep your nose to yourself, okay?"

"Will do, although - okay, I'm not objective, but to quote someone - I'm telling only the best - I mean, should I ever be asked."

Harry made a quick side-step, to show his beaming smile from a safe distance. These Texans had a way - would hit him first, and ask then.

15 - New Horizons

Back to normalcy ... The Headmaster, also a master of careful wording, hadn't used this expression - knowing, at least suspecting, that nothing would be as before. And right he was.

Hogwarts, the school of wizardry and witchcraft, had appeared on the map of some bureaucrats - Muggle bureaucrats, and they felt in charge.

The anti-terrorist units left two days later, until then keeping at their own. Apparently, service with a smile was not listed in their job definition, so everybody could have his own guess what they might think of wizards.

Shortly afterwards, Hogwarts got visitors.

Harry tried pumping Almyra to find out more about them. However, it was Dumbledore himself who broke the news in a short speech before supper.

"The Muggle government," announced the Headmaster, "has started activities to integrate wizards and wizard institutions into a system which eventually - hopefully - will combine both worlds to mutual benefit. For us here in Hogwarts, the first step is a kind of evaluation. Mr. Triplethorne ..." Dumbledore pointed toward a man, sitting at his side, "will be our guest for the next weeks. He will look over our shoulder to see how things are working in our school, in order to find out how Hogwarts can be integrated in the standard school system of Great Britain."

The Headmaster's face kept expressionless, quite in contrast to that of other teachers, of students, hearing these words - and of Mr. Triplethorne himself, who looked extremely unhappy.

"Mr. Triplethorne is a representative of the Ministry of Science and Education. You will treat him with the respect any visitor deserves. In addition, you will allow him to join classes and courses. Finally, you will answer his questions about habits and standards, and you will help him in all regards a non-magic person might have difficulties with in our wizarding environment."

That's still to be seen, thought Harry, feeling absolutely certain that every other student was thinking the same.

Ron, for example. "Civil disobedience - that's how we have to proceed. They'll never get along with us - never."

Harry couldn't follow. "What's civil disobedience?"

Of course, Hermione gave the answer. "Not following rules - shouldn't be a problem for you, Harry ... They send you a letter that you have to register yourself in some list, and you just do nothing. They send you a letter that you have to fill out your tax declaration, except you don't - and so on, and so on."

Contrary to Hermione's assumption, Harry still saw problems. "But they didn't send letters - they sent that guy. If he asks you something, you have to answer, and you cannot lie to him."

"Sure, but so what?" Hermione grinned. "Your answer has to make clear that it's awfully complicated, nearly impossible - for a Muggle, that is ... If we do that sufficiently, they'll just give up."

"Gimme'n example."

"My God, Harry - you're always so inventive when bypassing rules, how come you're so thick in this matter?"

"You just don't have an example at hand, that's all."

Ron looked very satisfied about this exchange, apparently agreeing to both remarks. In particular because he himself had an example. "Imagine - that Singlerose - er, Triplethorne comes and asks why we use parchment rather than plain paper. Well, my answer is, for what I've heard, paper is heavily suffering from stray spells - bleeds out, gets spotty, sometimes starts to burn, while parchment is highly spell-resistant."

"Is it true?" Harry looked baffled.

Ron grinned. "That's what I heard - and that's what you heard, now."

Harry knew at once - he would be a miserable player in this game. No doubt, for Ron or Hermione, it seemed the simplest thing of the world to muck Mr. Triplethorne around, and with a smile, while for Harry, the only alternatives were honesty or hostility.

Harry shouldn't have worried - Mr. Triplethorne had trouble already without students dragging his feet. A task as simple as moving through Hogwarts - for him a nightmare. Again and again, people saw him enter a room and then touch the wall along the door frame, until everybody knew - he was searching for the light switch, of course unable to conjure up a bunch of candles in the air. This marked the first stroke against his reputation.

Then - it took the Muggle bureaucrat forever to walk from one place to another, simply because all the shortcuts, common knowledge for every student at the end of the first class, did not work with Muggles. Whispering a keyword, passing a fake wall, turning an armour? Whisper as he might, nothing did happen. The poor soul had to take the long way around.

And then the guarding pictures. Mr. Triplethorne had the current passwords for all towers - big help for him, since the Fat Lady preferred to ignore him, in agreement with her fellow pictures in Ravenclaw, Slytherin, and Hufflepuff. Without an escort, Mr. Triplethorne got lost quickly.

After little more than a week, he gave up.

Many students saw this as a reason to celebrate a big victory. Not so Harry, nor Ron, or Hermione - the three friends agreed that this episode had been just a warming up.

However, for a few days, Hogwarts stayed free of Muggles.

* * *

Into this time fell the next significant change - less for Hogwarts altogether, more for Harry personally. It struck him as a lightning out of a cloudless summer sky, just at the end of a dance lesson.

The students had left the hall. Marie-Christine turned to him. "This has been our last lesson, 'arry."

"Huh?" He looked at her, baffled, not trusting his ears.

"Yes. I'm leaving Hogwarts - tomorrow."

Now he was truly speechless.

"I'm sorry - this is probably not the nicest way to tell you. But then ... It came all so quickly, and ..."

"Wait a second - what are you talking about?"

Marie-Christine looked away. "I got an offer - and I accepted. Tomorrow ..."

"What offer? Where? By whom?"

Marie-Christine shook her head, her cheeks burning. "Sorry - it's confidential, that's part of the contract. Dumbledore is informed, and I ..."

"Wait wait wait - what does it mean, confidential? Is this a secret job, or what?"

Marie-Christine bit her lips. "I'm not supposed to talk about it, 'arry. My replacement will arrive tomorrow, and I'll pass things over, and that's it."

Harry's rage was growing by the second. "So, will it? That's perfect - a wonderfully smooth transit for the school, really ... Except that your replacement may find herself short of an assistant - or is it a man?"

Marie-Christine's head was shaking.

Another thought struck Harry. "Say - are you sure there's everything alright with your new job? Confidential - that makes me very suspicious, that's how people disappear, never to be seen again."

A short smile. "No, 'arry - it's nothing dubious, and it won't stay a secret forever - there's just a certain period, that's all."

"Wonderful ... marvellous ... great, I'm beyond myself from excitement. Must be a hell of a job ..."

"Erm - yes, it is."

"Well, then ..." With effort, Harry tempered his maddening fury. "Congratulations, Marie-Christine ... Can nobody say you stressed your goodbye beyond any reasonable limit, really, by all means ..."

Marie-Christine still couldn't look at him. This, and her expression, and his *haragei* might have told him more, had Harry been able to sense anything besides his own rage and desperation.

"Adieu, 'arry ... It couldn't last forever, could it?"

Deeply hurt, unable to find a nice word, unwilling to kick and jump still more than he'd already done, Harry left the hall - student that he was, having just received a lesson like the others, except not in dancing.

* * *

Next morning, at breakfast, Harry found himself in the foulest mood he could remember. This day would be bad, and the next would be worse, and the damned Muggles were making a mess of the wizarding world, as he could read in his *Daily Prophet*. Further, he was looking ahead to a Christmas ball without a partner, to nights without ...

Hermione, a disgustingly sweet smile in her face, said - no, sang, "Harry my ferry - full moon's coming soon, time for a trip, to deliver a sip ..." She stopped, muted by an expression of burning rage in his face.

After a moment, she asked hesitantly, "Erm, did I say something wrong?"

"No."

"Hasn't been the right thing either, huh?"

"No."

Hermione looked guilty. "Er - I know that this deal's totally out of proportion, Harry - it wasn't planned that way, and as soon as you can make a portkey ..." She stopped again - what was intended as an apology seemed to arrive as a reproach that Harry couldn't manage his own portkey project in time, at least considering the expression in his face.

Ron looked astonished. "Hey, Harry, did you swallow a nitro ball by accident? That's how you look."

"Do I? ... Then I should swallow a fuse too, so it won't stick, what do you think?"

The smile in Ron's face died quickly - too high the risk that his next remark might provide the fuse Harry was apparently missing. Ron looked at Hermione, shrugged. Harry in bad mood - a rare thing, while a dangerous one.

At lunch, Dumbledore announced the change in the teachers' team, presented a Mademoiselle Danielle Crouchard as the new Beauxbatons liaison officer and dance teacher.

From his place, Harry could see a slim figure, short black hair in a fashionable cut, a beaming smile, altogether a good-looking young woman. He couldn't care less.

"Oh my ..." Ron's comment never made it to the end.

Even so, Harry could feel the glances of his friends, could sense their sympathy, making him aware that his affair with Marie-Christine hadn't been the secret he'd thought.

He tried to steady himself, feeling shame - not because of this discovery, just for his childish behaviour. He turned to Ron. "Er - weren't you going to say something?"

A careful glance. "Yes - er, about your job as assistant ... Are you going to continue with that?"

Was he? ... Harry didn't feel like it, not at all, had told Marie-Christine he wouldn't - well, a reply in the heat of his initial rage ... On the other side, he couldn't help thinking this was sort of a very cheap revenge, totally beneath his style. "Might be," he said with some effort. "... At least until she has found someone else."

"That's good, Harry - so I'm not the only assistant around."

The joke was so bad - startled, Harry realized how his friend was desperately trying to find something that would cheer him up. He grinned wryly. "Blimey ... that was an awfully thin one, Ron, but I appreciate the spirit, if you know what I mean."

Ron looked relieved. Hermione looked thoughtful. Harry decided to find something good to steam off - maybe damaging a large building.

What he really did was exercising in the training hall until he felt so exhausted, he couldn't even lift a wand. He worked alone, using dummies for targets, his imagination bringing them to life - a simple, archaic concept of opposition, suited well to forget all real-life complexities, to submerge in a world of pure good and total evil.

When his *bokken* seemed made of lead, Harry stopped with a grunt of satisfaction. For three hours - okay, minus the first ten minutes, he had been in a world of arcane rules, far away from his misery and loneliness. For a while, he hadn't been missing his love, had forgotten about a substitute sex partner lost yesterday.

Coming awake, sweating and panting, Harry sensed her.

The new dance teacher was leaning against the wall, near the entrance. Dressed like a Muggle - black jeans, white T-shirt, sandals, looking lean, clean, fresh.

Coming closer, Harry recognized the long, narrow pocket at the side of her right thigh. It was strangely relieving to see that even a witch in Muggle dress wanted her wand the flick of a hand away, all the time.

Her stare struck him as very French, very female, she would study his genitals with the same open interest as she did his face now. "You move gracefully, H'arry Potter."

His eyes widened a bit - she spoke English, had almost mastered his name.

He answered in French. "Thank you - although, for the last minutes, it cannot have been true."

"Maybe I was referring to the minutes before ... I came to talk with you - about dancing."

Of course - apparently sent by a Marie-Christine who had figured that her own presence would not improve the negotiations. Harry said, "If you'd give me a few minutes - if I don't reach the hot-water tub in a hurry, I'll be stiff like that *bokken*."

He saw a glimmer in her eyes, as though she had misunderstood him on purpose. "Mind if I come with you?"

He found his speech - rather quickly, considering her question. "Actually, yes ... I'll meet you in your office in, say, half an hour?"

She nodded, showing no embarrassment whatsoever. "My name's Danielle, assuming we'll - work together ... See you then, H'arry."

Lying in the hot-water tub, feeling relaxed and weightless, Harry started preparing for the conversation that would follow in a few minutes. This Danielle was looking for an assistant - naturally so ... She wanted to dance with him - and no doubt, she had more in mind than waltz and tango, was offering a very special two-step boogie, well outside the regular schedule. Now that was interesting ... How did he come to that honour?

Maybe just by accident - a French woman, not losing time to settle in a new environment, taking the first chance with acceptable odds. Could be as simple as that ... Had she heard rumours? - Unlikely, still more unlikely that Marie-Christine was trying to sell the whole package ...

Harry was already heading toward the steam room when he remembered a more realistic possibility. French press had been quite detailed about some scandal, involving him as well as Marie-Christine - detailed enough not to leave out full names, not with an old family pushing. From there, it was just straight-forward thinking - for a woman like Danielle Crouhard, born and raised in France.

Yes, he would agree to work as her assistant in dance lessons. Otherwise - Harry didn't think of her as a replacement for Marie-Christine, for more than one reason ... His situation wasn't that desperate.

Not yet.

* * *

Monsieur Armodéc had seen Harry's surprised glance - the dinner was served by the housemaid, Désirée nowhere in sight. "Today it's just the two of us, Harry. Mademoiselle Désirée has - found it preferable to look for new challenges, and I didn't have the opportunity yet to settle for a replacement."

Listening to this statement which sounded very questionable, except for an obvious fact, Harry kept silent.

His host had a fine sense for nuances. "I won't go into details, about how much it was her decision, how much it was me who found it about time for a change, Harry, but let me assure you - we didn't part in a row, and I'm not the one to be ungrateful when it's time to say goodbye."

Silent as before, Harry bowed, admitting that any doubts he had felt now were cleared away.

"I'm still looking around, you know. Might be - I could imagine myself inviting Mademoiselle Beatrice for a longer visit. What do you think of this idea, Harry?"

Now this was really insolent, wasn't it?

But Monsieur Armodéc's question had been serious, so Harry found himself forced to answer. "I wonder if it's appropriate for me to comment on your planning, Sire."

The *loup-garou* laughed with genuine joy. "Certainly not, Harry - I hoped to hear a comment on my choice!"

Harry felt disarmed. "Well, erm ... There might be a conflict between your policy and hers - about leaving a tiny amount of desire unfulfilled."

Monsieur Armodéc nodded gravely. "Yes, you're right - that was my feeling too. But then again, what's the sense in perfect harmony all year long? Every now and then, you need a conflict of interests, don't you think so?"

Harry, who was struggling for months with a serious conflict of interests, felt little inclination to agree.

His host showed no impact from Harry's gloomy mood. "It's a matter of proportion, of course ... I'm talking about differences in style, while the basic idea is shared between both sides - nothing like that deadly enmity between you and your long-time opponent ... By the way, what are you planning to do, Harry?"

"Huh?"

Monsieur Armodéc looked surprised, apparently considering this question as the most natural of the world. "With Voldemort. The plot's been completed, the wizarding world is a mess, will hardly ever recover ... That's his work - I hope we agree at least that much."

"I don't share this total conviction, Sire, but I cannot offer any realistic alternative about whom to take responsible."

"Then let me ask again - what are you going to do?"

For an instant, Harry wondered why this seemingly natural question felt more pushing than some offers he had received here. Blaming his current mood, careful nonetheless, he said, "Actually, I was indeed thinking about looking for him, and ask him personally - and, depending on his answer - well, if there's an answer at all ... Yes, there's an open issue, only, I've no idea where to start, how to find him."

His host looked satisfied. "That sounds more like what I've expected, Harry. Where to start - how did you find him in your previous encounters?"

"Finding him, that's good." Harry had a short laugh. "Mostly, it was him to find me - except for the last time, but even then, I just was a bit quicker than his own planning."

"There are probably many ways. The best summary I ever heard was an Indian proverb - *To find a man, you have to follow his tracks* ... Just find out what it means here, Harry, and then ..."

Monsieur Armodéc had surprised him again. Quoting Indians, down here in Haiti. Only after a moment, Harry realized that there were Indians all along the American continent, decided to ask Rahewa if she'd heard this quote before.

Then he asked his host whether the offer for a guest room was still valid. He wasn't in the mood to reach Hogwarts a few hours before dawn, felt sure enough here - expressing his request so late, without leaving time for a preparation, at a time when even Monsieur Armodéc had no flower of the night at hand.

Of course he could stay, his host looked pleased, said they could use the time for longer discussions, or do something they'd never done before - playing chess against each other.

Shortly after the thirtieth move, Harry told his king to kneel down, admitting the opponent's victory. "In chess, I'm no competition for you, Sire ... You should play against my friend Ron - that'd be a more realistic challenge."

Monsieur Armodéc beamed. "He's invited, Harry, by all means - any time, at any scale ..."

Harry kept his face steady. "Chess only, I'd suggest."

"... yes, but I'm sure your friend would accept some food and drinks too ... What's your game of choice, Harry?"

"Go."

"Yes of course - I should have guessed by myself. I don't know that game in detail, Harry, but I'd really appreciate if you would find the patience to show me."

"That would be a pleasure, Sire." Harry's words expressed more than simple politeness - he was fascinated by the prospect of watching Monsieur Armodéc's strategy in this game. "For the next potion, I could come with my Go set."

"Excellent - that would probably solve a problem. I wonder whether I might find a set here around, and even if so, then probably not of the best quality."

After another game, lost like the first but with some more decency, Harry said good-night to his host. Seeing his guest room again, this time alone, tired but sober, he asked himself why he didn't accept more of Monsieur Armodéc's hospitality, now that ... Without finding an answer, he fell asleep.

He was diving in the lake. His hands and legs looked normal, which meant he hadn't eaten Gillyweed - even so, he could breathe easily, move effortlessly through the narrow sphere in which he was able to recognize details. It was cool, a smooth touch on his skin, the gentlest caress along his flanks and thighs.

A line appeared in his vision, then another, then he recognized what he had found - the skeleton of a dragon ... No doubt - one of the four dragons which had died in the

Battle of Hogwarts, had been buried in the lake, with the other three somewhere close ... Funny to detect it now, after he had never been able to find a trace of them. Passing between two of the gigantic ribs, he glided toward the head somewhere in front of him, feeling like in an underwater cave.

A light spot. Coming closer, he saw it was a female figure, in a white T-shirt. One of the camp girls? ... No, looked very much like the new dance teacher, although a few details didn't match.

The face looked at him, the mouth unmoving while the words reached his mind. "Here you are, at last ... Riding a dragon, from inside - the dragon is inside you, Harry, but I'm inside the outside dragon, to ride you, when you come inside me."

He couldn't follow the logic, registered however the invitation, which he could follow easily, with his growing arousal, the faint stroke of the water, along his hardening member, replaced by a harder touch when two legs came floating up, closing around him, dragging him nearer toward her ...

Her face was very close now, a secretive smile curving her lips, no other movement visible, although he could hear the words clearly.

"Dance, Harry."

Only she danced, slight movements, with her legs twisting gently, her body stretching back, sending a wave of heat into his flesh, or was it the other way around?

He hung weightless, motionless, not daring to move, yearning to keep this incredibly intense sensation, spreading through his groin, through his legs, paralyzing him, the intensity still growing - it was impossible to stand much longer, any second now, he would erupt, only he didn't, not as long as he could hold still ...

He saw it coming, approaching slowly, its rotation much faster, its contours strangely distinct in this shadowy cave - a water ball, aiming at him, now passing her head, her breasts, slowing more while the rotation reached a frightening speed ... Barely inching forward, but the moment of hit would be ...

At the very last instant, he knew - the hit would be deadly, this was no water, was a terrible maelstrom, formed into ...

He bent his body backward. At the same moment, his legs came up, touched her body, and this single movement was enough to break the balance, to send him into a burning heat of ecstasy, his mouth opening wide in a silent scream while the deadly ball, ever so slowly, passed his face ...

Harry came awake, gasping, in a long groan, feeling the spasms in his pulsing flesh which was shooting, shooting ...

Darkness around him, the room quiet, a feeling as though an echo had faded an instant before ... And a heavy scent in the air, bitter-sweet, musky, beguiling.

Still panting, still unsure whether to be angry or relieved, Harry realized - this *loup-garou* had tricked him again, in a way never to be discussed.

* * *

It was afternoon local time when Harry jumped back to the Hogwarts Express platform, after a breakfast at which Monsieur Armodéc - never touching the issue of air conditioning Haitian style in a bedroom - had drunk his potion in a deliberate gesture and with obvious disgust.

Was he obliged to join the last class? What was it - Charms? Probably not, then, Lupin would understand that delivering a Wolfsbane Potion sometimes took a little longer than planned.

Reaching the Entrance Hall, Harry found a woman blocking his way, asking, "What are you doing here at this time of the day, young man? Where do you come from?"

Thin, not too big, Muggle clothes - somewhat formal, a pinched face, a great determination, like Hermione at her most unpleasant, and totally unknown to Harry. "I'm not aware that this is any of your business, madam." He tried to bypass her.

Her hand was on his shoulder, holding him. "Just a second ..."

The sentence never finished, ending in a cough.

In a reflex, Harry had responded with the classical technique against attacks as stupid as this one - stepping back onto the opponent's foot, his elbow shooting backward, the other arm freeing his shoulder, ready to deal further measures, like breaking an arm, hitting a larynx - or just holding before the woman collapsed at the floor, like in this case.

"Sorry - was a reflex ... It's not particularly clever to attack me from behind."

Come to think of it, not from front either, although the woman seemed ready for that, should her breath ever catch again.

Harry asked, "Who are you?"

Pain still in her face, nothing compared to the hate in her eyes. "I've ... asked first ... and now you'll answer me ... young man."

He shrugged. "Harry Potter's my name. And yours?"

"Harry Potter - I heard that name before ... And mine's Rosetta Rushmore, supervisor of the Education Ministry for Hogwarts - and I'll make sure you'll not forget that, never ..."

Oh yes, she did her best, with a deep grudge against Hogwarts in general, as it seemed, and a very personal hate against Harry in particular, not leaving any doubt about that.

Within the single day she'd been there when Harry met her first, Rosetta Rushmore had managed to wipe off the smile from *every* face that was so unfortunate and couldn't avoid dealing with her. Within the week that followed, she reached a point at which people were thinking about unforgivable curses - preferably all of them together.

Maybe the only reason which protected Rosetta Rushmore's mind and body was a simple conclusion. Mr. Triplethorne had been the first, had been replaced by her - then, for Heaven's sake, who'd be third in line if they found a way to get rid of her?

Harry didn't have to pump Almyra for internal details. First, because the teachers complained openly, voluntarily, about Rosetta Rushmore's opinions and style. Second, because the woman herself never hesitated to deliver remarks in full public, loud enough to be heard by everyone around. Third, because Harry got his special share of her personal attention.

The Hogwarts teachers weren't qualified for their job. They had never passed an exam, never received a certificate, certainly none from the Education Ministry. The only reason why they could keep working - so Rosetta's comment - was that nobody else qualified any better.

Hogwarts was apparently a close relative of Sodom and Gomorrah, considering her estimation - what with boys and girls so tightly together, and then the houses! Gryffindor had a Headmistress, nothing else - how was McGonagall supposed to keep order in the boys' department? Slytherin was even worse - a Headmaster who might find himself confronted with a situation in which he had to enter girls' dormitories. Unbelievable!

Within several days, everybody called her *the Rosetta Stone* - the means by which Mugglese, found on some papers from the Education Ministry and totally unintelligible, could be translated to plain wizard English, unfortunately not making significantly more sense.

Then a second-year called her "Mrs. Stone", innocently asking, "Isn't your name Rosetta Stone, madam?" when inquired for his reason. Nobody knew if that boy really hadn't known better, at any rate, the scene didn't improve things.

Then, at lunch, Hermione said, "Alright, let's call her Mount Rushmore."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, sure - a dirty piece of rock, with four faces, one more arrogant and ugly than the other."

Ron was already laughing uncontrollably while Harry, for whom geography and politics weren't his strongest, learned about this monument of megalomania in the Black Hills of South Dakota, USA.

Maybe there were some Hogwarts residents who couldn't stand a certain temptation. At any rate, the lady demanded that all students had to deliver their wands after classes, to be locked in until the next day. Harry heard about this from Lupin.

"Did she say why?"

"For reasons of security, as she put it - as if we didn't know whose security was meant."

"And - what was Dumbledore's response?"

"He flatly refused."

So there were limits even to this man's patience, thank God. "And then?"

"Then she made clear - not for the first time, by the way - that it would take her just a phone call to get a bataillon of policemen and guards into the school."

"And Dumbledore?"

"He said, 'Let them come'."

"Really?" Harry beamed. "Was he serious, or just fed up?"

Lupin grinned. "Neither, nor - just his old cunning self ... Took him a few days to recover from the shock, I guess." At Harry's blank face, Lupin explained. "Sure, in a way she's right - if we don't get along, the next step will be something drastic. But she's a hell of an ambitious lady - calling the cavalry would mean she's given up ... That from her? ... Never, Harry."

Soon afterwards, at supper, students and teachers alike had to wait half an hour for their food. Next morning, at breakfast, Harry had the story together, thanks to a close connection with the kitchen people.

"It was a warning strike." He grinned at Hermione. "You never came that far, remember, but Rushty managed just after these few days."

"And why?" asked Ron, while Hermione was still chewing on Harry's reminder.

"Well - Dobby said, it was just a warning. But if that woman ever again comes into their territory, the house elves will withdraw kitchen service."

Hermione said, "That's not going to stop her."

"Yes it is." Harry smiled triumphantly. "It was Samantha who spoke with them. She said, if the woman ever should come again, the elves should kick her out, and Samantha herself would make sure to notify the other side about this order."

Somehow, Hermione had trouble savouring the news, while Harry was grinning madly, remembering the scene how Dobby, freed a minute before, had sent Lucius Malfoy down a staircase.

Then Ron came to report that this education expert had demanded to forbid Quidditch. "I was checking with Dumbledore whether there's a chance for a Quidditch cup, now that wizards and Muggles seem to have stopped shooting at each other. He said it's a little late in the year, and a very bad time for asking - and then he told me why."

"What's wrong with Quidditch?"

"Highly dangerous ... the risk of injuries uncalculable ... A sport in which some team members are supposed to knock other people down, with balls hard as stone, is against the law ..."

"The law??" Harry almost giggled hysterically.

"... yes, and girls riding on broomsticks, that's obscene, she said."

Hermione glared. "Obscene? ... That's sexual harassment - discriminating a certain sex for ..."

Ron showed an exhausted grin. "Then go and sue her."

"It's funny," said Harry, "Monsieur Armodéc said something in that sense, except he just thought it's not really decent."

Ron looked at Hermione. "Go and sue him too."

"No." Hermione's voice was flippant, "it's not really funny." She turned to Ron. "And your advice is a typical example of male ignorance toward female discrimination. You should ..."

Ron waved impatiently. "I could do with some discrimination of a certain female, believe me. She said broomstick flying in general should be allowed only at the age of sixteen. Flyers had to wear helmets, use safety belts ..."

"That's not unreasonable, is it?"

"Yeah, maybe." Ron sighed. "But I'm telling you only the most outstanding ideas she has ... Say, Hermione, why do Muggles need a form in triplicate when someone's going to fart in the corridor?"

"Oh, that's simple." Hermione ignored the special style of Ron's remark completely, probably because - basically - it was a plea for her superior knowledge. "There are just too many Muggles, so, to keep them employed, one half's keeping accounts of what the other half's doing ... Well, that's the result."

These were the problems Hogwarts had with Rosetta Rushmore. They affected Harry only to some degree. But in addition, he had the very personal attention of the lady.

He was heading toward the exit, on his way to a place outside Hogwarts' protective sphere in which portkeys didn't work, when he met her again, blocking the door. He could swear - she'd been waiting for him.

"What do you want outside, Mr. Potter? Ain't you expected in your class?"

"I'm on the way to my classwork. Please let me pass."

A sneering smile. "Classwork? Outside? That's still to be seen ... Follow me."

"You're entitled to get answers from me, and help in tasks. I'm not obliged to follow orders from you, madam."

It was true, they knew it both.

Rosetta Rushmore stared at him, the smirk gone. "Then we wait ... Sooner or later, you'll change your mind."

Harry was changing it already, about the required level of politeness, and the required level of action, toward this ...

"Don't dare to point your wand against me - you know the rule!"

Yes, Harry knew. Dumbledore had established it publicly, announcing drastic measures against someone violating it, somehow keeping very unclear which measures exactly that would be.

Harry folded his hands in front of him. "Please." Then he murmured something else.

As though at their own, the woman's legs started to trip, moving her forward, away from the door. After a few steps, they stopped again.

Smiling, Harry shouted, "Thank you." Out he was.

He felt almost sure to be in for an unpleasant conversation with Dumbledore, prepared himself for the moment - except it never came. Rosetta Rushmore's repertoire was different.

He met her again at the door, this time together with Ron - on their way to the training area for nitro balls.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley - what's your current class?"

"Potions."

"That's what I thought. I spoke with Mrs. McGonagall about your project. I have to tell you that it's completely against the law - that's why I cannot allow you to go outside."

"What??" Harry and Ron were staring at her, at each other.

"Working with explosives is forbidden for anyone without a special permit, which is granted only giving proof of the Explosives and Chemicals Certificate - something you cannot possibly hold. Working with dangerous chemicals - like sulphuric acid, for example, is regulated by the same law ... Sorry."

Yeah, very much so - her face showed it.

"Then we'll do it with water."

"No you won't - moving, or shooting, projectiles of any matter, at a speed higher than four feet per second, outside closed cabins or pre-constructed areas with special security precautions, violates the first amendment of the Public Security Law ... You'll have to find another project, I'm afraid."

To which Rosetta seemed looking forward expectantly, ready to be as inventive as before.

Ron looked at Harry. "Mental, definitely."

"Mr. Weasley, you'll hear about that - you've been a Prefect and assistant administrator the longest time, mark my words!"

Ron glared at her. "With you around, that's the first sensible suggestion I've heard." His trembling fingers were fiddling at his chest. "You can have my badge right now - should be just fit to ..."

Harry grabbed his friend, stopping a remark he felt genuinely sorry not to hear - never would he know which of two alternatives had been on Ron's mind.

Of course, Ron kept his job and his rank - Hogwarts simply couldn't afford losing his work. But their project ...

Harry talked with McGonagall.

The Headmistress looked sour. "She's probably right about these laws - even if not, I won't be able to prove the opposite ... Besides, weren't you almost completed with?"

"Not quite - but aside from that, she's doing what she can to sabotage our work."

"You think you have problems, Harry?" The witch had bitter lines in her face. "Are you interested to hear what I'm dealing with? ... You come to me - you, the artist of rules, whom I had the honour watching for nearly seven years? Find a way, Harry - don't discuss it with me, don't tell me your shortcut around this rule ... And if, by some accident, your next shot happens to blow ..." McGonagall stopped herself. "This conversation never took place, Harry - and listening to my own words, I could start screaming right away."

Looking into a tired face, Harry suddenly felt calm, quiet, knowing what probably had been obvious for a while. He had to find the one who had caused this mess, and he had to punish him. It was very unlikely that this punishment would, somehow, let Rosetta Rushmore disappear, or the other Muggles, but he had neglected a duty already too long.

He smiled. "You're right, Prof ... You're soo right."

The Headmistress looked startled. "Harry - I hope you didn't take me literally, I mean ..."

He could laugh. "No, Prof ... She's a puppet on a string, isn't she? It's the string I have in mind."

* * *

For the short run, Harry and Ron found several solutions. They could use the secret passage with the exit in the *Three Broomsticks*. This was the longest way - quicker was the linkport to Durmstrang, where Harry got permission for their project without any problem, or to Beauxbatons, although this wasn't the best place to shoot nitro balls. Rosetta Rushmore knew about the linkports, but she couldn't be everywhere in first place, couldn't follow either.

Harry's portkey programming project was safe - which Muggle law should regulate that? He worked outside, feeling relieved in spite of the cold weather - sometimes at the former dragon camp, sometimes in the former Giants' camp. But his progress was slow.

A matter of accuracy, Ray had said. Still, deep inside, Harry hoped for - almost expected - the moment when, with an inaudible click, it would work, like it had happened with his apparition, and his pursuit. But unfortunately, portkey programming wasn't part of any

inheritance from his dark enemy. The best he had managed so far was a three-step jump - ridiculous the idea of a portkey to the Ile de la Tortue.

If the progress in that project was slow, Harry saw none whatsoever in his Animagus project. Changing into a sphere? No way, amigo. He tried it with wishful thinking - concentrating on the picture of him, as a dragon, diving down toward Rosetta Rushmore.

A nice picture, not rewarding more than a daydream.

After another encounter with the ministry woman, in which she demanded that the three recreation rooms be labeled - for boys, girls, teachers, Harry finally started thinking seriously about his quest for Voldemort.

Finding the dark lord, who wasn't a lord ... Maybe that was a hint, maybe he would find him when scanning Great Britain for all lords, and then discard those which were genuine. Only - aside from the technical problems, who said Voldemort was in England? Marie-Christine had suspected so ...

At this point, Harry's single-mind brainstorming mutated to a single-minded brooding. After a while, he called himself back to his schedule.

Then what else? ... Asking the Goblins - was a measure, although he didn't expect much. Of course, they would have to watch for Wormtail with the silvery hand ... As if Wormtail would appear in public with his hand unprotected. But still, he had to talk with them, would be too stupid not doing it, only to learn later that they had known all the time.

Maybe he should place an ad in all major wizard newspapers. *Voldemort, where are you? I want to talk with you - just a little chat, there's some question I'd like to ask. Well, yes, before I forget - depending on the answer, might be I'd like to kill you.* That would be the day, getting a response for such an ad ... No, he would get responses, lots of them, only they'd be crap.

But *newspaper* was the keyword which brought Harry on the right track - the track he had to follow, according to this Indian proverb Monsieur Armodéc had quoted. Voldemort had spread rumours, lies, disinformation, all through newspapers ... Muggle newspapers, of course. Then how had the information been passed over to them?

That was something to be discussed with Deborah, which meant a visit in the evening, or on a weekend. Visits ... How was the official state with Hogwarts students leaving the school? Suddenly, thanks to Thornella Brushface, this was an issue.

Before Harry had the opportunity to beat this bush in an innocent way, he found a letter from *Groucho Spectors*, delivered by the *Magical Tours* post service. *Shareholder Meeting* - two days from now, four o'clock in the afternoon, equivalent to midnight here.

Harry knew the location now, so he could jump directly, didn't need this stupid kind of operation base called hotel suite. Well, not for that, and for all he knew, not for anything else either.

It was half past eleven when he came down the staircase, dressed in his light grey business suit, fully aware that he would tremble miserably on his way to the jumping point outside,

which had been the better alternative, compared to carrying a heavy coat in Santa Monica. And who was standing there?

Coquette Crushdoor herself. Did she have spies, or could she read minds?

"What's this? - Mr. Potter in a Muggle suit? ... On your way to a costume ball?"

"No."

The woman's eyes widened, then narrowed. "Oh, I know - some silly girl's waiting for you, probably in Hogsmeade ..."

Harry started to giggle, then to laugh - about this crazy idea, from this crazy woman. A Zen joke from her, of all people ...

Rosetta Rushmore took his laughter exactly as what it was - something ridiculing her. "Whatever - you won't leave that building, Mr. Potter!"

"Yes I will." He made a step.

Something like fright, for a fleeting instant, replaced by stubbornness. "You won't curse me again! I've found out about you, that you don't need a wand for that ... One try, and you'll find yourself first in front of your funny little Headmaster, and the next day in front of a Muggle jury!"

Nobody called Dumbledore like that - nobody!

Harry crossed his arms over his chest, deliberately raising a twist from her when, for a short moment, his arms looked as if pointing at her. "Funny little Headmaster, huh? ... You miserable Muggle - you know what a memory charm is, do you?"

With a quick movement, Harry's hands touched his temples, fell back - enough to make the woman jump. "Allright then - what's your choice?"

Yes, she knew what a memory charm was, had no doubt he could perform it, which wasn't entirely true, not with the accuracy to blend out the memory of five minutes in the Entrance Hall. But she didn't know, while she was perfectly aware that her emotional remark had all the qualifications for a political scandal - and her demission, to say the least.

But Rosetta had guts, could nobody say otherwise. "You won't do that, Mr. Potter ... Not you, not after all I've heard about you ... It just doesn't fit."

"So? ... Some people are supposed to fight dark wizards, and then they're using dirty tricks by themselves ... Some people are supposed to consolidate wizard schools into Muggle systems, and then they're harassing students, and insulting teachers. Now ..."

"That's not true!" The woman swallowed. "I ... I take back what I said a moment ago - it was a stupid remark, and obviously wrong."

This could have been a reason to grin, if not for the tense atmosphere. And of course, she had left him no choice. "It's allright ... I take back what I said about you ..."

Leaving it to everybody's guess whether or not it was obviously true.

"... and you're right, I'm not going to use a memory charm ... But I'll go outside now."

"To which purpose, Mr. Potter?"

With some effort, Harry released his clenching teeth. "To join a shareholder meeting of *Groucho Sectors*, in Santa Monica, California, USA - where it'll be four o'clock in the afternoon pretty soon - that's the scheduled time."

He felt rage, being forced to tell her the truth, didn't feel any better when Rosetta Rushmore, looking totally perplexed, stepped aside, watching in astonishment how Harry left the hall to walk toward the Hogwarts Express platform.

Well - rage made for enough heat not to feel cold.

* * *

Entering the meeting room, Harry found just one person already waiting - Cho, an open folder before her on the table. She smiled at him! "Hello, war hero."

"What??"

Cho twisted a bit, slightly blushing. "Er - hello, Harry."

How did she know about what was happening in Hogwarts?

"How do you know about what's happening in Hogwarts?"

Cho blushed more. "I have my sources ... How come you look so crotchety?"

"Shouldn't be too difficult to guess, if you're so well informed - a minute ago, I had an encounter with Mount Rushmore herself, that's why."

Cho looked totally blank, which meant her sources weren't worth a sickle, or totally outdated. Before Harry could investigate the thought further, Sylvie and Jesamine entered the room, greeted him.

Cho opened the meeting, while the protocol pen was scribbling in a frenzy. When she started with the first topic, her voice was a bit tense. "Our movies department has started a major project, which - at the end - will consist of about a dozen sector cassettes. It's about dancing."

Harry nodded to himself inwardly. Of course - the one for which Rahewa was hired, and the rest of his dance crew, probably among others ...

"The first cassette gives a do-it-yourself course in the standard dances of the world dance program, covering the basic steps - foxtrot in three versions, waltz in two, cha-cha-cha, rumba, tango, jive, samba ... For each of these dances, there'll be an individual cassette with all steps known - very detailed, so you really can learn by yourself, especially with the advantages of sectors in contrast to Muggles TV - truly three-dimensional, you can look

from all angles - but whom am I telling that? ... Well, and the last cassette will be a demo collection of dances around the world - " she looked at Harry, "Grass Dance, for example."

Which made sense. In a spectator, you could really watch all the details. With a little marketing, this should be a boomer. Rahewa's part seemed placed in a distant corner, but so what - at least she'd got the salary.

"... first cassette in a beta version. I'd like to give you an impression how this project will be run."

Walking to the large spectator globe at the rear end of the room, watching Cho closing the blinds, Harry wondered why she was moving so awkwardly, like on full alert for something to happen.

When the misty gray faded, opening to the introduction scene, he knew why - knew also who had told Cho about the events in Hogwarts, and why Cho hadn't understood his remark about a real nuisance.

The male dancer was unknown to Harry.

The woman was Marie-Christine.

White-hot fury boiled up in him, made him gasp. He glared up, toward Cho, saw her stagger for an instant - apparently hit by an involuntary wave from his mind. She didn't look up.

He was desperately fighting for control, using the full ten minutes of this demonstration, to become again master of his voice, his mind, using all his skill to lock this burning rage up in some cage, to be dealt with later. He felt betrayed, manipulated, robbed, blackmailed - by Cho, that was, not by Marie-Christine whose motivation seemed fairly obvious.

They went back to their seats.

"So that's our project in the Edutainment area." Cho's voice had lost some of its tension, while her body still seemed unnaturally stiff. "It will take about half a year until the last cassette is completed, while the first one, what you've just seen, will be in time for the Christmas business ... With this project, we give a first answer to the request from *Narita Spectors* to provide spectator movies - without them, they're not going to sell systems, which is understandable ..."

Harry's mind drifted off, to something much more important for him. Marie-Christine, taken away from Hogwarts, away from him, officially for this movie project, while everybody with eyes to see, ears to hear knew the true reason behind ...

A very clever move, yes, oh yes - he could imagine Cho, grinning about her plot ... Well, she better watched, could happen easily this grin might freeze ...

"... more movies. For this purpose, we have to increase our efforts, and we have to become more efficient. That brings us to our main topic of today, the new corporate structure ..."

To hell with corporate structures. Some other structures were keeping Harry's mind busy, those of a heavy attack, of possible counter-attacks, those of a body he remembered well, of another body whose shape seemed seriously at risk to fade in his memory ...

"... will be *Groucho Recordings*, the one for producing the movies, and also this project. The next daughter company will be *Groucho Entertainment*, in charge of the marketing and distribution. The third will be *Groucho Manufacturing* - for the systems production, that is the interface to *Narita Sectors* ..."

Daughter companies? Cho was about to collect daughters of her own? ... Then, like for himself, there might be a surprise in store - she might find an indestructible barrier ...

"... candidates for the CEO's are obvious, I'd say. Sylvie has opted for *Groucho Recording*, Jesamine for *Groucho Manufacturing*, which means I'll go for *Groucho Entertainment* ... Okay, that's the rough outline - any comments so far?"

Harry raised his arm. "No."

Cho looked like hit in the face - no, more like punched in the stomach, taking all wind off her. Sylvie and Jesamine showed little surprise, only an anxious expectation.

Cho had recovered a bit. "Time-out ... Harry and I, we'll discuss this plan in my office - okay?"

Since she had been looking at the table, he didn't know whether this question was directed toward him. Probably so ... Well, then, time to rumble.

He followed her downstairs.

Cho's office looked splendid. Spacious, light, with a windowfront spanning the entire width, some comfortable-looking leather chairs placed at a low table with a top of gray stone, possibly granite. And then her desk - larger than life, crowded with papers, folders, phone, a second phone, a third phone, plus a side-table with what looked like a TV screen ... Had to be one of those people computers.

Harry sat down, examining the paintings at the wall opposite the windows, not registering a detail, hardly the fact that they were Chinese.

Cho didn't sit down. She was walking from one end of the free space to the other - a little more heat and energy, and she'd been floating. Now she stopped. "What's that supposed to mean - no?"

"No."

Her voice came snarling. "Talk in complete sentences, for God's sake!"

Harry almost did, remembered just in time what he'd sworn to himself some minutes ago - that she would pay, would pay for what she'd done, would pay more for every additional detail - like this command ... Maybe a waiter would obey, only he wasn't.

Cho was shouting. "This is a time-out! You're not restricted to yes and no!"

No he wasn't - not by their contract, to be precise.

"Do we have an agreement that I have to say more?"

"You wanna pay back, right? - It has nothing to do with the actual plan, it's just to strike back, to hit me where it hurts."

He could sneer too, had found the opportunity to train that - recently, in Hogwarts. "I've bought a blocking minority - and what happens? Your next step is to shift the business decisions into daughter companies, with the mother just good to earn the profits, or to pay the debts, and to hire or fire the CEO's - as if we had much choice in that ... But not with me ... Ask any business expert what he'd do in such a case - you cannot seriously expect me to agree how you're undermining my control power."

Cho was trembling in rage. "I don't believe for a second that's the real reason. If I'd suggested the opposite, you'd have said no as well!"

"Thoughts are free."

"Free, yes - so free, I felt like kicked the moment you saw her in the spectator." Cho sat down, hands balled to fists. "This is a perfectly normal business - she's hired as an actor, and dancer, for ..."

"Perfectly normal - bullshit! Marie-Christine's the first to admit she's not the greatest dancer of the world, not in the same league as others, Fleur for example."

Cho looked triumphant. "That's a do-it-yourself course, not a dance contest! She's coming over better in the globe than Fleur - people can identify with her - who'd identify herself with a Veela?"

This was true. Marie-Christine looked magnificent in the spectator - another burner to heat up his fury.

"I offered a contract much better than Hogwarts, and she came - that's all."

"Much better - oh yes, I can imagine. A lot more money, probably some other benefits ..."

Cho's face turned dark red.

"... and I can't blame her - I'd have fallen for the same trap - any time, except it wasn't me who got the offer - although I wouldn't have asked for money."

Cho dropped her nominal defense line at the spot. "Did you think I'd be sitting here idly, biting nails, while you were balling her all the time? Not caring much who knows about? ... And as if that's not enough ..."

"And why?" He was shouting too. "And why not? There's just one pussy on earth that's allowed for me, huh, which is yours, except this one's kept out of reach ..."

Cho gasped.

"... for reasons I still don't understand, week after week after week ... And then we meet after an eternity, and I'm told you can play the game as well, only it's no fun, and that's all there is for the next eternity. I'd say you're confusing cause and effect here ..."

"Certainly not!" Cho's eyes were sparkling fire. "It wasn't me who started playing games with other people - that was you!"

"Ah - the old story, unforgotten, unforgiven ... Okay, so it was me who started, but it's you who's ending them ..."

Cho twisted. "What's ..."

"Because I'm not playing along any further. I never told you what to do or not to do, and I'm not willing to let me drag along, to follow the whistle of your - bell, in particular not if it's never coming a certain way. You've messed in my business, Cho, and that's been the last time ..."

"Messed in your business? It's not your business alone - and besides, you've messed in *my* business, you're still doing so, not allowing us to do a necessary step in our development!"

Harry didn't even think about his decision. "Don't worry - it won't happen again. You can go along - I take my veto back, what do I care about that stuff, who's selling what to whom, and whether it's a ..."

"Of course you don't!" Cho's voice was almost tilting over. "You never did, except to throw spanners in my work, like some minutes ago!"

"I took it back, remember? And otherwise - why should I? How could I? Did I get a chance to participate - just with my natural interest, and sympathy? Did you come after a few weeks to tell me it's going tough, or well? Did I get any feedback after an investment of hundred grand? No. And when I bought myself in, I had to promise not to say anything but yes and no - the most ridiculous rule ever, and it was yourself who broke it constantly ... So where's the base on which I should feel concerned? Because it's you? ... I loved you without your business, I loved you with your business - the only reason for me buying in was to see you - did me a great favour, oh yes, but that's past - as I said, I'm going to make sure none of us is messing any further with the other."

Cho went very still. "What do you mean?"

"As for my loan to *Groucho Spectors*, it's no longer a loan. What I mean is, it doesn't have to be paid back. That's for the company as a whole - for all three of you ..."

Her eyes widened in disbelief.

"... My share of twenty-six percent goes to you, so you have control of the company and its next hundred daughters ... That's about half of what I've got from your father - the other half will be used for things like Mrs. Lightfoot's treatment, and otherwise for the fight against Voldemort, please tell your father that ..."

Cho almost exploded. "I'm not telling my father anything! I'm not your messenger!"

"Okay, then I'll write him a letter that, except for minor sums, I don't take personal benefit from this money that was passed to me on wrong premises - half of it for you, the other half for a good cause, that's the best I can handle, because I'll need it."

Cho's face had turned pale. "No - that's not what I had in mind - you cannot ..."

"I cannot??" Harry struggled to keep his own voice under control. "Oh yes I can, very much so, that's my business - and if it's not what you had in mind, then it's at least what you've reached - there's no clause that gives you a veto ... I'm done with *Groucho*, and I'm done with people telling me ..."

"And I? What am I supposed to do?"

Harry stared at her. "You can do what you want - like all the time before. The only difference is, now the same's true for me."

"Do what I want? Ha! As if I'd ever had a chance - wasn't it always your big crusade which dominated everything? Voldemort here and there, dictating every decision - even now, nobody's heard anything from him, but no, you cannot give it a rest, have to dig through all holes ..."

"Yes, exactly. I didn't choose my fate - and besides, for the last half year, the time in which we messed up so thoroughly, there wasn't anything of a crusade. But now it's high time, and yes, it's dominating my life - but it's not dominating all my decisions - not this one."

"Why can't you give it a rest? He isn't playing a role any longer."

"Why do you ask? You're dealing with spectors and movies, I'm dealing with Voldemort. I'm no longer telling you what to do, so please do me the same favour."

"But ..." Cho was fighting for her composure. "You can't be serious - not if this damned fate has any meaning. What about our ..." She was unable to speak the word he didn't dare to think of. "What about Voldemort's last plot? That can't be ..."

"He's been wrong before - obviously. Seems as if we've been wrong too."

"No! We weren't wrong." Almost a cry.

"Yeah, maybe not. But that was last year. Voldemort has done his blackmailing, and that's been the last time. Now you've done your blackmailing, and that's been the last time too."

"Only our noble hero Harry never did, right? Always the best intentions, because that's what counts - when spending money, when fucking girls, when killing people ..."

"And you? What about your intentions? Because - in case you didn't notice, let me remind you - we did all that together, and more than once!"

Cho swallowed.

"Maybe except for the killing ..." Harry stood up. "Anyway - I've blackmailed you once, yes, you can say that. The result's a disaster. If you want, blame me ... At least, I've corrected it five minutes ago, as good as possible. Mr. Spinbottle will take care of the papers."

"Yes, I blame you - and myself too, but you more ... You don't even give me a chance to correct my mistakes."

"Nonsense - I'm not preventing you from anything, I just made sure of that. New is only one thing - now it's the same the other way around ... As if it would mean anything, pretty ridiculous, with the current state in Hogwarts, but that's where you can find me, if you think there's a reason ... Goodbye."

The last picture burned itself into Harry's memory - Cho, her hands covering her face, the first sob ripping her body.

16 - Backtracking

So Harry was free, at last ... Free? A laugh, only he felt more like crying. But he didn't, hadn't, not even on his way back into the school, although his eyes were burning, his stomach filled with acid, his heart hammering, his mind whincing in pain.

He wasn't free at all. Love offered no switch to turn it off, no door to be closed.

He was imprisoned worse than ever - because it had been his own decision to throw away the key ... Yes, granted, this key hadn't helped a bit during the recent months, while now Harry found himself sitting in an invisible cell, unable to escape.

Danielle, for example. Nominally, by way of self-deassignment, now he should be free to accept her offer. Now this offer was the last thing Harry had in mind.

Danielle knew it. "H'arry, you can't keep that way. Since you're not ready to die, and since I'm obviously no alternative either, just go and tell her you're sorry, and you cannot live without her."

Harry almost jumped. "Huh?"

"Who? The one who's breaking your heart, or did you break hers first? ... I don't even know her name ..."

"Cho Chang." Almost mechanically, in a conditional reflex - for all Harry knew, nobody was suited better for discussing such painful matters than a French woman.

"Cho Chang? Okay then, call her to come ..."

"She won't."

"Then go to her - and if she doesn't let you in, you'll sit at her door until she does."

"I won't."

Danielle Crouchard smiled. "You're nice, H'arry, and attractive - and a bit stupid, and more than a bit stubborn."

So he was stupid? Fine with him, he'd never claimed to be a genius - just someone with a special fate, and a few special skills, most of them stolen from a dark wizard, easily recognizable because they worked flawlessly while anything that resulted from his own hard work was lacking precision ... A depressing thought, though not as depressing as the thought that he and Cho ... This picture of her, sitting in the chair ... It would not fade.

Harry in a bad mood, the morning after returning from *Groucho Spectors*, that wasn't particularly new. So it took his friends some time before they registered a change in quality.

Ginny was quickest - a clear sign of her growing skill in *haragei*, maybe also for some other reason. Only that the obvious topic to be discussed seemed too delicate, so Ginny kept silent, just watching him.

When, at supper, Harry still didn't look any different, Ron took all his courage. "Harry?"

"What?"

"How - er, was your meeting?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Probably so ... I thought you'd like to talk about."

"No."

"Was it that bad?"

For an answer, Harry just glared at his friend.

He was unable to think straight. Maybe a hard training ... It turned out a mess, he had no balance, no timing, no spirit, nothing. He couldn't walk, couldn't jump, hurt himself at falling. So what ... Pain was relative.

Sitting in the hot-water tub, he was crying ... Certainly no place suited better than here.

He should visit Deborah, to talk with her about methods how to track down sources of false information. But he couldn't - not in his state, unable to concentrate on anything else.

He took his Steel Wing, jumped up, flying around aimlessly, mindlessly, feeling numb from the sharp wind, numb inside.

He touched down at the former dragon camp, to work on his portkey accuracy. Ridiculous - as if he could muster any precision now.

The lesson from Almyra resurfaced in Harry's mind, given here at this place. Being just a sphere - no body that was aching in every fibre, only a clean, crystal-clear structure, no emotions, just ...

The world around him faded. He was alone in a void - not feeling anything, just being ... And free, totally free, for a fleeting instant not ruled by the world outside.

Then he was back again.

Harry couldn't even feel surprise. Somehow, all factors had clicked together. His former efforts, his encounter with a spirit that had lost its body for a while, his deep misery - creating a mood in which a bodiless sphere appeared as the most desirable state.

Only it didn't last - he was back in his misery.

Could he reproduce it? ... Not at his first attempt, not at the second either. Then he realized - this little spark of excitement, from having mastered a step in his Animagus project, was blocking him.

Abandon all joy. Abandon all fear. Abandon your presence - just be ... And here it was again, the void, this magnificent all-purpose existence, all too short. And back.

Once more, just to be on the safe side. Yes, it worked, he had caught the trick. It wasn't simple, he would have to work on that before he could find this narrow entrance while in a state of joy and excitement. But Almyra had been right - his experience with another void seemed quite helpful ... Or was it the same?

Flying back, Harry became aware that these transitions had been something like a high-speed meditation. He could think clearer than before, could examine his situation more objectively, could see what he'd done from a third person's perspective.

He'd been awfully, astonishingly stupid.

But not he alone.

* * *

There was a certain kind of freedom, after all. Harry just gave a damn for Rosetta Rushmore and her stupid little complaints. As if they had any significance now. However, Rosetta seemed more reluctant than before in picking at him. At any rate, Harry had no trouble leaving the school for some visits in London. Mr. Spinbottle was his first target.

"There's no change, Mr. Potter, no dramatic one, that is. A bit worse every week ... Which means, the clock's ticking definitely, I'm afraid ... Did you have some success in your search for - er, a new place for that girl?"

"Yes, there are candidates - more than one, although I didn't ask yet all of which I have in mind."

"That's good to hear. I'd recommend to ask the others soon, Mr. Potter, while there's still time - without the immediate pressure, you know what I mean."

"Yes ... Mr. Spinbottle, how's the legal situation for candidates?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well - er, does it play a role if they're married, or not yet married, or if it's a single person, or a family?"

The lawyer leaned back in his chair. "It's not my specialty, but I did some research, looked for decisions in the past. As far as I can see, Mr. Potter, if the basic conditions are met - I mean, above twenty-one, no criminal record, a home, regular income - then the girl herself has the first saying. Yes, a couple would take preference over a single person, a woman over a man, but a clear vote from the girl would rule out such differences ... Most often, the children are too young for that, and then the said differences take effect ... What's the state of your candidates?"

"All kinds - married couple with children, married couple without, unmarried couple, single woman ..."

The lawyer smiled. "It's quite a list, really, I have to say - as sad as the story is, at least I have these good news in case Mrs. Lightfoot would ask me."

"Well - Mr. Spinbottle, it was actually another reason why I wanted to meet you ..." Harry explained what the lawyer should do with a loan and with a twenty-six percent share of a prospering company.

It earned him a sharp glance. "Do you know what you're doing, Mr. Potter?"

Harry sighed. "Yes."

"Do you want to hear my comment - I mean my legal advice?"

"No."

Mr. Spinbottle nodded gravely. "That's what I thought ... I hope you don't feel offended if I'm asking you for a written order - giving away a quarter of a million is a bit outside the scope I'm taking verbally ... If you can spend a few minutes, we'll have it ready."

No, Harry wasn't offended, could follow the argumentation, felt grateful for a lawyer who really left his comment unsaid.

Fifteen minutes later, he had sized down his fortune by half. The other half was held in escrow by Mr. Spinbottle, until *Groucho Sceptors* would take over one part, Cho Chang the other.

So Harry had been stupid. But this was the wisest thing he'd done in a long while. As of now, whatever would take place would be just between two people ... If anything would take place, that was.

His mind a bit easier than before, Harry went to the *Daily Prophet* building, where Paul Sillitoe informed him that Deborah wasn't expected back within the next two hours.

Too long to wait here. Too short to jump back to Hogwarts. Maybe he could use the time for some Christmas presents.

Walking along shops, Harry realized that he was lacking any spirit, any imagination. And with a sharp twist, painful as the stab of a knife, he became aware that his list was one entry shorter than recently.

Maybe a visit in *Swashbuckle Sweets*. The twins said hello, then went back to their work - Christmas coming soon was hot season for them.

Maybe a visit with Ray, born in hell. Harry didn't find him either, found Mr. Caruthers instead, no, was found by him, leading to a conversation as short as unpleasant. Harry couldn't even muster the energy for a nice, threatening insult in response.

However, Mr. Caruthers' remarks about some damned Muggles had given Harry an idea for a present. Muggle technology, wasn't this something obvious for Arthur Weasley? Thinking about alternatives, Harry saw something which seemed still more obvious, would cover at least another person, although the thought felt quite hurtful. Still ...

Harry found a supplier, gasped a bit, hearing the price, knew that he had to come with a story that looked perfectly true - as long as he kept some recent events to himself. He paid with his GALA card, left detailed instruction where to deliver, and when, then it was time for another try in the *Daily Prophet* building.

Deborah had arrived a while before, had time, had no questions about Harry's dark mood when hearing his request. "Tracking down the first appearances of these reports - Harry, this alone's an awful lot of work. It means scanning the archives of the important Muggle newspapers around the world - twenty, at the least ... Then - contacting the authors, they'll be very reluctant to talk about their sources - well, okay, in the meantime everybody knows that most of them were crap, but that won't make it simpler, quite the opposite ..."

Deborah thought for a moment. "Paul's the best researcher I know. I'm sure he'll help, but it's too much for him alone - I cannot ask for such an amount of work."

Harry said, "Deborah - I'm ready to invest everything I can offer ... Time, money ..."

"Hmm ... It will cost money for sure - travel expenses, bribes ..." Deborah examined his face. "Say - would you be ready to hire people? Paul himself, for example?"

"Of course - if he'd be ready, that would be super ... He can fix his salary, and a premium, whatever."

Deborah smiled. "Then let's ask him, because your own time - Harry, going through newspaper archives needs some expertise, so your own time won't do much good."

At least, Harry's knowledge about journalism was accurate enough to ask, "Should we discuss it here or in a restaurant?"

Deborah grinned. "You may ask him, but my evening's already fixed, so let's do the basics here."

The challenge seemed to have more appeal for Paul Sillitoe than the money. He said, "It'd be a fulltime job, Harry, which means I could start in a week or two. You'd have to pay my standard fee, plus expenses, and you'd have to tell me how high I can go in bribing ..."

"Unlimited - I mean I'd leave it to your judgment."

The journalist looked pleased, glanced at Deborah. "I've got a first-rate reference, huh? For quality and trustworthiness ... That's nice to hear."

Harry said, "And a premium - if we can locate a source."

"A premium?" Apparently, Paul wasn't totally immune from money. "How much?"

"Erm - ten thousand galleons?"

The researcher beamed. "Well - that'll make the old bones moving. Harry, it's a pleasure doing business with you."

When they were alone again, Deborah said, "That's generous, Harry - I like to see Paul striking some gold, but you should be a bit more careful with your money."

Harry's smile was bitter, though maybe just for himself. "I'm very careful with that money, more than you'd believe - but this premium's placed just right."

* * *

Work was a dope, good to keep your mind busy, good to soften the pain all over your body. Who'd mentioned a broken heart? Nonsense, Harry's kept working flawlessly. Love hurt - yes, that was true, but when it did, it did so everywhere. Even that would be under control soon, with a few more sessions in the training hall ...

Then it was Transfiguration, and Harry informed his young teacher that he had mastered the sphere state.

Almyra beamed. "Hey - super, Harry, that was a quick one! What made you reach the breakthrough?"

"Well - er, somehow ..."

Almyra lowered her voice. "Whatever - come into my office for a demo."

Harry nodded, still busy to find an innocent explanation for his breakthrough.

Almyra grinned. "I hope you remember how a sphere is demonstrated, do you?"

"What??" Harry blushed.

"Only joking - although, that's a typical example for this unbalanced ..." Almyra stopped herself. "This isn't the right place for discussing the issue." Examining Harry's face, her smile faded. "Say - for such a step, and for this particular topic, your excitement's pretty limited. Something wrong?"

"Erm ..."

As short and unfinished as this answer seemed, apparently Almyra had heard enough. "Harry - come into my office after supper. I have the feeling this'll be a longer conversation ... Looks like an opportunity to pay back some debts."

Harry felt more than startled, looking forward to this conversation. "I wasn't aware you owing me."

"Maybe not from your perspective ... Maybe it wasn't you I had in mind." Seeing him twist, Almyra smiled again, making clear this was another joke - and probably with a nucleus of truth just like the previous one.

Harry's contribution to the conversation at the Gryffindor table scored barely above null, not exactly to the surprise of his friends. When Ron asked him for a game of chess, or maybe Go, after supper, Harry excused himself with the meeting shortly afterwards.

Suddenly, Ron and Hermione looked very relieved.

Harry said, "It's about Transfiguration."

They nodded - yes of course, however without changing their expression.

At this moment, Harry saw it - remembering his friend and step-brother, how Ron had been walking through Hogwarts, seriously believing no one but himself knew about his worried state. And he, Harry, had been the one to explain that nobody, repeat nobody, ever had mastered the art of hiding troubled love ... Only that Ron had been at the better end.

So they knew - except for some details ... Harry giggled.

Two heads wheeled around, staring at him in disbelief.

He giggled again. "Sorry ... I just realized - er, well, I mean ... You know what I mean, don't you? It's ... I could as well talk openly about - er, only I cannot."

Two sighs, almost in unison, like a strangling taken off. Ron said, "So it's about more than Transfiguration, huh?"

"I guess so, yes ... No, I'm sure Transfiguration will be the smallest part."

And he wasn't wrong. Entering the office, Harry saw a bottle of red wine and two glasses - highly unusual equipment for Almyra.

She registered his glance. "I'd have preferred a phoenix, but that's still out of reach for me, and who knows - maybe it's just Fawkes with this calming quality for you ... So a glass of wine is the closest I can offer."

Harry could smile. "Fawkes, yes ... But I'm - er, prepared enough." Anyway, he accepted a glass, just to oil the vocals.

"Alright, then ..." For a short moment, Almyra seemed to gather strength. "How is it - between you and Cho?"

Harry told her, summarizing the former encounters with Cho, going into detail on the last meeting of *Groucho Spectors*, leaving out some aspects, maybe important ones, however not leaving out Marie-Christine. But then, this hadn't been a detail.

Almyra listened, her expression changing between angry disbelief, pained amusement, and stunned astonishment.

Harry finished, "I met Spinbottle yesterday. The papers are signed, the stuff's now in escrow."

Almyra, her chin resting on her folded hands, looked at him with something that might have been admiration - for true grandiosity in messing up. "Well - can nobody say that money's an issue for you ... That's not the reason for your trouble, certainly not."

"I'm not so sure."

"You're not sure?" Almyra had a short laugh. "Isn't it obvious what's the problem?"

Harry shook his head. "Not for me."

"Harry!" Almyra's glance was reproachful. "You're having an affair with another woman, then Cho takes measures to stop that, and you explode. How about that?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "That's your view of things?"

"Not the complete one, but ... That's at least where the immediate problem's buried."

The blood rushed into his face. "Okay - so it's all my fault ... Be it ... Who cares? The story's over - this way or the other."

Almyra was up, came around the desk, leaned close to him, her hands on his shoulder. "Easy now ... Ain't we brother and sister?"

"Yes." It came growling.

"Okay, brother ..." Almyra waited a moment, until she saw Harry's face lighten up a bit. "Tell me your version."

"It ..." Harry stopped. "It includes a few details you're not supposed to know, but without them, the picture's just incomplete."

Almyra nodded expectantly. "I love details I'm not supposed to know."

"Alright, then ... For all I can see, the trouble started at the end of last term, when I gave her that loan, because then, I didn't hear anything from her until the end of vacation. Then I got an invitation to a party ... It was a mess ..." Harry described what he'd seen at that party, and especially what he'd heard afterwards from Cho.

Walking back to her seat, Almyra used the time to recover from her surprise. "And then?"

"Honestly, Al - I could live with that, I mean ... Only at that day, it was just the cream on the cake - so there was - er, nothing. And then I was waiting again - and waiting, and waiting ... Yes, Marie-Christine and I, we did it ... But it wasn't planned as a habit, only ..."

"Only there's a strong tendency to fall into a habit, huh?" The question came with a smile.

Sister or not, Harry preferred to keep a certain fever private. "Well - I mean, with Marie-Christine, that wasn't really new, if you ..."

Yes, Almyra knew what he meant.

"... and believe me, we were both second choice to each other, but if you're waiting forever, not hearing anything, not knowing what's going on - the next time I saw Cho was when she came because they were broke ... And then I bought myself in - that was the biggest mistake, I think ... I wasn't allowed to speak freely in the meetings, only yes and no, except it didn't work - of course not ... Yes, I kept to it - was upsetting her even more ... And then she lured Marie-Christine away, and at the last meeting ... Al, I don't know why we couldn't see each

other once a week or so, but ... Whatever reasons she had, living her life and messing into mine - I wasn't ready to accept it any longer, and I still don't."

Almyra looked thoughtful, then curious. "By the way - do you know who's Marie-Christine's first choice?"

Harry inhaled. "Yes."

"Okay, it's none of my business ..."

He interrupted her. "If it was that simple ... It's Cho."

For a moment, Almyra was speechless. Then a small grin spread her face. "Well, that woman has many talents, by all means ..." She glanced up at him. "What do you think? ... Now that ..."

Harry shrugged. "Ask Cho - the question's only on that side ... Al - even if they do it, or did it, honestly - that's not the reason why I went berserk, really. Quite the opposite - if Cho would have said, I called her for myself, then I'd have seen a motive I could understand ..."

"So she knew - about ..."

"Yes - since she knew about our affair."

"Well, well ..." Almyra grinned. "And it would have been a nice compensation for your own side-stepping, right?"

"Yeah, maybe so." When in doubt, play openly. "Al, I don't really believe that Marie-Christine and I - that this is what's upsetting Cho most. Not after ..." Harry let the sentence trail.

"Then ..." Almyra looked into his eyes. "Harry, was there someone else?"

"Well ..." He swallowed, only he had no choice - not if he wanted to present the complete list of troubles. So he told Almyra about the two cases that seemed to count so much even without his intention.

There was no word for the expression in Almyra's face. "Oh brother ... by and by, I get the picture."

Harry's cheeks were burning. "The one was a trap - nothing else. The other - I told Cho already that this was the only way I saw, and that I stand to what I did - I'd do it again."

Almyra, who once had been the recipient of another cure, said, "You might be right, Harry - but Ginny?"

"She's a sister too ... Turn it the other way around - there ain't that many for whom I'd have done it."

"The noble ..." Almyra stopped, blushing. "Sorry - that was unfair, Harry, should nobody know better than I."

He could grin. "It's okay - and besides, I heard that already - the full sentence, and more."

Almyra's expression was still guilty. "Yes, I can imagine ... At least, you see, that's what's more dominant in a woman's perspective."

Which was a great help for him, really. After a moment, Harry said, "Al - okay, there's sex involved, but still - it has to do with the money. For me it's a Zen riddle - without that money, Cho couldn't have started the business - with that money, she's going nuts ... Maybe it has to do with her father, that he gave that money to me, not to her ..."

"So it's Mr. Chang's fault?" Almyra's voice was mocking.

Harry laughed. "Sounds wrong, somehow - although, what do I know about fathers and daughters? ... Especially Chinese ones."

Almyra nodded. "Yes, could be ... Cho's power-hungry, that's for sure ... And with a successful father on one side, and the world's most powerful wizard at the other ..."

Harry's hand came up. "Now, now ..."

Almyra stopped him short. "No, Harry, it's true - yes, Dumbledore still knows a lot more tricks, and so does Remus, but - that's just a matter of age, and experience - in terms of sheer force, you've left them behind for quite some time."

Harry couldn't feel pleased. "Did me a big favour, didn't it?"

Almyra laughed. "No - but her. It saved her business - that's the problem, Harry."

He nodded in desperation. "I guess you're right - beware of those who'd have to be grateful ... Tell her I'm sorry about that."

Which gave Almyra a fit of laughter, releasing the tension, although Harry couldn't join wholeheartedly.

Almyra recovered. "You want me to help, Harry?"

"That would be good ... Question is, what can you do?"

Almyra looked surprised. "Talk with her ... Talk with you - what else?"

"Fine. And then?"

"What do you mean, and then? See what happens - see whether we can repair the broken chinaware." Almyra grinned about her play of words.

Harry didn't. "And then? ... Assume the last meeting never took place - then what's the benefit? We're back to square one - except we didn't shout at each other ... Al, if the super-long Chinese pardon ritual would be all that's required, I'd go through it gladly, but - nobody's going to hang me out of the window, to tremble in the wind, and then tearing up any jacket I'm using to keep warm. I've been treated like dirt for fifteen years by the Dursleys - I don't need nobody to continue!"

"Harry!" Almyra looked startled. "You don't mean that!"

"Don't I?" Harry's voice turned hard. "If it's a help, I'll make you a spector recording of the *Groucho* meetings so far - maybe that'd help to clarify what I mean. Imagine - Remus would move to, say, New York, to start some business, and you help him with your savings, and for all you know he's just an apparition jump away, except you don't hear from him for months ... Think it over, it might give you an idea what I mean."

"At least I wouldn't start an affair."

Harry calmed down. "Good for you - I mean, for him."

Almyra thought for a moment, grinned. "Although - maybe I'm the blind, talking about colours."

Harry smiled. "That was nice - thank you." Then he caught the opportunity. "Say - this Armodéc claims that werewolves have an - er, unusual virility as a side-effect from their condition. I'd like to hear your comment on that."

Almyra's face was a bit pinkish. "Yes, I bet."

Looking innocently, Harry said, "But if it'd be true, then why would they need this booster dope?"

"That's what I'm ask ..." Almyra stopped herself, glaring at Harry. "You and your tricks ..." Then she laughed. "Harry, I'll make you pay for that - there's still the issue of your sphere, remember?"

He blushed. "Let me try just so - I never had a test with so much on my mind."

"Coward - taking all the benefits, and squeezing little girls ..."

There was no challenge like from a woman. Within seconds, Harry stood there, naked, totally unembarrassed as he concentrated hard to reach this state of equanimity ... And there it was! The void, for a fleeting eternity, then he was back. "Now?"

Almyra beamed. "Excellent!" After a moment, she added smiling, "Harry, with this demonstration, I honestly can tell Cho she's doing a big mistake."

"Ha, ha."

Almyra giggled, surprising him. "We probably look like kids, playing doctor games." Seeing Harry's astonished glance, she added, "You know - showing each other private parts - did you never do that?"

"With whom? - Dudley?"

This time, they were both caught in a longer fit, Harry still more handicapped because he was simultaneously trying to come into his clothes.

"Okay, Harry." Almyra looked serious again. "I'll try my best ... Just for the record - do you still love her?"

"Guess what? No, I don't, it's hurting only eight hours a day, not twenty-four, so who'd call that ..."

"Shut up!" Into Harry's astonished silence, Almyra said, "Answer me, so that I can quote you, if the need arises."

"Yes, I love her, and it feels like hell without her, and I'd like to know why she made it feel like super hell *with* her, for the past months." Harry stared at Almyra. "Now you can quote me."

* * *

If he was right - if money played a role, then maybe he would hear from Spinbottle that the other side refused to accept the presents - at least one of them. But there was no such message.

Thinking it over, Harry had the feeling - more than ever before - that Cho's father indeed played a role, that there was a challenge running, maybe as long as Cho was alive ... If not, then Cho could not possibly accept the loan and the twenty-six percent share without developing an incredibly large guilt complex.

Which didn't mean she wouldn't.

During the next days, Harry worked almost exclusively at his Portkey Programming project, for three good reasons. The Poison Ball project was forbidden, and right now, Harry didn't feel like stepping out to other schools, to bang around with nitroglycerine. The Animagus project had just completed a major milestone - reason enough to give it a break. To be totally honest, he felt a bit scared of the next step - turning into a dragon. The project was scheduled till the end of terms, so why haste?

His portkeys, on the other hand, were in dire need of improvement. And now seemed the right time to work on them - relentlessly, with a fierce energy, the way Rahewa had trained water balls some time ago. This style of work wasn't his strongest, no sir, only work was all he could do, and there would be a reward - once mastered, Harry would pass the duty of the Haitian trips back to Hermione. Might she find fun on the Ile de la Tortue. However, until then, hard work was lying ahead.

Stupid, boring work.

Harry stopped cutting corners. He increased the jump distance only when the previous one was mastered safely. And slowly, steadily, he could program his test stool for more than a few inches, a few feet, a few yards, half the distance through the former Giants' camp. Pretty soon, he would try a portkey to the former dragon camp - and hopefully another one back, otherwise, he was in for a longer footwalk.

Somehow, it was surprising how far you could get with this approach.

Then, suddenly, Rosetta Rushmore was gone.

Her disappearance wasn't noticed immediately - not by the students. But one evening, Dumbledore had another short speech just before supper, and at that time, Rosetta's seat at the teachers' table looked already empty.

"My dear friends," said the Headmaster, "without trumpets, pipes, and drums, a new era has begun for our school. As of today, Hogwarts is an integrated part of the European Magical Education Council - a congregation which also includes Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. This has a few interesting effects."

Dumbledore beamed. "One of them is that Hogwarts is no longer under the jurisdiction of the British government - neither the Ministry of Magic nor any other. As a consequence, our guest until yesterday, Mrs. Rushmore, has left since there is no longer a base on which she could operate. In short - British Muggles have no saying here."

Never before, as long as Harry could remember, had an applause been so loud, and so long, and so unanimous.

"Another consequence is that every student from here is entitled to take courses in the other two schools, and vice versa. Of course, the language has to be mastered - you cannot expect English classes in Beauxbatons. We assume that exchange students will occur on a broader base only as of the next terms, but it's possible as of tomorrow."

That was something - only too late for Harry. He wondered if any student here would visit courses in Durmstrang. Maybe Grigorij.

"Also starting with the next year, we will see some adjustments in the courses. All members of this European council are supposed to offer the same base courses, with some optional enhancements. And last but not least," Dumbledore smiled, "are there some adjustments in rules and regulations. The most popular one, I might guess, is that students of sixteen and older are allowed alcoholic drinks ..."

Another tumult, shouts, whistles.

"... not including liquor with more than twenty percent alcohol. You won't be surprised to hear that in this, our French friends had the loudest saying. I, on the other side, won't be surprised to learn that this change just legalizes a common practice."

Grins all around. As if any of those students, for whom the new rule was relevant, had any doubt about Dumbledore's detailed knowledge of what was going on in Hogwarts.

Ron looked at Harry. "I know someone with a shopping list - that's me. And I know someone who'd reach the shop in a minute or so ..."

Harry peeked around. "Where?"

It wasn't exactly the most ingenious joke, but Ron and Hermione were looking joyfully nonetheless. Harry and joking - had been a rare event, recently.

Two days later, Rosetta Rushmore came back.

Before the general groaning could blow all reasonable limits, Dumbledore hastened to explain that Mrs. Rushmore now had the state of an observer without command authority. This would change when, some time in the future, politicians at European level could agree upon something as complex as ruling between Muggles and wizards. In other words, maybe in ten years, or two hundred.

Rosetta was entitled to watch and to ask questions, period. Sitting at her old place, the woman moved no face when students and teachers didn't bother to lower their voices while commenting on that.

The next day, on his way to the Giants' camp, Harry saw her in the hall. He couldn't resist. "Madam, I think you haven't seen yet our Poison Ball project at work - would you be interested to watch?"

A thin smile. "Thanks for the offer, Mr. Potter, but there's nothing particularly magical with explosives."

Then Rosetta surprised him. "But I'd like to ask you a few other questions ... If you'd find the time ..."

"Yes?"

"It may take a while, so if we could do it in my office - but I didn't want to interrupt your project work."

Curiosity was a strong motivator. "No, we can do it now - I can organize my project time quite freely."

"Yes, I had the impression." But it came with a smile.

In the office, Harry still felt suspicious - such a politeness, all of a sudden. Was it really just her new status?

"Mr. Potter, someone asked me to send you greetings." The smile hadn't lost Rosetta Rushmore's face.

"Greetings?" Then Harry's face lighted up. "They have to come from Mrs. Goodridge, I'd say."

"Right. She was quite impressed from your performance in that talk show, and she asked me to tell you, she could imagine you playing a role in the dealings between our two sides pretty soon."

Seeing Harry's face, Rosetta Rushmore showed a grin. "Well, that was the message ... Now to my questions - they have to do with the other schools in this European council, more specifically with the fact that for you, they're a few steps away while for someone like me, it always means hours of travelling, if not more."

Harry nodded. "Yes, of course - the linkports don't work for you."

"Exactly. It's a real nuisance ..." The woman hesitated. "Mr. Potter, I was told this magic cannot move us - Muggles, I mean ... Er, frankly, I never could stop thinking this is just an - er, favour returned, so-to-speak."

Harry couldn't suppress a short grin. "Yes, Madam, I see what you mean ... But for all I know, that's not true - by accident, I know a bit about *Magical Tours*, and I know their managing director, a Mr. Boonhill ... If they could do it, they'd have done so already, and now they'd make profits like crazy - I mean, returning a favour could be a motive for other wizards, but these people have no such - er, concerns."

Rosetta Rushmore examined Harry's face. "I didn't know about your connections - I asked you because you're the only student who can - er, apparate, yes. Seems as if there's a coincidence."

"Yes, in a way, it is." Not that Harry felt like telling in which way.

"Mr. Potter - how does it work?"

The question had a disarming quality. "I wish I knew - maybe then I'd make better progress in my portkey project ... I know how to do it - otherwise ... What I can say is, you don't jump - everybody talks like that, but it's wrong. You think yourself to the destination, and then you make your body follow, so it's more a pulling, or summoning as we call it."

"How can you learn it, if you don't know how it works? - And how come you're the only student with that skill?"

"Oh - I was a bit quicker, because I just inherited it from Voldemort ..."

Yes, Rosetta Rushmore knew the name.

"... so I didn't have to work on it like the others, but my classmates will be ready in a while."

The Muggle woman digested that. "I still can't see - actually, that's my biggest problem with magic - how can you do it without knowing how it works? All you know is a spell, right?"

"No, it's a bit more. The spell ..." Harry scanned his mind for an example, then said, "You know, if you have a knife, you can cut, slices of bread, for instance. But if you're untrained, you can cut your own fingers, or the slice is too thick, or misshaped ... Learning spells is hard work. But why a certain spell has a certain effect, and only with a wizard ... Madam, I'd recommend to ask Professor Dumbledore - I don't know the answer."

Rosetta Rushmore looked frustrated. "I did already."

"And what did he say?"

A sad smile. "He said he could take lessons on a violin for decades, he'd never come any closer to someone like Menuhin ... He said, if you can tell me why, you've found your own answer."

Harry beamed. "Yeah, that's him."

And now, feeling the wave from the woman, he realized what was driving her - political ambition, yes, but more still a deep envy, the desperate wish to be magical ... A witch.

And she had seen the recognition in his face, and like any good politician, Rosetta Rushmore took the opportunity to its best avail. "Then why can you do it without a wand?? Not even Menuhin can play without a violin."

Harry shrugged. "I learned from a Japanese teacher. He said the magic's inside us, the wand's just a help ... Maybe it's like with that man - the music's inside him, I don't know ... To some degree, it's certainly true - you know, when wizards are really upset, they can do things just so. But for me - maybe it's another gift from Voldemort."

Rosetta Rushmore sighed. "You seem to get a lot from that wizard."

"Yes - but I didn't volunteer for the deal. I guess it's just because that's the only way to destroy him ... I mean, in a metaphorical sense, he can be destroyed only when he's destroying himself - and I'm just the tool ..." Harry grinned, "you know, like the violin."

17 - Transits

Even with his Animagus project in hold, Harry had to visit some dragons and a dinosaur near Ellesmere. The dinosaur, as it turned out, was no longer the smallest creature around, at least for a while - Carrie's dragon gooslings had hatched out only days ago.

Four skinny lumps, consisting only of wings, heads, and tails.

And of large snouts, open all the time, hungry all the time, squeaking all the time. Poor Carrie could hardly follow their demands.

Rex had tried to help her feeding, with half-cooked chicken wings and meatballs, approaching Carrie's pre-digested baby food as close as possible. With very limited success, as he confessed. "Harry, old drumbone, be careful ... Carrie's mean as hell, and edgy, and suspicious - got me a bad burn - and the chicks, confusing you with the food, small as they are ..."

Small, yes, except you could almost watch them growing. Harry remembered well how quickly Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback had gained size. Armed with two large buckets of chicken wings, he walked toward the nest, had his approach ready. He would come openly, talk with Carrie first, to see how things developed ...

The mother dragon stared at him, head up, eyes unblinking, nostrils pointing at him.

Harry sent a wave of sympathy. "Hello Carrie, old girl - congratulations, that's a fine collection of babies you've got there ... I just came to help you a bit, I mean if you don't mind, if you'd let me have a look ..."

Carrie still didn't move.

Harry came a bit closer, stopped. If she would send a firejet now ... He sat down. "Here I am - with the most delicious chicken wings you can imagine - look here ... Let me send you a cloud of that smell, to be honest, it's more your babies which are supposed to smell, and to come closer ..."

As gentle as he could, Harry sent an air ball toward Carrie's mouth, then another one aimed lower, where he could see some small bodies whirling, dog-sized, tiny compared to their mother.

And Carrie had sniffed the smell, seemed to relax a bit - until a moment later the second wave had reached the gooslings, which started moving toward the source, a bit unsteady, yet very interested.

Now Harry could only wait, and hope.

Carrie didn't push her babies back. Instead, her head followed them, covering the bodies, until Harry found himself face to face with her. He took a handful from a bucket, held it up, touched her horny lips. "Here - check it, it's all good for your small ones ... Okay?"

And then they had reached him, and Harry was just too busy feeding, had no more time to think anything other than filling mouths before their impatience would send him another cloud of smoke, and another rush of burning sparkles.

Then came the critical moment - the buckets were empty.

"That's it! No more - here, look, everything's empty." Gently, Harry pushed opening mouths around, to send them toward their mother - thank God, with some success.

He stood up, touched the gigantic head again. "Okay, Carrie-girl - it's a greedy bunch you have there, must be a hell of a job - now it's yours again."

The dragon mother pushed and nudged to collect her babies back into the nest, giving him time to retreat.

Watched by Rex, Harry moved his wand here and there over his skin, curing minor burns from the bigger sparkles, realizing that his clothes were done, with this interesting pattern of burn holes. Rex said, "She likes you, Harry ... You might come every day, take over the feeding for me."

Harry promised to do his best, then jumped back to Hogwarts. In the afterthought, he felt a strange weakness in his knees - these seconds when the dragon gooslings had been coming closer, and Carrie's head too, and nothing, nothing but trust and confidence could protect him from a firestorm ... Be careful with women, Fleur had said, but somehow he got along with them, in particular with dragon ladies ... Real ones, that was.

"Harry! Since when are you supposed to dance on a volcano?"

Turning around, Harry saw a grinning Almyra - in Muggle clothes! A linnen-coloured pantsuit, a light-pink blouse, quite classy. Almyra looked as if just returning from a journey, and somehow, Harry had the distinct feeling he could narrow down the shop's location to a few square miles.

"I met Carrie and her babies, and fed them - which doesn't mean you're wrong." He stepped closer. "Al, you look great ... If *Gerry's Fashion* had woman clothes, I'd have said I know where that comes from."

"Clever boy - almost right." Almyra turned around, like a model in a fashion show. "These Muggles know how to dress ... Harry, can we talk?"

"Do I have time to change clothes first? This combination reminds me a bit of the beauty and the beast."

Almyra looked pleased, then grinned. "Might be that's fitting better than you'd think - might be you should keep it, because you look great too, with peeping holes here and there ... You could start a fashion line, or maybe your Gerry could."

"Yeah, that's exactly what I need ... See you in a few minutes in your office, okay?"

In contrast to him, Almyra was still wearing her travel suit when Harry reached the office. But she had dropped the jacket, and he could see that the blouse was quite thin, and that Almyra wore something lacy underneath.

He looked appreciatingly. "Allright - I, for my part, got rid of the peeping holes."

"What a pity ... Anyway, yours weren't that expensive - these people take an arm and a leg for a little piece of silk, unbelievable ..."

"Right - robbing poor little girls ..."

"Exactly." Almyra smile faded a bit. "You just gave me the keyword, Harry. I had a longer conversation with another - er, poor little girl."

"Aha."

"Yes aha. According to what I've heard, you haven't been entirely honest with me - your own description was lacking some details."

"So? ... Which ones?"

"For example, your list of - er, women. There was something missing."

"Who?"

"Has it grown so long that you already forgot? What about Deborah?"

Harry grimaced. "My God, that's an old story - and that's been last year ... Did Cho tell you more than the name?"

"Er - yes."

"Okay, then you know how it happened, and why, and that it's nothing to be listed forever, because ... I left it out because I didn't think it still plays a role, not after ..." Harry didn't finish the sentence, feeling sure Almyra could do it by herself.

She could. "Even so - Harry, it's quite amazing to see how the list is growing and growing - six names, if my counting's right ..."

Harry felt his anger rising. "Do we count names, without considering the circumstances? Al, the list of those whom I rejected's growing still faster - as if that means anything."

"Really? Then list a few, if you please."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

An affirming nod.

"All those groupies, for instance - Sally, in particular. Whenever I visit Armodéc, I have to make sure I'm left alone - staying overnight or not ... Stepping back in time - Katie, for example ..."

"And stepping forward?"

"Danielle, for example, if you really have to know ... I wasn't planning to tell it around, really, but if this bean-counting ..."

Almyra almost giggled.

"... is the only method to clear the issue, then okay, let's count them."

Almyra's hand was playing with a pencil. "Cho seemed to have the feeling there's someone else."

"No, there isn't." Feeling curiosity by himself, Harry asked, "How come? And who should that be?"

A slight embarrassment in Almyra's voice. "She said, when she asked you the last time, you refused to answer."

"Huh? ..." After a moment, Harry's face lighted up. "Yes, I know what you mean. No - at the end of our dinner in the *Three Broomsticks*, after I had told her everything, with this grandiose result, I said she shouldn't ask me again because I won't answer again ... That's all - she asked me again, only I didn't answer."

Almyra kept silent.

Harry stared at her. "Al - I never lied to her. I never lied to you - not now and not before. And that's why I don't have the intention to swear on every second sentence - either that's agreed between us, or we can end this conversation right away."

Almyra looked startled. "No - I mean, yes, that's agreed ... I believe you, Harry, I'm sorry if ..."

"It's okay." He waved impatiently. "I guess Cho developed this habit because for these movie people, lying is the norm, and a word of truth comes just by accident ... Anyway, this counting is ridiculous - I'm not counting on her side, I'm not asking what's happening now ..."

Almyra blushed a bit.

"... because that's not the point. And besides," Harry grinned wryly, "I know Marie-Christine well enough - would be just a matter of time anyway."

Almyra gasped.

"In a way, it's even some comfort - imagine, Cho would have abandoned sex altogether - that would be a problem."

Now it was a real giggle.

Harry sighed. "I wish I could laugh too ... Did you only discuss my malbehaviour with other women?"

"No ..." Almyra's face showed some relief to change the topic, only to gain a new worry at once. "You were right, Harry - money plays a role, more exactly your intrusion into the *Groucho* business - in her business, as she said."

"Yeah, obviously so ... But I gave it all to her, and the events with *Helix* - what does she expect? I cannot make it undone, and besides, didn't she benefit a great deal?"

"Sure, only it doesn't matter. Just your involvement ..."

"Al - that's totally unfair! I don't know where *Groucho* would stand without that - for all I know, they'd have ceased to exist!"

"Certainly." Almyra looked somewhat desperate. "Cho's the first to admit - but that's exactly the problem. She said, I know I'm unfair, but where's it written that I have to be fair?"

Now Harry gasped, again remembering Fleur's remark.

"That's the state." Almyra exhaled deeply. "It was a first step, Harry ... I'd say, you'll have other visits with Carrie, and I'll have other ones with Cho, if you get my bearing."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, Al ... You're a true sister."

"Like someone else," Almyra grinned, "but the other one would be badly suited for this job, that's for sure."

* * *

Since full moon would fall into the Christmas break, Harry travelled some days in advance to Haiti. And he did it a bit earlier than dinner time - he would not stay overnight, but he had promised to come with his Go set, and to teach his host the game, something to take place in the late afternoon.

Monsieur Armodéc had a new flower of the night. Well, not entirely new ... Beatrice. She had opened the door for Harry, had welcomed him with a smile, and now she surprised him again - while Harry and Monsieur Armodéc were sitting opposite each other, silently staring at the Go board, Beatrice did very much the same.

Women playing Go was nothing new to Harry - after all, it had been Cho who taught him the game. But, somehow, he hadn't expected this silent patience from Beatrice. More - for all he could sense, it wasn't simple politeness that kept her on the chair, and her eyes on the developing lines. No, Beatrice seemed to have her own thoughts, particularly so about the proper strategy against Harry's lines which, little by little, were taking on the shape of a strangler snake.

Because Monsieur Armodéc had trouble - more than, for example, Ron at the comparable time in his development as a Go player.

Which didn't worry the host. He was a good loser. Sitting over the hors d'oeuvres, Monsieur Armodéc said, "Honestly, Harry, it comes totally unexpected for me. After the games we played against each other in chess, I felt pretty sure to score a little better than that ... And I

have to admit - my first impression, after you'd told me the rules - I cannot remember when I missed the point so badly, because after ten minutes to me it looked like children's play."

Harry laughed. "Oh yes, you're not alone with that."

"I wonder what's wrong with my strategy ... Maybe I'm lacking the required standing. Maybe this patient scoring, point for point, looks too cumbersome to me ... You know, a sharp attack, wasting all resources to knock down a king, that's more my style."

Beatrice said, "You're not alone in that either."

Monsieur Armodéc grinned - a rare event. "No, my dear, definitely not." He turned to Harry. "Maybe I see the game from the wrong perspective. For me, it looks like collecting property, and real estate ... This has never been my strongest - sure, I keep myself in a state that this life of leisure and luxury isn't at stake, but otherwise ... What do I care if there's a single galleon left, once I'm dead and gone - collecting another million and still another one, that's something for other people."

He looked pointedly at Beatrice, back at Harry. "Also property in a wider sense ... Seeing a dinner, my only thought is to sit down and enjoy - I don't worry which spoon has been stirring which pot in the past. I like having dinners, joining dinners, sharing dinners - as simple as that. What do you think about that, Harry?"

Harry showed a tiny smile. "I think that my joining this dinner ends with the dessert. Aside from that ... if it's really your belief - fine, only it makes you neither more admirable nor more despicable than someone else. Only special - and I could imagine it makes you lonely too."

For a moment, Monsieur Armodéc's smile faded. Then it came back. "But I have Beatrice."

Harry suppressed the remark which had crossed his mind first, about paid company. Instead, he said, "If I'm not entirely mistaken, Beatrice would like playing Go - and I could imagine that her style covers more than sudden attacks ..."

As if he didn't know for sure.

"... and to make this possible, please accept that Go set in the other room as my present - a Christmas present, if you want."

The young woman beamed. Monsieur Armodéc said, "That's very kind of you, Harry. These stones, and the board - very beautiful ... Are you sure?"

"Yes, Sire. I still have a travelling set at home, and I know where to find a replacement, so it's not really a sacrifice."

"Thank you, Harry - that's a wonderful present. And I'm glad to hear that you'll find another one - you know, for me the value won't be diminished, knowing it was one out of hundred in your property ... I'm just not the type to appreciate sacrifices."

Beatrice smiled. "I do - small ones, that is."

Under different circumstances, Harry might have enjoyed this kind of twin-level conversation full-heartedly. But with the current state of things, he felt more relieved than sorry when it was time to leave.

However, Monsieur Armodéc surprised him once more, presenting a small bottle. "Harry - let me return the favour. This is my present - no, it's ours, because it was Beatrice who had the idea. It's a very special drink, but she said you know how to handle it."

Back in Hogwarts, Harry stared at the bottle. Somehow, nitroglycerine seemed harmless stuff, compared to that. At least the two liquids had something in common - small doses did the job thoroughly, using more would be just a method to leave deep holes in the environment.

But then he registered a major difference - try as he might, Harry couldn't imagine how to use this drink to good effect. Certainly not in the near future.

He took the next opportunity for a jump to the Tokyo Linkport - the easiest method to close the gap his own present had left. Scanning through the shops, he was very pleased to see some other items - very nice ones, to be used soon, since Christmas wasn't far away.

* * *

A real test still in the old year - Harry felt determined to do it, to pass it, and to consider this as the Christmas present toward himself. Sending other people through a portkey programmed by himself, just from a former camp of Giants to a former camp of dragons ... He was ready.

Would be interesting to hear what the others thought. The ones he intended to send through. When in doubt, ask - during lunch.

Ron examined Harry's face. "Am I the first one? Or has anyone else tried before?"

"I went through again and again. And I have someone else already - I don't think the sequence matters."

"Who is it?"

"What a stupid question," said Hermione. "Dreadnought Lightfoot's her name - more or less, I mean."

The said one seemed to watch the conversation from farther down the table. Not that she was looking in their direction, only Rahewa's ears darkened a bit at this remark.

Ron glared at a pufferable blow-it-all. "And what about you, genius at fork? Will you join the party?"

"I wasn't asked."

Harry stopped laughing about Ron's reply. "That's changed now - you're asked too, no question about that."

He shouldn't have laughed, or maybe a moment earlier. Hermione said, "No thanks ... It's too cold outside, and if the others come through, I'm sure I wouldn't show any different result ... As I said, Harry - the portkey to Haiti, that's my ticket."

Ron took the opportunity. "That's true friendship - ha! Chicken out, at such a memorable opportunity! You'll be sorry for that."

"I bet." Hermione didn't look that way. "And besides - that's true confidence, after all, my first jump will be much farther."

Ginny had listened. "Am I invited, Harry?"

"Yes, of course - I'd have asked you in a moment, you were just quicker."

"Which only shows - " although looking at her two brothers, Ginny seemed to address someone else, "that there are different kinds of quickness - quick to answer other people's questions, or quick to forestall them ... quick to say no, or quick to say yes."

She wasn't the only one to play that game. Also looking at some brothers, though not her own, Hermione said, "And some people would be better off not saying yes so quickly - girls, in particular."

Until her chair had crashed to the floor, Ginny stood already at Hermione's seat, one hand grabbing Hermione's jaw, the other ready to strike, flat, hard. "You've got three seconds to take that back ... One ... two ..."

"Three."

It was Hermione who had finished the countdown - with a fierce defiance in her face. It should be her last remark for the next few minutes.

Ginny's hand, flat and hard as a spade, shot forward, hitting Hermione's solar plexus. As short as the strike had been - Hermione's face lost all defiance, and colour, turning bluish after a moment, until - a painful eternity later - she could catch breath again, in short, sobbing gasps, while her hands were pressing her stomach - long after Ginny had returned to her place, had caught her chair, to sit down, to resume eating.

Ron had watched Hermione's recovery, his face not showing the slightest hint of pity. He turned to Harry. "That reminds me of a lesson I had not so long ago ... Pain is a very skillful teacher, especially if the lesson's given in full public."

Hermione glared up. "Your sister ..."

She didn't come further, was interrupted by Harry. "Don't say it, Hermione - look at my arms ... One more word, and you'll have a water ball in your face."

Hermione glanced at his pointing arms, looked up. "You'd be expelled for that."

Harry nodded. "Yes, probably."

Something in his voice kept Hermione silent, avoiding this particular challenge. Maybe it had been the thought of his services in Haiti, only Harry didn't think so. For him, who remembered a training session about vulnerable spots of the body, there was little doubt - Ron had been right, pain could indeed be called a skillful teacher, and the solar plexus an attentive student.

* * *

They met after the last class of the day, to finish the task before supper, using the last day of the light. The weather was even nastier than predicted by Hermione - a sharp wind, driving a thin, icy rain into their faces. On a broomstick, it felt still worse, though only for moments, until they touched down between the remnants of huts and barns, torn apart by nitroglycerine balls.

"This weather's good for one thing," said Ron. "None of us will waste a second to jump through - just to get out of the rain."

Rahewa looked detestful at him, while Harry scanned around for a suitable item. Not that it mattered, could be anything, but his first serious test ... Then he saw a milk can, maybe even the same he had used for exploding water balls. Should be the right omen. A moment later, he was done, stood up. "Allright. Just touch it, that's all ... Who's going first?"

Ron said, "What the heck ..."

Even that was too much, left him only second place. Rahewa stepped forward, touched the can - and disappeared, creating an almost inaudible pop when the air closed into the emptied space.

About to touch the can, Ron was stopped again from Ginny's voice. "Is she still alive?"

Ron looked at his sister, saw her malicious grin, muttered an angry sound - and disappeared.

Ginny said, "Harry - please don't forget to follow. That joke wouldn't be too nice." An instant later, she was gone.

He might as well have apparated, but for the sake of the ceremony, Harry touched the can - to appear near the hut of the former dragon camp, almost bouncing into Ron.

Then he was patted, and hugged, and pushed, had to endure some congratulations - short ones, it wasn't the least bit warmer here under the trees.

Harry selected a larger piece of wood, reminding himself to return and to de-program the piece, before someone else, by some accident, would touch it to encounter the shock of his life. Then he said, "Okay - here's your ticket to ride. Ladies first?"

Rahewa disappeared. Ginny disappeared.

Ron looked at Harry. "That's the right place, and the right day. All that's missing now - it has to work."

"Yes, sure. What ..."

Harry stopped, gasping. Ron had disappeared, which looked very natural - only that the piece of wood was lying on the ground, some feet apart.

Ron could Apparate!

Harry quickly disempowered the wood, jumped to the other camp, to find a beaming Ron. "Super - fantastic - brilliant, Ron! Congratulations!"

The two girls looked at them, at each other, then Ginny caught it first. "Ron - did you ... Have you ..."

Rather than answering, her brother disappeared again, was back some seconds later, to be hugged by a beaming sister.

Rahewa came closer, her face showing a mix of reluctance, joy, and envy. "Congratulations, Ron ... I wish I could follow."

Ron gently ruffled some black hair, at this moment feeling safe from bad replies - with a knife, for example. "Thank you - I'm sure, you'll set a new speed record, what with that bad company you're permanently found in."

A short glare, then Rahewa looked pleased. Niceties Weasley style - something to get used to.

At supper, reaching the Gryffindor table, Harry and Ron found a tight-lipped Hermione sitting there. With a voice as frosty as the weather they had escaped, Hermione asked toward Harry, "Was your test successful?"

Ron answered. "Oh yes, in more than one sense. You should have come with us, maybe it would have worked for you too."

Hermione stared at him. "Answering other people's questions, huh? So at least I'm not alone with that."

Harry kept silent.

Hermione asked, "Ain't you talking with me any longer?"

"Did you take back what you said at lunch?"

"I didn't find the opportunity - and besides, she's more than balanced out, I'd say."

It was again Ron who answered. "Ginny - yes."

Hermione looked at him, at Harry, swallowed, swallowed again, looked at the table. "I'm sorry."

Harry's voice sounded considerably louder than required for the short distance. "Ginny, did you hear that?"

"What?"

Hermione didn't wait for another invitation. "I'm sorry - my remark took the wrong direction, it was just the first thing that crossed my mind, at that moment."

Ginny smiled sweetly. "That's okay - and please excuse if my hand took the wrong direction, you were just the first thing that crossed its path, at that moment."

Hermione sat through the laughter at the table with all the composure she could muster, however unable to avoid two burning cheeks.

Harry felt the moment right to give it a rest - and the final touch. "Erm - to answer your question, Hermione - it wasn't quite successful."

She looked somewhat grateful, more astonished. "What?"

"Yes - we reached the dragon camp okay. But on our way back, the portkey didn't work for Ron."

"Are you joking?" Hermione looked at Ron. "Why not? How did you come back - walking?"

Ron grinned maliciously. "It was my mistake. I didn't touch the thing - I jumped back by myself ... As I said, you should have come with us, might have worked for you too."

Which seemed more than unlikely - Ron had just used the opportunity to present the result of hard work, of many hours spent on Apparition while Hermione had worked on her Wolfsbane Potion project. Even so, Hermione had lost a race - beaten by a Weasley, and somehow, this was harder to stand than another blow from another member of the same family, given at the same table, some time earlier that day.

* * *

It was supposed to be a highlight of the year, had qualified for this role at least in the two years before. However, this year's Christmas Ball - Harry's fourth - was threatening worse than the first. He simply would have avoided to join, had there been a chance.

But there was Gabrielle.

Rahewa seemed ready to drop it, to cancel the Grass Dance presentation. Maybe with respect to her mother's state, maybe with respect to Harry's state - he hadn't told her a single word, and still, Rahewa seemed to know exactly what was going on. Yes, she loved dancing, and she liked joining a ball, but sorrow and sympathy together would have weighed more.

But there was Gabrielle.

And so Harry never saw a realistic chance to avoid the Christmas Ball of Hogwarts completely. When asked in advance, he said he would be there only for his own dance group, and maybe for organizational purposes. Not more.

Which was a pity, somehow. Many a girl could imagine pictures of being invited by Harry Potter, now that this little Chinese devil wasn't constantly seen near him. But no.

Ginny had just one question. "Harry, are you going to join the ball?"

"No. Only the dance group."

"I see."

Danielle was a bit more direct. "H'arry, are we partners for the ball too?"

"If it's about organization, fine with me. Otherwise - no."

But that wasn't what Danielle had sought. Apparently, she could master the little bit of organization by herself.

And so the big day came, for Harry restricted to its second role - marking the end of terms in the old year. Next morning, after a last breakfast, the students would travel home.

Harry wore even a new dress for the occasion, bitter irony that it was. But the old one didn't fit any longer, more from an additional year of *aikido* training than from additional growth. He would have used it anyway, looking into a mirror was none of his common habits, not generally and certainly not in the recent weeks.

But there was Gabrielle, who made him promise to go shopping, after she had insisted on a test performance with dresses and all, and after she had seen Harry in his old dress.

And while his dancers had to fight nervousness and stage fright, Harry felt calm, thinking of his own performance, and desperate, thinking of the moment afterwards.

His crew appeared better than ever. Small wonder, with one more year on their shoulders, with the gained confidence, with the traces of a slowly awakening sexuality. But there was an additional quality in Rahewa's movements. The Grass Dance, expression of coming and passing, of birth and death, suddenly had a new dimension for her.

And everybody could watch it - in these last seconds, when Rahewa was left as the only figure on the grass, in her last movement, when the body had already stopped, desperately seeking another second of joy and movement, before it collapsed to the ground, sending a goodbye in this last instant before the lights went off.

Harry had to recover from watching, did so just in time to let the grass disappear before the lights came on again.

And he wasn't the only one spellbound. It took a second before the first, hesitant applause could be heard. Then it came roaring, thundering.

Danielle met him behind the stage, where Harry waited for his dancers. "Oh H'arry, it was so beautiful! I saw it at Easter in Beauxbatons, but I didn't remember how good they are. This girl in particular - she's far beyond her age, a true natural ..."

Harry smiled. "Go tell her - say, did you get smoke in your eyes?"

Of course, he couldn't leave right now, had to sit with his crew for a while. He used the opportunity to talk first with Gabrielle, to hear how Fleur was doing.

Fleur had recovered quite well. She and Bill lived in their house again, although not quite as before. Gabrielle reported that there was a guard of two Goblins at the house, day and night, that the guards escorted Fleur on shopping tours and other occasions. She was known as *the witch with the dwarfs*, also as a woman with a hot temper and little patience with Muggles, their clumsiness, their stupid rules. And the two *dwarfs* at her side were choking protests in the throats, giving a damn for Muggle laws, looking mean enough so that even the *flics*, when called by a complaint, showed little intention to press the charges.

Fleur and Bill would be in the Delacour castle over Christmas. The Weasleys were invited, all of them, plus girlfriends, boyfriends - as far as present and ready to follow the invitation.

Then Harry talked with Rahewa, felt little surprise to hear that she would stay in Hogwarts for the Christmas break. Rahewa said, "Our apartment ... I don't mind cleaning the mess my father has left there, but I don't mind leaving it just so either. I can travel to the hospital from here even faster."

"I did the same until a year ago, although for different reasons." Then Harry asked the question which was lingering in his mind. "Rahewa - do you want to come with us? To the Weasleys? You know that you'd be ..."

The answer came fully as expected, only quicker. "No. Thanks for the invitation, Harry, but ..."

There was no sense in pressing. Too well could Harry remember his own feelings. Even so ... "Okay, I can understand that. I would've said the same, at that time ... But listen - I've got a present for Ginny, and I'm pretty sure that we'll need a fourth person, so if I come ..."

Yes, for an afternoon, maybe even a longer one, it was okay, Rahewa would come with him when he arrived to catch her. Suddenly, these coal-black eyes could look at the world with considerably more joy.

Since he was hanging around anyway, Harry felt obliged to dance with the girls in his crew, which didn't take too long as the sense of obligation seemed mutual. And since the others were sitting near by, he also danced with Janine and Ginny. It took a bit longer, was almost fun, in particular since they both had the good sense not to ask for Cho.

Which of course meant they knew perfectly well what was going on.

Then Harry was done, and it was time to leave. A last look around. Heading toward the exit, he froze in mid-step.

For a split second, he thought he'd seen a very familiar black mane, then it had disappeared behind larger figures. Cho? If it was her, she had come incognito, in a way - there'd been nothing similar to a red dress.

Definitely not - every red spot in his vision was reason enough for a sharp glance, since entering the hall.

Harry pushed himself through the crowd toward the spot where he'd seen - imagined? - the long mane, scanned around, with eyes, senses, everything.

Nothing.

He stormed out, to see whether a lone figure could be seen walking toward the Hogsmeade linkport, had to temper himself - he almost mounted his Steel Wing to do a scan patrol more thoroughly than ever before.

But the path was empty. Of course - he knew the gates timetable by heart, for trans-atlantic jumps, that was.

Back into the whirling mass of ball guests, smiling, laughing, moving, blocking his way, damned idiots. Harry fought his way to a staircase, then to another one. Guest suites - could this be a possibility? And if so, which?

He didn't find the courage to knock at the doors. No answer at all seemed the best answer he could get. What if some strangers were opening? *Excuse me, did you see a Chinese girl, very pretty, otherwise with the manners of a hatching dragon?* And what if it was herself who opened the door?

Harry felt like in a time travel, four years back into the past, when the thought of being addressed by that girl had been enough to let his heart fail a beat.

He trotted back into the hall. Had been an imagination, wishful seeing ... Almyra would know, which didn't mean she would tell. Of course, he could spy on her, what with his *haragei*, combined with a trap question ... Could he really?

Approaching the teachers' table, he was grabbed by Danielle. "H'arry - nobody's supposed to look like that on such an evening ... C'mon, let's dance, and then you'll drink a glass with me, and then the world may look a bit friendlier."

Oh yes, fat chance for that.

After a few steps, Danielle looked at him. "H'arry, this is not a dance, this is an insult. Please do me the favour and let me think I'm a woman."

"I'm sorry - my mistake."

"Now that's a relief, really, I was worrying quite a bit ..."

Harry could smile, concentrated more on the dance and his partner. Danielle was right with her reproach, he would have bowed, hadn't it been totally out of sync with the music.

Then she pulled him to the teachers' table, ordered him to sit down, and not to escape while she went to fetch some glasses of champagne, muttering about such remote places like here, where you had to walk for your own drinks.

Seeing the other people, seeing Almyra, Hermione, their smiles - somewhat amused, somewhat cool, although for different reasons, Harry felt like his own snake, having outgrown the old skin but, somehow, unable to don another one, fitting better.

Danielle was back, ordered him to drink, and Harry reminded himself to be careful, remembering Jean-Baptiste's explanations. Misery and alcohol - a hellish combination, never to get really drunk, only deadly sick.

Politeness demanded to dance with Hermione. Politeness demanded her to accept. After some steps, Harry suppressed the temptation to quote Danielle, only with inverse meaning. Instead, he asked, "Still mad at me?"

"Yes, I am. I know that I did wrong, but it wasn't necessary to teach me such a lesson. Not for such a stupid remark."

Hermione's bluntness felt refreshing. "You're right, in a way ... Let me tell you so much - it wasn't intended as a lesson for you, if you know what I mean."

Quick as ever, even while dancing, Hermione asked, "You mean - by some bloody accident, I stepped into the biggest greasepot I could find?"

Harry grinned. "That's a perfect description."

Hermione looked a lot friendlier than before, and a lot more curious, giving Harry reason to point out, "No, that's all I'm saying. If you want to know more, talk with her."

"Yeah, sure, she can hardly wait to tell me."

Harry laughed. "Probably not ... But I happen to know, somewhere deep inside, you have a sympathetic soul, and if that's switched on, it's hard to resist ... Take it as a challenge."

"How come your compliments feel so edgy at the corners?"

Remembering a similar remark, given by someone else, not too far from here but some time ago, Harry's smile faded.

Hermione sensed it. "Another greasepot? ... Sorry, me and my talent ..."

He shook his head. "Not your fault ... C'mon, let's just dance."

Politeness demanded to dance with Almyra. Politeness also demanded not to ask direct questions, and as a result, after the dance Harry wasn't any wiser than before.

Danielle came with more champagne, her speed in emptying glasses clearly exceeding Harry's own. He asked, "Are you sure this is a good idea? ... I'm not trying to tell you how to celebrate a ball, but ..."

"You better not, young man, since you're not trying to tell me how to celebrate something else." Danielle's speech, as well as her choice of words, made clear that his advice had come a bit late anyway. "Harry, this place here's a rat trap for a woman like me."

"Why's that?"

"Look around - every man that's worth making a move is already in someone else's hands," Danielle grinned, "or he's useless because he cannot stop thinking of someone else ... There's just not enough men, tha'sse problem, 'arry."

"Hold on - next term will be better, for all I know, there'll be some new courses, and some of the new teachers will be men ... Would be just too unbalanced otherwise."

"Hopefully. In the meantime ... I guess I'll have a look at home over the break, to see whether I can get my own special Christmas present." Danielle giggled.

More from sympathy than from interest, Harry asked, "What about Kenzo?"

"Yes, what about him? ... He's a very reserved guy, somewhat difficult. I just didn't know how to - er, express myself. It's a shame, 'arry, a woman like me." Danielle giggled again.

Harry didn't feel like giving a suggestion. Not his business for sure, and Danielle seemed too advanced in her march toward next morning's hangover to be an attentive listener - more likely, she would answer with a remark loud enough to be heard along the entire table, and that was exactly the missing item in his collection - he couldn't imagine that such a conversation, overheard by Almyra and reported to someone else, might improve his score.

This someone ... Had she been here? Had he, by some accident, missed a short moment in which the impossible could have been within reach? If it had been her, why had she left before meeting him?

Had he done something to repel her? What had he done a moment before? ... Dancing - with Ginny! Had this been the reason? Ridiculous, really ...

It had been a bad mistake to follow Danielle's invitation. Harry was sitting there, feeling miserable, wishing he was somewhere else, at the same time feeling obliged to stay as the only one sober enough to represent the organization team.

But Danielle had more standing than expected. After a while, she caught herself, sighed, and said, "Okay, time to earn my money ... I'll get me a large glass of water on ice - what about you, H'arry?"

"Do you need help in supervising the rest?"

"No, thanks - it's a self-runner, at least that's better here."

Which gave him the opportunity to leave, to have another walk outside, checking around, inhaling the fresh air, feeling like the loneliest person under the sky, seriously tempted to walk right now to the Hogwarts Express platform, to reach a place where it was late afternoon, and to face whatever would happen.

Instead, he walked inside.

* * *

Next day, after a late breakfast, students were visiting each other to exchange Christmas presents with friends before closing their luggage, and to wait for whichever service - the cart to the Hogwarts Express platform, or the service van of the Hogsmeade linkport.

The same was true for Harry. He could of course have jumped, and Ron too, but there was still Ginny, and it was no question that they would travel together. And besides - for the way to the jumping point, they could imagine something better than carrying their luggage by themselves.

The list of presents to be exchanged was shorter than the year before. And the list of people to be met was still shorter, because one of them had to receive two.

Harry met Almyra in her office.

"Hi, Harry - you're just in time, I'm almost done." Almyra reached down, came up with a voluminous box. "I don't have to tell you - not opening before Christmas morning, okay?"

"Thank you." Harry weighed the box, surprised by its weight, having no idea what he might find inside. Then he placed his own present on the table - a very small box. "The same is true for this here - although, in a way, it's somewhat incomplete. But I think it should be finished after Christmas."

Almyra studied the tiny box, took it, weighed it, shook it. "Thank you, Harry - you make me really curious, in particular since it's so small." She looked a bit suspicious.

He laughed. "It's no jewelry, that's all I can tell you - this is Remus' realm. Anyway - you'll find out."

Almyra seemed relieved. "Well, then ..."

"Wait a second - there's something else." Harry deposited another box at the table. "I don't know when you'll meet her, but then, this isn't exactly a Christmas present ... It's for Cho."

"Oh ..." Almyra showed surprise, and a slight embarrassment. "That's - well, I had thought ... You know, twenty-six percent of *Groucho* would have been sufficient as a present by any standard."

"No - it's not a real present."

Which perplexed her completely. "What is it, then?"

"It's ... I got a present from Armodéc, after I gave him my Go set. It's a bottle of that stuff - the bottle's in this box."

Now Almyra looked seriously embarrassed.

"There's a letter inside, but you should know too, Al ... I don't see myself using that stuff ever again. But since Cho is determined to blame me for that, I thought I should give her a chance to find out by herself what she's talking about."

Almyra glanced at the bottle as if expecting it to bite. "You think that's a good idea?"

"She can do what she wants - the letter leaves no doubt about the effect, so can nobody say she wasn't forewarned - in contrast to myself."

"I wouldn't do that, Harry."

He stared at her. "You think it's unfair? ... So what? I'm fighting fire with fire, Al ... Will you give it to her?"

Almyra sighed, looked unhappy. "Yes, okay."

"Thank you, and a happy New Year ... Bye."

As short as it was, the letter inside had taken him some time. In a way, it was the first letter he'd ever written to Cho, and although nobody would have called it a love letter, looking at these words, he didn't think it was anything else:

- *Dear Cho,
the bottle, which comes with this letter, contains the ecstasy potion I
drank on the Ile de la Tortue. The bottle is a present from Monsieur
Armodéc, after I left him my Go set.*

*I don't think I will ever be tempted to use it. I send it to you not as
a present but as an argument. You blame me for this night, while I
believe that I am innocent. This bottle is your chance to prove you are
right.*

*To make one thing very clear: I do not recommend using it. But if I am
wrongly accused, I feel entitled to defend myself with all means, in
particular if my defense comes with a fair warning.*

At any rate - if you decide to give it a try, don't do it alone.

*I had to say more, but I do not want to mix what's left unsaid here with
this bottle, its contents, and this warning.
Harry*

His last station was Rahewa. He expected to need Ginny's help for calling the girl from its hiding in a dormitory, but when he reached the hall, a skinny figure came hurrying. Somewhat out of breath, impossibly a result from these few yards running, Rahewa said, "Harry - I've been waiting for you. Erm - that's for you."

A box, thin, about ten inches, delivered from a trembling hand and with a bloodred face.

"Thank you, Rahewa." Harry simply grabbed her, hugged her, feeling how the embarrassment left this body with its first signs of what would become a woman's bosom. Then he took out his envelope. "And that's for you. I have to tell you - it's not the present itself, just an explanation. But when you read it, you know why this is the only method, and how we'll do it."

"Thank you." Rahewa looked at the envelope with a suspicious expression, reminding him of Almyra some minutes ago.

"It's no money." Harry grinned. "That's all I'm telling you - no, just one more hint ... It's very, very personal."

And of course, Rahewa was at a loss to guess, looked relieved as much as perplexed, at any rate happier than before.

Walking away, Harry beamed to himself, imagining how Rahewa would look at Christmas morning, almost alone, when reading that letter, only to wait impatiently for him. He beamed still more at remembering how it had been for himself, with only minutes of forewarning from Hagrid.

Because the envelope contained an invitation to the *Magical Menagerie* - to look around, and then, finally, of course to buy a pet animal for Rahewa, after she had taken her choice.

18 - Wheel of Fortune

Christmas morning in *The Burrow* found the Weasley family - plus adopted enhancement - sitting around the breakfast table. Actually it was pretty late for breakfast, and still the family members presented themselves in all shades of dressing, from little more than a pyjama to a full set of clothes suited for this particular morning.

Even ignoring the dresses, every spectator would have chuckled expectantly, because all faces were grinning madly, perfectly matching the occasion. Well, with one exception ...

Ma Weasley

She was furious.

At Harry.

Yes, right - impossible as it sounded. Because Harry had broken the agreement, according to Ma Weasley's opinion, and that was unforgivable. Regardless of the intention which didn't count here, quite the opposite. Regardless of the fact that Mrs. Weasley found herself alone with this opinion while everybody else - her husband, Ron, Ginny, and of course Harry himself - looked extremely pleased.

Two things had made the Weasley mother furious. Either of them had been acceptable - coming alone, that was. Only, for bad measure, they had come together - not surprisingly so, since both of them counted as Christmas presents. And in some way, this was exactly the problem.

One *corpus delicti* stood in the entrance of *The Burrow*. This particular one was the reason why Arthur Weasley, former head of the former *Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office*, new head of the new *Department of Muggle Cooperation*, looked like a ten-year-old, barely mustering the patience to have breakfast before storming out to play with his new toy.

A Volvo estate.

After months of arguing, and after Arthur Weasley's new position had given him a better argument than ever, a long fight in *The Burrow* had ended with a compromise. The family would not have presents for each other - okay, except for something small, very small, mind, and except for some items necessary anyway, like shirts, pyjamas, underwear. In exchange, Ma Weasley had come to live with the idea of a new family car.

This was the agreement, and so far, the Volvo estate would not have raised trouble.

But half an hour before, a delivery service had arrived, depositing a very large box, requesting not more than a signature in return, and confirming that yes, this was the right address, madam, no doubt about that. And while Ma Weasley was still demanding to know what this meant, Harry had arrived from upstairs, to sign the paper, to move the box into the family room, and to take out the items, arranging them as good as possible in this room, already crowded with furniture and seemingly too small for the large globe.

A spectator.

Within seconds, the family had gathered, staring in awe at the globe, the control panel - latest technology, fast-forward, standstill picture, zoom, and their growing excitement struck Harry as the best he'd encountered in a while.

Well - if not for this little barrier that still prevented him from feeling undiluted joy.

At this moment, said barrier grumbled, "We've been very clear, haven't we? The car's our only real present at Christmas, right? And then - " Ma Weasley glared at Harry, "just when the car's there, bought and all, you come ... You - the last from whom I'd have expected this! Such a ..."

Ron, feeling safe not being the culprit, grinned. "Harry isn't made for rules, Mum, everybody knows that."

Mrs. Weasley shot around, changed tack. "Ron Weasley, you're not made to interrupt your mother." And back. "Harry - you'll take that out. Period."

Carefully balancing concern with glee in his voice, Harry explained, "Sorry, Ma, but they won't take it again. It's been ordered, it's working, so they have no reason."

"Then I'll sell it personally - ten percent under list price ..."

Next second, Molly Weasley looked genuinely trapped. Yes, she was serious, no doubt about that - only in this case, she would have to ask her step-son for the price, and this thought seemed still more dreadful than accepting his present.

And of course, the other genuine Weasleys had registered the trap at the same moment, reason enough for them to look triumphant, and expectant to see how Ma Weasley was going to lose a battle.

Harry, in contrast and due to his role in this plot, was searching for golden bridges. "Ma - it's just a player, nothing else. There's no camera, you cannot do a recording ..."

With some bitterness, obviously from anticipating the inevitable result, Mrs. Weasley complained, "As if that's a comfort! As if that would make a difference ..."

Oh, it would, definitely. A recorder was about ten times as expensive. Only Harry didn't feel it wise to express this argument aloud.

"... We had an agreement, remember, young man? And you couldn't await to break it, to come with that spector!"

Ginny smiled sweetly. "But Mum, Harry was upstairs when it came."

"Watch your language, young lady! Making fun of your old mother who's trying to get a hold on this treacherous gang that counts for a family!"

With some effort mustering a serious expression, Ron said, "But Mum - for Harry, with his connection to *Groucho Sectors*, that's not a breach of agreement, is it?"

This was the first argument to come through. Ma Weasley thought for a moment, then said, "Only if he's got it for free. I'll ask Cho about the regulations."

Uh-oh ... Harry decided to keep to the truth, and to take all the heat at once. "Erm - that might be difficult."

A suspicious stare. "Why? Won't she tell me?"

"She wouldn't know what you're talking about, Ma. This is no *Groucho* model, and Cho won't come because - um, between her and me ... er - right now ..."

For a moment, Harry as well as Ron were preparing themselves for a new explosion, about this case of broken agreement and attempted deception, then the second message had reached Ma Weasley's mind. "What's between you and her? Trouble?"

"Yes."

Seeing Harry's face, Ma Weasley was lost, was melting away, everybody but herself registering the change with relief, amusement, or envy, depending on the individual perspective. She said, "I'm sorry to hear that ... Is it serious?"

"Yes, Ma."

"How serious?"

"I wish I knew ... No, that hasn't changed, I still ... But for the time being, we're pretty incommunicado, so-to-speak."

Ma Weasley looked very sorry to hear this, lighted up considerably when realizing that, as a consequence, Harry would be with the Weasleys at New Year. The expected competition, the traditional dinner party in the Chang house, would be out of the question under these circumstances. And all this, somehow, had moved a broken agreement to a remote corner of Ma Weasley's mind.

After breakfast, Ron grinned at Harry, kept his voice low. "You and rules ... Harry, I wish I had such a luck. Just when I thought she's caught you once, you slip away again."

"Yeah, but for which price?"

They went upstairs to resume the task that had been interrupted by the arrival of the specter - opening their presents. Maybe the pile looked really a bit smaller than in previous years, though not much. Yes, the Weasley parents had kept to the agreement, there was no major present, but they had found quite a lot of minor things. And for Ron, Ginny, and Harry the agreement didn't count between each other - why, it had been just a strategy to squeeze a Yes out of Ma Weasley for the Volvo. While otherwise, the next year would start soon, and one of its first days would provide another five grand from a certain sponsor.

So far, Harry had managed to open the presents from the Weasley parents - well, most of them, finding a hand-knitted sweater, among other clothes. The sweater was dark blue, with a white pattern at the chest that looked like two Go stones on connecting lines.

He was probably the only one with this special type of present, because Ma Weasley's own children couldn't appreciate it as he could, and Harry felt very proud of that.

There was still another small box of which he didn't know the origin, so this could only be another one of these *minor* items. Opening it, Harry had to grin. Minor items, huh? Well, Ma Weasley had her own technique to bend rules beyond measure.

An alarm clock. A magical one. The alarm time had to be set with a command, rather than with some button. Then the clock asked, "*Are you serious, pal?*"

If the answer was, "Yes", a bell would chime at the proper time. Five minutes later, a song would start playing for another five minutes, at the end of which a voice like that of a drill sergeant would start shouting, "*Get up, you lazybag!*"

If the answer was, "Very serious," the bell would chime for just one minute, to be followed by the drill sergeant's voice immediately.

If the answer was, "My God, no, it's just a good intention," the bell would chime every ten minutes for a full hour, before songs would fill the next hour. At the end, of course, came the drill sergeant - after all, this was an alarm clock.

And in addition, you could set any other interval. An answer like, "Yes, give or take twenty minutes," meant the clock would *give* twenty minutes.

Well, then ... What next? There - Rahewa's present.

Inside, Harry found what he had expected, after having seen the shape of the flat box. A combat knife, twin blade of six inches, shimmering, razor-sharp, in a leather sheath with straps, and a description how to sharpen the blade after every usage.

No card - not from Rahewa, not with a present which by itself already said more than what could be written. There was little doubt - this knife had to be exactly the same model as Rahewa's own, the one which had tasted Voldemort's blood almost a year ago.

Harry became aware - at this time of the day, Rahewa would have read his own letter. The *Magical Menagerie* would be open again day after tomorrow - he would use his new alarm clock to wake earlier than usual during vacation, would tell it yes, he was serious. It gave him a feeling of joy and expectation.

He grabbed the next box - Hermione's present. Had to be a book, by tradition as well as by its shape. And right he was. *Explosives: Demolition at a Glance, the Fireworker's Quick Reference Handbook*, by Aldron Blackencorner. Scanning through, Harry realized immediately that the author was a wizard, writing about Muggle chemicals.

Where had Hermione found such a rare bird? Then Harry saw the card, lying inside.

- *Dear Harry,*
Happy Christmas to you. This book is supposed to be the most concise reference book of its kind, but even so, I have to apologize (!) for the following items missing in the list:
- Hermione Granger
- Ron Weasley

- Ginny Weasley (newest development)
- Harry Potter (needs a strong fuse)
- Cho Chang
Love, Hermione

P.S. Maybe the list is not quite by explosive force, but there is a common denominator: Handle with care.

Harry almost gasped. Such a gentle message, together with another apology, from Hermione! He felt a hotness in his eyes, grateful to be alone at this moment.

His own present for Hermione was a multi-calibration scale, the hottest item in the scientific world, according to the descriptions. A combination of Muggle technology and magical power, could be scaled in a range from five grams to the weight of a human body - well, maybe not covering Madame Dussolier, but even so beyond anything the Muggles could manufacture without magical help. And Harry's own card had been a nice one too, speaking about *touchy items*.

The door opened, presenting a grinning younger sister. Ginny kept her voice low. "Harry! - You won't believe what's happening downstairs ... Mum's sitting in the family room, watching a spectator cassette."

Harry glanced up, hoping he might look normal again. "Er - which one?"

"The dance course." Ginny's expression showed an interesting mix of emotions, leaving it to everybody's guess which were the ingredients - her mother's surrender, the dancing figure of Marie-Christine, or the fact that Harry's eyes were still blinking a bit.

Harry asked, "Does she follow the steps?"

"Not yet, but I won't be surprised ... Could be, Dad's in for a surprise."

After a moment's hesitation, Harry seized for Hermione's card, offered it to Ginny. "Here, read that - I think it tells you something too."

With some astonishment, Ginny took the card. A second later, a smile started spreading her face. Then she looked up. "That's kind of her, really ... Well, sometimes I wonder how you and Ron could come up with something like her, and then ..."

Ginny read the card again. "Clever girl - placing herself on top, quite voluntarily, and then claiming the order's not by explosive force - ha! Yes, of course she wouldn't rank on top, but ..." Ginny stopped herself, blushing. "I'm sorry - that was very tactless of me."

Only Harry's smile lacked confidence, while not his voice. "No, Ginny - there's no question who ranks on top, and I shouldn't hang around blocking every wisecrack in my presence ... It's better that way, believe me."

"Is it?" Ginny stepped closer, determination in her face. "Harry - tell me, am I one of the reasons for - for this trouble?"

Harry, not famous for lies anyway, was prepared for this question since the Christmas Ball. "From her side, yes ... From my side, no."

Ginny swallowed. "That's what I thought ... Harry, I'll write her a letter, and give it to Almyra. I'll tell her what he did to me ... And I'll tell her how scared I was, and ... How it was, and that it's over since then."

Harry felt startled. "No, Ginny - you don't have to fight my own fight, especially not with this!"

"Didn't you say I'll overcome it the better the more I can talk about it? Well, that's what I'm doing - and besides, there's a freedom of letters, remember?"

Due to a recently developed allergy to the word *freedom*, Harry had to suppress an initial impulse. Instead, he asked, "Are you strong enough?"

"Yes, I am - although, honestly, she's the real stress test ... I mean ..."

Harry grinned. "Yes, certainly ... But if you're strong enough for that, then you're strong enough for another story."

Ginny looked first blank, then suspicious. "Which one?"

"A story about what happened to a very popular talkmaster."

A gasp. "Did you ..." A moment of uncertainty, then a stronger force had gripped her - curiosity. "Tell me - what was it? - When was it?"

"My own part was the smallest. You should ask those who did the most work."

"Others??" After a second, the blank terror faded. "Okay - whom?"

"In the sequence of appearance - Rahewa, Ron, myself, Myrtle ... And Sirius, except he doesn't know about the background, so I think I should tell his part."

"Whew ..." Ginny seemed to encourage herself. "Well, then ... But with Rahewa, I'd have to wait till Hogwarts."

"No." Harry beamed. "I invited her, and I'm pretty sure it will be more than one afternoon."

"Yes, right, then we can ..." With some effort, Ginny remembered that it was Christmas.

"Well, I guess we can talk about that later - I'll let you open your presents, and maybe Ron's done already, and maybe I don't care if the story doesn't come in the proper sequence." Showing remarkable excitement, Ginny left the room.

Harry knew what she meant - her present from him, something to which he was looking forward almost more than to his own presents. But there was time enough, this Christmas break would not contain any schedule in some other family, and therefore, the longer it took, the better.

Next box - the heavy piece from Almyra, so much bigger than Harry's own present for her. His' was a GALA card - still empty, of course, had to be filled and sealed at the next Gringotts residence. Would have been an expensive present - from Almyra's side, while for himself, the

monetary aspect didn't exist. Gringotts refused to charge him for a GALA card, even though it wasn't for himself. Nice people, those Goblins.

Another book, and what a volume! *The Dragon Encyclopedia*, from Caliban Crippleneck. Now that was an author with short titles, while his book looked anything but short. History - biology - races - myths - magical power ... Well, thought Harry, this might be his first entrance - if he had to read the book before trying his first transition, then he was in trouble, the rest of the school year seemed hardly enough.

And there was still another box. Opening it, Harry giggled - small dragon figures, moving ones, apparently one for each race, and they could even breathe a coloured smoke. The tiny clouds faded quickly, not leaving a trace in the air, thank God - Ma Weasley would have told him some stories about smoking in *The Burrow*.

For the next minutes, Harry felt six years old - according to his guess, because at the age of six, he hadn't possessed such beautiful toys. The small dragons did not really fly, he had to hold a figure in two fingers and move it a bit through the air, then the toy dragon spread its wings and performed a pseudo flight. Didn't matter - they were perfect to study the bodies, the shapes, the movements.

Harry came awake from an antediluvian world, or maybe early Trias, or Pre-Cambrium - whatever, a world in which dragons ruled the earth, probably shortly after the dinosaurs. Then he saw the card.

- *Dear Harry,
Happy Christmas to you. May this book help you in your ambitious task, in which you have made remarkable progress in such a short time.*

*May this understanding help you in another task, which - somehow - crosses my mind when talking about dragons. You will find my help here as well.
Your sister in spirit
Almyra*

P.S. Did you play already with the figures? It took me almost an hour before I could leave the book shop.

So Harry wasn't the only one falling back to childish habits at the sight of these wonderfully detailed dragon figures. Would be interesting to see if he and Almyra could resist when he brought the figures into her office - and still more interesting would be the expression of another visitor, coming to see them playing with mini dragons ...

There was one box left, flat and big, which meant that Ron and Ginny had worked together, unless one of them had something special in mind. Opening the box, Harry found the card, saw his assumption confirmed, except that Ron and Ginny had joined with two other people:

- *Dear Harry,
Happy Christmas to you. For someone as determined as you to find some other people - one in particular - we thought this is the only appropriate present. (And, somehow, it follows a family tradition.)*

We hope you will understand (quickly) why it took the joined forces of Ron, Ginny, Bill and Fleur

P.S. from Fleur: My dear hunter, the others assured me that my scornful remark is not the only reason you are looking for Voldemort. I really hope it's true, otherwise, we have to talk.

Toward Harry, the text looked a bit mysterious - until he had the flat board in his hands. Moments later, he felt truly speechless.

A map - the map of all maps, no less. In idle state, the board showed a world map. Touching any spot presented a new map - a zoom into this particular area, which could be zoomed again, and again, and again ... Using Ottery St. Watchpole as the test target, Harry zoomed down until he saw the board presenting a street map of this little town. Then he did the same for Santa Monica, then for Rex' dragon camp near Ellesmere. The map never failed.

And for any scale below world level, pressing an edge of the board moved the map toward the respective direction. A small spot in the legend box at the lower right zoomed one level out, another spot returned to the world map.

This was like the pocket version of what they had seen in a travelling services office of *Magical Tours*, just before Harry's trip to Japan. Remembering the scene, still more this trip, Harry did another downzooming until the small Japanese island Iki filled the display.

Had been a mistake - identifying the location of Matsuo Shigura's house reminded Harry of Tamiko, which in turn reminded him of Cho ... He quickly stepped back to world map level.

To push off these thoughts, Harry did one more zoom - toward Plana Cays, the two small Caribbean islands where his last encounter with Voldemort had taken place. While inspecting other spots in the legend, suddenly Harry became aware that the map offered more than just zooms. Pressing a clock symbol showed the time zones of the world, a character symbol stood for a world map of languages, and a church symbol for a map of religions.

When pressing another spot in the legend, the map changed into *mark mode* - then, a touch marked the respective area in a different colour, one of four that could be selected from the legend. At world map level, a touch marked an entire country. At lower levels, it marked a city, or a highway, or a mountain. At street map level, it marked a single street. Touching the fifth colour spot in the legend cleared all markings.

Harry gasped at trying to guess what these four people had paid - probably a small fortune.

He rose to find the others, for expressing his thanks as much as for collecting his own feedback. Voices from Ron's room told him the proper direction. When he knocked, the voices fell silent.

Harry opened the door. "It's me - no need to worry." The two faces, still on full alert, told him enough about the interrupted topic. He grinned. "If Ma Weasley would see you like that, you'd have trouble giving an unsuspecting explanation why you're looking so terrified."

Ron snorted. "But she's watching a certain dancer - er, her steps, I mean." Now he looked innocent. "Wouldn't know what else could be so fascinating - would you?"

"No, why?" Harry could play the game not quite as good as Ron, though clearly better than Ginny - this alone reason enough to change the issue quickly. "If you're done - I came to say ... You're really mental, you two - I mean, thank you." He hugged first Ginny, then Ron.

His brother smiled. "Well, you know, with the prospect of some fresh supply, we didn't think more than twice ... And then, honestly, one of us had to have that thing. Harry, to tell you the truth, I spent already more than an hour playing with the map."

"I hope my present isn't too boring, compared to that."

Ron beamed. "What do you think - for me? Harry, it's cool - super - mega - ultra - cool. I didn't even know there's something like that available."

Harry laughed. "Of course not, otherwise I'd have been too late, right?"

His present for Ron was a pen - looking quite modern, and very simple on the surface. Except that the piece used magic through and through. For starters, the pen had an ink cartridge, definitely unspectacular from a Muggle perspective, but the ink was a very special one.

A ring at the upper end showed five differently coloured sections. When turning the ring, the ink changed colour - instantly, in the middle of a word. To be fully precise, this wasn't really ink, because then the fluid in the tip would not have changed its colour. The cartridge contained a magical potion to change the colour of the target matter - paper, parchment, wood, whatever.

The first four colours presented exactly the collection you might expect - black, blue, green, red. The clou was the fifth.

At writing, the words appeared in an iridescent mix of gold and light blue. After a minute or so, they disappeared.

None of the common magical methods would make them appear again. Only a certain charm would show the writing for another minute, and this charm had to be specified by the pen owner. For this purpose, the pen needed a branding similar to that of the Steel Wings.

However, the branding just established the master charm. In addition, every individual document could be protected separately. For this purpose, the author had to write down the selected charming word first, typically on top of the paper or parchment. It was important to have all letters in the word connected to each other, further, the text had to be surrounded by a circle - a line drawn from the beginning of the first letter to the end of the last letter. Then, the included text would appear either with the specific charm or with the master charm.

A perfect tool for love letters - provided the lovers agreed upon a common secret word.

And for more mundane purposes, the pen had a second ring - used to scale the line width from extremely thin to the thickness of a marker pen.

Harry said, "The only problem left - how to pass the keyword to Janine?"

Ron beamed. "Don't you worry - we'll manage. And besides, I know enough things to write for myself, and with that I can be absolutely sure that nobody will read them, no matter where I left my parchments ..."

Ginny showed a face of disbelief. "Don't tell me you write poetry."

A pair of flushed cheeks made both Ginny and Harry stop their laughter. Harry recovered first. "Hey - Ron, we had no idea ... When will you show us something?"

"Erm - when I'm satisfied enough with my own attempt ... But only if you keep your mouths shut, of course."

"We promise." Ginny looked at Harry. "Look there - Ron the poet ... Harry, did you ever try that?"

"Only haikus." Then Harry had to explain what a *haiku* was.

Ron said. "Harry, I think it's clear what that means, isn't it?"

"You mean you'll show me your poetry only if I show you mine?"

"Exactly."

"That's unfair! What about Ginny - she doesn't offer anything in return."

Ron smiled. "Well - sisters get a special bonus." Which was reason for a certain sister to look extremely pleased.

Harry thought for a moment. "Might be I'll back out - I just wrote three, and all three of them are a bit - er, special."

Ginny said, "What - in seventeen syllables? Harry, you must be an artist."

Joining their laughter, Harry felt certain - maybe not today, but some day he would find the right moment to present his haikus to these two redheads which, about seven years ago, had stepped into his life.

Then Ginny said, "Harry, your present ... Really, at the first moment I thought - didn't he find anything better? A board game? - For me?"

"And now?"

"I looked inside, read a bit about how it's played - and I saw the figures. Now I'm dying to find out what I should think. I mean - can we play?"

Harry nodded. "Fine with me ... Ron, what about you?"

"What is it?"

"The Wheel of Fortune."

A sparkling appeared in Ron's eyes. "I heard about that ... They say it's addictive."

Harry looked expectant. "Really? The shoplady said something in that direction - I thought it was the usual crap." Then he glanced from one to the other. "And she said, the more players, the better ... I'd know another player - if that's okay with you."

Ron looked blank, but Ginny smiled. "Go and fetch her ... But hurry up, we're waiting."

Moments later, Harry was walking toward Hogwarts.

He found his candidate in the Gryffindor tower, reading, totally caught up by her literature. He reached her unnoticed. "Happy Christmas, Rahewa."

A fleeting instant of disbelief, followed by a beaming flash, then, to Harry's total surprise, Rahewa flushed, quickly closing the book, and hiding the cover.

Harry grinned. "Honestly - if I didn't know for sure there's nothing like that in the library, I'd think you're caught with a porn magazine."

Rahewa giggled, relaxed. "No - erm, it's ..." With some effort, she turned the book around.

Harry read, *Pets for Pleasure, Friends for Fun. How to find your pet animal - a guide for the thoughtful wizard*, by Kitty Leech-Tailbone.

"Yes, of course." He looked up. "First thing day after tomorrow, when the *Magical Menagerie's* open - my alarm clock's already set."

Rahewa beamed. "Thank you ... And ..."

Although the question didn't finish, Harry had no trouble guessing. "It looks wonderful, Rahewa - same as yours, right? ... Yes, I was sure of that - and you must show me how to sharpen it, seems not to be that easy, without hurting the blade."

Oh yes, she'd do that - any time ...

"But the reason for my coming - Ginny's got a game for Christmas, and we want to play it, only we're a player short ... So, what do you think?"

For a split second, Harry felt sure next moment Rahewa would hang around his neck - without a knife. Then she just nodded, to come up, to race toward the door, to be back quickly afterwards, ready to travel.

It turned out a memorable journey, giving proof that Harry still had work to do with his portkey programming - first, because he couldn't master yet the direct distance from Hogwarts to *The Burrow*, second, because his skill in one-time portkeys was lacking accuracy.

At the Hogwarts Express platform, he prepared a bench, let Rahewa jump to the Hogsmeade linkport. Testing the bench, he found himself also in the linkport, had to jump back to clear the spell that had been planned as a one-timer.

With the help of a generous tip, the gate to London Linkport was ready within five minutes.

In London Linkport, Harry's attempt to program a waste basket for *The Burrow* failed - still too far. So he let Rahewa jump to the outskirts of London, and from there to *The Burrow*, in both cases following via apparition after clearing the portkey.

Reaching the entrance, Harry had to push a bit before Rahewa found the courage to enter, had to suppress a grin - this girl scared? Of Ma Weasley??

However, it took Mrs. Weasley just one of her usual welcomings until a beaming twelve-year-old, bursting of expectation, was storming upstairs, to be greeted by Ginny and Ron.

They decided to take the twins' old room - the family room was nearly full with the new globe alone, and this game would need some space.

Pretty soon, they realized - it would also take some time.

Wheel of Fortune was a game about families and tribes, about alliances and conflicts, about money, fame, and happiness. Each player started with two figures - a couple, man and woman. If everything went well, this couple would have children, these children would grow, marry the children of other parents, forming tribes, always fighting for their money, fame, and happiness.

The player had to select a role for his man figure - farmer, fisherman, or miner. Because of these three roles, six players were the optimal team, while a three-player game had a tendency to keep static, too balanced.

Rahewa said, "Indians are farmers, there's no question about that."

Ron said, "Harry's the only one who ever saw a pit from inside - I'd say that's a clear case, isn't it?"

Ginny said, "Alright, alright - I'm the only one who ever saw a boat from inside, that's what none of you dared to say, right?"

They stared at her, somewhat perplexed. Ginny's grin looked a bit stiff.

"Okay," said Ron, "I'll go for farming too."

The game was played in rounds. The families could harvest in each round, with varying success, of course, and with the luck heavily unbalanced between farmers, fishermen, and miners - in a single round, that was. A central market served as the place to sell their goods.

They quickly realized what made the game so attractive, and so time-consuming. This central market paid poorly for wheat, fish, or metal - it was significantly more profitable to trade between each other.

Next, they learned that it was necessary to maintain friendship with another family, to close alliances.

Of course, Harry and Rahewa planned an alliance, same as Ron and Ginny. But trying so, they learned another important factor in the game. These figures - magical ones, of course - had thoughts of their own. Farmers didn't go well with miners - actually, they didn't go well with fishermen either, were a pretty stubborn people. Although other farmers were their closest competition, persuading the figure to such an alliance turned out easier.

So Harry the miner allied with Ginny the fisherwoman, against the farmers' union of Ron and Rahewa.

Raising children was a difficult task. These children grew pretty quickly, could marry after sixteen rounds or so. But first they had to be there ...

If a family didn't collect enough happiness, children would not come. If there wasn't enough money, the children had a tendency to die - not exactly from starvation, but from diseases. If there was too much money, the families had a tendency to raise just one child, two at the most. If there was too much fame, the children had trouble finding a partner.

At some point, Harry said, "By the way, Ginny - this is the adult version of the game."

After a quick glance to the youngest player in the round, Ginny asked, "And what - er, does that mean?"

"Well - the figures can commit adultery, and that's of course reason enough for a lot of trouble."

Oh yes, the figures could, and did ... Worse, each figure had certain preferences, and dislikes. There were twelve male and twelve female figures, named - and designed - after famous persons, no matter if Muggle or wizard. Cleopatra, the wife in Ginny's couple, proved herself as a troublemaker par excellence, attracted by other men like a moth by the flame. Caesar, the husband in Ron's couple, couldn't hold his money together, always looking for fame, and Ron had a hard job sending him to the places he considered promising.

Then Ma Weasley came to ask if they had lost all interest in food, especially on such a day.

The Weasley-Potter gang might have opted for skipping the lunch, in favour of the running game and after such a late breakfast, but a look at a skinny twelve-year-old was enough for Mrs. Weasley to order them downstairs - all of them.

Sitting around the table, it was obvious that the breakfast in Hogwarts had been earlier. Rahewa was busy chewing and answering questions in-between. And she answered them without hesitation - that her mother, whom she had seen just yesterday, was deadly sick, that her father was happier in a tavern than at home, and that she didn't know what would be - afterwards.

Ma Weasley looked consternated.

She recovered when her smiling daughter explained that Harry already took care, that he was covering the costs for the hospital, and that he probably had some idea what to do - er, afterwards. However, hearing these news, Ma Weasley looked *very* thoughtful.

After lunch, returning to their game, Ginny suggested to start over again - now that they had found how the game worked.

"Fine with me," replied Harry. "I guess you shouldn't have separated Cleopatra from Caesar - look at mine, they work better." He had selected Odysseus, however by completely ignoring Penelope and instead marrying him with Circe. While this couple seemed better suited for the role of fishermen, his Odysseus kept mining without moaning.

"No," said Ron, "that's not necessarily the only problem. Look at Rahewa's couple."

Rahewa had married Lord Nelson with the Spanish queen Isabella, to great success.

At any rate - everybody saw mistakes to be corrected, and besides, wasn't it Ginny's present? So they started again, this time with Hannibal and Joan of Arc as Ginny's couple.

The alliances were the same as before, and with them, each tribe was able to balance out times of bad luck. Then, just before supper, the two farmer tribes of Ron and Rahewa started a feud against each other - apparently, a marriage between some grand-grandchildren had resulted in deeply hurt feelings, might have been a problem with the dowry.

Ginny's suggestion to have a few plates with sandwiches found little sympathy from Ma Weasley. Sandwiches yes - downstairs, of course. So they had another break to discuss strategies.

Then, when the united forces of miners and fishermen were about to steamroll the countryside, Harry's figures opened a gold mine. What could have been the cornerstone for an easy winning turned out a disaster - suddenly, the miners looked detestful at their allies, started rows within their own tribe, and more than one murder for the greed of gold was decimating their number.

Harry threatened to flood the gold mine, and to punish them with a few water balls - of the size used for the gnomes, waving off Ginny's protest that this was her game and not necessarily waterproof.

The miners obeyed - or so it seemed, only that now Harry was taught a lesson in civil guerilla tactics, directed against his other commands.

Slowly, but steadily, the farmers recovered.

Then, with a jump, Rahewa came up. "Harry - when's the last gate to Hogwarts?"

Harry checked his watch, quite as if he didn't know already for some time. "Oops - that's been an hour ago ... Rahewa, you have to stay with us overnight."

Ginny, barely able to keep her face steady, could convince a startled girl that yes, there were some - er, necessary items available, and a room, and a bed, and such.

The game ended with a stalemate. True, the alliance of miners and fishermen was a few points in the lead, but within the next twenty minutes would ... Except if ... But in this case ... After a short discussion, the four tribes agreed that they had won all together.

Ma Weasley busied herself to guide a skinny girl, looking tired as death while otherwise quite happy, through the sleeping time chores in *The Burrow*, then she caught Harry in a quiet corner, out of earshot from the rest of the family.

"Harry, is it true what Ginny said?"

"Yes, Ma Weasley - of course, did you think she'd be joking about that?"

"No, certainly not, it's just ... Er, do you know already whom ... I mean ..."

Harry beamed at her. "I have a few candidates, and there's one I didn't ask yet. Now guess who might that be?"

Ma Weasley gasped a bit, flushed a bit, smiled. "That's very kind of you ..." Then she turned serious. "But I have to think it over, Harry, and talk with Arthur, and with my other children ... That's nothing to be taken easily ... Although, she's such a sweet girl ..."

Harry laughed. "Sweet? ... Don't get confused, Ma - she has quite some ants in her pants. She carries a twin-bladed knife all the time - her present for me was just such a knife ... But then, there's no doubt - you two would get along well."

Ma Weasley seemed to think the same. "How much time is it still?"

"As if anybody knew ... But not more than a few months, that's pretty sure."

"Terrible ..." Ma Weasley looked at him, looked away. "And the other candidates?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry, Ma - no comment, that's what I said to all of them when the question came up."

"Yes - yes, you're right, I shouldn't have asked." Mrs. Weasley looked appreciating. "I'm proud of you, Harry ... Say, is the hospital very expensive?"

"Yes it is, but it doesn't matter - there's enough, and besides ... Erm - compared to that, some other things are almost for free."

Yes, Ma Weasley got his drift, was smiling more.

Harry went for the opportunity. "I'm glad you like it ... And this cassette seems quite fascinating for you - what do you think? Would a dance course be to your taste?"

Ma Weasley laughed. "Me? In my age? And ..." The unfinished sentence might have referred to her body, which could be called plump, or a bit more than that.

Harry protested vigorously. "Nonsense! Ask Fleur - she'll tell you, all that matters is the rhythm and the movement. I can show you - wanna give it a try?"

Ma Weasley almost giggled. "Not today ... Let me watch it still a while - you might be right, this woman's by far not as thin as Fleur, but she moves very gracefully ... It's a pleasure to watch her."

Yes it was. Or had been - depending on the perspective.

19 - Family Business

Next morning, after breakfast, Harry escorted Rahewa back to Hogwarts. The Weasleys were invited from the Delacour family. Of course, they would have taken Rahewa with them any time, why not, except that the offer had been rejected with an expression which, on any other girl, would have been called horrified.

Not expecting an overnight improvement in his portkey programming skill, Harry used the same steps as the day before, only in reverse. At the Hogsmeade linkport, he said goodbye to Rahewa - less from own impulse, more following the girl's demand. "See you tomorrow," he called when realizing that Rahewa wouldn't show her face a last time for this day.

A second after she had disappeared, Harry found it mandatory to test his programming. But of course - this time the one-time mode had worked. Consoling himself with the image of a very informative book in the Hogwarts library, he jumped home.

Ginny had the clever idea to take the game with them into the Delacours castle. The result, easily predictable - as soon as possible within the boundaries of politeness, they were sitting in a large room and playing, with Gabrielle instead of Rahewa.

And they learned something new. A quarter-Veela could control her figures easily, never hearing a protest from them. Therefore, Gabrielle might have won effortlessly, if not for her strategy which could only be called wanting. She simply didn't take money seriously enough, ran always short of that, aiming too much toward fame and happiness.

However, after a while, Ginny, her ally, could convince Gabrielle to share a common strategy in which Ginny would administer the budgets while Gabrielle had to rule the figures. The end was inevitable - a triumphant victory over Harry and Ron. At least, they still had some time left to sit and talk with the older people.

Harry had a few minutes with Fleur alone. Until then, Fleur had found the time to watch Harry's present. It was the *Groucho* dance course - complete, so far however with just one cassette. The others would be delivered when ready. Fleur said, "It was very interesting - especially after hearing some other news, and knowing a bit of the background."

"Interesting - yes, you can say that."

Fleur laughed. "Maybe, if you find the opportunity, you can use my parents' present."

"Fat chance." Even so, Harry had to grin - this present was a Veela shawl, passed over by a smiling Elienne who had admonished him to use it only for honest purposes.

Fleur asked, "What about the new teacher?"

"Danielle? ... She's okay, but I wonder whether she's going to stay longer - she seems in desperate search of something - er, male."

"That's a shame, 'arry - and you call yourself her assistant? Ts, ts." Fleur had fun.

"Veela - it's unbelievable." Harry sighed. "As if I hadn't trouble enough."

Growing serious, Fleur asked, "And you think chastity now will solve it? ... I don't think so, Harry - that's definitely the wrong approach."

"I didn't say it's an approach - but I'm awfully sure it's a prerequisite."

Fleur still looked unconvinced, however she admitted that Veela and Chinese - in particular Chinese dragons - might have different opinions. For her, there was no sense in shying off from an opportunity, not after being caught with the hand in the honeypot anyway.

When they had to leave, in order to catch the last gate back to *The Burrow*, everybody agreed - it was high time for Harry to master a long-distance portkey, after all, what were relatives good for, even adopted ones?

* * *

Next morning, Harry learned what it meant being serious toward his own alarm clock. Hearing the drill sergeant's bellowing, he jumped out of his bed quickly, feeling guilt for this racket that had to be heard three rooms farther. However, stepping out of the room, he couldn't hear any noise from Ron's or Ginny's direction. Maybe next room this sergeant sounded like the house ghoul, although Harry didn't think so.

At any rate - he was fully awake, his anticipation toward a shopping tour for a pet animal growing by the second.

Reaching the breakfast table, Harry found a letter at his seat.

The envelope alone told him enough. And right he was - an invitation from Mr. and Mrs. Chang, to a dinner party at New Year's eve, expressing also the hope Harry might be ready for his famous magical artistry, except that this year, with everybody aware of wizards and witches, the premises might be a bit more challenging.

Harry had expected this letter, felt no surprise whatsoever. This was why he found the words quickly, didn't lose much time in writing his answer - he was sorry, but under the given circumstances he felt it inappropriate to come, and Mr. and Mrs. Chang might forgive him for letting them down with their other guests. In a few minutes, reaching London Linkport, he could send the letter as urgent mail. The sooner they knew, the better.

Harry wouldn't have been surprised finding Rahewa waiting outside. However, she sat in the Entrance Hall.

Today, savouring every minute, Harry didn't feel like programming portkeys that would fall too short anyway, and his companion had no objections. Wandering toward Hogsmeade, Harry asked, "So, did you finish that book?"

"Er - yes, I went through twice."

The answer made Harry smile for an instant. Then he realized - Rahewa would have done it a third time, just to let the day go by. He asked, "And - know what it will be?"

"Erm ..."

After a moment, not hearing more, Harry said, "We have all day long, so take your time. I was just asking because - you know, if it would be an owl, it had to be Eeylops Owl Emporium, while for any other pet, it's the Magical Menagerie ... Anyway, they aren't far apart."

"No, not an owl ..."

Harry grinned. "Then I figure it's a toad, right?"

He wouldn't even receive an answer for that.

"Aah - I almost forgot, if it's a dragon, we have to travel to Ellesmere, there's an opportunity right now, in a few days, Carrie will be fed up with her four chicken."

Rahewa giggled, shook her head.

Harry felt pretty sure - she knew exactly what she wanted, wouldn't tell him, try as he might ... Maybe Rahewa was afraid her particular choice would not be available in the *Magical Menagerie*. Glancing to the girl at his side again, another thought crossed Harry's mind. "Rahewa?"

"Hm?"

"You'll go only by their looks, and by your preferences, right?"

A moment's hesitation ...

"And you won't ask for the price - that's my job, right?"

Full-scale hit. Obviously, this damned book had been a bit too detailed. Searching desperately for a tight lock against such concerns, Harry said, "That reminds me - for horses, hippogriffs, and mountain trolls, we have to look still somewhere else."

Another giggle. "No, not that big ... actually, it's pretty small what I was thinking of."

"Okay ..." Feeling sure he would find his answer just by watching Rahewa inside the store, Harry said, "Then I won't ask more, and you won't ask more - alright?"

A nod.

The *Magical Menagerie* looked very much like the last time Harry had been in - four years ago, when Hermione had bought Crookshanks. His eyes followed Rahewa who was moving around in the narrow space between walls, racks, piles. Rahewa had ignored the toads completely, barely noticed the snakes. Well - little surprise, so far, who would go for a snake after Nagini had upped the ante that much?

The rats got a look, then Rahewa had passed.

The giant tortoise was inspected more closely, while not in earnest, just for the spectacular view. This done, Rahewa's glance went to the rack of cages with cats inside. Harry saw her smile. Would it be ...

A squeak - and gone she was, disappeared around a corner.

Harry followed expectantly. Had Rahewa found what she was looking for? ... Probably so, guessing by the sound. And then he saw it, crammed between a pile of food cans and a rack full of bird cages.

A basket on a table. Inside two bundles, snow-white. Only when coming closer, Harry recognized the tiny faces, the button-shaped eyes - mini poodles, obviously still quite young.

He reached Rahewa, who stood before the basket, frozen in admiration. "That's it? - Mini poodles?"

The answer came breathlessly. "Yes ... A dog, and small, and white - poodle, terrier, spitz ..."

"And they're okay?"

"They're the best - the highest intelligence, they don't bark ..." Rahewa stopped - apparently, poodles ranked also on top of another category, except she wouldn't tell, which left little doubt that this category was part of Harry's job in this business.

The girl looked no longer frozen. Rahewa's hands caressed the tiny creatures, kept still while small, pink tongues came out to lick them. According to Harry's guess, the dogs' age could still be measured in weeks, months at the most. And he had the distinct feeling that there was some dope in their food, or maybe in the water - a tranquilizer to keep them quiet in this shop fuller than full with animals of all kinds.

Maybe even an act of mercy. And for one of them, within the next hours ... Harry said, "Well, then - pick your choice."

The girl was at a loss to decide. The two small dogs looked like twins.

Harry examined them closer, not finding any individual sign. Then he took them up, to check from all sides. "A male and a female ..." Harry turned to Rahewa. "Does that help in your decision?"

No it didn't. Harry learned that the book had listed as many pros as cons for either sex - totally unbiased, and somehow not helpful at all.

The two poodles seemed a bit more lively than before, responding stronger to Rahewa's caressing. Even so, there was nothing which would help coming to a decision.

"Shall I count them out? ... Eeny meeny miney ..."

"No! Please ..."

Rahewa looked as if under torture. After some more hesitation, she grabbed one of the two bundles, held it to her chest. "This one."

It was the male.

"You're ..." Harry swallowed the rest - of course Rahewa wasn't sure, hopefully that might come later. "Alright - c'mon."

After the first step, the remaining poodle looked alarmed. Coming around the corner, the one in Rahewa's hands looked alarmed too. Halfways to the cashier desk, they could hear a desperate whimpering from behind.

Rahewa looked worried - no, terrified.

Until they had reached the desk, the bundle in her arms was responding to the sounds from farther down.

Rahewa stopped, looked at Harry, with an expression for which heartbreaking seemed a rather inadequate term. "Wait ..." She turned, moved forward, again heading toward the hidden corner.

Harry followed her, just in time to watch how Rahewa dropped her bundle back into the basket, where it was welcomed with an effusive licking and sniffing.

"I ... I can't ... They belong ..." That was all Rahewa could muster, then she made a step to pass him quickly, to leave, to storm out before ...

Harry blocked her path. "You're totally right. Stupid of us not to see it instantly ... Hold on!"

The last words were almost a shout, since Rahewa, face to the other side, was trying to break his barrier. Then Harry stepped to the basket, seized for the two bundles, turned. "Here - you take the dogs, I take the basket."

"Wha ..."

Not waiting for the rest of the question, which never came, Harry fetched the basket, walked to the desk, put it down to ask for some more utensils - collars, leashes, and a box of chewing bones suited for the sensitive teeth of such puppies.

Hearing the sum, he suppressed a whistle, while grinning inwardly - his money, which no longer felt like his property, was completely dedicated to socially valuable purposes like hunting dark wizards, rescuing white dogs, and similar tasks.

Outside, Rahewa seemed still busy recovering from a rapid sequence of shocks, her eyes shining from excitement, and still from something else. "Harry ..."

"It's okay ... It wasn't our decision, was it? We couldn't separate them, and we couldn't leave without a dog, so that's the only possible solution - it's as simple as that ... Now - in the mood for a short visit in The Burrow, or directly back to Hogwarts?"

Back to Hogwarts - Rahewa's mind was filled from front to end with two tiny bundles of snow-white fur.

They had to wait a few minutes in London Linkport. Examining the documents that had come with the dogs, Harry said, "According to the papers, they're called Alma and Abraham ... What do you think, are these proper names for them?"

"These are breeders' names, Harry ... The first letter tells you that it was the mother's first litter."

"A bit boring ... Do you know already how to call them?"

"No, not yet ... I wasn't prepared for two, and then things were happening so fast ..."

However, reaching Hogwarts, Rahewa had cleared her mind. She turned to Harry. "I know how to call them."

"So?"

"Er - Romeo and Juliet."

"Romeo and Juliet? ... Wow - say, doesn't it bother you that they're brother and sister?"

"No, why? ... You know, the book says, breeding with siblings is quite common - for dogs, I mean."

* * *

Back in *The Burrow*, Harry was of course asked if their shopping tour had been successful, and why he hadn't brought Rahewa and her pet with him. He answered, "She's busy with - well, what we've found. For the next days, we have to play a triple round, or look somewhere else." Harry was referring to the *Wheel of Fortune*, what else.

"What did she get?"

"Guess what?"

"A dog?" Ginny looked quite convinced to have guessed correctly.

"Wrong."

"A cat?"

"Wrong."

"A tame harpy?" That was Ron.

"A pixy?"

"A black panther?"

Harry grinned. "There's a nasty little trick - your guesses weren't that bad, but they all share the same mistake."

Hermione wasn't present - for her, this trick question would have been a piece of cake. However, while Ron was still looking blank, Ginny smiled triumphantly. "Two dogs!"

"Very good! - Yes, two mini poodles ..." Harry explained what had happened in the *Magical Menagerie*, then they settled for another round with Ginny's game - this time a three-player round.

Three players - nearly a different game, as it turned out. No alliances, each tribe on its own - suddenly, lucky accidents had a stronger impact, while strategy seemed less important because the bandwidth of decisions was more limited than before.

Still, the time consumption hadn't changed at all. It was already late afternoon when they heard the doorbell ring. Moments later, Ma Weasley's voice called from downstairs. "Harry - a telegram for you."

A telegram? Who ...

It had been delivered by the *Magical Tours* postal service. The envelope didn't tell Harry anything - small wonder, had been provided by the local office. He opened it.

- From: Shiu Lin Chang
To: Harry Potter
+++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++
Decline not accepted STOP Please call me at home STOP
S.L. Chang
+++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++

A phone call into the Chang house? The thought alone was accelerating Harry's heartbeat - what if it was *her* to pick up the receiver?

Hopefully not ... probably not, not if Cho's father had sent this telegram. Harry went upstairs to announce a break in their game, then he jumped to what for him came as the closest pay phone - London Linkport.

"Chang." Thank God - Mr. Chang's voice, reduced to the limits of a phone line.

"Hello, Mr. Chang, this is Harry Potter."

"Oh - Harry, thank you for calling back so quickly ... I was a bit suspicious whether this telegram would work - you know, for us Muggles, this is an almost archaic communication method, would be surpassed only by horseman's mail, ha ha."

"Owls are quicker, sir, but I know what you mean."

"Yes. Say, Harry, you can't be serious with your decline, can you?"

"Er - I'm afraid so, sir. Right now, it wouldn't be a good idea to come ..."

"Yes, we heard about the little dispute, Harry ..."

Little dispute? If there was ever an euphemism, then this one.

"... but wouldn't this be the best opportunity to take it out of the way? Or are you afraid my wife and I would be totally biased, on Cho's side?"

"No, sir, that wasn't the point, I mean, not at all. It's just ..."

"Then why don't you give it a try, Harry? My wife and I, we were looking forward to your visit."

Tricky guy, that - playing the well-meaning host and businessman, interrupting Harry at every sentence, surprisingly un-Chinese over the phone.

"Sir - it's your invitation, so I'm sorry to appear so impolite, but I don't think Cho would take my coming well, and under these circumstances, I think it's better to stay off."

"You hit the point exactly, Harry ..." Suddenly, Mr. Chang's voice sounded a bit cooler, more Chinese than before. "... It's *our* invitation, and we feel some disappointment, in particular since it comes so undeserved, given the relationship so far between us."

That was heavy artillery. Relationship so far - translate to half a million galleons ...

Even so, or maybe just for this reason, Harry felt himself relaxing, although not in his decision. "I'm truly sorry that it affects you and your wife that way, sir, but I don't see a choice - not as long as your invitation isn't supported by Cho. I cannot confront her against her own will in her parent's house ..."

"Yes, Harry - her parent's house - our house, which means it's our decision whom to invite, and when."

Even over the phone, the voice reminded Harry of a conversation in Hogwarts, almost exactly two years ago - and this memory made him find his next words. "Certainly, sir. I would never deny my obligation toward you, and your wife, but as I explained at a previous occasion, if it turns out a matter of priorities, then Cho's perspective is my first consideration ... I can only hope that you'll accept my position."

A moment of silence. If there had ever been the question, now it was obvious that Cho hadn't signed this invitation, never would.

"It sounds strange, Harry - to claim Cho's perspective, in this situation."

"Yes, sir, probably, but as long as I don't know any better, I see no other choice - the risk's too high to deepen the conflict."

And of course, Harry didn't learn any better. All he learned till the end of this conversation were some low-temperature remarks, ending with a frosty goodbye.

When returning to *The Burrow*, Harry couldn't concentrate too well on the game - his real wheel of fortune kept whirling in his mind. His tribe - fishermen, for a change, was steamrolled by Ron's and Ginny's figures.

* * *

Next morning, Harry first visited Sirius in his office, learning that life with not more than wizard criminals had been simple in comparison. From there, Harry headed for the *Daily*

Mrs. Chang smiled. "Yes, of course it is - and the same problem hangs between me and my daughter. Imagine - what would you think if, by some accident, Cho would tell your - how do you call her? ... Yes, Ma Weasley."

"Then ..." Thinking it over, Harry felt sure. "Well, I guess then we'd discuss it."

"Just so?"

"I'd be embarrassed, certainly, but ..." Harry grinned. "Ma Weasley can come on quite straight."

"Then she has an advantage." After a moment, Mrs. Chang said, "Harry - I promise you not to use my knowledge against my daughter."

Harry looked at her, startled. "No - I didn't think so for a second, Mrs. Chang ... That's not my concern."

Another pause, then Cho's mother asked, "Do you think her father plays a role too?"

"Erm - yes, that's my feeling."

"What a surprise." Mrs. Chang smiled again. "Alright, Harry - I promise you not to use my knowledge so that my husband can use it against our daughter ... Is this a base on which we can talk?"

"Yes, it is ..." Harry swallowed again. "Our problem has two parts. One is - er, another woman, and the other is money and Cho's business ..." He summarized the last half year, the meetings with Cho, and finished, "On our last meeting - after I saw that she had hired Marie-Christine, first I blocked the plan with these daughter companies. Then ... Cho and I had a conversation, and were shouting at each other ... At the end, I told her I'd pass over the loan to Groucho, and the twenty-six percent share to her personally, and that from now on I'd be on my own ... I'd no longer mess with her business, and make sure she won't mess again with mine ... Well, that's about all."

Mrs. Chang kept silent for a moment, thoughtful. Then she looked at Harry, smiling. "She was right, you know?"

"What?"

"Cho - she said, money doesn't impress you at all - remember?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe - certainly not as much as some other things."

Mrs. Chang laughed openly. "Well formulated - pity I can't quote you, Harry."

He blushed. "No - I mean, I never intended to play power games with money ... I bought the share mainly to meet her - was a big success, really ... What's left - I don't think I own this money rightfully, and I have the feeling Cho thinks the same, but I need it for hunting Voldemort, and for some ... That's why I cannot give it back. Maybe after ..."

Mrs. Chang took his hand. "Harry - don't stop halfway through."

He didn't understand.

"Either my husband gave you that money free of conditions, and free of afterthoughts - then it's yours, no matter what happens, and why. Or ..." Cho's mother looked into Harry's eyes, "... it was an attempt to buy you, or bribe you, only it didn't work, as this invitation shows so clearly, but then you shouldn't feel worried at all, keeping it, or spending it for purposes of your choice ... This way or the other, the money cannot establish an obligation."

Harry shook his head. "It certainly does, this way or that way. It simply doesn't feel like something I can dispose of at leisure ... Anyway, it's a secondary issue."

Mrs. Chang looked satisfied. "Then we can drop it ... I have to thank you, Harry, and I'm awfully glad we had some chat before - I'm sure, without that, this meeting wouldn't have worked out ... I cannot offer a solution at the spot - but maybe I can help a bit."

"Erm ... Mrs. Chang, er - how is she?"

This smile was a sad one. "You two would be a perfect match - one looking more miserable than the other."

* * *

New Year's eve would be a big day in *The Burrow*. Ma Weasley had invited all of her children for a New Year's party, and all of them had agreed. She had also invited the Delacours, which however excused themselves with social obligations of their own.

The day before, Ma Weasley said to Harry, "What a pity - they all come, and all with their wives or girlfriends, and Janine's brother's coming too, which makes it even with Ginny, and you're the only one left ..."

Harry grinned. "You mean, I should invite a girl?"

Ma Weasley looked surprised. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"Yes, I do."

Ma Weasley looked more surprised, then suspicious, then she caught the joke, smiled. "Allright, Harry, ask her ... Might be an opportunity, in a way."

The girl didn't think so, seemed a bit scared of this idea, excused herself with her new duties toward two little dogs for which everything was new and exciting.

Badly missing a serious rejection in his *haragei*, Harry argued, "Poodles have a strong social impulse, right? ... Well then, meeting lots of people is the best education they can get."

Probably so, only they would meet still more people here in Hogwarts, pretty soon, and besides ...

"Rahewa - if you don't come, I'll be the only one without a partner at this party."

This argument could not be invalidated, while the thought of such an inferior role felt simply unbearable - for Rahewa, at least, and so she finally agreed.

Strange as it was, in the few minutes Harry still kept around, playing with Romeo and Juliet, Rahewa's reluctant consent seemed to change into an excitement that was growing by the minute.

The twins with girls - that was the topic at lunch, at least among the younger family members, and Ma Weasley was stormed with questions.

"Do you know whom they'll come with?"

"Something serious?"

"Are these girls twins too? Would make things easier, what do you think?"

Ma Weasley didn't know, very much to her disappointment. These two of her sons, which always had been the most difficult ones, apparently showed little inclination to deepen their mother's influence now that they were on their own.

Until it was time to fetch Rahewa, Harry trained portkey programming - with a fierce energy, ignoring the invitation for a game, ignoring the teasing jokes from Ron. It was just too ridiculous not to master the distance ...

Half an hour before he had to jump, a triumphant shout from outside told the other Weasleys that Harry's efforts were crowned with success. London Linkport was just one portkey away ... True, no one-timer yet, Harry had to de-spell the piece, however it gave him a sense of achievement on this last day of a year that had deteriorated from a promising start to an end that leaving much to be desired.

Harry arrived with his knapsack, designed for a snake, now offered for two snow-white bundles. To no avail - Rahewa looked indignant, almost outraged. "Harry! Such a dark bag - really!"

"Try it - all dogs like caverns, especially if they're well isolated."

No she wouldn't, and besides, small that they were, fitting under Rahewa's coat, could she offer caverns by herself.

Only that she looked like a twelve-year-old with an enormous bosom, and Ron didn't hesitate with a remark in that direction, earning him a sharp answer from Janine while Rahewa wasn't impressed much, simply because all her concentration kept with the two dogs.

Janine had arrived with her brother Alain - the middle one, about a year younger than Ginny. It wasn't exactly clear whether this had to be rated as an act of babysitting or as balancing in the number of guests, maybe a bit from both - at any rate, Alain looked quite self-conscious in Ginny's presence, while Ginny managed politeness enough to suppress her amusement.

Rahewa's arrival solved the problem elegantly. No longer being the youngest guest, seeing the two dogs, Alain seemed to revive, busied himself to follow them into all corners, together with Rahewa.

Then the other guests arrived in quick succession - Bill and Fleur, Percy and Penelope, and finally, awaited with great expectation, Fred and George with their girls. The first of them, Mary-Ann, was unknown to Harry, however finding his approval. She belonged to Fred - whatever that meant.

The other girl surprised Harry considerably when she said, "Hello, Harry - long no see ... Where's Cho?"

It was Katie.

Before Harry had a chance to gather more information about how *serious* this relationship could be rated, he found himself in the centre of attention. Harry cross with Cho - who'd have thought?

Fred said, "You picked a bad time for that, Harry, by all accounts."

George said, "Which doesn't mean we'd know any other time suited better, mind."

Percy said, "That's a necessary experience young people have to go through - then, after a while, they'll settle."

Harry felt ready to strangle him. He also felt sure that Ginny would help - and maybe it was just good that Rahewa had to deal with her curious little dogs, raising delight in every face.

Katie said, "I can't believe it, Harry ... Cho cross with you - that's nothing new, but you with her? Sounds like one of the twins' jokes - somehow, I'm still waiting for the punch line."

Janine said nothing. She knew too much about the background, felt no need to rub salt into a wound that was deepening enough without her own contribution.

Fleur saved him. "Shut up, you lot - he loves her as before, can everybody see that, and if you don't stop making fun of him, I might make a bit fun of you!" Her face made clear - she meant it, and nobody felt adventurous enough to mess with a Veela.

With so many people in *The Burrow*, the topic in conversation was a matter of choice. In one room, Percy discussed ministry politics, even after poor Arthur Weasley was the only listener left. In the next room, Muggle fashion provided the topic, discussed mostly by women. Bill and the twins talked about business with Muggles, and every now and then, the groups interrupted themselves to make a fuss with these cute little dogs.

Harry ran a second attempt to squeeze Katie - with little success. She said, "I can offer you a deal, Harry - you tell me what's going on between you and Cho, and I tell you what's going on between George and myself ... You'll even get a bonus - I can tell you what's going on between Fred and Mary-Ann."

Harry grimaced. "Sounds fair - only, the price is too high."

Compared to a dinner party in the Chang house, this party here in *The Burrow* was bursting of life, joy, laughter. And still ... Harry waited almost impatiently for the clock to chime twelve - less for the party, more to mark an end of this damned year.

And then all people gathered, glasses in their hands, counting down, drinking to each other, exchanging hugs, kisses, good wishes for the new year. This done, Harry stormed out to wipe off his frustration in the longest - and loudest - firework he'd ever conjured up.

Of course, within minutes, it developed into a contest between most of the male Weasleys, plus some of the girls.

Harry and Ron together won the award for the highest shot. Ron scored with the loudest bang - Harry's nitro ball might have been still bigger, only it shot much higher, so the explosion was not as impressive as Ron's. George won the crown for the best illumination, while Bill surpassed everybody with the longest curtain of glittering sparks.

Entering the house again, Harry found two younger guests, looking very reproachful at him. One was Rahewa - the noise from outside had scared Romeo and Julia considerably. The other was Alain - torn apart between staying with Rahewa and watching the firework, Alain had opted for the gentleman's tour, however without feeling too happy in that role.

Fleur came over. "Did you make a resolution for the new year, 'arry?"

"No."

Fleur looked disappointed. "None? ... Not a single one?"

"Not tonight. But don't you worry - I made a few some weeks ago, enough to keep myself busy all year long, believe me."

There were four, actually. The simplest of them was probably a matter of time - programming portkeys for any distance around the world. The other three were competing against each other in the number of question marks you could attach. Finding Voldemort - and dealing with some dragons, their shapes, and their behaviour.

Good intentions were also the topic in the greater round. Arthur Weasley, for example, had sworn to make sure that the new family car would not get lost, due to some son's careless navigation - raising much laughter and also a protest from Ron who pointed out that now, having mastered apparition, there was no longer a risk.

Ma Weasley's comment was shorter. "Don't make it fly, my dear - that should be sufficient."

Which of course raised a discussion whether this was still illegal, when all Muggles knew about the wizards. The common agreement was no, it wasn't, would only require a pile of forms in triplicate for which *The Burrow* would be just too small.

Then the guests said goodbye, one group after the other, with Rahewa as the only one to stay overnight. And Romeo and Julia, of course.

* * *

When escorting Rahewa back to Hogwarts the next day, Harry felt a kind of expectancy at the sight of the school buildings. This was the year in which he would finish school - a few months from now, one restriction would be gone. And by then, maybe ...

They had been late, and Harry had lost a bit more time watching two young poodles in the halls and corridors of Hogwarts. Returning to *The Burrow*, it was already early afternoon. And shortly after his own return, he saw the first omen of the new year arrive, via owl mail. A letter - from Cho!

Dear Harry,
I write this letter just before returning to Groucho, at the end of a visit which did not turn out too well. Terms between me and my father are a bit tense currently.

Part of it is of course this dinner party. He wanted to show off, and then it did not work. What I'm trying to say, I want to thank you for your decision, of which I heard through a 'reliable source'.

Your 'presents' raised too many emotions, this is why I do not want to comment on them here. But I certainly wonder if I should thank you for them.

Do you feel free to do what you want?
Cho

Sitting in his comfortable chair, Harry read the letter again and again. About once every five minutes, he had to stop himself from jumping across a large ocean, across a large continent, to Santa Monica. Wasn't this the most hidden version of an invitation??

Yes, definitely. And he had been right - he wasn't the only player opposite Cho in that game, her father was pulling strings, or trying so. Well, of course - one such pull had brought Harry a lot of money.

Only ... Assuming he would visit Cho, what then? Would anything be different? Was there any hint that she felt ready to change her policy? Harry couldn't find any, try as he might. He would arrive, and they would continue the dispute where it had been stopped the last time.

Yes, today was the first day of the new year. But was this a reason for stepping back to square one?

20 - Traces

January brought the first real snow of this winter. It had barely come down, covering the muddy ground with a thick layer of brilliant white, when the weather turned crisply cold. For two days, a sharp wind was blowing, chasing clouds of powdery snow over plains and toward the walls of Hogwarts, then the temperature dropped deep below freezing point. A milky sun, small and powerless, hung in a hazy sky, providing a dim light with few sparkles in a landscape of black and white.

Soon afterwards, the Hogwarts lake was coated with ice, thin first, then solid enough to hold the weight of students.

In this landscape, Harry could be seen day after day. Wearing a thick coat, gloves, his face hidden under the mask knitted by Dobby, was he working on his Portkey Programming project.

Tirelessly, tenaciously, stubbornly.

Samantha compared him with the men who once had built a railroad track across the American continent, coast to coast. Except what Harry created was no railroad track but a portkey link - charmed, tested, destroyed instantly ... And another one, a bit longer. And another one.

He didn't go west, he was aiming south. A portkey from Hogwarts to *The Burrow* would mark his next milestone. It was tedious work, in particular when preparing for another step - from the farthest point mastered, Harry had to explore his next target, reaching it on his Steel Wing, settle the picture in his memory, testing with an apparition jump, testing with a short-distance portkey, and then the real test - a full-distance portkey.

And, at the end of each step, the proof of accuracy - the one-timer version.

The small towns next to Hogwarts provided his first destinations. Ever so slowly, the increase from one step to another was growing by more than a mile. Then Harry reached Bellingham, the first nominal point on his schedule.

From then on, he kept working on two routes. The western route spanned from Bellingham over Alston, Durham, Darlington, Leyburn, Pateley Bridge, to Leeds as the first major city. From there over Sheffield, Nottingham, Leicester, Northampton, to Milton Keynes, Luton, and finally London.

The eastern route went from Bellingham to Perrith, Kirkby, Lancaster, Bolton, to Manchester, Stockport, Derby or Stoke on Trent, to meet the other route at Leicester. The steps were bigger here, so the western route was always the first on which a longer distance had to be tested.

While on tour, Harry celebrated every successful test with a small nitro ball, shot into the next snow drift, creating a nice jet of exploding snow. It gave him a kind of grim joy, it was an audible markstone, and most of all - it trained his experience with the chemical formula of nitroglycerine.

By any spectator of his daily routine, this technique would have been called just the proper method for achieving the desired skill. For Harry himself, however, it was more. Literally to the point, his work presented the visible expression of his current state.

Feeling lonely? Allright then, out into the cold, doing solitary work. Feeling disoriented? Up into the air, looking for the next target. Burning in anger about Rushmore, or Cho, or himself? A trip into the snow would cool him down.

Returning to Hogwarts, he went into the training hall, for thirty minutes of exercises, to flex his muscles, to warm up. Then hot-water tub, then steam room.

Then supper - wolfing down quantities that half the Gryffindor table was staring at Harry in disbelief, watching him with a mix of astonishment and envy. And some teachers too - Samantha, for example, or Danielle, wondering how Harry managed without gaining a single pound of fat.

And then the evenings ... Working at his map of maps for a while, feeling satisfaction about the day's progress. Except this feeling didn't hold, not for long, and this kind of satisfaction delivered a thin surrogate for another one. A well-trained, hard-working body was poorly suited for chastity. Awfully poor, to be precise ... Not at all, to say the truth.

Harry interrupted his routine once to visit Rex and his dragons. But they had curled up in some hibernation, unwilling to move in this sharp frost. All Harry learned was that the baby dragons, dog size when he'd seen them before, now were as big as horses.

Well then, back into the portkey mill.

Harry had reached Bellingham, was working toward Alston, when the *Daily Prophet* quoted a Muggle politician. This man suggested to gather all wizards - and witches - and to send them in some exile, maybe Madagascar, or New Zealand, or somewhere in Canada, should be enough place for all of them, shouldn't it?

The wave of uproar in the press - wizarding and Muggle - lasted until Harry had passed Alston, also Durham at the west and Perrith at the east, was working toward Darlington and Kirkby. Columnists at both sides agreed that exile might indeed be a good idea - for boneheads like this right-wing rowdy.

Even so, the number of places was growing in which *Magicals* - the new Muggle term for wizards and witches - were persona non grata. This included restaurants, shops, but most of all casinos and other places for games of luck. Turfs, for example. How reliable was a horse race if wizards were standing at the third bend, ready to slow down a winning champion?

Wizards tried to make clear that spells were not exactly invisible, could be watched easily. It didn't help much.

However, other reports indicated that more business-oriented people had already started integrating both worlds - the organized crime, for example. It seemed as if every gang, and first of all the larger connections, were hiring wizards like crazy. They could solve certain problems quite efficiently.

When Harry was aiming toward Leyburn and Lancaster, a spectacular robbery made headlines in the newspapers. A gold transport, protected by everything Muggle technology could offer, and guarded by two dozens of professional security men, had been found empty - nobody killed, not even hurt, just unconscious. Well, bullet-proof glass and armoured vehicles did not protect against clever plots and stunning spells.

While the police was still scanning the entire country, and the offered reward for useful information climbing toward the half-million line, security companies started a second rush - for Goblins, as experts in dealing with magical attacks against gold and other valuables.

* * *

Harry had reached Leeds on his western and Manchester on his eastern route when he got a letter from Paul Sillitoe, who asked for a meeting - in Paul's office, containing all his results in grabbing distance.

The letter had been waiting for Harry all day. Now it was too late, so he had to wait until next day afternoon before jumping to the *Daily Prophet* building.

Paul greeted him. "Want some drink, Harry? It'll take a while until I've told you what I found out - and what I didn't."

Harry accepted a cup of tea, had no objections when Paul extracted a squarely-shaped bottle to add some flavour - Cointreau, adding also some heat.

"Let me tell you first what I did, Harry, so you'll have a chance to follow my conclusions - " Paul grinned, "... or to disagree with them. But I can tell you in advance - I didn't go into some far-fetched guesses, simply because there was no need. It's amazing - again and again - how much you can figure out with simple statistics."

To Harry, this sounded as if, some minutes from now, Paul would tell him the address of Voldemort.

Apparently, his face had shown this expectation, because Paul said, "I haven't found his residence, Harry - statistics don't do miracles. And I wasn't able to pump any of the authors - they were tight as a vir ... er, didn't tell me anything. But this would have been a surprise anyway."

Harry nodded, readjusting his hopes.

"I checked the major newspapers in the leading western industrialized countries, plus their news agencies. Here in Europe, this covered our own lovely island, then Germany, Italy, France, and Spain ... Yes, and the Netherlands, because this is just a big marketplace for everything, from dope to slave girls, and news are trade goods like any other ... Then the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan."

Harry, who had brought his magic map, quickly marked these countries while Paul watched in fascination. Looking at the map, two emotions were fighting in Harry's mind - Paul had done a hell of a job, and still, large parts of his world map remained dark.

Paul saw it too. "Don't get confused by that picture, Harry. Square miles isn't a measure here - forget Africa, forget from Russia to Siberia, forget China ..."

No he wouldn't - well, okay, maybe in this context.

"My pattern was two newspapers per country - the leading one in serious journalism, and the leading one from the yellow press ... That worked well here in Europe, while in the States, the boundaries are somewhat floating, that's why I had to add some more American newspapers. Anyway - I scanned through a total of twenty-four newspaper archives, plus five news agencies."

"My God!"

"I looked for articles about wizards, for the dates when they were published first, and where ... I could drown you in a flood of facts and lists, Harry, but to finish before dawn - basically, I looked for first publications of any particular fact, rumour, or lie that was published about us."

So far, it looked quite obvious to Harry.

"Then, of course, I had to filter out the news from the agencies."

It no longer looked obvious to him.

Paul explained, "Harry - if a news comes from a press agency, it's published simultaneously by all newspapers with a subscription to that agency, the only difference then is the question when the new day begins in a particular country. What we are looking for are stories passed over from some wizard to a journalist of a specific newspaper - that's the only chance to locate our source."

Paul smiled triumphantly. "But guess what I found - without any exception, the news from the agencies were waterproof! ... Isn't this wonderful? - That's statistics at their best, Harry."

"Wait a second! What ..."

"Press agencies - the leading ones, I mean - are a suspicious bunch of people. They have a reputation to lose, that's why it's very hard to sell them a hoax. And our dark lord didn't even try."

Harry looked into a beaming face. "So? What's so wonderful about that?"

"Can't you see it? It's proof that our approach was right!"

Harry, who had lost any doubt some time earlier, couldn't appreciate the beauty in this statistic.

Paul leaned back. "Harry, you're no journalist, so I'll try to forgive you ... But you must know, filtering out lies, half-lies, and half-truths is the hard part. If someone tries to trick an agency, these people pay back instantly - they do what's called *burning a source*. They publish the news as an attempted hoax ... And since this never happened here, we have an extremely significant pattern, which tells us that the entire plot has been controlled by someone ... Okay, maybe for you it was clear from the beginning, but not for me, I can assure you."

"Sorry, Paul ... I didn't catch it immediately, but now it's clear."

The researcher and journalist looked more satisfied. "Okay, that left the firsts - what every newspaperman is dreaming of. And here," the beaming returned in Paul's face, "I found the next pattern. Almost without exception, the stories were published first in English-speaking papers."

Harry, for whom this offered small surprise, had learned from the previous minutes, so he looked pleased.

"There are just two exceptions - both in the same newspaper, the German *Bild-Zeitung*. First I had some trouble with them, thought for a while that your old friend had a temporary hired hand or so, but then I figured it out ... This newspaper is notorious for the large scale on which they're lying, so it's clear what happened - they invented the stories by themselves!"

"You sure?"

"Pretty much ... There were just two other newspapers who took them over, the Dutch *Telegraaf* and *Le Soir* in France - both in the neighbourhood, and both of them quoting carefully, something like 'According to an article' and so on."

More from curiosity, Harry asked, "Which stories did they invent?"

"One about artificial roadworks on highways - makes sense only there, but cleverly thought up ... The other's about cursing their national football team, so it cannot win important contests - not really important for us, but this local flavour is another indicator that these were fakes."

Paul smiled in admiration of such collector's items, found himself alone with these feelings, finally continued, "So, then I checked the remaining list again, and even more closely than before. And then I found the next two patterns ... Harry, these stories are clustered, in both time and space."

"Aha."

Paul, now in full swing, failed to notice Harry's blank look. "Let's concentrate for a moment on the clustering in time. These stories came in waves - say, one wave in time for weekend issues, then a few days nothing to let them work, then the next wave - see what I mean?"

Yes, expressed in plain words for the common Hogwarts seventh-year, Harry saw what Paul meant.

"Which of course is another proof of our theory - that someone is sitting somewhere, then gathering his hired hands, telling them what to spread next, and waiting again for the public effect."

By and by, Harry got a sense for these statistics, loved so much by people like Paul, or Ron.

"Now there's a very interesting change in the pattern, Harry. For a while, there's always a delay of one day between the American and the British newspapers. Then, suddenly, it changes ... The delay is gone, the papers at both sides of the Atlantic publish their new stories

at the same day. And this change," Paul looked triumphant again, "was shortly after the Tyler massacre."

"Paul - sorry, but you've lost me."

The researcher smiled. "Of course - you have to track it down on a timetable. Let me guide you step by step, to check whether we come out with the same conclusion ... Okay, assume you're Voldemort, and you call your helpers for the next meeting. When would you do that, Harry?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, at which time of the day?"

"Oh ... Late afternoon, early evening, I'd say."

"Exactly! So let's say they gather somewhere here in England, at tea time, okay? Then Voldemort tells them what to do, and they swarm out ... And now watch! The meeting is at day one. The British informants meet their press contacts, most likely at the same evening. The journalists write the story, but it's already too late for next day's issue, so the stories appear in the issues of day three ... Okay so far?"

Harry, fully familiar with time differences, suddenly could see the pattern. "Yes, of course - while the American ones, jumping back after the meeting, have a local time somewhere in the morning, and that's time enough to meet their contacts to have the story published at day two."

Paul nodded enthusiastically. "Yep - here we go ... And now a bit of speculation from my side, but it's not difficult. The Tyler massacre tells Voldemort that the United States are much better suited to spread rumours to the worst effect, so he moves from England over there. Maybe he had another reason too, but look at the new time pattern. He gathers his people still in the afternoon, and now it's in the States that an order from day one results in publishing at day three. While his British helpers, jumping back, come home around midnight. They call their press contacts first thing next day, which is day two, and the stories appear one day later, which is day three."

Harry stared at Paul in awe. "That's incredible - you've found out that Voldemort moved from England to the States, and when ... Paul, the premium is yours."

A grin. "Be careful, because now comes the clustering in space, and this isn't as precise as the clustering in time ... Until the change in the days pattern, our own newspapers had a majority of stories - not a big one, but enough to support our theory ..."

"Your theory - I buy it, but the honour goes to you."

"Whatever - so the *Times* and the *Daily Mirror* had a lot of first stories, compared to their American counterparts. Then, after the move, this changes ... The west-coast papers, which beforehand were almost ignored, suddenly have a lot more, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for example ..."

Hearing about the west coast, for a moment Harry had trouble concentrating on the issue at hand.

"... while the share of our local papers is shrinking, and that's enough for me to say - Harry, since October last year, Voldemort's residence is in the States."

"And where?"

When Paul hesitated, Harry felt almost desperate - if he had to scan a half-continent rather than this island here, the entire project could hardly be rated as a success.

"Yes, where ... Harry, what I'm telling you now is not quite as well based on statistical facts than the previous stuff, so let's see if your own speculation would go the same direction ... Assume you'd move over to the States, and assume you'd look for a quiet place - where would you go?"

"California." It came without even thinking.

Paul grinned. "Certainly ... But let me try again. You're not you, you don't know anything about some company near Hollywood - you're Voldemort, born and raised in England ... Where would you go?"

"Hmm ... If I'd be a traditionalist, of course it had to be one of the New England states, but if I were looking for nicer wheather, I might settle for some lovely place - Virgina, for example."

Paul nodded. "That's very much what I thought by myself. And that's why I scanned some more papers, local ones. In the south, I found nothing specific - the *Richmond Observer* or the *Washington Post* never had a first-timer ... But guess who had? ... The *Boston Globe*, Harry, and quite a lot, considering its minor role compared to papers like the *New York Herald Tribune*. And now, if you look at this fantastic map of yours ... zoom in ... here, what do you find?"

With a gasp, Harry pointed, marked. "Salem."

"Yes, sir - a centre of witchcraft, just right to find wizards of all kinds, especially those with a knack for dark magic."

Paul exhaled deeply. "Okay, Harry - let me summarize ... You're looking for Voldemort, and for all I know, you should look in the eastern part of Massachusetts, in the southern part of New Hampshire, and maybe also in the southern part of Maine. Look for someone who has moved in around October last year ... That's it."

Harry swallowed. It was still a large area, but after a moment, he realized what his researcher had performed - sizing down from a world to a continent, from there to a tiny spot at this continent's map ...

"Paul, that was brilliant, absolutely marvellous ... These patterns you found ... I'd have looked here in England forever." Harry nodded in confirmation. "Yes, the premium is yours."

A wide grin. "Thank you, Harry."

"You thank me? I have to thank you - it's still a lot of work, but there's a focus ..."

"Harry - do you know how to continue?"

"No, not yet."

"What you have so far is enough to let some professional searchers start working."

"Professional searchers?"

"Yes - private investigators." Paul's finger pointed at Harry's map, with the effect that the display zoomed in again. "You'll find a lot of them over there, all kinds. I have a tip for you, with good news and bad news. Wanna hear it?"

"Of course."

"Contact Pinkerton - it's the largest agency in the States. The good news - they're serious, honest, they're professional, and they have enough people for this job."

"And the bad news?"

"It'll cost you a fortune."

Harry grinned. "For some reason, that's more good news than anything else."

"Is it?" Paul raised his eyebrows. "You've got a strange perception of money, but so what, it's yours ... By the way, I found something else - might be of some interest for you." Rummaging through a pile of newspapers and magazines, Paul extracted an issue of *Time*. "Here - the cover story might be worth reading, I'd say."

Staring at the cover, Harry agreed. Under the headline *Groucho Returns*, it showed a large spector globe and three heads. Sylvie ... Jesamine ...

And Cho.

* * *

Paul's results had all ingredients to be discussed carefully with some other people before making the next step. Leaving the *Daily Prophet* building, Harry decided to start right away - with his godfather.

He walked the distance to the ministry, used the time for settling his own mind. Reaching the building, he realized how irrational human brains could work - Sirius' office would have been not farther apart from Hogwarts than a single jump, and still, to him the ten minutes' footwalk seemed less effort than coming from the school.

Sirius listened to Harry's summary with an unmoving face. Nearly two years of police work had left their traces in his mimicry.

Coming to the end, Harry asked, "What do you think of it?"

"Sounds realistic." Sirius nodded appreciatingly. "And if Paul's ever pissed off by his job, he can sign to the squad any day - you may tell him that."

"Do you think that'll ever happen?"

"No," admitted Sirius, "... unless he wants to find out what it means to be really pissed off."

"That reminds me ... I read in the newspaper that more and more wizards are hired by gangsters - what does it mean? What's the effect for you?"

Sirius pointed at the pile on his desk. "More work ... And closer cooperation with Muggle police."

"Oh, really? And how's that?"

"We get along." Sirius smiled. "We share the same problem, that forms a strong bond ... Officially, we're still waiting for some rules and laws, and without them, we're not supposed to do anything together. But if we'd wait for that ... No, Harry, we've learned from each other, both sides had some opportunity to realize that the others are more than a bunch of idiots, and that's quite a basis."

"What do they hire wizards for?"

Sirius grinned. "Opening locks - what do you think? ... And all other kinds of tasks for which a little spell is quicker, more efficient, quieter, less violent, or whatever. To give you an example - a broomstick flyer can pass a border practically undetected, while carrying any goods not suited well to be controlled by customs. Small volume, high value - dope, for instance."

Harry wasn't particularly interested in dope. "Is there anything, any pattern which indicates that Voldemort could be involved?"

Sirius shook his head. "Just the common list of ordinary crimes ... Okay, something like that robbery is spectacular for the press, while from our standpoint, it's nothing but a simple robbery at a larger scale."

"Simple?"

"Yep." His godfather grinned. "It's not even armed robbery, which shows you how much the government is lagging behind - robbery with a wand had to be counted as armed robbery, quite obviously so."

Harry had one more question. "What do you think of Paul's suggestion to hire private investigators?"

"That's exactly the job they're good at." Sirius looked at him sharply. "Harry - when you talk with them, make sure they know what they're looking for. You have to warn them - a private eye doesn't expect something like Voldemort at the other side, not even in crime novels."

"Yes, you're right." Harry grinned. "And if they don't take me seriously, I'll refer them to you, okay? ... Say hello to Deborah - see you."

* * *

The Headmaster wasn't in his office, Harry had to wait until the next evening. In the meantime, he mastered the distance to Sheffield and Stockport - maybe the promising news had inspired his accuracy.

Dumbledore listened, then said, "That's quite remarkable, but it fits well to Voldemort's profile, don't you think so?"

Harry looked uncertain. "I'm not sure I know what you mean, Professor."

"If you consider this plot - he made it unsuspecting enough so nobody pointed him out while the campaign was running. But he didn't really hide his work - he never did before, and maybe he expected more disastrous results ... Right now, the two worlds are trying to cooperate, probably not what he'd planned - which means we should expect new actions from his side."

Harry was at a loss to imagine what that might be. "Professor, what do you think of Paul's idea? ... With the private investigators, I mean."

Dumbledore didn't look too happy. "I don't know anything better, Harry, although I have bad feelings at the thought of sending Muggles toward Voldemort."

"Yes, Sirius said the same - he said I should warn them thoroughly."

"He's right - also for another reason. They shouldn't jeopardize your advantage, Harry."

His advantage? "Which is?"

Dumbledore looked astonished. "Voldemort doesn't know that you're looking for him - I thought it was obvious ..."

Probably so ... Enough for Harry to show two coloured cheeks.

"... And if he finds out, he might disappear again, and then you're back to square one."

Back to square one - a remark which let Harry's mind drift off for a moment, with the result that he almost twisted when Dumbledore asked, "Are you still in contact with Mademoiselle Thérout, Harry?"

"Er - not currently, no."

Dumbledore's face was expressionless. "It might be a good idea to discuss this with her - the hit ratio of her psychological profiles was astonishingly high, so she might come up with another guess that helps to locate him."

* * *

As much as Dumbledore was probably right - Harry felt sure, if this meant asking Cho for Marie-Christine's address, then no thanks, buddy. But maybe ... He decided to talk with Almyra, with some kind of flexible strategy - playing by ear.

His introduction was innocent enough - he presented the *Time* issue from Paul. "Look here - have you seen that?"

No she hadn't, scanned through the article with a pleased look at her face. "So she's making headlines ... Well, and money too." Almyra looked up. "They would have paid back your loan quickly - maybe you've been somewhat premature in this, Harry."

"Yeah, that bothers me all the time, really ..."

Almyra could laugh more about his joke than Harry himself. He said, "Al - I got a letter from Cho ... A thank you, for staying off from her parent's house at New Year."

"Yes, I know." Almyra's laughter faded, made room for a careful smile. "You had scored quite a bit ..."

Harry watched Almyra's face. "But?"

"But then I had to deliver your bottle." Almyra shook her head. "Oh my - she almost went berserk ..."

Harry wasn't impressed much - why, he hadn't been present. "Did she throw it away?"

"No - but you should be prepared for a few tough words about that, if the opportunity arises ..."

"Well - if she thinks we should discuss it, then she may invite me ... offer some drink ..."

Almyra looked at him with anger in her face. "That wasn't a good one, Harry ... And besides, don't wait for an invitation."

"No, I don't."

"What I mean is - she said, it was you who broke off, so it has to be you to make the next move. She says, her office is open all day long."

"Now that's helpful to know, really ... What should I do there? - Listen to her complaints about undesired presents? If she didn't like the bottle, then why didn't she spill it in the sink? If she didn't like the papers from Spinbottle, then how come they weren't returned?"

Almyra simply bypassed his own suada. "What you should do there? Talk with her - without me in-between. I would consider this an improvement - for all three of us, honestly."

Harry grinned, with limited pity. "I know that feeling - you do someone a favour, travel somewhere, and strange things happen ..."

Almyra grinned back. "Touché, Harry ... But really, I think that's the only way to come any step further."

He nodded. "Probably so ... Okay, I won't wait for an invitation, but I'll certainly wait for any sign that the situation will be different - afterwards. That's the absolute minimum."

"Minimum?" Almyra seemed desperate of such stubbornness. "Harry, how can you set conditions if you love her?"

His answer came instantly. "Very simple - someone taught me, someone with long hair and a short name, and an even shorter fuse."

"Well ..."

Almyra seemed looking for a nice word to end the conversation. Remembering one reason for his coming, Harry said, "Wait a second - do you know Marie-Christine's address?"

His sister in spirit glared at him furiously. "No - and even if, I wouldn't give it to you!"

"Save it - it's about Voldemort. Paul Sillitoe has tracked him down to some area, and when I spoke with Dumbledore about it, he suggested to hear Marie-Christine's comment."

The fury was gone, making room for concern in Almyra's face. "Oh ... No, I don't know her address - shall I ask Cho?"

Harry shook his head. "No. For her, Voldemort isn't a better reason than any other."

* * *

Mostly with respect to Dumbledore's remark, Harry let a few days pass before approaching his next step. Contacting Muggle detectives - this seemed easier done than said, somehow, at least considering the feelings this idea raised in his mind.

While mulling it over, he continued in his project, welcoming the warmer weather though not the rain that came with it. However, after passing Nottingham at the west and Stoke on Trent at the east, Harry reached Leicester - the place where his two routes joined. This seemed omen enough ... Time for a visit to those Pinkerton people.

But along came Hermione, searching for the politest form to tell Harry that another trip to Haiti was due.

He nodded. "That's alright ... Considering my progress, I'd say the next time it'll be the two of us who are going on that trip, and then ..."

"Really?" Hermione looked expectant. "What's your farthest distance right now?"

"Leicester."

"That's - er, pretty close, I mean compared to Haiti."

Harry grinned inwardly - Hermione shying off from a blunt statement, that was rare. "Yes, sure, but look where I stood a month before - just two miles or so. The increase isn't linear ... Once I've reached London, I think I can try bigger steps - Paris, or some other point in France ... or Germany ..."

"Or Bulgaria."

Harry grinned openly. "What's the value of a Bulgaria portkey in coaching?"

The reply came instantly. "Depends on what kind of coaching, Harry." At least Hermione's smile looked innocent.

* * *

Monsieur Armodéc was very interested to hear about Harry's activities in his search for Voldemort. For reasons Harry couldn't even explain to himself, he kept Paul's story out, spoke about criminal statistics, that he had contacted his godfather for this purpose, and about the chances of the recent gold robbery being Voldemort's work.

His host seemed a bit disappointed. "That's not very imaginative, Harry. From the outside, it looks as if you don't take this search seriously."

"Oh, I do ... And I'm open for suggestions."

Which was of course the polite version of something like, *Shut up if you don't know better*.

And Monsieur Armodéc smiled, taking Harry's remark exactly as it was meant. "Why don't you try another travel through the void? Didn't it work before?"

"Yes - but what I found was Nagini, not Voldemort."

"Who said so? At that time, they were together, weren't they?"

"Sure - although, at my third visit, only Nagini was at home, while Voldemort was somewhere else, catching Lupin. And I came out at Nagini, not at him."

The *loup-garou* shrugged. "What's wrong at giving it a try?"

Monsieur Armodéc was right, as Harry had to agree, and he decided to follow this advice before jumping over the big water to hire dozens of Muggles. Would be really stupid to spend ten thousands of galleons, only to realize that his enemy could be found just a trancing spell away. If he would be able to contact him ... Voldemort would know then that he was looking for him, but if it worked once, it would work again even after his enemy had moved to another country.

* * *

Harry returned to Hogwarts after the dinner, arriving at four in the morning local time. This gave him a sufficient excuse to sleep till eleven, to take the lunch for a breakfast, and to leave for his portkey work before anyone could find a chance to discuss such an unruly schedule.

Working with full concentration, Harry managed two steps in rapid succession - Northampton and Milton Keynes. The portkeys themselves had worked almost immediately, most of the time had been spent in the air, exploring the target on his Steel Wing.

He decided to drop Luton - the next step would be London, probably tomorrow. And then he would establish a portkey to *The Burrow*, and another one to the Cambridge University Hospital, and ... Harry realized - if, for some reason, he would be expelled from Hogwarts

now, he could start a business of his own. *Potter's Portkeys* - or something similar. A pleasurable thought.

Reaching the Gryffindor table, after his usual routine through the exercise hall and the recreation room, Harry found Ron waiting for him with a letter. "Mail for you, Harry ... It came with the Tours people - must have been minutes after you left."

The envelope expressed the message *Urgent* with words, colour, and stamps. Opening it, Harry found a very short note.

- *Harry,*
please contact me asap.
Sirius

He looked at Ron. "What's asap?"

The answer came from Hermione. "As soon as possible." She had barely finished her last word when she suddenly twisted, glancing nervously at Ron.

Ron just grinned. "It's okay - I didn't know the answer anyway."

Hermione looked relieved, while Harry said, "I translate that to *after* supper - a single meal per day's just not enough to survive."

Hermione looked at his dish, while Ron found the courage to speak out what she was thinking. "Single meal, huh? ... Some other people wouldn't manage such a pile in a single day."

Between two bites, Harry asked, "Are you talking about pencil-pushers?"

"Definitely not ... I, for example, use a very nice pen, not a pencil - and I'd never push it, Heaven forbid ..."

"Yeah, sorry, I forgot - for things as aesthetic as ..." Just in time, and warned by Ron's alarmed glance, Harry suppressed the end of his remark - Ron writing poetry was strictly confidential, within the boundaries of the Weasley-Potter gang.

Hermione had noticed of course, however she didn't press the issue - a clear sign that she had expected hearing the words *love letters*, and this was a topic hotter than hot - with Harry around, and his current state.

Every spoonful swallowed raised two levels at once in Harry - that of the food in his stomach, and that of his curiosity. Never before had Sirius been that short and mysterious in a message. So with his last bite chewing, Harry was already up, heading for his coat.

Reaching the Hogwarts Express platform, for a short moment he felt tempted to try a portkey to London now, then dropped the idea quickly - he just hadn't the nerve now, while wondering more by the second what Sirius wanted from him.

At that time of day, he tried the house first, and found his guess confirmed. Sirius opened the door. "At last! ... Harry, I've been waiting for you since lunch!"

"Sorry - I got your mail only minutes ago, been outside all day long ... What's so urgent?"

"Come in."

Still no answer inside - with astonishment, Harry watched his godfather dialing a cellular phone, heard him saying not more than, "Black ... Yes, he's here ... Fifteen minutes? Okay ... Bye."

Still not hearing any explanation, Harry said, "You really make it thrilling, don't you? ... Gimme a hint, what this is all about."

"No."

Perplexed, Harry stared at Sirius. "That bad? ... The last time you sounded like that was when you fetched me from Privet Drive, and the next thing I heard was the plot against the Hogwarts Express."

For a fleeting instant, Sirius' eyes widened, then he had his face under control again. "Just a few minutes, Harry - I don't want to say anything because I should keep you as unbiased as possible ... A drink?"

A drink was welcome, with so much food to be digested. When the doorbell rang, Harry kept seating, although with some effort, was up at once when Sirius returned with two visitors - a man and a woman.

"Harry," said his godfather, "I'd like to introduce you to some colleagues of mine ... Tracy Chipman, and Wayne Ellis ... Miss Chipman, Mr. Wayne, this is Harry Potter."

"Good evening, Mr. Potter - nice to meet you."

The words, and the handshake, were enough to tell Harry - these colleagues weren't British ones, which left just one conclusion, in particular with the woman's colour, a dark, saturated brown ... These had to be American cops.

Next moment, the man surprised Harry still more when he presented something like an identification card in a small leather case. "Mr. Potter, my partner and I, we are special agents of the FBI, working together on a case that ... Well, this case is the reason for our coming."

Harry looked at Sirius, back at the man, at the woman. "Special agents? ... Are you ..."

The woman spoke, with a contralto in which someone had sharpened the edges. "It means we're not attached to a specific location, Mr. Potter ... And no, we ain't Magicals - that's another reason for our coming."

While Sirius was busy preparing some drinks, Harry found the time to recover from his surprise, and to examine these two agents more closely. FBI ... All he knew was that they could work nationwide, were called if some crime crossed state boundaries. Mr. Ellis was middle-sized, middle-aged, hair trimmed very short, sand-coloured with some grey in it. The woman seemed younger, somewhere at the other end of her thirties, bulky figure, looked as if she could lift Harry without breathing harder.

But as different as they were, Harry registered a common factor in their expressions. A smile, if ever shown, had a short life in these faces.

Agent Ellis put his glass back on the table. "Mr. Potter, I'd like to tell you about the case we're working on, and then hear your comment ... Is this okay with you?"

"Er - would you tell me first why you want to tell me?"

"No."

"Well, that's very much what I expected, after Sirius ... Okay, then."

"Mr. Potter, do you know what an amusement park is? Or entertainment park?"

Seeing Harry's hesitating glance, Agent Ellis explained. "They're quite typical for the States. An amusement park is something like a fair, running all year long - or closed only at times when the cold weather, or the snow, prevents them from operation. And they're large - very large, they offer roller coasters of half a mile and more, all kinds of rides, and anything else that's good to give fun to a family with people of all ages."

Harry tried to imagine a fair spanning a mile and more, had trouble with that - his experience with fairgrounds was badly limited, thanks to fifteen years with the Dursleys.

"Like with other forms of entertainment in our time, these amusement parks are more and more developing into high-technology parks ... They try to offer the ultimate thrill - for people with a reasonable mind, who don't think a shot of heroine or jumping from a tower is the only way to get a kick in their life. You have to know, Mr. Potter, these parks are big business, and the number of visitors per year is astronomical - on a sunny day, you'd have to wait in line almost an hour before you could enter the next cart in such a roller coaster."

An hour?? Harry couldn't imagine a ride worth that much patience - well, not if you had a Steel Wing, maybe that was the difference.

"In the recent years," continued Agent Ellis, "they built a new attraction - ghost trains. After the first park had started, the others had to follow - competition's hard. And just recently, they've started to make them really fanciful ... They hired Magicals."

Harry couldn't suppress a grin.

Agent Ellis didn't smile back. "Whatever they're supposed to do in detail - their job is to scare even a visitor who's seen it all, been there before ... And they're quite successful in that - ghost trains with wizards and witches are all the rage - the hottest ticket in town."

Still grinning, Harry asked, "Do they hire ghosts too?"

"No. A ghostly appearance is an elementary thing with the simplest methods."

Harry didn't agree, but then, he was no expert in the amusement business.

"Such a mix of thrills and shocks raises a conflict, Mr. Potter. People in the States have developed a habit of suing other people for their own mistakes, and naturally, a ride in one of

these ghost trains would be the perfect cause for a lawsuit. This is why every visitor has to sign an agreement that he's doing it on his own risk, that he cannot take the park responsible for any damage resulting from excitement, fright, shock, and so on ... It won't surprise you to hear that this alone makes them even more attractive - a reported heart stroke is about the best advertisement they can get."

For a moment, something like disgust could be heard in Agent Ellis' voice. When he spoke further, it was gone. "Then, one of these parks had some kind of accident. Coming out from the ghost train, a visitor was found unconscious. Of course they have medical stations, good ones, actually ... But they were unable to bring him back to consciousness. So they sent him to the next Mayo Clinic - in a neutral car, of course, this kind of accident doesn't count on the bonus side."

"And?"

"He's still unconscious, together with three other cases that occurred shortly afterwards, although in different parks. We came into the story after the third case, when a local cop was clever enough to check for similar events ... The fourth case occurred while we were working on the others. We interrogated the wizards and witches of these parks, and for all we could figure out, they're not the ones to blame. But something in what they said gave us reason to come over and discuss it here, with Mr. Black."

Maybe it had been Sirius' strange behaviour, more than Agent Ellis' report, which made Harry's mind spinning in one direction. "These four people - what exactly is their state?"

Agent Chipman answered. "No visible damage ... heart beat and other physical functions regular - but no brain activity whatsoever ... The docs classified them brain-dead."

Harry felt his neck hair rising, looked at Sirius. "The Kiss of Death."

21 - The Deal

Looking around, Harry felt as if he just had made a remark about the weather, rather than about Dementors and the *Kiss of Death* - well, except that the weather might have raised more emotion. None of the faces around him showed any reaction.

So this had been a test - not of Harry's own guesswork, more of someone else's conclusion. And this someone had known that here, in England, some experts in fighting Dementors could be found ... And these two agents had contacted the British wizard police, to meet Sirius, who had called ... No - something was wrong in this chain, and at the same moment Harry felt sure - this someone had mentioned him personally, and the two agents had simply taken the normal route, totally unaware of the relationship between Sirius and himself.

"Who is it?"

This time Harry saw a reaction - the shade of an appreciating smile in Sirius' face, some other eyes narrowing. After a short moment, Agent Ellis asked, "Who is who?"

The man knew exactly what the question meant, Harry didn't need Nagini for that. He looked at the man, at the woman. "Can we stop playing stupid?"

Without hesitation, the woman said, "Your name popped up, Mr. Potter."

Harry rose from his chair. "Okay - has been a fascinating story ... I wish you luck ..."

Agent Ellis interrupted him. "Sorry, Mr. Potter - the answer was complete, only we forgot that this term doesn't tell you anything. Our mistake ... What my partner meant was, we made a scan through our database with some keywords, and your name was in the result - at a significant position."

Harry kept standing. "Database? ... Is this something with computers?"

"Yes, that's something with computers." Agent Ellis didn't smile at all. "For the last half year, the FBI has been working desperately to build up an information base about - magical people. It's still thin, compared to our standards, but significant events - like the Battle of Hogwarts - are recorded ... The starting point was of course Dementors, and that's been given by several wizards we interviewed."

Harry sat down. "In this case - please excuse my - er, impatience. I wasn't aware ..."

Agent Chipman waved dismissively. "Mr. Potter, from this short description, you say *Kiss of Death* without hesitation - why?"

"Because that's the only explanation I know - and because I'm somewhat familiar with it."

"Would you exclude any other cause?"

Harry shrugged. "How could I? ... But it just fits - although there's something weird ..."

"Why does it fit? - And what's weird?"

Harry glanced at the man, turned back to the woman. "How much do you know about Dementors?"

Agent Ellis answered - like in a ping-pong match two against one. "Not too much - let's assume for a moment we know nothing, Mr. Potter."

"Well ... Dementors feed on emotions, they don't need body contact for that - and such a place, with thrilled people, for them is like a gala dinner for us. I guess it's dark in these ghost trains ... Well, so there's a perfect hide, and people won't recognize their aura ... But that's one of the things worrying me - in a way, it's extremely unlikely."

"Why?"

"Dementors joining Muggle places, to feed on emotions - this alone makes me wonder ... And executing the Kiss of Death, without a permit - that's like committing a crime in full view of hundred witnesses ..."

The two FBI agents weren't impressed at all by this argument, seemed to consider such an event as the most natural thing, something to be seen every day.

"... And it's also unclear to me why the wizards inside didn't feel them - a Dementor aura is very strong, it's like a cold creeping into your bones ..."

Sirius interrupted Harry, speaking for the first time since the introduction. "I think I can solve this particular mystery." He looked at his two FBI guests. "Harry's a living Dementor detector, but he's not fully aware of that - other wizards must come very close to a Dementor before they feel their aura, while Harry can sense them over quite some distance."

Agent Ellis looked at the living detector. "How far?"

Harry shrugged. "I never measured - maybe hundred yards ... It's unmistakable."

"Is it? ... How does it feel?"

"Cold, as I said - a cold different from any other ... And something else."

The two agents looked at Harry. When he still hesitated, Sirius said, "Please, Harry - if you ..."

Harry swallowed. "When I come closer to them, I experience the scene how my parents are killed."

It raised some movement in the two faces - and next moment, barely suppressed, an expression like that of gold diggers, detecting a nugget. Harry glared at them. "That's not supposed to be public knowledge."

Agent Ellis nodded. "That's understood, Mr. Potter - let me assure you that it's nearly impossible to break into our database."

What a relief! Nearly impossible ... And what about all the other FBI agents? But a second later, an idea was growing in Harry's mind, quickly enough to make him relax. "Yeah, okay."

The woman asked, "You said their behaviour is unusual ... Then how would you explain it?"

"Hmm ... Probably not at ..." Harry stopped, remembering a conversation some days ago. "No - there is an explanation, and it fits even better ..." He looked up. "It's just a speculation, and not mine alone - do you ..."

Seeing their faces, he saved the question whether they wanted to hear. They were dying for it. He asked, "Does the name Voldemort tell you something?"

Yes it did.

"Okay, then ... According to our analysis, Voldemort is responsible for the development between our two worlds - Muggles and - er, Magicals. And for all we know, he's somewhere in the United States ..."

The two faces couldn't suppress a sharp twist of greed, while Harry felt no intention to go into more detail on that aspect.

"... According to our Headmaster's expectation - and I agree with him - Voldemort is pretty disappointed that the encounters didn't result in more damage and killing - which means he's planning new actions ... And such a plot, sending Dementors to kill people, so it looks as if wizards are killing Muggles - that's exactly his handwriting. And he has used Dementors almost regularly in the past."

Agent Chipman asked, "Which means we have to find Voldemort to stop these accidents?"

"Certainly not!!" Harry nearly gasped.

"Why not?"

"Because that's my job."

"Ah, yes, of course."

With some effort, Harry stopped himself to shout at the man, his expressionless tone, his face not hiding disbelief. If they were going to mess up now ...

Sirius came to help. "Mr. Ellis, Miss Chipman - if your database is worth a sickle - er, a nickel, then you should know that Harry's right, and you should listen carefully - especially if you like funerals of colleagues as much as I do."

For an instant, the man's nostrils turned white, then he had himself under control again. "Okay - I'm listening."

Sirius looked at Harry. "Explain it - you can do that better than I."

Harry took a moment to weigh his words. "I'm the only one qualified - and don't ask me why, I don't know the answer ... Voldemort cannot kill me, when trying, he would destroy himself - that's one reason. The other ... whenever we meet, I gain some of his skill - over time, I gathered enough power and skill to fight him, and the next time will be the last time ... From my perspective, he'll destroy himself, and I'm just the tool required for that."

Agent Ellis stared at him. "All this granted, Mr. Potter - do you expect us, the FBI, sitting idle and watch you and him meet in some showdown - after he's as good as killed four American citizens, or more, and after you told us that he's in the States? ... You can't be serious about that."

Harry's idea was developing to full shape. "I didn't say so."

"Then what else? What do you have in mind?"

Harry smiled. "A deal."

* * *

Sirius stared at him with a mix of pleasure and desperation. Pleasure from the opportunity to watch his godchild wrestling with some FBI agents, and desperation because this fun would have a short life, to be followed by either side messing with Voldemort - and apparently, Sirius couldn't decide which alternative looked worse, Harry or the FBI.

Agent Chipman asked calmly, "What kind of deal, Mr. Potter?"

"You get the help against those Dementors - that's why you came here, and this is the first part of the deal."

"Your help?"

"Mine - and that of the second wizard who can kill a Dementor."

Agent Ellis' head jerked up. "Mr. Potter - we didn't come to hire some killers, not even for Dementors! That's the last thing ..."

Harry shook his head. "You cannot arrest Dementors, and you cannot put them into a prison ... We're not necessarily planning to kill them - please don't confuse me with Dirty Harry ..."

They twisted! No question, they'd done just that.

"... but if you cannot kill a Dementor, you better stay off ... Sir, madam, please remember - they're not human, and whatever ethics they have, these ain't ours ... What I'd like to do most is to find them, to interrogate them, and then to send them back."

"Just so?" Agent Ellis didn't hide his serious doubt.

"Yes - with a message to their community. Something like, either they stop sucking Muggles - kissing to death, I mean, or we come and kill the complete community ... And you can believe me - they know us, my - er, friend and myself."

Agent Chipman said, "So this is one side of the deal. And the other?"

"No, madam - this deal has three sides ... The next part is that you, the FBI, provides help in searching Voldemort - with this database, in particular."

"I thought you knew where Voldemort is?"

Harry's head shook again. "Only the area. I was planning to hire Pinkerton, and still do - but any information is certainly helpful."

The woman sneered a bit. "Pinkerton - to search a man? ... Are you a millionaire, Mr. Potter?"

"In dollars, yes."

"But not afterwards."

Harry nodded. "That's okay."

This, more than his previous answer, made Agen Chipman stare at him, speechless.

Harry took the opportunity. "And then there's the last part - and that's the most important from my perspective ... You, the FBI, will not try catching Voldemort, you won't try to watch him - er, observation is the term, I think ... You just make sure he doesn't notice you, doesn't know about you."

Agent Ellis said, "He won't know - we're no bloody beginners, Mr. Potter ..."

"No, sir." Harry's face had lost all joy. "What I'm saying is, you just do nothing in this direction - nothing."

"Mr. Potter - you're asking for the impossible! Even if we'd agree, it won't help you - we cannot speak for the entire FBI. As soon ..."

Harry interrupted him. "Then forget the deal."

The woman said, "Mr. Potter, it's just unrealistic."

Harry looked at her. "Then we have a problem. I'm not discussing your abilities - it's just that nobody can approach Voldemort unnoticed, not to mention a guard over days, or weeks. That's impossible! And if he knows he's been found, he'll disappear again ... We cannot afford that."

"But - if nobody can come close unnoticed, how would you do it?"

Harry grimaced. "What I have in mind is - these detectives find a possible candidate, someone who - er, meets the criteria. They tell me, there and there's someone who *might* be Voldemort. And then - I visit that place, and in this first visit, I have to finish the story - if it's him ... I can pursue - if he apparates away, I can follow, we played that game already. But I cannot leave and expect to find him some minutes later - if he'll see me, he'll know what's going to happen."

Agent Ellis said, "Let's say, we believe you every word, Mr. Potter - this still doesn't solve our problem."

Sirius smiled. "But of course it does. In this case, you just forget the Voldemort part in your report ... And later, you work as the contact toward that database - you know the game perfectly well, don't you?"

The woman looked at him. "So what? How would you know we're serious? How could you trust us?"

Harry beamed. "There's a method, madam - if that's the only problem left, then we have a deal."

Agent Chipman glanced at him. "A lie detector? Forget it ... And don't expect us to accept some brain drug - scopolamine or whatever."

"Scopalmine? Never heard of ..." Harry had fun. "Anyway - we don't need that."

A suspicious stare. "Then what else?"

"Nagini - a snake, has been Voldemort's snake, and now it's mine."

The woman almost laughed, however not from joy.

Harry asked Sirius to explain a bit more, and to expect him back in fifteen minutes. Then he jumped to Hogwarts, fetching the two items he should have brought with him in the beginning - his snake and his map of maps.

* * *

When he entered the room again, carrying Nagini around his body, the two FBI faces showed more expression than all the time before - some admiration for a brilliant-green animal, and deep mistrust. The woman asked, "What's it doing, Mr. Potter?"

"It's not an it - it's a she! ... Her name is Nagini."

"Well, okay ..."

Harry could hear - and feel - hardly tempered impatience, clearly a sign of days and weeks spent working on a mysterious and gruesome criminal case. Even so - what he had to say wouldn't make them feel much better. "She's my lie detector."

"Aha."

Harry's eyes turned to his side. "They don't believe a word, Nagini, do they?"

"No, master. They are desperate for help, but they are not ready to believe they can find it here."

The two agents had watched the conversation with astonishment, showed an expression as if, next moment, they were asked to readjust their perception of Santa Claus.

"That was Parseltongue," explained Harry, "one of the gifts I inherited from Voldemort. Nagini can sense emotions, but very detailed - and she knows if someone's lying. She never fails."

They just stared.

Fully aware that these two FBI agents had to *believe and trust* before leaving the room, Harry came to his decision. Words alone weren't enough, while a stage performance some time ago helped him to find the right approach. He asked, "Madam, what's your age?"

Agent Chipman caught the idea immediately. "Thirty-seven."

Nagini hissed.

"Not true. So what is it?"

"Thirty-six."

"Yes, that's correct ... How old have you been when you lost your virginity?"

The woman's mouth fell open, closed again. "Seventeen."

"No."

"Er - no, I was already eighteen."

"No."

Blood was filling her face. "Twenty-one."

"That's correct ... Please excuse the question, but Nagini told me you two don't really believe us, so I thought it was time for something drastic ... Another test, or do you accept it?"

No - not another test.

After a moment's listening, Harry shook his head. "Sorry - you still don't believe it, you're just afraid of the next question ... Do you sometimes wish you were white?"

No answer.

"Do you sometimes wish you were younger? ... Are you satisfied with your appearance?"

Still silence.

"Madam - each of these questions raises emotions in yourself - strong enough that I could give you the answer to all three questions, if I'd ask Nagini. I won't - but I'm not going to stop until you believe me."

Agent Chipman was fighting for her composure. "Mr. Potter - gimme a few minutes, please ... It's too much at once."

"Yes, I can imagine." He turned to the man. "Sir, ready for your own test?"

"Maybe not, but ... Ask, Mr. Potter."

"What's your true feeling toward wizards? ... Or witches?"

"They're - strange, and fascinating ... A challenge - for myself, for our organization, for ..."

Harry stopped him. "Sir, politeness is just an accepted form of lying - but for Nagini there's not much difference." He said something in Parseltongue, listened a moment, looked up. "Ready to hear the translation?"

The man's voice was flat. "Yes."

Harry grinned. "I don't need Nagini to translate that - you're not ready, but damn if you'd chicken out here, right?"

Agent Ellis relaxed a bit. "Probably ... Okay, I'm listening."

"Well ... Strange - of course, and deep inside, you're scared as hell, only you're not ready to confess it to yourself, not to mention saying it aloud ... Fascinating - sure, and it raises some hopes in yourself of which you thought they were gone with your childhood ... Challenging - you're going to fight toe and nail to prove that you, or maybe the FBI, are superior to some damned wizards."

The man swallowed. "The snake told you all that?"

"Not in these words - as I said, she only senses emotions, but very accurately, so I had no trouble translating them into motivations you'd expect in a police officer."

Agent Ellis exhaled deeply. "Wow ... Just for the peace of mind, Mr. Potter - another test, a small one?"

After a moment's thinking, Harry grinned. "Did you ask yourself how it is to have sex with a witch?"

More grins were spreading - in Sirius' face, in Agent Chipman's face, while the man blushed. "I'd say the answer's obvious - I can feel it."

Sirius said, "Okay - now that we've embarrassed each other sufficiently, what else do you need to accept our statements - Harry's, in particular?"

The woman was quickest. "Mr. Potter, I believe that you know what you're talking about. What's still missing - for me, I mean ... Could you please explain again - in terms a Muggle cop like me is used to hear - why the only reasonable method should be to send you - you alone - against this Voldemort?"

Harry took his time to prepare his summation, fully aware of its importance - the two parties in this room needed each other, needed mutual trust, and now it was make or break.

Finally, he looked up. "I think that's two questions - why not someone else against Voldemort, and why me? For the first - Voldemort has dominated the wizarding world until the day he killed my parents, and tried to kill me. He doesn't hesitate a split second to kill people, and the worst is, he's no killer by passion, for him it's so natural - he kills or argues, whatever he sees fit ... His power hasn't diminished while he had to wait for a new body, he's restricted only by the knowledge that his first public crime will call me - I promised this the last time we met, and he believed me. So far, three people except myself have survived an encounter with him -

Sirius here because he was used as hostage, my friend for the same reason, and our Headmaster who's the only one powerful enough to survive such a meeting. But Dumbledore - our Headmaster - cannot kill Voldemort. Nobody can, except myself."

The two agents listened silently.

"Coming to the second part - for all I know, I'm the tool of some fate which has decided that Voldemort must die. That's why he cannot kill me - I mean, I don't know any natural reason, nor does anyone else ... Each time we meet, I gain new powers - from my perspective, it's as if Voldemort has to prepare his own destruction by giving me these gifts ... Since the last half year, I'm up to the task - by my powers and by my mental state."

Agent Ellis said, "Killing someone deliberately - Mr. Potter, fate is one thing ..."

Harry interrupted him. "Yes I know - I killed three people directly and two others as a result of my doing." Watching the expression in the two faces, Harry realized that - at least in such details - this database was incomplete.

Sirius stood up. "Let me fetch you new drinks, before we'll ask you the question of questions." After returning with the glasses, he sat down, looked at his American colleagues. "Ready for an oath?"

Two nods.

"Do you accept that our descriptions are as accurate as anyone, Muggle or wizard, can possibly give?"

A nod, and a "Yes."

"Do you accept that any of the standard police tactics against Voldemort - yours, mine, whichever - would result in a mess, without going into details?"

Agent Chipman said, "Yes."

Agent Ellis said, "I believe it - maybe I can accept the thought tomorrow, or in a week ... But I believe it."

Nagini still kept silent.

Sirius smiled. "Very good ... Do you believe that, in order to keep your oath toward your country, you have to break the rules, keep the story of Voldemort to yourself, and steal some information out of that database?"

The two looked at each other, nodded simultaneously. "Yes."

Sirius looked at his godchild. "Your turn, Harry."

* * *

For the next hour, they discussed places and possibilities, methods and alternatives. According to the basic assumption, Dementor attacks would occur only in amusement parks

with wizards as entertainers. So far, there were six of them - the four in which the accidents had happened, and two others. These two seemed the most natural candidates for the next attack, however there was no guarantee.

"These parks are very similar," explained Agent Ellis. "If you know one, you know all of them."

Harry shook his head. "No - unfortunately not."

The Muggles were surprised to hear that Harry had to visit a place at least once before he could apparate to that location. They seemed relieved that Apparition was far from any kind of omnipotence. So Harry would be in for a round trip through the States, using FBI Learjets, FBI helicopters, and FBI cars - together with Lupin, and this thought reminded Harry that another meeting had to follow soon.

He said, "We have to talk with our Headmaster - I need his permission to be away from the school for a while, and still more to take Remus with me ... That's my partner in this plan - I hope he is, but he's a teacher."

Sirius said, "He'll come - I'm sure about that."

Harry had the same feeling - and he knew that Almyra would be truly happy about this plan. Which fit just great, now that Almyra represented his only hope to straighten out terms between himself and Cho ... Only there was no choice.

They agreed to meet again next day in Hogwarts - the poor Muggles would need a good part of the day to reach the school, and Sirius would accompany them to make sure they didn't get lost. Then they resumed the discussion of their strategy.

The basic idea was a kind of patrol - of breathtaking dimensions. From dusk till midnight, the time period which they considered as the critical one, Harry and Lupin would take a ghost train ride, then jump to the next park, take another ride, jump to the third, and the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and back ...

Harry examined his map, which had raised pure delight in the faces of the two FBI agents. The display showed the United States with six points marked - Disneyland at Orlando, Florida, then College Park near Atlanta, Georgia, next came the Cumberland Park south of Nashville, Tennessee, further Six Flags near St. Louis, Missouri, Fort Fun at Cheyenne, Wyoming, and finally Ride'n'Joy near Riverside, California - seemingly in spitting distance from Santa Monica.

Checking the wide arc these places marked across the map, and the area where it ended, Harry's heart started beating faster. So close ... And so far away - these ghost patrols would keep them busy.

Agent Chipman said, "You'll need some identification to be entitled for the next free cart if you arrive - otherwise you might have to wait in line, and we cannot afford that ..." She examined Harry. "You'll have to wear normal clothes - er, I mean ..." She blushed.

Harry grinned. "That's fine with me, only - I still wonder if I'd pass for some Muggle authority."

"Why not?" The woman looked astonished. "Because of your age? - Or because of ..." Her glance hung at his forehead.

Harry grinned broader. "Imagine I'd wear a business suit - what do you see?"

Agent Chipman shrugged. "A young man."

"Yeah - with a snake around him."

"Oh ..." A short hesitation. "And you're sure this is the only way?"

Harry nodded. "She saved me more than once ... You wouldn't go without your gun, would you?"

They agreed that Harry would try some camouflage, that Lupin would appear as the main authority, and that they probably bothered without need - people waiting in line to enter a ghost train were not particularly suspicious.

Many more questions remained open - for example how to establish a contact person in each park, and where to place the headquarters for the entire operation. However, all this had time, couldn't be decided here, not without the second member in the team.

Although - Harry had a clear idea where he would like to see their headquarters, the place where he and Lupin would sleep, eat, hold meetings with the FBI agents. And this place wasn't Florida, more the opposite.

* * *

Next morning, Harry informed both Dumbledore and Lupin that Sirius would arrive with two guests late in the afternoon, maybe early evening, and that a longer meeting would be required. Of course they wanted to know more, but Harry refused to answer by indicating that they should have the same advantage as he himself - listening to a story unprepared, and unbiased.

The Headmaster looked at Lupin, Lupin looked back, then both looked at Harry with some suspicion, in particular because Harry couldn't suppress a grin. So Harry assured that yes, he was deadly serious, and confessed that his grin was just a bit gloating because he himself hadn't scored any better a day ago. Maybe it was this argument what made the two teachers finally believe.

This settled, Harry headed for his final strike in British territory - the portkey to London. He was determined to reach that milestone in his project before leaving toward the States - might take weeks until he returned.

This final step had one advantage - Harry already knew the destination, didn't lose time in flying around. He took London Linkport as the target for his first try, since this was the closest point he knew.

First attempt - failure.

Second attempt - failure.

Just for a cross-check, Harry tried his farthest point so far, Milton Keynes. Failure too ... Damn, he was too excited, lacked accuracy. Couldn't he manage something of his own, without a stolen skill from a dark wizard??

Yes he could - with enough anger, remembering the previous evening with himself playing the big expert toward some Muggles who had to learn everything by themselves.

Well then, next try ... Failure. God in Heaven!!

Harry sat down to meditate, ignoring the cold, the muddy ground. Next moment, he remembered that there was a high-speed method of meditation - of course too late for his coat, which looked ready for a major cleaning.

Concentrate, you pretense of a wizard ... And there it was, the void, the brilliant-clear nothing. And back.

Concentrate, you stupid fool, whom Almyra called the ... Bingo! Yes-oh-yes-oh-yes, sir, here we go - the London Linkport before Harry's eyes!

And now a one-timer back ... Yep! Was it really? ... No, still working. De-spelling, next try. And back, and the waste-basket was harmless as before.

And now *The Burrow* - worked immediately, the permanent as well as the one-time version. Harry would have to talk with Ginny, ask her where to place the permanent connection.

And, finally, the Cambridge University Hospital - no problem either. Harry could feel how his experience grew, how the routine was settling - the thought of some Muggle competition, as unrelated as it was, seemed to help a lot.

Was this how people without so many natural gifts were working? Maybe he should ask Hermione, provided he'd ever find the proper formulation for that question, hehe.

On the Hogwarts Express platform, Harry walked a few steps in the direction nobody would go, because it didn't lead anywhere, then he looked around. There - a small metal plate, with some numbers and dates. It looked perfect for Rahewa's direct link portkey.

At the hospital, Harry walked around until he found a tiny building with something technical inside, might have to do with electrical power. At the backside, he found a small grid, covering a ventilation hole in the wall. The grid looked untouched for the last twenty years ... Should be secure enough - and if not, the poor soul would see some buildings when coming out at the other side.

Harry checked it twice, then he returned to the school, just in time for lunch.

* * *

Ginny, as it turned out, wasn't interested in a permanent portkey to *The Burrow*. A one-timer, at occasion, yes - and for that, Harry was around, wasn't he?

Maybe not in the next time, only Harry couldn't say that, not without spilling the secret here in full public. So he just nodded, exchanging a glance with Rahewa - enough to tell her yes,

there was another portkey too, and they would meet a second after the last bite was gulped down.

Which they did - well, a few more seconds later, because first Rahewa had to reach her dormitory where two small white bundles were waiting for a walk.

Heading toward the platform, Harry studied the two dogs. "They look so incredibly clean in this mud - say, do you shower them once in a while?"

Rahewa laughed. "No ... Water isn't their closest, not the least. But I brush them."

"How often? Three times a day?"

The girl took his teasing with a smile. "Not quite ... But certainly after a walk like that - otherwise, my roommates would tell me something, and for myself too, since ..." Rahewa stopped herself, seemed slightly embarrassed.

The conclusion wasn't difficult for Harry. Looking innocently, he said, "Yes of course - this basket would become too muddy ... Especially during the night, I mean ..."

"Er - yes." Then Rahewa giggled. "Sometimes, one of the other girls tries to lure them into her bed ... But they always come into mine."

They reached the platform. Harry said, "Okay - put them into your coat, or shall I take one of them?"

"No." A short whistle from Rahewas lips, and the two poodles came hurrying. Then, guided by Harry, Rahewa examined the small plate, used it, found herself in the park around the hospital, then followed him to the grid which served as the return portkey. "That's super, Harry ... Thank you."

"You're welcome ... If you want to visit your mother now, I can take care of Romeo and Juliet - I don't think there are dogs allowed inside."

No they weren't, and Rahewa accepted the offer immediately. "It won't take long, Harry - she just hasn't the strength for longer visits."

The two poodles looked a bit startled when Rahewa disappeared in the building, calmed down when Harry assured them that she would be back soon, alive and unhurt. However, they wouldn't follow when he tried to walk away from the entrance.

About ten minutes later, Rahewa was back. While receiving the stormy welcome from the poodles, she glanced up. "Erm - my mother asks whether you could join her for a minute, Harry."

Not exactly what he had in mind, but he gave the only possible answer. "Yes, sure."

Rahewa told him where to find her. "Er - she looks different, Harry ... The medication, you know."

He nodded, went inside, preparing himself for this encounter.

Mrs. Lightfoot looked - horrible ... Totally bald, the face twice as broad than the last time Harry had seen her. The skin reddish, shining, though not in a healthy shimmer. Hearing about side-effects was one thing, seeing them quite another.

Nonetheless, the woman's eyes smiled. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Potter - and for what you've built for Rahewa. That's very convenient."

"It was the first thing after I managed to reach London, Mrs. Lightfoot - this was my project milestone, and now it's done."

The woman moved herself a bit more upright. "Mr. Potter - this is the last time we'll see each other ... I wanted to thank you for all you've done, and I wanted to ask you a question."

Unable to find words that wouldn't sound hollow, Harry just bowed.

Mrs. Lightfoot smiled a bit more. "You'd qualify as an Indian any time - keeping silent if there's nothing to say ... But what I wanted to ask you, er ..."

He knew already. "There are four candidates, Mrs. Lightfoot. I asked all of them - no, one of them volunteered by herself."

"Who are they?"

"The family in which I live ... The parents of my girlfriend - Mrs. Chang's the one who volunteered ... My godfather and his fiancé - and a woman from Texas who's teacher at Hogwarts."

"Does Rahewa know?"

Harry shook his head. "No details, no names - only my promise."

"And which of them ..."

"I thought Rahewa should pick her choice, when ..." Harry swallowed. "When the time has come."

The woman nodded. "Yes, that makes sense ... Mr. Potter, this knowledge is not only a comfort for me, it's ... You gave me a purpose, and that's more than I could expect."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lightfoot ..."

"No - you cannot see it. What I mean - in a little while, I'll be gone, and so far, the end was just an end, nothing else. While now - afterwards, you'll break the news to my daughter, and she'll have to take her choice - a very purposeful act ... I'm happy to know that."

"I wasn't aware, Mrs. Lightfoot ... It just seemed natural ..."

"Yes, it is - for someone who can feel the natural." The woman leaned back. "Alright, Mr. Potter - and now let's just pretend this was a visit like any other, okay? ... See you - in a while."

Harry stood up. "Okay - I'll be off the next days, so it might take some time ... Bye, Mrs. Lightfoot."

The woman smiled - not knowing what he was talking about, she seemed to take Harry's remark for an artful farewell of the desired kind.

But that was fine with him.

* * *

Dumbledore and Lupin listened silently, intently, while Agent Ellis explained the background of amusement parks and what had happened in them recently, while Harry felt calmer with every minute passing, what with Fawkes on his shoulder, while Agent Chipman studied the room and the scene of Harry and this bird with a dreamlike expression.

Hearing about the victims, the Headmaster and the ex-werewolf took the same conclusion as Harry - Dementor's work, the Kiss of Death.

Agent Ellis finished, "Mr. Potter had an idea what causes these Dementors to behave that way."

Heads were turning to him, so Harry explained his view of things.

Again, Dumbledore and Lupin saw no reason for disagreement.

This out of the way, Harry explained the planned deal, and that is was settled between him, Sirius, and the two FBI agents, after they had cleared some misunderstandings with the help of a certain snake. He finished, "That's what we have in mind - provided we get your permission, Professor ..." he looked at Dumbledore, then at Lupin, "and provided you'll join the party - er, Prof." Then he sat waiting - expectantly but calmly, thanks to Fawkes' effect.

Dumbledore turned toward Lupin. "What's your comment, Remus?"

"Makes sense ... If you let me off the hook, I'm in - interrogating a Dementor with the help of a Golden Patronus, that might be an interesting experience."

The Headmaster looked at Harry. "If you find them - how can you make sure they won't come back, or others, if those inside are killed?"

"Well - what I had in mind was to tell them, either they stop it, or we come with two Golden Patronuses to their - er, nest or whatever, to stop it once and for all."

"Do you know where to find the nest?"

"No - I hoped you'd know, Professor."

"Hmm ... There's more than one, but - yes, it might work. Since the Battle of Hogwarts, for them a Golden Patronus is an argument that's hard to resist - I'm sure about that."

Harry glanced at Lupin, back at Dumbledore. "So we have your permission, Professor?"

"I don't really have a choice, do I? ... We have an obligation here, and afterwards - Harry, are you ready for the final confrontation?"

"Yes, Professor."

Dumbledore nodded. "My feeling's the same ... Well, yes, you have my permission - and we have to look how to get along without Remus, might be I'll do some classes by myself ..."

Harry grinned. "If Professor McGonagall would take over Charms in that time, I'd know someone for Potions."

The Headmaster smiled. "Miss Granger, right? ... Yes, that might be the solution - anyway, that's not your problem, Harry."

Agent Ellis said, "Mr. Dumbledore - seems as if we've achieved what we wanted, but still - somehow, I have trouble trusting my ears ... All this feels a bit unreal ..."

"Certainly, Mr. Ellis." Dumbledore looked at the woman, back at the man. "You see a school Headmaster, sending a student and a teacher into a demon hunt, and agreeing to the idea that the teacher will return afterwards while the student is going to confront the madman in the background ... But, aside from the details, this is what I've been awaiting for the last sixteen years - since Voldemort made his first attempt to kill Harry ... That's why I'm better prepared than you."

Agent Chipman said, "Even so ... Do you expect him back, Mr. Dumbledore?"

The Headmaster responded to the underlying accusation with a faint smile. "For a long time, I wasn't sure, Miss Chipman - no, worse, I felt pretty sure he won't, and this was a terrible thought. But then, some time ago ... Harry has promised someone to come back, and I have to tell you - as questionable as he is in terms of rules and standards, he keeps to his promises. And therefore - yes, I expect him back."

The framework was set. Now they could talk about details.

Exploring the six amusement parks was calculated as a two-days trip, starting at Orlando, Florida, ending at Riverside, California. Agent Ellis started drafting times, dates, flight schedules ...

Harry interrupted him. "Wait a second - you don't expect us to sit eight hours in an aeroplane just to reach Florida, do you?"

"No?"

"No - because we'll jump. We can meet in Miami, or maybe in Orlando ..."

The man clenched his teeth. "Damn ... I'd give my left ball if I could do that ..."

Agent Chipman sneered at him. "Yes? Imagine it would work - then what about me? What was I supposed to give for Apparition?"

The wizards in the room had fun, finding themselves alone with that feeling.

Agent Ellis said, "We need a headquarters for this operation ... Any preferences from your side? If not, I'd suggest somewhere near Washington ..."

"California." It came from Harry, his voice matter-of-fact.

Agent Ellis didn't like it. "But that's at the end of the time scale - your patrols start three hours earlier in Florida."

"So?" Harry felt no intention to accept a compromise here. "It means we'll jump from California to Florida - exactly what we'll do at the end of each patrol, ten times a day ... And besides, you may place your headquarters anywhere - I'm talking about the place where we're going to stay for that time."

A sigh. "Okay ... And where in California? Just in Riverside?"

Harry looked at Lupin, saw him grin, and shrug. "No - somewhere near the beach. Santa Monica, for example."

Agent Ellis smiled. "You've got a fine taste - the most expensive place along the entire coast."

Even under Fawkes' influence, this was Harry's smallest concern, thinking about this place. "Is it? ... Well, I can pay our expenses."

Agent Ellis looked determined. "Certainly not! ... Santa Monica, then."

They agreed to meet tomorrow, one o'clock p.m. local time, in the Miami Linkport. A car would wait for them - the first vehicle in a chain of cars, helicopters, Learjets, carrying them along six amusement parks toward Santa Monica.

Checking it through, Harry realized that the two FBI agents would be on the road - or in the air - for days. He looked up. "You're not losing time, are you?"

Agent Chipman answered. "We don't have time. This afternoon, we got a call - there's a fifth victim."

* * *

Next day, Harry was busy informing friends and teachers that he would be off for a few days - Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Rahewa, further McGonagall, Snape, and Samantha. Asked about the purpose, he said, "Hunting Dementors - together with Lupin."

One teacher was missing in the list. She would be informed by now - even so, Harry was waiting for a conversation of which he felt sure it would come. And it came - after lunch, when Almyra invited him into her office.

When he entered, Almyra looked at him, looked, just kept looking. Finally, she said, "To make it short, Harry - I'd like to hug you, kiss you, and kill you ... Which sequence do you prefer?"

"Erm - how you said it, that sounds about right."

Seeing his honest face, Almyra didn't know whether to laugh or to be angry. "You know why, don't you?"

"Sure - hugging me, and wishing me luck, because we're going to hunt Dementors. Kissing me, and wishing me still more luck, because I'm going to enter the lion's den, so-to-speak ..."

Almyra was unable to avoid a grin.

"... and killing me, and wishing me to hell, because I got Remus involved."

Almyra nodded. "Exactly - ten points for Gryffindor ..."

Harry took his chance. "Now, or posthumously?"

"Stop joking! It's not funny!"

Harry suppressed the remark that it wasn't him who had started the joke - somehow, Almyra seemed not in the mood to appreciate such details. Instead, he said, "It's only for the patrol - and for the raid against the Dementor nest, if that ever happens ... What comes afterwards, hunting Voldemort, is my job alone."

"As if that isn't enough!" Almyra glared at him. "And the way you describe it - listening to you, the patrol's just a preparation, and the real thing comes afterwards, and it looks just ridiculous shouting at you ..."

"No, Al ... I've been waiting for this conversation since yesterday - no, since the meeting in Sirius' office. It isn't ridiculous - in a way, the patrol's more dangerous because we could be killed both, while with Voldemort - he cannot kill me, so that's the safer part."

"You have a funny way to give comfort, Harry."

"Yes, but I don't know any other ... And you can visit him every day, if you want, and you can combine it with some other visits, if you want ..."

"Yeah - thanks to a clever young Potter who made sure to select the right place for that." Still angry though, Almyra's face showed some approval.

"Of course ... And somehow, for me, that's the most scaring part - I'd gladly accept any help I can get, if you know what I mean."

Almyra gasped. "Now that's really impudent! Getting Remus for help, getting me for help ... That's all, or something else?"

Harry smiled. "Aside from that - just what you had in mind initially when we came here ... Maybe save the killing, if you please."

22 - Gran Turismo

The FBI loved helicopters - understandably so, if the alternative was a car stuck in a traffic jam for the next two hours, too precious a time to be wasted like that.

Harry hated them on the spot.

Loud? A cacophonous hell they were, unbearable without earmuffs, and the earphones inside as the only way to communicate. Then this rattling, and these unnaturally sharp turns the pilot was flying. Sharp turns in the air shouldn't be a problem for Harry, after all, only if it was someone else at the steering handle, and they came so unexpectedly ...

Nagini was suffering too, Harry could feel it. He closed the knapsack tightly, maybe the lining would help to protect her against this deafening noise.

Chopper, they called them. The first chopper caught Harry and Remus at Miami Linkport, carried them to Miami Airport where Ellis and Chipman stood waiting.

A Learjet was more to Harry's taste. Eight seats, only half of them filled with two FBI agents and two wizards, luxurious interior - and the power of these twin jets when the aeroplane went speeding down the runway, to take off and climb into the sky at an incredibly steep angle ... An eight-seater Steel Wing, luxury version.

Even so, they hardly found the time to finish a drink before the two hundred and something miles from Miami to Orlando lay past them. And there - you guessed it, another chopper waiting.

Disneyland was gigantic - in terms of space, that was, had even several landing strips for helicopters. Otherwise ... A landscape of fairytales, with castles, towers, and a lot of weird figures. Well, not Harry's taste, not his problem either, the ghost train the only part that mattered.

Harry had expected something like a large barn, maybe a little bigger. He wasn't prepared for this building, seemingly larger than the Ministry of Magic, not really a maze because the carts were running on tracks, following a fixed route.

Fifteen minutes for a ride! This was the largest of the six ghost houses. Suddenly, despite of the funny demon figures bobbing and blinking outside, their job looked considerably more difficult than before.

Lupin, in dark-grey slacks and a jacket with a herringbone pattern, was introduced as Mr. Seamus Walgrave, a consultant for construction security, and Harry, in jeans and leather jacket, as Terry Pritchard, his technical assistant - one of these tech whiz-kids who recently appeared everywhere, and so incredibly young, masters of their profession while in other regards ... Well, you had to take them as they came, hadn't you?

Agent Ellis made sure they were established with the proper authority to enter the building any time, to walk around inside, to take the next free cart - whatever was required to check the security of the passengers.

Then they had their first ride.

At the beginning, Harry just grinned. Skeletons, skulls with glowing eyes, something that looked like a rotten corpse at some gallows - harmless stuff, especially for someone who once had been hanging from the ground above his head into a bottomless sky, Dumbledore's trick in the maze and in the exam patrol.

Then he twisted - a cold, wet touch had hit his face ... Just an airstream, but quite efficiently, together with that mud-streaked figure appearing from an open grave.

Harry twisted more often, and Lupin also, but only from things which suddenly appeared out of the dark, barely feet away, with light and sound and motion - mechanical constructions all of them, nothing of which Harry's *haragei* would warn him. Anyway, both of them felt sure - after the fifth ride, they would know the sequence by heart.

Then a car seemed to come from the other side, headlights flashing into their faces, growing and growing, apparently at high speed, until the crash seemed inevitable - then the illumination disappeared behind them.

The next lane in this meandering through the building was better illuminated. A relief for just a moment, then they could see the tracks hanging in empty air - and thirty feet ahead, the tracks ended in mid-air! But their cart didn't stop, and any second now, they would ... here they were, and the cart really jumped forward! ... To hit the second track inches below, invisible before in this tricky lighting ...

Both Harry and Lupin felt ready to admit - the customers got a thrill for their money. Coming out into the sunlight, their hearts were hammering like those of any other visitor.

Well - this had been their first ride, and the longest, with almost no repetition of any particular trick. It would be routine soon.

In contrast to their real job. They still had to learn at which points they could leave the cart to enter the maintenance pathways, which criss-crossed through the entire building. And they had all reasons to learn carefully, at some point here the first victim had been attacked ... And the fifth - apparently, the attacks weren't planned sequentially across all six places.

However, the closer examinations would take place later, as part of their first patrol, which would start earlier for this purpose. The important issue now was to finish the tour.

Back to Orlando Airport, with the chopper, of course.

* * *

The Learjet was ready, refueled. The same was true for the two pilots. To reach the same state among the passengers, some food was awaiting them - the flight to Atlanta would take about an hour for the four hundred miles, time enough to eat something on this day which would last long without offering a regular supper.

Inspecting the boxes, Harry had to grin - chicken wings, reminding him of another scene with four hungry mouths.

Agent Ellis, apparently not very hungry, turned toward Lupin, who just had finished what was called a *cheeseburger*. "Now that you've seen the first train, Mr. Walgrave ..."

The agent waited an instant, giving Lupin time to recognize his *nom de guerre*, and the obvious intention for using this name.

"... what's your comment? Will it work?"

Lupin cleaned his fingers with a tissue, then seized for a notepad. "I made a few calculations ... Our assumption is that the Dementors will stay in these buildings for a while - independently of the question whether they plan a direct attack. This is a realistic approach because they feed from emotions ... If they'd come in a rush, to attack and disappear immediately afterwards, we'd have little chances - a complete patrol takes about one and a half hour, maybe a bit less if the other rides are shorter."

Agent Chipman asked, "Did you think about a split?"

"A split?"

The woman looked at Harry, back at Lupin. "Yes - splitting your team into two, to size down the time between two patrols."

Hearing that, Harry shot a hard glance toward her, but Lupin was quicker. "No, Miss Chipman - and to bury this discussion once and for all ..." he pointed toward Harry, "here's your patrol. Harry's the one with the sensors to detect a Dementor across hundred yards - I'm just his company, if you get my bearing."

The woman looked unimpressed. "I'm just trying everything - no offense intended."

Harry resumed his chewing - for all he could see, and hear, his friend and teacher would handle this discussion quite well.

Lupin checked his notes. "If we look at it more closely, the situation's not quite as bad, thanks to the time differences. If we take east-coast time as our reference, then one shift runs as follows ..." His finger traced down his writing. "We start in Orlando at five forty-five. For the ..."

Agent Ellis interrupted him. "Just a second - why that early? Didn't we say a patrol runs from six to midnight?"

"Yes, but then the shares for the different places are too unbalanced. Here - look at the time table that comes out with this starting time." Lupin passed his notepad over to the FBI agent.

Harry, who hadn't given much thought to the details of a patrol schedule across four time zones, had to wait while first Agent Ellis and then Agent Chipman were examining the paper. Then the woman passed it to him, but at that moment Lupin resumed his explanation, so Harry had to listen first.

"... are thirty-seven rides altogether," summarized Lupin. "The first time zone gets six visits, that means Orlando and Atlanta. The next one - Nashville and St. Louis - gets five. Cheyenne as the only house in the third zone gets six, and Riverside in the fourth zone gets nine."

While the two FBI agents were digesting that, Harry could finally check the paper. It was the craziest schedule he'd ever seen.

- 17.45 Orlando
18.00 Atlanta
18.15 Orlando
18.30 Atlanta
18.45 Orlando
19.00 Atlanta
19.15 Nashville (18.15)
19.30 St.Louis (18.30)
19.45 Orlando
20.00 Atlanta
20.15 Nashville (19.15)
20.30 St.Louis (19.30)
20.45 Cheyenne (18.45)
21.00 Riverside (18.00)
21.15 Orlando
21.30 Atlanta
21.45 Nashville (20.45)
22.00 St.Louis (21.00)
22.15 Cheyenne (20.15)
22.30 Riverside (19.30)
22.45 Orlando
23.00 Atlanta
23.15 Nashville (22.15)
23.30 St.Louis (22.30)
23.45 Cheyenne (21.45)
00.00 Riverside (21.00)
00.15 Nashville (23.15)
00.30 St.Louis (23.30)
00.45 Cheyenne (22.45)
01.00 Riverside (22.00)
01.15 Cheyenne (23.15)
01.30 Riverside (22.30)
01.45 Cheyenne (23.45)
02.00 Riverside (23.00)
02.15 Riverside (23.15)
02.30 Riverside (23.30)
02.45 Riverside (23.45)
03.00 STOP

It gave him a first feeling what it meant in detail, running thirty-seven ghost train rides per day until the Dementors had the decency to be found. A bit more than nine hours per day - not too much, just counting the time, while Harry felt at a loss to imagine their feelings after the twentieth ride.

* * *

The sound of the twin engines told them that the Learjet was approaching Atlanta Airport. Harry, as the last one still eating, felt in charge to store the boxes, then they sat back, closed their seat belts for the touchdown.

Another chopper was waiting, carried them to College Park, where they went through the second sequence of introductions before Harry and Lupin could enter a cart.

For the entertainment part, the FBI agents were right - knowing one meant knowing all of them, Harry couldn't detect any illumination not already seen in Orlando. For the building itself, the story was different - much smaller, the smallest of all six, nine minutes for a single ride.

On the other hand - this ghost train hadn't counted a victim so far.

Back to the airport, taking off for another flight of two hundred and some miles toward Nashville, Tennessee. Touching down at Nashville Airport, they gained the first hour on their trip - suddenly it was six thirty rather than seven thirty.

The Cumberland Park contained the scene of crime for the third victim, so Mr. Walgrave and his assistant Mr. Pritchard received appreciating smiles in their introduction. The building itself looked already familiar, sized somewhere between that in College Park and that in Disneyland. The ride took eleven minutes.

Their next flight, two hundred and forty miles toward St. Louis, Missouri, would be their last for today - with the Learjet, that was, while another chopper expected them at St. Louis Airport for the visit of Six Flags.

It was almost a duplicate of the previous step. Victim number two had been found here, the building looked very much like the previous one, the ride took twelve minutes.

But this park had something new - a barrier of thundering flames toward which the cart was moving at undiminished speed, until - at the last instant - the flames faded while Harry and Lupin still felt the hot air in their faces.

Returning into the manager's office, Lupin wanted to know how they made sure the flames would burn down just in time - and how often it failed.

The manager grinned. "Never, Mr. Walgrave - and I'll tell you why, which is confidential information ... The flames are an optical illusion from a video - the sound comes from a tape, and the hot air from something like a gigantic hair dryer. If the time control fails, the cart goes through light - that's all. Clever, isn't it?"

Clever, yes. Except that now it was half past ten - local time, while for Harry and Lupin, it felt more like half past five in the morning.

Flying back to St. Louis Airport, where rooms had been booked for the four people, Harry almost fell asleep - in a chopper!

He and Lupin declined an invitation to a last drink at the hotel bar - breakfast was scheduled for eight o'clock in the morning, leaving them little more than eight hours of sleep after such a long day.

* * *

The breakfast offered some grace time to come fully awake, otherwise something to forget soon - whatever the Airport Hotel in St. Louis might be famous for, tea and some food according to a British student's taste weren't part of it. For compensation, it was close to the Learjet, saved them from another chopper-hopping.

The flight from St. Louis to Cheyenne, Wyoming was about eight hundred miles, meaning two and a half hours. Minutes after take-off, under the calming influence of the whining sound from two jet engines, Harry fell asleep.

He came awake from the bumping when the Learjet touched down. According to his watch, it was eleven thirty, but of course they had gained another hour.

Fort Fun as a whole had a strong emphasis on the myths of wild west - cowboys, Indians, bank robbers, train robbers. For the ghost train, it made little difference, except that it was a train rather than a car what came steaming toward their cart, headlights flashing and whistle blowing.

Ten minutes a ride. This was the building in which victim number four had been found.

About to leave, Harry and Lupin were stopped by the manager. Didn't they want to watch the daily attraction?

It was called *High Noon*, and this was exactly the time when it took place. A showdown in a reconstructed street of a western town - a sheriff, shabby clothes, the only shining spot his star, against five bad guys, expensively dressed, the boss of the gang completely in black and silver. To nobody's surprise, the sheriff shot the first two bandits at once, the next two during the subsequent minutes, and finally the black-and-silver guy.

The performance clarified some of the crap Harry had heard from that lunatic, in the former Giants' camp. Otherwise, it was a waste of time, necessary for reasons of politeness - these people were so proud of a history that seemed nothing but a long list of unlawful killings.

As a result, they were thirty minutes behind schedule - acceptable, if you had a Learjet waiting for you personally, and if there was just one more ghost train waiting to be seen.

The flight from Cheyenne to Riverside was nine hundred miles, scheduled arrival four o'clock, meaning three o'clock local time. Harry, who felt determined to use the next days also for his portkey programming, was scanning the distances from one park to another in his mind when Agent Chipman came along with a huge box - their lunch.

A Wyoming lunch consisted of large amounts of meat - very delicious, though little more. Harry could draw parallels from there to Texan habits, learned from Samantha - it had been him who used to come with the salad, half a year ago. Would it be possible to jump back, fetch a salad bowl, and Apparate right into a Learjet, flying at several hundred miles per hour? ... An interesting question, however quite a theoretical one, because Harry felt no inclination to find out.

And of course, he was just into his third spare rib when the FBI agents started another conversation about tactics. Couldn't they separate food from business?

Agent Ellis couldn't. "Mr. Pritchard ..."

It took Harry a second to connect this name with himself.

"... assume you've sensed some Dementors - what then?"

Harry swallowed his bite. "Then we'll try to locate their position in the building, as close as we can. Basically, that's Nagini's job - to point the exact direction while we're moving along these pathways."

"How close do you have to come?"

"Well - we want to talk with them, right? If the only purpose was to kill them, it would be much simpler - we could just send our Patronuses and wait till they come back to tell us that it's over ... A Patronus doesn't need pathways, and it can cross through walls - very handy, unless you want to instruct them how to treat the Dementors in detail."

The two FBI agents looked as if they would like to see a Patronus very much, and as if they weren't sure if this desire was reasonable.

Sensing it, Lupin said, "We can show you our Patronuses - but not here, it's a bit narrow for a centaur."

"A centaur??"

Lupin nodded. "Yes - that's Har ... er, Terry's shape. Mine is a simple wolf." He said it with a grin in his face.

Agent Chipman asked, "How do you instruct a Patronus?"

Lupin grimaced. "Good question ... To be honest, only Harry can communicate with his Patronus, while mine - so far, I wasn't able to talk with him."

The two FBI agents looked at Harry, once more showing this conflict between their natural habit - considering Lupin, the older one, as their first reference, and the actual situation in which a seventh-year claimed this role again and again.

Harry grinned. "I'm the whiz-kid - remember? ... Sorry."

Lupin suppressed a laugh. "But a Patronus follows the intention of his master, so I'd assume even a mute wolf won't kill them at the spot ... We never had this situation before - in a few days, we'll be wiser ... Hopefully."

Agent Ellis asked, "Will you try to interrogate them?"

It was Harry who gave the answer, sharply. "No - under no circumstances."

Three heads turned to him with astonishment. Agent Chipman was the one to ask, "Why not?"

"If our assumption is right - if it's Voldemort who sent them, then he'd hear about this interrogation. And then he'd know that I'm looking for him. This must not happen. And besides - the only interesting news would be his address, and as much as I'd like to know - do you really think he invited some Dementors at home to talk with them? ... Never!"

Lupin nodded. "You're right - er, Terry. I didn't think it through - but then, I was busy with the time schedule." He looked at the two FBI agents. "You see - we team up quite well, no sense in separating us."

With satisfaction, Harry could feel how the two FBI agents were decoding the underlying message ... and accepting it, finally. He and Lupin - yes, they were student and teacher, but only in Hogwarts, not in the days to come.

* * *

The weather in Riverside was nice, quite unexpectedly for someone who had left the muddy cold of Hogwarts just a day before. Still better - they used a car rather than a chopper, Ride'n'Joy was pretty close to the airport.

After College Park in Atlanta, this was the second place still waiting for the first victim, an indicator that the size alone couldn't be the reason. The ghost train turned out almost as big as that in Disneyland, Harry timed a single ride at thirteen minutes.

With the official schedule of their two-days trip finished, Agent Ellis asked whether Harry would like a normal visitor's tour through the amusement park.

Harry looked at Lupin, saw his head shaking. "No thanks ... We'll see it often enough, I guess."

Which left the question how to reach Santa Monica. Agent Ellis could offer a car or another chopper for the last fifty miles - the Learjet would take him and Miss Chipman back to St. Louis, the place they had selected for their own operation headquarters.

Lupin looked at Harry. "What's your choice?"

"Not a car - it'll take forever in these traffic jams. And another chopper ..." Harry's grimace told clearly what he thought of this idea. "I could jump - can you pursue?"

Lupin grinned ruefully. "Sorry."

"Alright, then ... A chopper, just for good measure."

They touched down on the flat roof of the Sheraton Hotel, their residence for the next days, maybe weeks. It was the largest hotel in town, and the most expensive - a natural choice for FBI guests.

A suite for each of them - bedroom, bathroom, day room, spacious, luxurious. And the two day rooms connected to each other, very conveniently so. Lupin said, "Terry, I think we'll leave this connection open - at least as long we have no visitors."

Harry nodded, grinned. "Sure, Seamus ... I can easily imagine a visitor for you, while at my side ..."

Lupin, alias Walgrave, looked sympathetically. "Now that we're here - I hope there'll be an opportunity even for you."

"Maybe," replied Harry. "Only question is - should I hope, or should I be afraid?"

* * *

The next day made it into Harry's list of the most strenuous ones he could remember, comparable only to his excursion into the furniture mover's profession - two years ago, when he had worked for a desk and a cabinet. Today, however, there was no immediate reward in sight.

What they had in mind was getting accustomed to the inner topology of six ghost train buildings, becoming familiar with the paths, exits, and entrapments of the maintenance pathways - the places where the Dementors would hide. Half an hour per building seemed the minimum - together three hours in addition, which meant they had to start in Orlando at two forty-five, only that here in California this meant eleven forty-five.

Jumping from park to park was no problem, except that they couldn't find a quiet spot in which to appear. So they scared quite some people, suddenly appearing in their view. This would change once they had a clear memory of the insides. Until then, it was somewhat nerve-racking.

In the Cumberland Park of Nashville, they nearly crashed into a group of young men. After the first moment of shock and fright, these Muggles started to brawl, waving their fists, giving bad remarks about "damned Magicals", and closing the circle around Harry and Lupin.

Lupin suggested to disappear - back to Atlanta.

Harry shook his head. "No - they'd hunt us all the time." Then he addressed the closest of the gang. "Sorry, man - my mistake ... Stay cool, okay?"

The answer was a sneering, and the promise to stay very cool, while they'd make sure ...

Next moment, there was a gap in the circle, result of Harry's flat hand which had come forward, to hit the solar plexus of his direct opponent, sending him on his knees and out of combat.

Harry and Lupin quickly stepped through the opening, turned to have the group in front of them.

The circle reformed, grew wider, and the man in the middle, apparently the leader of the pack, suddenly had a knife in his hand.

Without turning, Harry said, "Seamus - fetch the park security, now!" Hearing Lupin's steps toward the building, he stared into the knifer's face. "The cops will be here in a minute."

"That's enough." The man approached with careful steps, well balanced, knife kept low.

Harry had Rahewa's present at his left arm - only he was no knife fighter, his weapon was *aikido*, and he remembered Kenzo's warning. *'Don't try to hit the hand with the knife - that's something for movies, in reality, the hand is too fast.'*

He waited until the distance was right, made one step forward, then hung in the air, his leg shooting forward, hitting the man's temple at the unprotected side, landing at feet and hands, coming up instantly in a motion sequence trained over weeks.

His opponent's standing was remarkable. Even so, the man staggered for a moment, with glassy eyes - time enough for Harry to kick the knife out of a numb hand, to grab this cannonball of a head, to have his own knife ready, pointing the man's throat.

He looked around. "That's it ... Get lost!"

The other figures stopped, obviously impressed by the sparkling six inches of Harry's twin-blade knife. After a moment's hesitation, one of them recognized some people approaching quickly from the building, and both arguments together were convincingly enough. Seconds later, Harry was alone with his opponent.

He stepped back, made his knife disappear - not as quickly as Rahewa, but in time before the guards arrived.

"What's going on here? ... Did this man threaten you?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry - was a misunderstanding, but we could clarify the issue."

Then one of the guards saw the knife on the ground, took it up, asked whether it belonged to one of them.

No, it didn't, was unknown to them, they hadn't seen it before.

The guards seemed familiar with such scenes of misunderstandings, and maybe a sudden loss of memory. They asked Harry whether he wanted to file a complaint, were satisfied when the answer was "No, why?" and restricted themselves to stay there for another minute while the conversation partners in this misunderstanding left to opposite directions.

Lupin glanced at Harry. "Do you feel better now?"

"Not really, because at the moment, I'm a bit sick from the adrenaline ... But it was the right thing to do - I've learned from the camp people that there's no sense in playing friendly toward such a lot ... And we managed without using our wands."

"Oh yes - I, in particular." Lupin looked a bit grudgingly. "Harry - er, Terry, I could swear I saw a knife in your hand, and even from the distance, it looked very much like another one I've seen once ..."

After a careful glance around, Harry made a quick movement. "You mean - this one here?"

"I knew it! ... It belongs to that girl, doesn't it?"

Harry grinned. "No - it's her Christmas present for me."

* * *

The ghost train buildings, as it turned out, were all built according to the same basic design. The track meandered through the building, starting at top level, losing height over ramps, short sections separated from each other by swing doors, one scene per section. And the pathways, made of metal grids, went between levels and under ramps, almost nowhere offering sufficient room to stay upright. Assuming the Dementors didn't like ducking low all the time, there were only few spots where they had to be expected.

These were the good news. The bad surprise - without an exception, these spots were also the only occasions to leave the cart en route. Either Harry - or Nagini - would sense the Dementors soon enough, or they would appear as a sudden and nasty surprise - provided they came again.

Nagini hid under Harry's leather jacket which, for this purpose, had been bought in a bigger size. It made him look more like a football player than a technician while not really unusual - not in this country which offered an astonishing mix of body shapes and dress fashions.

After their first thorough round, completed quicker than expected, they had some spare time to look for food. It taught them another lesson - as of tomorrow, they would come with a lunch box from the Sheraton Hotel, sandwiches and salads, plus some coke, to be deposited in Ride'n'Joy. The offerings in the amusement parks were low quality, greasy junk food, expensive, and worst of all - you had to wait in line forever.

This was followed by the first regular shift - ride after ride after ride, quickly reduced to a boring routine. Jumping into the next building, coming out - initially as a surprise for the staff, until they were getting used to it - claiming the next free cart while showing their fake identity cards, sitting down, and riding ... Then Nagini would report the presence of a wizard, but nothing else, and ten to fifteen minutes later, they could climb out.

Then they learned to get out of the cart at the last spot of their ride, to jump from there to the next park, occasionally wondering what the people outside might think seeing an empty cart - coming out of a ghost house for which the average time to wait in line was growing to twenty minutes and more.

And then, finally, their first shift was over. Back in the Sheraton Hotel, they took benefit from local habits - food after midnight, only sandwiches, but a sandwich in the States was a piece of kitchen art, outperforming anything they had seen in England, in size and in quality.

With the necessary weight in his stomach, Harry fell asleep within minutes.

* * *

Next day, after a breakfast taken as late as possible in this luxury hotel, Harry examined his map for another purpose. There was still a task pending - gathering the results from Hermione's two test candidates. A real nuisance, in this situation, only he had accepted the job at some time, so there was no choice.

Haiti and Orlando had the same time zone. When jumping now, eleven o'clock local time, he would arrive at two in the afternoon, in the midst of the siesta time. So he had to wait two more hours.

It was a narrow time frame. Contacting Benoît, jumping to Gros-Morne, waiting for him, contacting Caprien Marût - who reported a first success - no transfiguration at all! Joining the smile, Harry paid the agreed premium, fifty galleons. A month from now, the real test would come - did the effect hold, or was Hermione's brew just another version of the standard Wolfsbane Potion?

And up to the Ile de la Tortue, apologizing toward Monsieur Armodéc - without releasing any detail about his current task, hearing the expected report, saying goodbye, and whooosh - into Hogwarts, spending two minutes with Hermione, who looked pleased hearing about Marût, and fierce hearing about Armodéc.

And back into the Sheraton Hotel - minutes before their next schedule.

Lupin looked angry. "Damn, Harry - you're a stressful company, did anyone ever tell you that?"

Harry grinned. "You talking with me? ... My name's Terry - let's go, Seamus."

The first three rides were a relief, after his previous travels under such a time pressure. The next four felt like Social Ethics - a constant level of noise and movement, here even combined with illuminations, none of which could reach his mind.

The other thirty felt like a mild version of the Cruciatus curse.

Harry knew that they were in dire need of some improvement in their patrol organization, and until midnight west-coast time, when their shift ended, he had a clear perception what to do.

Next morning, after a breakfast not quite as late as the previous day, Harry fetched a cab, after making sure he and the driver were talking the same language - roughly speaking. Then he explained what he was looking for.

The cab driver took them to a hardware store.

No sir, they hadn't such items, he might try it in the mall, just three miles down the main street.

The mall turned out a large collection of small shops, offering all things you never thought necessary, and till today saw no reason to change your mind. At least, Harry got another tip - the *House and Garden Center*, another mile down the street.

The cab driver had no objections - why, the taxameter was ticking since more than a hour, and Sheraton passengers seemed trustworthy even for such astronomical fees.

And here Harry found what he had in mind - large letters and digits, bronze casting on a socket plate larger than a hand, perfectly suited for his purpose. He added some adhesive and a reel of thin wire - his collection of fixing spells for the practical wizard felt a bit incomplete for this task.

Thirty plates together were heavy, on the other hand, the weight would shrink quickly - five per ghost train building, so he wouldn't have to carry the full amount for long. Harry paid his faithful cab driver, waited until the car had disappeared around the corner, then jumped to Disneyland.

Half an hour later, his first five plates were mounted, and four of them already operative - small wonder, with distances measured in yards. Then came the first challenge - four hundred miles to Atlanta.

Harry's maximum distance so far - from Hogwarts to London - was something about three hundred miles. And now ...

The first two attempts were failures.

Harry sat down - to concentrate, and to imagine how Lupin would look at hearing the confession that this was still beyond reach. Then he tried again.

Yep! Atlanta, here we come.

Training did the job. Twenty minutes later, the building in the College Park was *mounted*.

Two hundred and some miles to Nashville - easy play. And after some more minutes, the weight of his box was down to half.

Two hundred and forty to Six Flags ... Done. Five more signs to mount ... Done - well, except the activation of the fifth, aiming across eight hundred miles to Fort Fun in Wyoming.

What Harry would like now was a brain booster, like the Giants' dope in his exam patrol. Only he hadn't. But a moment later, he remembered the scene when this exam had started, how his team partner had been talking about sugar as a brain shooter.

The memory felt somewhat painful, while the advice had been good. Five minutes later, Harry returned with three candy bars. Two dropped into his box, the third disappeared in his mouth.

Inhale deeply ... exhale deeply ... concentrate, and now - go west.

Yipee!! Wyoming, you're mastered.

With five signs and two candy bars left, Harry told himself that nine hundred miles wasn't really different from eight hundred, was it?

No, sir - not after the two candy bars had been sent the way of all food.

And what about two thousand miles?

No way. Not today, not in these shoes, not while still feeling the satisfaction of two other successful tasks only minutes ago. Well - Harry could live with that, at least until tomorrow, when he would return and not give it a rest until their patrol circle was closed, even across a continent.

* * *

When he jumped back to the Sheraton Hotel, it was half past two - fifteen minutes until their shift would start. Lupin asked, "Terry, are you going to keep that habit? I mean, getting lost after breakfast and returning ten minutes before it's time to leave?"

"No, sir." Harry smiled proudly. "And you'll take that back in a few minutes."

"Take that back? ... It was a simple question, so why ..."

"No it wasn't - it was a reproach, it was something like, first you drive me into this adventure, and then you're not seen all day long ... But I have a surprise for you - wait and see, and then let's talk again."

Harry fetched Nagini, then it was time.

In Disneyland, Lupin started heading toward the cart line, but Harry grabbed him. "No - come inside."

Closing the door of the maintenance entry behind them, Harry pointed at the first plate, showing the number (1). "Here - duck a bit, then touch it, and then step aside because I'll follow."

Lupin obeyed, disappeared. Harry gave him three seconds, then followed - across a quarter of the building, to his second checkpoint which showed the plate (2). He came out inches away from Lupin. "Oops - I said step aside, I didn't say shuffle at the spot."

Lupin had caught the idea already, grinned, touched the plate. A minute later, after passing the centre with the (3) plate and the last quarter with the (4) plate, they reached the other end.

Lupin examined the last plate in this building - (A) for Atlanta. Then he turned - and bowed. "My dear Terry, master of all portkeys, I apologize wholeheartedly, expressing my deep shame and burning embarrassment, after having ..."

Laughing, Harry stopped him. "Okay, okay - it's enough. What's more important, now we can save these stupid rides, they were about to drive me crazy ... And we need a new schedule - that's your turn, I'd say."

"Definitely." Lupin looked a bit embarrassed. "To be honest, I had some ideas of my own - I guess our thoughts went the same direction during the rides yesterday ... And aside from that, some people count me as the teacher in your portkey project, so ..."

"And why didn't you talk with me?"

"How should I? I won't bother people during breakfast, that's a crime. And then you were gone ... And I didn't know how to address the issue."

"What?" Baffled, Harry looked at his friend and teacher.

"Yes, sure - Harry, I don't know anything about portkeys, calling me your teacher is a Hogwarts formalism and has nothing to do with the reality - that's why I had a bit trouble finding the right words."

Harry felt consternated. "After all we did ... Say - is it that bad with me? Am I that difficult to handle?"

"Well ..." Lupin hesitated, then looked into Harry's eyes. "Let's say, half of it is my mistake - and the other half of the answer is a simple Yes. Since a while, you're very touchy ..."

Harry felt the blood rush into his face.

"... but so what - I mean I know why, and this here - Harry, you've done an excellent job, so let me do my one and only task as your teacher ... This is your exam work, and you've passed."

"Just a second - I have to tell you, from Riverside back to Orlando - this portkey doesn't work yet."

Smiling, Lupin took his arm around Harry's shoulder. "I bet you'll be gone after breakfast tomorrow, and won't come back until it's working - am I right? ... Or maybe the day afterwards, it's only a matter of time."

Harry nodded, still suffering from a mix of joy and shame, swearing to himself that he would work on this problem, as soon as he could find the time, and the opportunity - and a certain conversation partner required for this task.

* * *

At the end of their first round, reaching the (○) plate which still was inoperative, Lupin stopped him. "Terry - I know how to reorganize our schedule. These portkeys are wonderful, much better than apparition - you don't have to concentrate, they save energy, quite a lot ... So we can make a round in not more than ten minutes, and we can keep our concentration in that time. Then, we'll have a break - ten, fifteen minutes, to relax. And then the next ... Let me check it through ..."

For a while, Lupin was counting, murmuring times, using his fingers to count, then he looked up. "We can make about twenty-five rounds that way, and all of them through all six buildings, as long as they're open ... Each building gets about sixteen patrols, more than twice as much than with the old schedule ... And we'll feel worlds better than before."

And so they did. After the next round, Lupin took his cellular phone - their permanent connection to the headquarters in St. Louis, to inform the FBI agents about the improvement.

Harry listened how Lupin was talking about good news, and portkeys, and a brilliant whiz-kid, then he saw him grinning. A moment later, Lupin switched the phone off. "They have no idea."

"Huh?"

"They were quite impressed, but then they said how glad they were to have me in the team, and as the direct contact ... Harry, they're scared of you." Lupin chuckled. "It was very wise of you not to tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"That I'm a werewolf - they'd just lose all their faith in me."

* * *

Next day was Saturday. It didn't mean anything for their shift, but coming down to the breakfast table, Harry found a visitor who was beaming toward him almost as much as toward Lupin - Almyra.

"Morning, Harry," she said. "Nice place here - just right to invite some people, what do you think?"

"Hello, Almyra - people for whom our breakfast is more like supper, or people for whom our breakfast is more like breakfast?"

"Well ..." Almyra grinned. "You two, you can split the task - Remus covers those having supper, and you those having breakfast."

Harry glanced around. "Without changing the subject - be careful with whom you speak, okay?"

"What? ... Oh!" Almyra blushed a bit. "Got it, Terry - seems as if someone has been quite clever with the phonetics, to cover such clumsies like me ... But coming back to my suggestion - would you agree to that?"

"Sure - except that movie people have breakfast at noon, while for me, there's a task waiting to be done - right after breakfast."

"Then tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's the same." Seeing Almyra's expression, Harry added, "It's true - I need three days at the minimum until the most urgent work is done ... Then, if we'll be still here, I can think about - er, visits."

"And what's so urgent?"

"Getting something started ... This place is a bit too public for discussing it in more detail."

Almyra looked somewhat disappointed, but Harry had been totally honest. Today, he would attack the two thousand miles barrier - this done, he would try to settle the business with that Pinkerton agency.

After breakfast, he jumped again to the *House and Garden Center* because he needed another one of these plates - to approach his goal in reasonable steps, rather than trying too much at once again and again.

He came out with a (T) plate - the most fitting letter he could think of, with the T standing for Terry's task, tremendous target, for training - test - triumph ... Hopefully so.

Nine hundred miles had been his farthest portkey so far. Alright then, thousand should be his next milestone - the distance from Cheyenne to Nashville, for a change across the direction of their circling route.

He mounted his plate - provisionally, if it worked, he would take it off again soon.

Yes it worked, almost immediately, very much to his surprise. Remembering his map with the six places, he knew why - the direct connection Cheyenne - Nashville was less than thousand miles.

But it was more than ever before, reason enough to try the next step from Cheyenne to Atlanta - twelve hundred miles minus something.

The something couldn't be much, because it took Harry almost an hour until his spell worked as desired. Even then, the distance wasn't really mastered yet - two more failures before he could reproduce it again.

Remembering the promise toward himself - not cutting corners - he worked until he could program his plate successfully three times in a row. Just to be sure, he dismounted the plate, jumped to Atlanta, and made a test the other way around - after all, portkeys from east to west might be more difficult than those from west to east.

But they weren't.

Back in Fort Fun, after having fixed his plate once more, Harry aimed for the next milestone, a direct link to Disneyland, sixteen hundred miles on their route, about fifteen hundred as the crow was flying ... Poor crow, if it really had to do that.

Poor Harry, who'd been ordered so by himself.

Half an hour passed without progress, and he felt hungry. Driven by ambition, he told himself - no food before this portkey was working.

For the next twenty minutes, his doubts were growing if this had been a good idea. Accuracy was suffering from hunger, wasn't it, still more from starvation ... Then, suddenly, it worked.

One had worked. And what about another?

He was crazy - it would fail, and then he'd be stuck here, his pride preventing him from having a lunch before their shift ... But oh wonder, he could repeat it.

Jumping back to the Sheraton Hotel, Harry had little more than an hour left before it was time to start today's patrol - enough to eat without untidy haste, while the big jump had to wait till tomorrow.

23 - Hunting

Lupin appeared in the lobby minutes before their first round was due, after Harry had already fetched his snake, realizing that the connection between the two suites was closed.

For Harry, the closed doors were reason enough to suppress any remark. Partly in favour of politeness, partly also because the risk of showing envy coated with bitterness felt too high. Lupin, on the other side, suffered from no such restraint. He asked, "How far did you come?"

"Cheyenne - Orlando, about fifteen hundred ... Maybe tomorrow, if the progress is the same as before."

"Six hundred per day - Terry, that's no reason to make such a face."

Maybe it wasn't, but then, maybe Harry's expression had more to do with lucky people, finding reason to close some doors.

After the second round, he felt better.

After the fifth round, he felt really good because Lupin said, "Terry, your portkey track is bloody marvellous! These parks have roller coasters of a mile - but you, you have a coast-roller across a continent ... And tomorrow or so, it will be a Terry-go-round, then you can jump yourself dizzy."

After the twelfth round, Harry felt hungry, so they opened their lunch box to diminish the pile of sandwiches, and the row of soda cans.

Harry's last sandwich had been the one too much, or maybe it was the last coke. Whatever, he felt a bit sick arriving at point (1) in Disneyland. Stepping aside to make room for Lupin, he heard Nagini saying, "Master, there is a presence ... More than one."

Arriving, Lupin saw Harry drawing his wand, did the same. "Do you feel them?"

"No, but Nagini - more than one, she says ... If these are Dementors."

Coming out at point (2), Harry's sickness increased - a feeling like cold sweat all over his body. He touched Lupin, kept his voice low. "Now I sense it too - this coldness."

"Any direction?" Lupin kept his voice as low as Harry.

Harry asked Nagini, shook his head. "No ... It's too vague."

"Next point, then." Lupin disappeared.

Harry counted, "Twenty-and-one," followed. The coldness was strong, creeping into his bones - any second now, the dreadful scene would resurface in his mind. He had to suppress the impulse to conjure his Patronus and send it forward.

Lupin whispered, "I can feel them. Any direction now?"

Another question toward Nagini. "For her it's the same as for me - stronger than at the center point, that's all she can say."

"C'mon - fourth point." The air popped into the empty space where Lupin had disappeared.

Waiting the second, Harry followed. He came out staggering, sick and dizzy, registering Nagini's voice like from a distance. "Master - over there!"

Where??

Then his vision cleared, and Harry saw Nagini's head pointing.

Lupin had watched, didn't need Harry's translation, was already stepping forward, ducked low in this narrow path. Feeling a metallic taste in his mouth, Harry followed.

Passing over the separator wall to the next scene section, they saw it - almost instantly, just when Nagini hissed, "There, Master - two of them."

Two huge figures, cloaked, dark, invisible faces - just at the end of the section, where the track went through the next u-turn at the end of eighty feet straight, and a two-seater cart was rolling along, right now passing the middle part where the track was roughed up to give the passengers a rattling shake as part of the scene.

Too late for what they had planned, maybe even too late altogether - in fifteen seconds, the cart would pass the u-turn, right between the two figures, illuminated by a dark-violet spotlight ...

Harry saw Lupin frozen in ultimate concentration, then the scene around him faded, his own mind calming, steady, pushing away the expectation of a scene with his parents alive, focussing on the scene with his parents dead but in full action, under the brilliant arc ...

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

His eyes open again, Harry watched the golden cloud erupt from his wand, almost bursting into another one, condensing, forming a centaur, the fraction of a second after a magnificent wolf had taken shape.

Soundlessly, the thundering only in Harry's ears, the centaur raced down the track, closing in on the wolf, reaching it when they passed the cart at either side, ten feet before the u-turn, crashing into the figures.

This unearthly, piercing scream - doubled, worse than anything Muggle technology could install ... Stopping abruptly, the figures collapsing to both sides while the echo still was tingling in Harry's ears.

A slight bump, when the cart hit the lower part of one figure, pushing it aside, then the cart jerked around through the u-turn, was gone.

The two Patronuses came racing back together, looked at their masters, looked at each other, and disappeared.

Lupin exhaled. "C'mon, Harry - let's move the corpses out of the way."

Awakening from his own trance, Harry jumped to the other end of the section. However, it was Lupin who used some moving spells to shift the cloaked bundles aside, out of the path while the next cart came already approaching.

They jumped outside. Lupin seized his cellular phone to talk with the headquarters in St. Louis while Harry checked around, listened around, to see whether he could locate the passengers.

There! "... wolf, and a horse, but with a man's body ... And that scream ... Wow, man, that's ..."

Checking closer, Harry saw two teenagers, a boy and a girl, apparently still shaky, although beaming - they had seen quite a show for their money.

Would other passengers come to complain that this spectacular scene could no longer be seen? ... Not his problem. Harry returned to Lupin, who said, "They wanted to meet us in Six Flags, but I told them we could as well meet at the headquarters - seems as if they're not completely used to the logistics of apparation. Well, not too surprising if you cannot ... Let's go, Terry."

"No, wait - first another round. If they attack simultaneously at several places ..."

"Then we'll be too late." But Lupin followed, speeding along the portkey chain until they reached Ride'n'Joy without having noticed anything else.

The two FBI agents listened to Lupin's description of the events. Then agent Ellis asked, "Okay, Mr. Walgrave, what does it mean?"

"Tomorrow morning, or maybe this night after Disneyland has closed, you should have some people ready to take care of two dead Dementors ... I'd guess your scientists are quite interested, although I don't think they'll learn something useful."

"Not tonight - it's Saturday evening, other people believe there's a home and a family ... Tomorrow morning's the earliest possibility."

Lupin explained where to find the corpses, while Harry mused about office hours for FBI agents. Apparently, these two were determined to synchronize themselves with his' and Lupin's shift.

Then Agent Chipman asked, "Does your strategy still hold?"

"Today we had no time for anything else," replied Lupin. "But we'll continue - they'll come again, and maybe next time ..."

Harry had found time for thinking it over. He said, "No - probably not."

Heads were turning to him.

"We saw them, and we saw the cart coming closer, and that's why we sent our Patronuses to kill them. But what if they weren't planning the Kiss of Death?"

Talking about it, Harry's certainty grew with every word. "I mean, not at this moment. Maybe they had planned to feed on the emotions for the next hour, and this was just the place they selected ... There's a cart every minute - we'd never know what's going to happen if the cart passes them."

Lupin looked thoughtful. "Yeah - they look perfectly normal in that environment, for a normal visitor, that is ..."

After a short discussion, they agreed to continue the patrol and to wait for a second chance. There was a common agreement that it wouldn't take too long, while almost everybody offered another opinion about why the Dementors had selected Disneyland for the third time.

"It's the largest," said Agent Ellis. "They can feed more than anywhere else."

"It's more spacious than the others - just more convenient," said Harry.

"Whatever," said Lupin, "they don't think in our categories. If they come again, it might be any of the six parks."

Nobody expected another attack in the same night - even so, all four of them felt a pressure to end the discussion and to let Harry and Lupin continue their patrol.

However, the rest of this shift went by without any further event, and Harry had time to reconsider the evening, swearing to himself that he would not again eat that many sandwiches while on patrol.

* * *

Coming down to breakfast next morning, Harry found Lupin's seat empty, also that of Almyra. There was little doubt, the two were using the services of a luxury hotel for a leisurely Sunday morning breakfast in bed.

The sting of envy hurt surprisingly much, considering the fact that this was the second day already. Which meant - Harry's tolerance with his own situation wasn't growing, quite the contrary ... Well, he'd never guessed.

Next moment, his grumpiness was gone because he saw another visitor, obviously waiting for him - Marie-Christine.

She stood up. "Good morning, Terry. I thought it might be a good idea to visit you ..." Marie-Christine's eyes studied his face, anxiously awaiting his reaction.

Harry greeted her in French style, with kisses on both cheeks. "That was a wonderful idea - I'm glad to see you ... You look marvellous."

"That early in the morning?" Marie-Christine smiled. "But it's nice to hear that - from you."

Harry smiled back. "I had time to calm down - quite a lot, actually. I don't blame you ... For nothing."

Marie-Christine flushed a bit. "Be careful with what you're saying."

They were interrupted by the waiter. To Harry's surprise, Marie-Christine ordered tea - probably with respect to the coloured water they called coffee here. Then he assured, "I know exactly what I'm saying - and I think you know what I mean ... You're the only one aiming straight ahead in this mess ... I realized that some time ago, and this is the opportunity to tell you."

"Am I?" Marie-Christine looked a bit wondering. "Then how come I feel guilty?"

Harry grinned. "Must be the company you're in - from my perspective, you're alone with that feeling."

"Thank you - er, Terry, I appreciate that a lot ... Still, I'd like to help you - the two of you."

"The two of us? ... Marie-Christine, your terminology isn't quite up-to-date, I'd say."

"Stop joking! It is - you know that it is, as good as I know, and Cho knows."

"Does she?" Harry sobered up. "I could do with some help - for example to find out what Cho expects from me, or what's her idea of being together."

"I can ask her ... And you - what do you expect? From her, or from you being together?"

Harry took his time for answering. "Well - being together, more often than twice a year ... And without fighting constantly - I have to fight all the time, I don't need that in my spare time."

Marie-Christine looked thoughtfully. "Okay, Terry, I'll tell her that ... By the way, how's your fight running?"

Harry glanced around. "I have some other questions to you in that context - but not here, somewhere more privately."

Marie-Christine's expression grew slightly self-conscious. "But not your suite."

"Why not?"

"Erm - it's a bit inappropriate ... Too risky."

Harry stared at her in disbelief. "What are you thinking of me? Do you expect me to grab you the moment the door closes behind us?"

Marie-Christine smiled. "Maybe not ... Maybe it's not you I'm afraid of - or maybe I don't want to say, I spoke with him for a while - by the way, his suite is splendid ... Whatever."

Harry laughed. "Okay, then I'll show you another place - after the breakfast, meals are precious these days."

Looking around, Marie-Christine asked, "Where's Lupin? And Almyra?"

"Probably in bed - possibly for breakfast."

Marie-Christine grinned. "See what I mean? These luxury hotels ..."

Sitting and chewing and listening, Harry learned that Marie-Christine had heard from Almyra about him being here, that Marie-Christine was busy with her own project, happy with her work and the conditions - and that she and Cho were seeing each other not too often - at least less frequently than some time before.

Breakfast done, Harry told Marie-Christine to follow outside, marched ahead, approaching a waste-basket where he stopped. "Alright then, what shall it be? I can offer Riverside, Cheyenne, St. Louis, and Nashville - the rest's still beyond reach. But if you want to see Disneyland, we can do it in two steps."

Marie-Christine beamed. "Hey - super, Terry, that's quite some progress ... Erm - yes, I'd like to see Disneyland."

Harry spelled the waste-basket as a one-timer to Six Flags, feeling satisfied to see the effect gone after Marie-Christine had disappeared. After a similar manoeuver with another waste-basket, they stood in Disneyland, where it was two o'clock in the afternoon, with lots of people walking through the park.

Harry pointed toward the large building. "There - yesterday evening, we found two Dementors ... We had to kill them, there was no time to talk with them."

Marie-Christine looked startled. "My God ... And now?"

"We'll continue - there'll be more."

"I wonder whether I should tell Cho."

Harry looked astonished. "What's the problem?"

"It'll drive her crazy ... You should have seen her, after she'd heard about your patrol - hunting Dementors in narrow places, after some people were found brain-dead ... She's worrying, 'arry, what do you think?"

Hearing that, he felt incredibly pleased.

"And aside from that - she's fighting also with her own sense of guilt ... 'arry, your defense tactics are taking quite some effect, yes they do."

"Defense tactics??"

"Sure - first the money ... Then that bottle ... Then that letter from Ginny, and now you're doing a good work for both Muggles and wizards, and by some accident, your residence is just here in - er, not here, in Santa Monica ... Expertly plotted, by all means."

Harry suppressed the question he had in mind, feeling sure he knew the answer already. "Only the bottle's my own work - yes, and selecting Santa Monica as our place. The letter was Ginny's idea, and this patrol - after we've been asked, the answer was obvious, wasn't it?"

"Yes, probably. But for her, the perspective's different, that's what I'm trying to explain."

"So she feels guilty ... Doesn't seem to help much."

"No, it doesn't - more the opposite." Marie-Christine sighed. "Why don't you visit her, and wait what's going to happen?"

At least, the thought was no longer turning Harry's mind to a raging fury, or his bones to jelly. "Yes, I might try that - but first some other things must be out of the way ... Marie-Christine, I want to ask you something about Voldemort ..."

Harry explained what Paul had found out, and that he would start searching Voldemort with the help of private investigators, scanning an area which was small compared to the country but large enough to waste time and money. He finished, "Dumbledore said your psychological profiles were the best ... Well, if you have another one, I'd like to hear it."

"What a story ..." Marie-Christine looked impressed. "So he has moved out of England ... Yes, maybe because the effect of his plot was stronger here - or maybe just to have some distance between him and you ..."

Harry didn't believe that.

"... or because Wormtail's still his servant, and his face is known by some people in England - all this together, in any mix ... 'arry - I'm guessing as wild as anyone, but I'd look for a solitary house, some forest around or near enough, not too far from the next town. That's how he lived until his parents' house blew up, so that's what I'd expect now."

Harry nodded. "Okay. I'll tell them to look for such houses first."

"That's all I can tell you - probably not more than you'd have guessed by yourself."

"Maybe so. But you know how it is - if you're too close, you can miss the obvious forever."

Marie-Christine smiled. "Sounds as if you just changed the subject, 'arry."

Then he was told that no, she couldn't apparate yet, so Harry had to make two portkeys back to Santa Monica before saying goodbye to Marie-Christine.

* * *

Harry jumped to Fort Fun, the place where his (T) plate hung. He took it off and jumped to Six Flags. A portkey to Riverside, seventeen hundred miles, would be his next milestone.

But first, he sat for a while inside the building, thinking about what Marie-Christine had said. If it hadn't been Sunday, with Cho certainly not in her office, or if he had known where she lived, he would have jumped right now ... Wasn't it crazy? He didn't know her address!

Harry promised himself - mastering the portkey, getting the Pinkertons running, then he would visit her.

With this decision taken, he felt quieter than in weeks. Should be a good omen for his portkey programming.

Unfortunately, it wasn't.

After a dozen failed attempts, Harry stopped, sat down again. It felt as though he'd come across a barrier. Yes, the distance was greater than before, only what was so special about hundred miles more? What kind of barrier could that be?

Thinking about other barriers, Harry became aware that an apparating body - assuming light speed was also the limiting speed for apparition - would need about a hundredth of a second to pass the distance. How far did the earth globe rotate in this time period? Couldn't be much ... After some calculation, Harry realized with surprise that it was no less than five yards. Could this cause the misdirection in his spell?

Thinking about the globe, it occurred to him that the globe's curvature played quite a role in a connection between two points that far apart. A direct line would be - how deep in the ground, in the middle between both points? His math wasn't enough, while just by guesswork, Harry came up with several miles. He gasped - was that his problem? Did he try to send himself through rock level?

How did an apparating body go from here to there? Harry didn't know, anyway not through the air, so much for sure. Then not through rock level either - but still, physical factors had to be taken into account.

With a totally different perception, thinking in arcs rather than straight lines, Harry tried again.

It worked!!

It worked also the other way around, and it worked from Riverside to Nashville, and to Atlanta - and minutes later, Harry's (O) plate in the Ride'n'Joy building was operative.

For another test, he gave his (T) plate a new meaning - Ile de la Tortue. Moments later, he found himself on the island, jumped back quickly before anyone would detect him.

A final test - from Riverside to Hogwarts. Yes it worked, it worked, it worked!

Harry felt like dancing, then he recognized that his legs, still more his mind, were exhausted. Portkey programming long-distance style seemed hard work. This was why, after lunch with Lupin and Almyra, he called the reception to wake him at half past two, then fell down on his bed for an afternoon nap - the first he could remember.

When he came down into the lobby, he was told that Almyra had returned to Hogwarts.

The only remarkable event in their shift was Lupin's comment, after a beaming Harry had pointed to the (O) plate and had said, "Here - from now on, we can rotate - twice per minute across a continent, if we touch the plates quickly enough."

Lupin touched it, disappeared, awaited him in Disneyland. "Congratulations, Harry ... Now that it's done, I can tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"After you signed for this project, with me as your nominal tutor, I contacted some people to learn a few facts about portkey programming. And they told me - for distances beyond thousand miles, it needs a team of two or three wizards, because a single one cannot master the power ... And sometimes, it takes them a day or more to manage - seems to be a problem of synchronzation, all three of them cursing at exactly the same moment."

Lupin grinned. "At first, I thought I should warn you. Then, I remembered that you're the owner of a very undecent super wand - and I thought, let's wait and see ... And I was right - so, as I said, congratulations."

* * *

Next day, Harry prepared the ground for his Pinkerton visit. It started with a visit to the two FBI agents, whom he asked how to proceed in this issue. They told him that Pinkerton could be found everywhere, with their headquarters in Chicago, Illinois, which belonged to the same time zone as St. Louis.

Agent Ellis made a few phone calls, then looked up at Harry. "It's settled, Mr. Pritchard. You have an appointment tomorrow at two o'clock with a Mr. Burns - Richard Burns. His office is in their headquarters."

"Thank you, sir. This Mr. Burns - who is he?"

The FBI agent showed a dry smile. "He's pretty high in the ranks - and what's more important, he'll understand what you're talking about if you'll tell him that this is a confidential job, and a tricky one."

"What does he know about you, or the FBI?"

Agent Ellis smiled a bit more. "Enough, Mr. Pritchard ... It'll work as agreed - we have a deal, and you won't find a reason to complain."

Harry was ready to believe that, however he still had another question. "Say - did your scientists find out anything about the Dementors?"

"No, nothing. According to what they said, these corpses might have been rotting for weeks, except that the usual stench was missing ... For them it's a mystery." The FBI agent looked as though expecting Harry to know more.

But he didn't. "Mr. Dumbledore may know details - I never felt interested to learn more about the background of Dementors."

After saying goodbye, Harry took a cab to the St. Louis Linkport, had to wait a while for the next gate to Chicago, where he took another cab to the Pinkerton headquarters.

A skyscraper, with Pinkerton occupying about a dozen floors. And here, Harry found an interesting information - the full company name was *Pinkerton - Burns, Security Inc.*. Well, if this contact wasn't high in the ranks, then he didn't know.

Having seen the place, feeling sure that he could reach his appointment tomorrow via apparition, Harry jumped back to the Sheraton Hotel.

During their shift, he and Lupin were more on alert than usual - two days after the accident seemed a good time for some other Dementors, coming to see what was going on. But they had no unplanned visitors.

In the breaks, Harry developed a habit of high-speed meditation, by transfiguring into the sphere state for a moment. The effect was remarkable - after four hours, he still looked fresh and clean while Lupin showed heavy signs of mental exhaustion. Examining his partner more closely, Harry said, "You look bad, Seamus. You ought to do the same - a moment of sphere state's enough to recover from the stress."

"Brilliant idea - with just a minor problem." Lupin grimaced. "I cannot."

This werewolf used the traditional method for his transfiguration, had never seen a reason to learn what Almyra called the digital method. Harry felt pity. "Wanna longer break? I can do a round or two alone."

"No, thanks ... And don't get confused by my looks - remember, I'm just older than you, quite a bit, actually."

Harry smiled, feeling relieved. As long as Lupin could give such replies, he was probably right. And his teacher started using the breaks a bit more systematically, with five minutes' meditations of the conventional method. When they had finished the last round for the night, they looked equally tired.

* * *

Next day, Harry had just made his first step into a large office with wonderful antique furniture when a huge grandfather clock chimed two.

A man in his early sixties, two steel-blue eyes in a reddish, weather-beaten face, rose behind his desk. "Mr. Potter - you're on time to the second, this is always a good beginning."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Burns ... This was the easy part, because I've been here yesterday to find this building, so I didn't depend on traffic conditions."

"You - apparated, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now that you've been in my office, you could apparate into this room any time - is this correct?"

"Yes, I could do that."

"Then, Mr. Potter ..." the man looked in mock desperation, "please tell me how a security company like ours could protect their secrets against people with your skill."

"Oh, that's simple." Harry explained how an interference charm protected Hogwarts against apparition and portkeys.

Mr. Burns said, "I didn't know that - which tells me that my magical consultants are not quite the experts they claimed to be ..."

Harry had the feeling these experts were in for an unpleasant conversation.

"... and I owe you, Mr. Potter. What can Pinkerton do for you?"

"Excuse me, sir - how much information did you already get?"

Mr. Burns examined Harry for a moment, then said, "I got the best file about you that exists - please note that I'm avoiding the term *complete*, Mr. Potter. I was told that you have a very special kind of support by the FBI, that you have an order for us ... and that you can pay." The last words came with a smile.

"Yes, sir ... Well, I want to find a man, and I need your help to find him."

"And then?"

For an instant, Harry looked blank.

"If Pinkerton is ordered to find a man, and this man exists, we'll find him, Mr. Potter. What will happen then?"

Now it was Harry's turn to examine his host, with more than just eyes. This done, he said, "I'll kill him."

Mr. Burns didn't blink. "Does the FBI know about your intentions?"

"Oh yes, definitely ... I had a lot of trouble to stop them from searching him by themselves, sir - and this is already part of the complications which play a role in this case ..."

Mr. Burns waited for Harry to continue.

"The man's name is Voldemort. In the wizarding world, he's known as the Dark Lord - until some time ago, he was called The Man Who Must Not be Named ... The problem is - this man must not become aware that someone's searching for him, in particular not that it's me. If he'd find out, he'd kill your - your people ..."

"Field agents is the term, Mr. Potter."

"... your field agents, thank you, and knowing that it's me, he'd disappear to another place, this time without leaving a trace."

"So he knows you, knows what you have in mind - and strangely enough, both of you seem to agree upon the possible outcome."

"Yes, sir. I'm the only person he cannot kill - he'd kill himself when trying, and he knows what will happen if we meet again ... I promised him a year ago."

"Aha ... But you can kill him, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, I do. Voldemort thinks it would kill me too, but there's no doubt about his own fate in such a case."

"Is he right?"

"Probably yes - without precautions. But I feel quite confident to prove him wrong, sir."

"That's good to hear." With a friendly face, while otherwise totally serious, the Pinkerton host asked, "Still - would you mind a payment in advance?"

Harry presented his best smile. "Not at all ... Is a million okay?"

Mr. Burns still didn't blink. "Let's say, a half ... Mr. Potter, after reading that file about you, I was wondering a bit ... But I have to admit, it's accurate, although incomplete - I could already add some important facts."

"Hmmm." Harry tried to read in this face with these incredibly blue eyes. "If that's been a compliment, then ..."

The man laughed, loudly and openly. "No, Mr. Potter - and it's been quite a while since someone suspected me of compliments."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Burns."

"There's no reason, young man - I feel pleased, really ..." Mr. Burns looked into a folder, looked up again. "Are you interested to hear what I'd add, Mr. Potter?"

"Certainly, sir - I'd be interested in the complete file, to be honest."

"I can summarize it for you. It's the FBI file of course, I'm sure you guessed that already. It lists the known facts - nothing you wouldn't know as well, or better ... Then it contains a skill profile, and a psychological profile, both of them written by the agents Ellis and Chipman. You know your own skills, so what's left is the psych profile." Mr. Burns smiled. "In short - they say you're determined, honest, challenging ... And they strongly recommend to take each of your words seriously, and not to confuse you with a graduate student."

Even so - hearing about himself, Harry felt as pleased as the next-best graduate student.

"So I was forewarned ... What's missing, Mr. Potter, and what I would add, besides some minor details - you're taking decisions fearlessly and at an astonishing speed ... I'm not bad in that game myself, so you can trust my judgment."

"Well ..."

The man smiled. "You're suspecting me again, am I right? ... No, Mr. Potter - many people are similarly fast, but there's a short moment in which you can see it working in their faces - which means they have to fight with themselves."

Harry looked surprised. "Mr. Burns, I fight with myself quite a lot."

"Of course - when you have the time, but not in a confrontation, under immediate pressure ... If you're ever looking for a job, Mr. Potter, Pinkerton would welcome you - and now we'll start to show you that we are up to our reputation."

Mr. Burns made some phone calls. Minutes later, three men had gathered in the office, now sitting in comfortable chairs, looking expectantly.

Mr. Burns came around his desk. "What you see here, Mr. Customer, are three Pinkerton agents who, from my judgement, would qualify equally well to perform your project. But in my experience, the chemistry between contractor and customer plays an important role, that's why I'd like you to select your choice out of ..."

He pointed. "... Mr. Chaykin ..."

A middle-aged man, outwardly unremarkable, looking expressionless.

"... Mr. Lopez ..."

The oldest of the three, furrowed face which might have been staring into a few more glasses than appropriate, somehow looking burned-out.

"... and Mr. Hickox."

A young face, looking expectant, and confident.

"You may ask them questions, Mr. Customer, or just go by the looks. Take your time."

Recovering from his surprise, Harry regretted for a moment not having brought Nagini with him. Then he concentrated on his own senses - his eyes, his *haragei*. Silently, he studied the three candidates, registering their appearance, how they were reacting to his examination, what he could feel, while imagining them how they were walking around to look for Voldemort.

Three minutes later, Harry nodded toward the oldest. "Mr. Lopez, please."

The agent looked up. "Yes, sir?"

"No - I mean, I had no question ... You're my choice."

Mr. Burns reacted instantly. "Thank you, gentlemen - except for Mr. Lopez, of course."

While the other two left, Harry could watch how the initial disbelief in the agent's face faded, making room for expectation, and also suspicion.

Then Mr. Burns turned to him. "Mr. Potter, would you tell me how you took your choice, and what made your decision - if that's okay with you?"

"Sure ... I used something which is called *haragei* ..."

Yes, Mr. Burns had heard about that.

"... and Mr. Lopez had two advantages over the other candidates, which I think are crucial in this task."

Harry had the full attention of both men. "Mr. Lopez wasn't waiting to prove how good he is - like Mr. Hickox, and he seems to know what can happen if something goes wrong - that was missing in Mr. Chaykin ... Mr. Lopez knows what it means to be scared, and that's the most important prerequisite."

"Very remarkable." Mr. Burns grinned toward his agent. "That's your day, Francesco - and mine too." He turned toward Harry. "There are some people who think my brain's softening, for keeping Francesco Lopez - but I figure I still know what I'm doing ... Allright, Mr. Potter, you've found your partner in this contract - now tell him what it's all about."

Then Harry was escorted by Mr. Lopez into another office, some floors below, much smaller, not luxurious at all - for him, who was used to Goblins' offices, fine as well.

"Please sit down, Mr. Potter ... And now, if you please, tell me why I'll have reason to be scared."

Harry told him - the headline, the outline, the details, until the clock showed him that his shift was due in some minutes. "I have to go, Mr. Lopez ... How shall we continue?"

"I still have a million questions, Mr. Potter - I want you to tell me everything you know, everything that happened ... Can we continue tomorrow? Here, or at your ..."

"Here's okay - I can travel faster than you."

It earned him an envious smile. They agreed to meet in this office tomorrow at ten o'clock, which was eight o'clock in California, so they also agreed to start with a breakfast.

* * *

Returning to the Sheraton Hotel, Harry found Lupin waiting in the lobby. The teacher's face was tense. "I'd rather you wouldn't wait till the last minute, Terry."

"Sorry - I talked with the Pinkerton people since two o'clock - their time. What's wrong with you?"

"Today we'll have visitors, that's wrong."

"You think so?"

Lupin grimaced. "I'm almost sure. This is the third day after we killed two of them - they didn't come yesterday, so it'll be this night ... What's more, I won't be surprised to find more

than one team. Terry - if I'm right, they'll attack simultaneously at several places, and that's why we have to change our technique."

"And how?"

"If we find some of them, we kill them, make sure the track's free, and jump to the next place. We talk with the FBI people when there's time - after we've found all places empty for a full round, or two ... And forget about negotiating with the Dementors - it takes too long ..."

"But then it'll never stop!"

Lupin shook his head. "I thought it through. If I'm right - if we find visitors, then I'll talk with Dumbledore, tomorrow morning Hogwarts time. Dumbledore has to visit the nests and tell them - either they stop harassing Muggles, or the two of us will raid the nest ... The original plan, only that we'll send our Headmaster rather than a Dementor."

Harry had time to think it over, and to wonder why his friend and teacher suddenly behaved like the male version of Professor Trelawney - until shortly past seven west coast time, when the events caused him to drop any parallel to divination.

They were pausing in Ride'n'Joy, outside the building. Harry had just returned from his sphere state when Nagini's hissing reached his ear. "Master, there are Dementors coming closer."

Harry shook Lupin to break his partner's meditation trance, then asked his snake, "Where? Can you locate them?"

"Not exactly - maybe in a moment."

Lupin didn't wait, had a better idea how to find them. He froze in a moment of concentration, then the familiar golden cloud erupted from his wand, condensing to a wolf.

The magnificent shape stood motionless for an instant, not even the ears moving - then it shot forward, around the corner of the building.

Lupin turned to Harry. "Jump - and if you sense something, don't lose time, let your Patronus find them ... We'll meet here again."

Harry touched the (O) sign, came out in the Disneyland building, feeling the creeping cold like a blow in his face. He only heard the first words of Nagini's remark, then he was already concentrating for his own memory.

The golden centaur formed, looked at him. "There are Dementors, master."

"Kill them."

The man horse disappeared through the wooden wall. Seconds later, Harry could feel how the terrible cold broke, faded, while a muffled sound reached his ears, barely distinguishable from the other noises in this building.

Still waiting for his Patronus, Harry twisted when suddenly Lupin appeared only feet away.

Lupin just asked, "You okay?" waiting another second for a confirming nod before he jumped forward along the portkey chain to reach Atlanta.

An instant later, the centaur returned. "Two Dementors, master, which are dead now. There is nothing else."

"Thank you - and I think we'll see each other in a while."

The centaur just bowed - rearing on its hind legs was impossible in this narrow space, then it disappeared.

Harry went to the control center, notified the people there that they should run a check whether the track was still free, and that they would find two corpses somewhere, then he jumped to Atlanta - via apparition, not even taking the time to reach his own portkey.

The College Park building was clear.

Reaching point (3) in the Cumberland Park building, Harry met Lupin again, apparently missing another wolf Patronus by seconds.

"I'm okay, Terry ... I'll tell the people - go ahead, and wait in Riverside after a full round without new Dementors."

Six Flags was empty, also Fort Fun, and Ride'n'Joy had been cleaned minutes before. Going through another round immediately, Harry found all six places clear.

Five minutes later, Lupin arrived.

"Terry, do you know where in the Disneyland building the corpses are lying?"

"No, I didn't see them. I told those people to check for a clear track."

"Okay ... I'd say those here are the most urgent ones - they're lying outside, scaring the Muggles no end. I'll call our friends from the FBI - can you do another round without me, until I've talked with them?"

"Sure - if we don't have to locate them, it's easy going."

No, he didn't have to locate them - after passing Disneyland which still was clean, and jumping to the College Park in Atlanta, Harry came out just in front of two other Dementors.

The impact from their emanation was so strong, Harry felt dizzy, like hit on the head. With the cloaked figures only feet away, there wasn't time enough to conjure his Patronus - the closest figure made a step forward, had almost reached him when he found the presence of mind to touch the (1) plate.

Had they realized what he'd been doing? Could they use portkeys? To be on the safe side, Harry jumped further to point (3) before sending his Patronus.

Feeling certain to find more Dementors in some other parks, he just waited until the centaur was back, had disappeared, before racing forward through the portkey chain.

Nothing in the Cumberland Park, where Lupin had stopped an attack minutes before.

Nothing in Six Flags - surprise, he'd been almost sure.

But Fort Fun had visitors, thank God not as close as the previous ones. Harry conjured another Patronus, sent him out, waited for his return after registering the change with his senses, and notified the maintenance people.

Attacks in all places except Six Flags - why not there? ... Rather than advancing in his tour, Harry jumped back via apparition, and then he knew why. For some reason, they had arrived a few minutes later.

When this centaur had returned and disappeared, Harry felt another kind of dizziness, like after hours of hard thinking. Apparently, a Patronus in full action drained a considerable amount of energy - conjuring them up went faster with each time, but it was obviously his own power they used to carry out his order.

Returning to Riverside, Harry found Lupin still talking into his cellular phone. He touched the teacher's arm. "Tell them - attacks in all places ... Always twin teams."

Lupin's eyes widened for an instant, then he passed the information further, finished his call quickly to check Harry. "You look a bit groggy ... Get yourself some chocolate, I'll do the next round alone."

Harry had just returned with some candy bars when Lupin appeared again. "I've seen the two in College Park - must have been a real surprise, coming out there."

"Oh yes - as if you'd jumped into a deep-temperature freezer. Say, can Dementors use portkeys?"

"I'm not sure ... Probably yes, but if they didn't recognize them - after all, Dementors are not particularly clever."

Dumb or not, Harry had seen - or felt - enough Dementors for the night. However, there weren't any others until the end of their shift - one team per place, certainly not a random pattern.

After they had finished the last tour in Ride'n'Joy, Lupin turned to Harry. "It's eight o'clock in the morning in Hogwarts - I'm going to talk with Dumbledore, to send him toward these nests ... Could be he wants me to join him - if I'm not back in time, you're on your own." Lupin passed the cellular phone over. "Here - your contact to the FBI ... Be careful."

"You too - and don't expect me during the day, I'll be in another meeting with the Pinkerton people."

Back in his Sheraton Hotel suite, Harry had just ordered two club sandwiches at the room service when the cellular phone beeped. The call came from agent Chipman, telling him that the corpses would be taken care of, and asking him some questions about how he and Lupin had managed. Harry told her it had been pretty simple, in a way - after having dropped any attempt to talk with them. Then, as quickly as possible without being too impolite, he finished the phone conversation.

The information she had given him was not really important. For all he knew, this Muggle woman had simply tried to recover from a mental gasp - after witnessing how two wizards, within minutes, had defeated an attack that spanned a continent. Harry could understand her feelings, might have liked talking longer with her, but not that late in the night, not while two sandwiches were waiting for him.

Today, they tasted *deserved* - better than ever before. The price of a sandwich in the Sheraton Hotel was tremendous by any standard, but the prices for those served after midnight were astronomical. Remembering today's patrol, Harry relished every bite.

* * *

After a night shorter than agreeable, Harry found his next food in the cafeteria of the Pinkerton headquarters in Chicago - a place in which Francesco Lopez was ready to talk about a customer's business, after telling Harry that scanning the large room for electronical bugs was part of the daily cleaning routine.

This out of the way, the Pinkerton detective suggested to call each other by their first names.

Harry agreed gladly.

"Well then, Harry - before I'll squeeze you for every detail you know or will remember, let me summarize what we're talking about. We are looking for a wizard called Voldemort, somewhere near Boston, Massachusetts. Most likely, he lives in a house at some remote place, and if it's more of a castle, then the better. He lives there since October last year. This we have to do without him getting wind of our doing - for the better of you, and most of all for the better of ourselves, because he'd kill our agent without even asking ... That right so far?"

"Yes. Most likely, he hasn't been seen around - Voldemort doesn't like to appear in public, especially not with his new body."

Francesco Lopez twisted a bit when hearing the expression *new body* - something he wasn't used to. "That might even make it simpler - someone living in a house, and never seen in town - people register something like that."

"Not necessarily - he has a servant, his name is Peter Pettigrew, also called Wormtail, and I'd think Wormtail is doing Voldemort's errands. But if that's true, it shouldn't be too difficult to remember him."

The detective grinned. "That ugly?"

"No, but his left hand is silvery. I'd expect him to wear gloves all the time, at least at the left hand."

"Silvery? An artificial hand?"

"Yes. Voldemort gave it to him, after his own hand was used for Voldemort's new body."

Francesco Lopez' appetite wasn't diminished the least by this news, except that he glanced toward his customer with palpable suspicion.

Harry assured him it was the truth, and he would tell the story of this event first thing after breakfast - for something like that, this place seemed a bit too public, or Mugglese.

However, their first action after the breakfast was a visit in what Francesco called the *Designer Studio*. A room with a large computer screen, from which Harry had to select facial parts for Voldemort and Wormtail - one after the other, from forehead, to eyes, nose, mouth, chin, each part separately, to check the final result with great surprise, and only minor corrections left.

This was even true for Voldemort's picture, although first Harry had to tell the operator how to modify the nose that came closest to what he remembered. Pinkerton's facial database, large as it was, did not cover a face like Voldemort's by prototypes.

Then, until he had to leave for his patrol, Harry was talking. First he told Francesco all his encounters with Voldemort. Then he told him what other people were thinking of the dark lord, and of the events. Then the detective went through each event with many more questions, closing gaps in his understanding, digging one or the other detail, which had been missing before, out of Harry's memory.

He did so with great thoroughness, and when they finished, Harry said, "Yesterday I just thought I'd taken the right choice, but today I'm sure ... Your interrogation technique is quite impressive."

The detective grinned wryly. "Most of my colleagues think it's outdated - they like playing with electronic tools, and some of them think they could do everything in front of a computer."

"And you?"

"I think the most reliable database is an old lady, peeking through the window all day long, watching her neighbours - and every stranger passing town. You need an access code for them like for every computer database, and this code can only be found in a nice little chat ... But it takes a bit longer, that's true."

Thinking about his deal, Harry asked, "And the FBI database? Will it be of any help for you?"

"Maybe yes, maybe not." Francesco smiled. "Harry - I didn't say I detest computers, so I'll use them as good as I can. But scanning a computer database is homework, something you do *after* you've found a name, or a fact, and *before* you go and ask the neighbourhood." Then he grinned mischievously. "And I'll use it for a few questions I had for a while - after wrapping them artfully in some crap ... Don't get me wrong - I can play with databases, I just don't think a computer can replace a private eye's common sense."

They agreed that the detective would contact Harry as soon as he had found a temporary residence near Boston, and that Harry would pass by in regular intervals - to answer questions, to filter out candidates, or to disqualify them.

Returning to the hotel, Harry was greeted by a yawning Lupin. "Dumbledore's on tour - if we're lucky, today is our last patrol."

"And if not?"

"Then it takes him longer, and we have to do still another one tomorrow."

"No - I mean, what if Dumbledore cannot convince them?"

"Oh, that - there's little question, after yesterday's dozen didn't return. I'm sure they'll resist the temptation in the future."

"Didn't Dumbledore ask for your company?"

"I offered him, but he wanted to travel alone." Seeing Harry's glance, Lupin added, "He cannot do a Golden Patronus, but he's not defenseless ... Okay, let's go before I fall asleep."

The patrol went exactly as expected - eventless, boring, seemingly endless before it was finally midnight west coast time.

* * *

Next morning, after breakfast, Lupin jumped to Hogwarts, came back after fifteen minutes, relief in his face. "It's done, Ha - er, Terry. We still have to inform our federal friends, and then back home ..." Lupin looked around. "Has been a nice place, but I've seen enough hotel suites for the next time."

"Er - can you visit them alone? I'd like to do another visit, before returning to Hogwarts."

Lupin grinned. "Not Pinkerton, huh? ... That's okay - I wish you luck, and may you find the right words."

"Yeah - thank you, I'll try my best ... See you later."

"No - tomorrow, because I'll arrive in Hogwarts when it's time to sleep, and that'll be incredibly fine with me."

A human mind could play strange tricks - particularly so in times of emotional pressure. Facing a visit of the difficult kind, Harry had to find a way how to deal with his luggage, and his snake. He could leave it in his suite - except that the suite would then be occupied until after noon, meaning it had to be paid for another day. And while Harry hadn't cared about its price all these days, he didn't like this idea.

He could just jump to Hogwarts, drop luggage and snake in his dormitory, and jump back to Santa Monica, couldn't he?

Not at all - touching Hogwarts ground before the visit would lose him a mysterious momentum, would destroy his chances, or his own perception, in an inexplicable way.

So Harry draped Nagini around his body, took his suitcase, and damned if he looked ridiculous.

The reception lady at *Groucho Sectors* was either well trained in good manners, or used to wizarding habits, or both. She smiled at Harry, admired the brilliant-green snake, and passed him further to a dragon's ante-room dragon.

Harry felt reminded of visits at *Magical Tours* - this company here seemed to grow fast.

He had entered the secretary's room and was about to explain his determination to storm a fortress when another door opened and Jesamine came in - apparently notified by the woman behind the desk. "Harry! ... And Nagini - she looks better than yourself, Harry." The ex-teacher for magical creatures smiled. "You wanted to see Cho, am I right?"

"Er - yes."

"What a pity ... She left this morning for a two-week's trip to Narita Industries and Narita Sectors - Japan, Hongkong, San Diego, and Sussex."

Feeling numb, Harry asked, "Sussex?"

"Yes - the little company for the crystal boards, remember? It was your own suggestion."

One day late ... And now he had to wait two weeks at the least, would return to Hogwarts, would fall back into habits and patterns of the previous weeks ... Would he?

Walking to the elevator, and leaving the building, because for some reason he didn't want to jump right from the spot where he stood, another thought crossed Harry's mind. This two-weeks' trip - had it been planned and scheduled long in advance? Or had it been arranged rather quickly, just in the recent days, after Almyra had told Cho some news?

Why didn't he walk back and ask Jesamine?

Very simple - because he was afraid to embarrass someone. Either himself - this would have been still affordable.

Or Cho.

24 - Meeting

The Hogwarts routine, ruling pattern for the last seven years, was giving Harry trouble. Astonishingly much actually, considering the short time he'd been away in a luxury hotel. At closer inspection, however, it became obvious why.

The first problem, gone after some nights, was the day rhythm. Harry suffered from a jet lag *and* from the change in his working hours. Expressed in Hogwarts time, he had worked from ten in the evening till eight in the morning - exactly the time Hogwarts students were expected to sleep.

Then, at a deeper level, lurked a loss of purpose, combined with a feeling as though Harry's new goal was still beyond reach. He felt like someone standing in line with many others, standing on top actually, pushed forward by those behind - while just in front of him opened an abyss, and the other side too far away to be reached with a step, even with a jump. Almost finished, so close to the end, Harry found himself confronted with the risk of failing thoroughly.

His Golden Patronus, for example. It had worked to the greatest success, only that now, after Dumbledore's journey, Harry felt almost sure - never again would he find the need for conjuring up another centaur. A tool used until yesterday, and now it seemed outdated, purposeless.

Then the classes ... Regular schedules hardly offered a meaning for him. Yes, there was still Social Ethics, with Binns going broadside and longside about Muggles versus *Magicals* - the ghost had gladly adopted this new term because it included males, females, *and* ghosts better than any other. For Harry, however, there was little reason in listening - he might have felt more at home in the teacher's position, or as a student presenting the results of a large project, except he didn't feel like investing any work here.

And otherwise ... Potions and Defence against the Dark Arts together stood for his - and Ron's - Poison Balls project. This project was completed, checked off, an issue of the past. Charms, with a small link to Defence, had meant apparating, pursuing, and portkey programming - mastered altogether, checked off as well. Yes, there was still the nominal goal of summoning, only this would be out of reach in the short time left, and nobody would blame Harry for reducing his initial project scope - least of all his teacher, who had benefitted from such a nice chain of portkeys.

Which left Transfiguration together with Care of Magical Creatures - and here the feeling of purpose beyond reach grew dominant. Harry had no clue how to master the last step - from the sphere state to a living dragon. And besides, he couldn't really try it in a classroom, could he?

So what to do all day long?

Biding his time, waiting for news from Francesco Lopez. Biding his time, waiting for some business manager to return from a trip, to be found in her office again. Biding his time, waiting for an inspiration from Heaven how to transfigure into a dragon ... Failing that, waiting for a kick in the small of his back - not from Heaven but from his young teacher.

He was so awfully good at waiting.

* * *

Harry's friends, in sharp contrast, looked happy to see him back, pleased to learn that Harry could program a portkey to any place on earth, and expectant to hear everything about his Dementor patrol, about amusement parks, about life in luxury, Sheraton style.

It filled some time, unfortunately not during classes. Then Ron asked, "Say, are these portkey plates still in place?"

"Oops - you're right, I should go and dismount them, before someone by accident ..."

"No, not yet - I'd like to have a tour through these places, doing a ghost ride, just for fun ... What do you think, would you do me the favour?"

Another tour, at two o'clock in the night, just when Harry had settled back to British time? But the idea had appeal. "And how do you reach the starting point? You haven't been there before, so ..."

Ron looked at Harry with disbelief. "Ain't you the master of all portkeys?"

"Aarrgh!" Harry clapped his forehead. "That was a bad one ... Yes of course, I should get used to it at least as quickly as anyone else."

Hermione said, "You will, Harry, and I'll help you in that ... In ten days or so, we'll travel together to Haiti - with a very special potion for a very special candidate. He has tricked us for the longest time, but this time he's in for a nasty surprise."

"What is it?"

Hermione looked deviously. "I figure I've found out what's wrong with our Monsieur Armodéc, and why the other potions didn't work - and I hope you don't mind if I'll keep it to myself, until we're there." She smiled sweetly. "You know - this way, you don't have to hide your knowledge."

That was fine with Harry. Whatever Hermione had in mind, this would be his last visit on the Ile de la Tortue. Funny - until recently, he had waited for the end of his duty with growing impatience, while now it struck him as just another purpose lost.

Next evening, at supper, Ron asked, "Harry - is tonight okay with you?"

"What?"

His friend suppressed a sharp remark, glanced around carefully. "You know - what we talked about yesterday."

"Oh ..." Startled, Harry followed Ron's example. What he saw were mostly innocent Gryffindors, not knowing what they were talking about - with some notable exceptions aside from Ron.

Hermione, for example, who knew quite well, not caring much, which was somehow remarkable - until taking into account that her own ticket to Haiti was involved, and in the last seven years even Hermione had learned how to bend rules and consciences to mutual benefit.

Ginny, for example, who apparently had been broadcasted through a brotherly channel - a bit to Harry's surprise, but then he realized that this was part of Ron's changed attitude toward his sister. The change had developed during the recent months, after Ron became aware that Ginny's trust and confidence in a brother had a new and challenging alternative.

And, farther down the Gryffindor table, Harry saw a younger girl with burning-red ears. This could only be translated to yes, Rahewa knew something was going on, maybe didn't know exactly what, certainly wasn't sure whether she would be included.

Harry turned to Ron. "Yes, sure - I'll summarize the project." Then he looked pointedly at Ginny. "Us two and you two - right?"

"Huh? ... Oh, yes, of course." This was followed by a deep grin.

Farther down the table, two ears seemed to glow even stronger - well, at least the visible one.

Hermione smiled. "You're an awfully bad company for little girls, Harry."

"That's funny - someone told me older girls are an awfully bad company for me."

Poor Ron, who just had been chewing full-mouthed, tried to avoid a disaster - with the worst result possible. Most of the food spilled over the table, while the rest had found a way into Ron's throat, so he was kept coughing and laughing alternately.

* * *

The four adventurers met at two o'clock in the Entrance Hall, to sneak out noiselessly, wandering toward the Hogwarts Express platform, keeping their voices to an excited whisper until they were sufficiently far away.

Examining the selected lamp pole, Harry thought - if he'd fail now, tomorrow morning it would be Hermione's turn to choke on a joke, hearing about that. But of course it worked, and a minute later the four stood in front of the ghost train building of Ride'n'Joy, Riverside.

One of the maintenance people had noticed them, came hurrying and shouting when they tried to enter the building. Then the man recognized Harry, relaxed, and his expression changed to a grin when one of Harry's twenty-dollar bills, brought for such and other purposes, changed hands.

Inside, Harry turned to his friends. "Let's jump to Disneyland first. It's the largest, and you should have your ride first before looking behind the stage - otherwise you'd spoil the fun."

And so they did, to enter the next two carts - after Harry had shown himself, his identification card from the FBI, and - less obvious - two other of these nice green pieces of heavy-duty paper. Ron and Ginny took the first cart, Harry and Rahewa the second.

Harry's young partner in this journey was squeaking a lot, enjoying the opportunity as much as she could - for once, Rahewa was supposed to be scared, frightened, horrified. When Harry saw her beaming face after coming out through the last swing door, he knew that one ride hadn't been enough. He said, "Let's do the other in Riverside, okay? That's the second largest."

Then, stepping from point to point, Harry took care to deactivate the plates, however without dismounting them. What for - he wouldn't know what to do with them, and not even Rahewa was enough of a souvenir hunter to demand a plate.

Back in Riverside, Harry learned that each of the three others wanted another ride - Rahewa for the thrill, Ginny to see how another park had made things differently, or so she said, and Ron to check how it was made, after he'd seen the inside. At least that was his justification.

And so they stormed two other carts, after Harry had oiled their path to the top of the line, certainly saving half an hour waiting time.

Harry was sitting relaxed, in the sovereign manner of the seen-it-all, and therefore caught by a total surprise when the world suddenly turned upside down. The local wizard had implemented Dumbledore's trick from the exam patrol!

Feeling Rahewa's hands clenched at his body, Harry whispered, "It's okay - this is a magical trick ... Remember what I told you about my exam patrol, how Cho crashed into the tree?"

Rahewa calmed a bit. "Oh ... That's how it feels?"

Outside, she glanced at Harry. "I ... I have to apologize to Cho, only she doesn't know."

"Why's that?"

"When you told me about your patrol, I was thinking, how clumsy she's been - crashing into a tree just because the sky was suddenly on the other side ... Erm - well, I'm a bit wiser now."

Then, of course, they had to pay a visit to the sweets shop - after all, what was an amusement tour without that? Walking back, Harry found his path blocked by a bulky figure. "Good evening, Mr. Pritchard."

Agent Chipman.

"Oh - hello, Miss Chipman ... Erm - yes, I realized that I had forgotten something, and I took the opportunity to show my friends the places ... I'd like to introduce you with Ron Weasley ... Ginny Weasley ... Rahewa Lightfoot ... This is agent Chipman."

The woman grinned. "My name tells your friends enough, huh?"

Harry blushed a bit, remembering their first meeting. "Er - yes, but I left out some details when I told them."

Agent Chipman looked pleased. "Your manners are flawless, Mr. Potter - although the local wizard has a different opinion." The woman had come for two reasons. One was the local

wizard's new implementation, unparalleled so far in the other parks. The second - this wizard had reported something that looked like a trap - Harry's portkeys.

"I'm sorry, madam - but I just deactivated them. They're still in place, but without effect."

The smile faded from the woman's face. "Do you think you'll need them again?"

"Oh, no - I just didn't bother dismounting them, that's all ... No - if our Headmaster says they agreed, then you can take it as a given."

"That's good to hear." The smile returned. "Did you get our mail?"

"No, not yet ... Mail to Hogwarts - I mean, Muggle mail, that may take a few days more ... Anything urgent?"

"No, not urgent." The woman seemed not inclined to tell Harry more. "Okay then, have a good trip."

Ginny and Rahewa wanted to have a look at the roller coaster, which at this time of the day presented an impressive half-mile of lights downhill before the track meandered through breathtaking loops and curves. There was little doubt - even for these two members of a Quidditch team, a ride would have been due, if not for the long line of waiting people. And Harry's status didn't extend to this ride.

So, after having finished all sweets, and after letting them swim in some coke, they stood in a very short line until Harry had prepared the portkey home to Hogwarts, back into bed.

* * *

What agent Chipman had talked about, without saying anything, arrived in Hogwarts two days later. Considering the fact that it had been sent via regular Muggle mail - rather than *Magical Tours* service, not to mention owl mail - the journey of these letters had been quick. From the layers of envelopes, Harry could figure out why - a merciful Muggle soul somewhere in England had passed the letters over to the Ministry of Magic, and some clerk there had ordered two owls for delivering them.

One letter was addressed to Harry, the other - as he could guess and was confirmed later - to Lupin. But first Harry had to pay the owl - with a knut more than usual, for this totally un-owlsh format, earning him a reproachful stare from two large amber eyes.

Harry chuckled inwardly, imagining what Lupin might have heard from Almyra if she had noticed, then he opened the letter.

Nice words to read, really. The U.S. government thanked them for their services in protecting American citizens, and asked whether they would accept a medal of honour. Apparently, this question was a formalism - the author hardly expected a decline.

Well, he - no, was a she - might be in for a surprise, because Harry had no intention to appear in any public ceremony that might be read about, or heard about, near Boston, Massachusetts. He only didn't know how to refuse politely - after all, he couldn't say that two FBI agents were already rewarding him and, for this purpose, probably broke rules by the dozen.

So he went to Lupin.

"What? ... First you drag me into this crazy adventure, and now you force me to refuse this honour? ... Harry, I'll never get another chance - I'd be the only werewolf with a U.S. medal on his chest!"

Harry felt so consternated that he didn't even think of using his *haragei*. Therefore, it was only Lupin's grin - after a moment - which told him he'd been teased.

"Okay, Harry - I'll write them, in your name and in mine, and I'll tell them something nice about Hogwarts policy and friendship between Muggles and Magicals, or whatever ... But you owe me."

"I owe you anyway - with or without a medal."

"That's your view of things." Lupin looked pleased. "But now, I can rightfully claim an ob on you - in the size of a lost medal."

Harry could live with that, considerably better than with the medal itself, more exactly with a press report of such an event. Still, he was asking himself how much of Lupin's reaction had been a joke, and how much his friend would have appreciated this public praise for outstanding services. Of course, there was no sense in questioning Lupin.

But he knew someone else to talk with.

Almyra said, "It's both, Harry ... On one side, Remus would never compromise you in your fight against Voldemort - that far, it was a joke. But look at it from his perspective - a werewolf, mistrusted for decades, had to fight for respect even from his colleagues, is suddenly offered a medal ... For someone like you, who's collecting Hogwarts awards like other people stamps ..."

"I'm not collecting them! ... But yes, I see what you mean."

Almyra smiled. "You shouldn't worry - it's not a real problem, but it explains why he feels justified to claim an ob on you." She grinned. "So what - for all I know, you're dealing with obs all year long, ain't you?"

"Yes - and I take them seriously, in particular those which come in the shape of a Zen riddle."

"Where's the riddle here?"

"Remember Voldemort's real name?" Now Harry grinned. "No - that was a joke. The Zen riddle is this - because Voldemort's involved, we cannot go and fetch our medals. But without him, there'd never have been a chance to earn them ... And Zen riddles are what I really collect - even at the cost of an ob."

"I wonder if he'll ever claim it."

"He won't, but that's part of the true ob's nature, as he knows pretty well - and he knows that I know, which means it's my job ..." Reconsidering Almyra's explanation, Harry nodded. "Yes,

that fits - totally unremarkable on the surface, but underneath it's really the burden that weighs more than anything else."

"My God!" Almyra looked startled. "Ain't you exaggerating a bit?"

"No, I'm not. You know, it's none of these simple cases, like saving someone's life - it's just a minor issue, could almost be neglected ... Shigura would be proud of Remus, to have found this fine nuance."

Hearing this reference to Harry's weeks in Japan, Almyra's mind changed the subject in an interesting circle, however easy to follow. "By the way - how's your planning for some other nuances, maybe less fine?"

"I'm waiting - first she has to come back."

But Almyra's question had been very informative for Harry. She hadn't known that Cho was on a two-weeks journey, which meant the journey hadn't been planned much in advance ... Which was good to know, if only he could see what it was telling him ...

Then another thought resurfaced in Harry's mind. "Almyra - can we try another trance? Maybe I can locate Voldemort - I spend more than thousand galleons a day for Pinkerton agents, and if ..."

Almyra gasped. "That expensive?"

"Well, it's quite a territory they have to scan. And if I could see anything, or feel - any information would be helpful."

Almyra didn't like this idea very much, was afraid Harry would do some damage - maybe to himself, maybe to his efforts. She wasn't ready to accept his argument - that if he could detect Voldemort now, he would detect him at any other place as well. "Assume you detect him, Harry - with a scene in some house, and you have no chance to locate it ... That's how it's been before, right? But then he knows that you're looking for him, and you've lost your advantage."

"No - quite the opposite. If I can detect him, and he sees me, and he knows that I cannot identify the place, he feels sure ... Actually, who said he doesn't know I'm looking for him?"

"But didn't you say ... Isn't this the reason why Remus cannot get his medal?"

"Not exactly ... One thing is to know I'm looking for Voldemort - in some sense, this is true all the time, or so he might feel. Another thing is to know where he is, or in which region ... Marie-Christine thought he might have moved to the States to get away from me, for better hide."

"Marie-Christine, huh?" Almyra eyed Harry with suspicion in her face. "When did you talk with her?"

"When some other people had - er, let's say, breakfast in bed - understandably so, I might add, perfectly reasonable in such a luxury hotel, I'd have done the same, if I'd been in a comparable ..."

"Okay, okay!" Almyra stared at Harry. "Cho's totally right - funny it took me so long to realize."

"To realize what?"

"She says, if you argue with Harry, make sure there isn't the slightest glitch in your position - otherwise, he'll come over you like a landslide ... Other people would have answered my question with something as simple as *Sunday morning* - notice that the essential information is exactly the same, while this version lacks all the underlying accusations ..."

Harry giggled. "Accusation? ... Who's accusing whom to lie under?"

Almyra snorted with laughter. "C'mon, let's go trancing you - that's the only way I can imagine closing that mouth of yours."

They were sitting in her office, comfortably enough, so Harry just kept seated while Almyra drew her wand.

"Mesmerisio!"

He reached the void instantly, felt at home in this nowhere - not surprisingly so after mastering the sphere state that often ... Was it the same void? ... He couldn't decide - how to compare two spaces of nowhere, empty both of them? Didn't matter ... He wasn't here for scientific purposes.

Sensing around, Harry found nothing - very much as expected, the first moments in the void always felt like a quiet room entered from a noisy street. Relaxing did the trick, and extending his perception toward this endlessness ... The void had a smooth surface, like velvet, only thinner - not hiding the slightest dent, maybe more like silk ... There was no dent ... There was a slow, quiet beat.

Should this be Voldemort? Most unlikely so - not this calm, steady emanation.

Harry tried to locate it, to get a bearing. But there was nothing to help in his orientation, totally different from previous experiences.

He dropped any thought of a topology ... This was no space, thinking that way would only confuse him - it was a level of perception, or maybe existence. Harry focused his self toward this beat, until it filled his mind. Then he connected his self, touched it ...

Darkness ... Not quite - the dimmest shade of green light, coming from a small display ... An alarm clock! The clock stood on a bedstand, and suddenly Harry knew where he was - and now the contours of black in a dark grey made sense, confirmed his recognition.

A hotel room - somewhere in Japan, where it was around four o'clock in the morning, with normal people in the deepest phase of their sleep, like this room's guest, a head almost hidden under the cover, a long black mane partly inside, partly outside.

Cho.

Would she hear him? ... Would she see him, coming awake? ... Harry examined the head, the contours under the cover - amazing how much you could recognize in the light from a digital clock ... A painful longing was filling his heart.

The head moved, then the entire body, and Harry heard a muffled sound. She was dreaming.

"Sleep well, my love."

He had whispered the words, barely audible - still, Harry saw her twist, any moment she might come awake, and then ... Quickly, he disconnected.

Back in the void, he couldn't sense anything. Where was his own self - where was Almyra's office?

A void is no space, remember ... So nobody would get lost here - it was a level of perception, and all he had to do was regaining a perception of ... what?

Of course - his own physical reality. Moments later, Harry's senses filled with the feeling of his own body, then Almyra's office sprung into his vision, a harsh light blinding his sight.

"Ouch ..." Slowly, inch by inch, Harry let his arm fall back, which had been raised to protect his eyes.

Almyra sighed. "Pheew, that's been a long one ... Harry, if I'd known how to explain this, I would have called for help ..."

"Why? How long ..." Looking at his watch, Harry gasped - more than half an hour had passed since Almyra's spell had sent him into this trance.

"Yeah, right ... But then you were smiling, just enough to stop me worrying ... You haven't seen Voldemort, have you?"

"No - not the slightest trace of him."

Almyra's face showed curiosity. "For a failure, you look astonishingly pleased - which might give me an idea what you've found, or seen, or whom you've met."

"If meeting means talking with anyone awake, I met nobody." Harry grinned. "What I saw was a dark room, and a sleeping figure."

Almyra, less accustomed to time zones, looked bewildered. "Dark room? Where is it dark now?"

"In a Japanese hotel suite, for example."

* * *

Driven by his own curiosity, as much as by a young teacher who kept reminding him that his goal was just a transfiguration away, Harry made another visit in the dragon camp near Ellesmere. Without expressing in words, not even toward himself, he nourished a hope, more

a daydream - that he just had to play with the dragons for a while and then, suddenly, he would find the transit to the same shape.

Rex warned him. "Harry, old clawfoot, be careful. The young ones have just no discipline - they burn you from sheer joy, they're so full of high spirits that breathing fire is their only way to calm down."

Playful they were, yes - as you'd expect from young children, chasing each other, fooling around, attracted by everything, quickly losing concentration, only that each of these *chickens* had the size of a small truck.

Harry said hello to Carrie - hoping that the young ones had learned not to burn their mother, this way avoiding whatever dragons used to teach their children - so when keeping close to Carrie's head, he would be safe.

It worked - quite well, actually. The young ones came along, curious. Harry could touch them, talk with them. He wondered if they could remember him, that he'd been the source of food once or twice. Maybe it was just Carrie's behaviour - she accepted him, and after all, humans were nothing strange.

Then Harry said hello to Samuel, asked him what he'd think about a little flight.

The dragon didn't understand, or pretended not to.

To make it a bit clearer, Harry mounted his Steel Wing and danced up and down through the air.

Whether it was his reputation in the eyes of the other males, or an impulse to show off in front of the young ones - whatever, Samuel spread his majestic wings and joined Harry in the air.

The two other males gave a damn, while the four child dragons seemed quite impressed. They were staring skywards, their eyes following Samuel and that small dot which kept circling around the large body.

Samuel, satisfied with this demonstration, touched down.

The small dot, usually called Harry, swerved down until he was flying at tree top level over the young ones. And really - they tried to join him!

It was little more than a helpless fluttering, a jump of a few yards, sailing down to the ground. Then, one of them managed a bit more, caught some height, had reached about forty feet when - from the unfamiliar perspective or from exhaustion - it lost its courage.

In an unfortunate reflex, the small dragon tried to hide, making itself as small as possible, folding its wings - with the inevitable result. The animal didn't exactly crash down like a stone, simply because its strength was insufficient to fold its wings against the carrying airstream, but it was a remarkable bump-down.

And now, for the first time, Harry could hear the sound of a wailing dragon chicken. Unusually loud and shrill, while otherwise not different from any other child after having done a hard fall.

Carrie came hurrying, and there was little doubt - her eyes looked angrily toward Harry, she was blaming him.

And she was right. Without thinking, Harry touched down, reached the hurt bundle in truck size, put his hands behind the small ears. "I'm sorry - my mistake, but I'll repair the damage." Then he sent the strongest wave of comfort he could muster.

A little squeak, then the wailing faded.

Harry kept his efforts for two minutes before he stopped, patting his patient. "Okay, shorty, c'mon - try your legs, you've survived."

The small dragon did as ordered, although probably from its own impulse. After a few careful steps, realizing that the pain was gone, it waddled to its siblings where it was welcomed with snorts of smoke.

Harry glanced over to Carrie, which had watched. "Alright, old girl - you see, I stand to my mistakes. But I won't try again - until you've taught them that they have to keep their wings open."

The angry stare was gone. These eyes were quite articulate, could communicate well without words. For an instant, Harry felt reminded of Ma Weasley.

And now was the time. He made his try.

He could feel it - he reached the sphere state, seemed to hold it longer than ever before, and everything was right, the path was open ... Except that his dragon cure had drained more power than expected - he was just too weak to finish. Next instant, Harry was back in his own shape.

Even so - for him, it didn't count as a failure. This feeling of *right* had been something new. After returning to Hogwarts, Harry had to wait after classes before he could discuss it with Almyra.

She listened to his description. "Yes, I think you're right on track ... Pity you've lost so much strength." Then Almyra smiled. "Curing a dragon baby - did it ever cross your mind that the mother might have been angry enough to toast you?"

"Carrie? ... No, not really. It wasn't that bad, and I figure she knew what I was doing."

"We must have been out of our mind, Harry, to start such a project - but now we're so close ... Unless this is another Zen riddle."

"Huh?"

"Yes - without sending mental waves to a dragon, you cannot find the transit, but after having done so, you're too weak to transfigure."

"Oh - no, hopefully not. If I can remember that feeling, after having recovered ... It's a step forward."

"Yes, definitely." Almyra looked expectantly. "And now that you've managed with one female dragon ..."

"I might try with another one. I will, Al - as soon as she's back from her trip, and has found a day to settle."

Almyra grinned. "Maybe you shouldn't wait that day - who knows, that might make the difference."

* * *

Harry didn't think so. And he considered Cho's office not as the proper place for this meeting - not that close to some phones which might call at the wrong moment, not in this territory. Yes, it was open all day long, as he'd been told ... Then he knew what to do.

Next afternoon, he jumped to Santa Monica. Jesamine confirmed that yes, Cho was expected back day after tomorrow. With this information, Harry could finish a short letter, put it into Jesamine's box for internal mail.

Four days later, a quarter past noon local time, he was sitting at a table in the Sheraton Grillroom - waiting. His invitation had said twelve thirty. If Cho would come, he would meet her, face to face, in a few minutes. If not ...

The table was placed in a corner, hidden behind a half-height wall, probably the best table in that restaurant. It blocked Harry's view toward the entrance, while not his *haragei* - he felt Cho approaching, felt very much the same as inside himself - expectation, and quite some tension.

He watched how the waiter moved her chair, received her order - a dry sherry - and disappeared. It gave him time to study her appearance - black jacket, grey skirt, pink blouse. The pink was pretty close to flaming red, perfectly suited for the long string of green stones around her neck. Had to be jade.

"Hello, Cho. You look - impressive."

She smiled. "I did my very best to reach this effect." She examined him. "And you'd pass for one of these young billionaires any time."

Harry looked astonished.

"Yes - sitting in the most expensive restaurant of town as if it's their kitchen, and giving a damn for their clothes ... You need a new dress, Harry."

This was exactly what he needed - criticism from her, in particular about something as unimportant as ... Just before the thought could boil up, Harry remembered their encounter in the Hogwarts Express, Cho's remarks, and he knew - it was just nervousness.

And besides - Cho was right, Gerry's piece had suffered from bad treatment. Then the thought crossed Harry's mind that clothes might be not that unimportant, not for Cho. He said, "A few days ago, I was sitting here in jeans and an oversized leather jacket, and the waiters didn't even blink."

"That explains why you're sitting there as if you'd been caught slightly overdressed - and it's proof that the waiters here are really first-class, or maybe it had to do with the people who booked your rooms ... I heard about your - er, activities ... from different sources."

Harry smiled. "Two, or more?"

"Two - and the end of the story's still unknown to me. I've heard about two - er, visitors."

"We had some more - six more twin teams, one in each park, almost simultaneously. Then Lupin contacted Dumbledore who made some visit, and a certain - er, promise ... Since then, it has stopped."

They were interrupted by the waiter who took their orders - salmon and rice for Cho, the biggest steak in the list for Harry, plus a lot of french fries and a lot of salad.

Hearing his order, Cho stared. "Where do you store these quantities, Harry? That sounded like a family plate, rather than a lunch for a single person."

"I was spending the last weeks mostly outside, and it's winter in England. While some days ago, I had to cure a baby dragon - that drains a lot of energy."

Then Harry became aware - Cho didn't know about his transfiguration project, or if so, then not about his target shape. He was instinctively sure that Almyra hadn't told her. However, Cho's expression showed no surprise - for her, this seemed one of those tasks you might encounter in the company of a Texan teacher.

Harry asked, "How was the food in Japan?"

"Basically excellent ..." Cho grinned, "If you took the right choice."

"And how was the trip otherwise?"

"Quite successful. Of course, at first I had trouble with the jet lag, was confusing day and night ..."

"But then you got accustomed."

"Yes, sure." Next instant, Cho glanced at him suspiciously. "Why do you ask - if that's been a question?"

"Er - just so. I mean, you don't jump through time zones as often as I do."

Cho wasn't buying his explanation, Harry could see it in her face. And of course, he knew what was startling her - without knowing how it had been for herself.

Cho said, "I also had a bit trouble with the style of conversation there - always at two levels, the words themselves and what they really mean ... Maybe that's why I can't help thinking ... You adapted to that style quite well, didn't you?"

How many levels were implied in this question? "Yes, I think so."

"But I'd prefer the Californian style - straight into the face. So, if you were trying to ask something else - it was a business trip, and I travelled alone."

"I know." Seeing Cho's worried look, Harry added quickly, "Jesamine told me. I tried to visit you at the end of our action here, but you had already left."

The explanation wasn't enough to dispel her doubts, but for some reason, Harry avoided to tell her about his visit in the dark of the night, and - maybe for similar reasons - Cho avoided to dig deeper. She asked, "What about your travels?"

"Almost done. My portkey project's completed - I can make a portkey to any location on earth. In a few days, I'll create one for Hermione, and introduce her to her candidates - then it's done."

Watching, Harry saw how Cho suppressed an instant reply. After a moment, she said, "Very handy, these portkeys. You can jump wherever you want, and you can take your company with you - even someone who cannot apparate."

"Provided I've been there before." Then Harry realized Cho's remark to its full extent. "Tell me - has this been a Californian statement, or a Japanese one?"

"Maybe a Chinese one."

The waiter arrived with their hors d'oeuvres - some tiny pieces on a large plate for Cho, another large plate for Harry, except that it was full with salad, including tuna, eggs, anchovies.

He started to eat, stopped. "Yes, it's very convenient ... I can establish them for other people, between points they have to travel often. It's just a matter of asking - or maybe not even that ..."

"Like, for example?"

Now this was more Californian style - her words and her expression. Not changing his own voice, Harry said, "Rahewa, for example. She has a link between the train platform and the Cambridge Hospital."

"Oh ..."

Harry remembered Almyra's remark. Did he play landslide against Cho's position? He wasn't aware - but then, he hadn't been aware at other occasions.

Now Cho asked, "And what's filling your time and your freedom otherwise?"

Harry saw his chance, took it instantly. "Work, mostly. But now the work is almost done, and the freedom feels empty. That's why I'm here."

Silence on the other side of the table. Cho couldn't even pretend to be busy with her food - the few pieces were gone. Then she looked up. "You're not looking for a job, are you?"

Harry examined this answer, which was a question, with all his senses. No doubt - Cho was trying to gain more time, maybe also more information. Well then - he was ready to give her

both, and if this was possible only in his landslide style, he couldn't help. "No - I get lots of offers, recently, for jobs and other relationships. The last came from Pinkerton, from someone pretty high in the ranks - for all I know, he's one of the owners. But I still have the same job as before, at least till summer - I'm a Hogwarts student. And I still have the same task to perform, although now with the help of Pinkerton agents ..."

Cho was waiting for him to continue.

"... But with some luck, it's done in a few weeks - months, at the most ... And how's your business?"

Cho twisted a bit - apparently, she hadn't expected this change of subject, or delay of the essential point. But then she took his offer with some relief. "It's going great - we grow faster than expected, actually we're quite ahead of our original planning ..." She blushed a bit. "A major factor has been that we got some - er, financial capacity not so long ago, which came at a critical point, and that's why we could make a quantum leap."

The waiter arrived with two other plates. As before, Cho's was barely covered while Harry's own seemed hardly enough to hold all the food.

Glancing at it, Cho grinned. "Talking about capacities ..."

"That's my supper, don't forget - my last meal has been eight hours ago ... And talking about finances - I've found out that I should have done it in the beginning."

"Done what?"

"The money - giving it as a loan was a mistake, it ought to have come as a present, or donation, whatever ..."

"Why?"

"Because ... I'm not the right person to be rich, and to play rich man's games. Look what happened - I'm great at spending money, awful lots of them, and as long as I keep to that habit, things work better ... Like with the Goblin Request ... Even now, I'm spending several thousand galleons a day, couldn't imagine a better usage for that money. It was an attempt to bribe me, only I didn't realize it immediately." Harry grinned. "But I've found a way to spend it - nobody can spend a million quicker than me."

Cho nodded. "A bribe, yes indeed ... And when it's gone?"

"Then I'll look for a rich woman." Harry looked into her eyes. "I know someone who'd fit - from my side of things."

"And who's the ..." Cho stopped, unable to finish the joke.

After a moment of silence, Harry felt the time right to ask the question for which he had come. "Cho - what's been the reason that we couldn't meet for such a long time? ... You know, when you started Groucho."

"It's ..." Cho stopped, spoke again. "It's not a single reason - or maybe it is, except that it has so many aspects. When I left Hogwarts, I wanted to find my own position, and I had this picture, this idea - and two other people who'd help me - they were perfect because they had their own skill but not the same - er, ambition ... I wanted to have the thing settled, and running, before ..."

She stopped again, looked at Harry. "I can tell you why. I wanted to be my own self - not a rich father's daughter, and not the girl at the side of the wizard who defeated Voldemort, and who's going to destroy him soon."

Cho dropped her fork, continued before Harry could speak, not registering that he was keeping silent on purpose. "I felt free - for the first time really free to do what I wanted to do. But that wasn't the main factor, it was just ... But then things went awfully wrong - I needed help, and called you, and you came ... I hated myself for needing your help, and I hated you for the efficiency by which you solved our problems ... With the money, with Helix, with the negotiation ... Then I thought - why can't I do it by myself, I ought to keep you outside, but it just didn't work ... And all I managed was to accept your help in the critical situations while at the same time I've been punishing you and myself for not being able to separate one from the other ..."

"I'm not ..."

Her hand jerked up. "No - let me finish. At some point, I realized where my perception was wrong. Yes, I was competing against my father - you were totally right in that. And I was fighting against a fate, the fate which made you the one you are. But there was no reason to fight against you, because - you didn't play power games, no, you simply were you, the most powerful wizard, trained for the last seven years, and just by accident, all your powers were quite helpful to move Groucho around the corners ..." Cho grimaced. "Well, not Groucho alone - you've been helping other people too ... Anyway, I drove it too far, and when ..." She looked at him. "You know when I realized all that? When the lawyer arrived with the papers ... I wouldn't have thought it possible until the day before - my business ideas are formed by my father, of course, and I'm similar enough to him - something like that, giving up two million dollars, just to make something clear ..."

Cho swallowed. "It has made something clear - for me. I've been fighting a phantom that - no, it does exist, but it's not you."

Harry knew what she was talking about. He had learned to accept this phantom, sitting on his shoulders like Fawkes but with inverse effects, ruling his life, steering his own decisions as well as those of other people - Dumbledore, for example ... Small wonder that even someone as close to him as Cho failed to separate one from the other.

He looked up. "What about your father?"

A beaming appeared in Cho's face. "The fight's almost over. He has challenged me - over years, and now the challenge's countered, I'd say ... Besides - he's a merchant, I mean he likes to trade, while I've found out that I'm a manufacturer - playing with stocks and bonds is useful sometimes, but what I really like is to see a product - spectors, movies ..."

Harry grinned.

Cho blushed. "I know that I'm mixing things, that's what I just tried to explain ..."

He interrupted her. "No, I wasn't teasing you - I bought a spector for the Weasleys, and although this isn't a Groucho model, I'm one of your best customers for the dance course." He told the story of his Christmas present, and that Fleur would receive the complete sequence.

Cho said, "You see, I was right - she has presence in a spector movie ..."

"Definitely - she has presence in real life too."

"The same's true for some other ..." Cho stopped herself. "I've answered your question. What do you think now?"

"Hmm ... I cannot separate myself from my role and my powers - I'd fail as badly as you did. I don't feel pride to be the one, to have killed some people already ... But I've found out that being gifted spoils you, and how it feels to learn something through hard work. This portkey project ... It's something I didn't inherit from Voldemort - I had to train hard, day after day, week after week, and finally, it worked." Harry stared at Cho. "And I had to pay a price."

"Which one?"

"I had to finish the chain of portkeys across the six amusement parks, and it took me several days. Then I had to visit Pinkerton - and when the work was done, and I came to Groucho, you were gone."

"But I came back."

"Yes - only that in the meantime I had returned to Hogwarts, and that ... There was a momentum two weeks ago, something ... I'm not sure if it's still there."

Cho looked at him - not wondering, more like understanding perfectly what he was talking about.

Harry asked, "Your trip - was it an escape?"

"I came back, didn't I?" Cho's voice was defensive enough to give Harry the answer.

"Do you feel guilty?"

"No! ... Yes - oh, I don't know." She looked angry. "This argumentation doesn't work, Harry. I told you why I did what I did, and how I recognized my mistake - but it doesn't mean I'd make anything different ... Same with the other things - this bottle, for instance. Of course we tried it - you knew that I'd be unable to resist, didn't you? Only it didn't help - I was still blaming you, even after knowing that there is no resistance, more than before ..."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't accept that it had happened - because I wanted to blame someone, and you were the only one at hand ... I'm fighting a phantom, and that phantom is your fate ..." Realizing how her own voice had grown in volume, Cho twisted.

"And why more than before? Because I tried to defend myself?"

"No." Cho flushed. "Because afterwards I knew ... In that night - what was left of my brain was busy imagining you with this woman, and this thought alone was almost enough to let me ... I felt like dead for days afterwards, and I was cursing you."

"So you're still accusing me of the same crimes as the last time?"

Cho shook her head. "No. The bottle - the letter - and Marie-Christine, from an objective standpoint you're judged innocent or not guiltier than I am - " she looked desperate, "while at the same time I'm still mad at you for exactly these reasons."

"That sounds like a Zen riddle."

"Maybe it is ... You alone, Harry - that's just the amount I think I can handle. You together with your fate, and the situation you're put into - that's a bit too much ... I was thinking seriously whether it would help to share you with someone else - only I could bear this thought even less."

"With some luck, in a few weeks, my task is completed. An then - do you think it's different then?"

Cho looked pleading. "Yes, I'm sure it is ... Then it's something of the past, and of course you'll be still the same, with all your scaring skill, but I guess I can handle that." She grinned. "You know that we're made for each other, don't you? I don't know anyone who could stand my temper for such a long time."

"I'd really like to give it a try now."

"No - please, Harry, bring it to an end before ... Then we'll start again, wiser than before, but without a burden greater than life - and I fully agree with your idea."

"Which one?"

"That I'll earn the money, and you'll be the one spilling it for some honest purpose."

Harry smiled - a sad smile. "Well - I had hoped for a bit more - no, not more, but sooner."

"Yes, I know, but I can feel that this is the better way ... Now that I've told you what I wanted to tell you, I still have a few days to get rid of my feeling guilty ..." Cho smiled, "and you have still a few weeks of freedom."

"Yeah, that's awfully helpful."

Cho's eyes started glittering. "My spies told me you weren't using your freedom at all - how come? Lost interest?"

"No ... Might have to do with my priorities, or preferences, whatever ..."

"Marie-Christine told me you're no longer mad at her, and why not ... Are you still mad at me for taking her away?"

Harry wouldn't start lying now. "Yes."

Cho smiled archly. "That's good - it balances us a bit, and it saves you from being a saint ..."

Harry chuckled.

"... and what's more, it gives me an idea how to solve this problem in the future."

He stared at Cho with some disbelief, totally unprepared for her next strike - the blow out of nowhere. "And now, young Potter, tell me at the spot what happened in Japan!"

"Well ... I asked Almyra to trance me, because I wanted to see whether I could find Voldemort. But there wasn't any sign of him - while there was something else. I followed it - and I came out in your hotel room."

"I knew it was more than a dream - but you see what I mean, talking about scary skills ... Although, peeping Tom is a new role in your repertoire."

"Why - you've been alone, and sleeping ... How was it for you?"

"That's none of your business, young man."

"Now that's fair, really!"

Cho beamed. "You're famous for your tricks, and I'm famous for my unfairness - but wait a few weeks, then ask me again ... Unless you've guessed until then, which isn't too difficult, if you remember my previous remark."

"A ..." He stopped himself, grinned. "While on the subject - would you tell me your address? If I had known, I'd have visited you there."

"Yes, probably, but I don't think I'd have let you in, and for the same reason, please wait for some more weeks."

"But why? What's wrong with talking with you in your apartment, or house?"

"It's too risky." Cho smiled. "I'm sure I made the right decision, letting you finish your task first - and I can stand to it here, or in my office. Is this answer enough?"

Yes it was - and in a way, it was more torturing than the decision itself. Harry only could hope Francesco Lopez would be successful soon.

25 - Potions and Candidates

The Pinkerton agent had only blanks for Harry. He presented pictures, taken with a tele lens, half a dozen for each of the possible candidates. Yes, there was a superficial similarity with Wormtail, but Harry could discard all of them. One candidate had been photographed because the agents could not exclude that he was Voldemort - not from the phantom picture Harry had built in the designer studio.

Harry could exclude it after a short glance - as ugly as that guy looked, he was just too human.

Back in Hogwarts, Harry got mail from Paul Sillitoe, sent with the *Magical Tours* service - a thick envelope, raising the hope that Paul had found something else.

Yes he had, although not about Voldemort. When opening the envelope, Harry found an issue of a magazine called *Forbes* - obviously a business magazine, and the cover story was about *Groucho* and *Narita Spectors*. Harry learned that *Narita* was the market leader in this new branch of the entertainment industry, with *Groucho* as the brain tank in this joint venture.

As if that was any news to him.

Into this time of waiting stepped Hermione with her newest developments - the trip to Haiti was due. To Harry's surprise, they also had to visit Caprien Marût. "He needs a backup potion," explained Hermione. "If the last one was right, he won't change at full moon - but if not, this one will protect him."

"Well, okay ... And Armodéc?"

"I have to be present when he drinks it - and to be ready with some antidote."

Harry stared at her. "Are you going to poison him?"

Hermione looked grim. "Not if he's been honest - and if not, I'll be ready."

Harry had no idea what she had in mind, agreed with her that he was better off not knowing in advance. What worried him a bit was that they had to stay overnight.

"What should happen, Harry?" Hermione smiled. "If he's going to try something, you're there to protect me, right?"

He would be there - so far, her statement was true. Otherwise ... Harry didn't think he had already seen all tricks of that *loup-garou* - more exactly, experienced. He suggested to let himself deliver the flask to Caprien Marût, since he had to announce their visit on the Ile de la Tortue anyway. But no, Hermione wanted to see her successful candidate.

Well, understandably so. Harry jumped to the island - announcing their visit seemed wrong, but coming unannounced would not give him a better feeling.

Monsieur Armodéc looked delighted, hearing about the guests he was going to host.

From the island, Harry jumped to Saint Marc, informing Benoît that they'd expect him, next day at five o'clock local time, in Gros-Morne to translate - hopefully for the last time.

This prospect seemed to raise quite some inspiration in the young man. The last time meant - afterwards, this wonderful broomstick would be irrevocably his'.

* * *

Programming a portkey from the Hogwarts Express platform to the marketplace of Gros-Morne in Haiti, just so, under the eyes of an excited Hermione - Harry felt a deep satisfaction from his hard-earned skill. This, his *aikido*, and his *haragei* were arts not inherited from a dark wizard, making them more precious than any other.

Well - not to forget another art learned from a Japanese teacher, although this particular skill found little employment recently.

Hermione was unprepared for the heat, for the humidity in the air, even in the shadows of the few trees. Hearing her gasps, seeing her sweat-streaked face, Harry offered an instant return.

No way - a challenge was a challenge for an incurable suffer-it-all, so after dropping as many clothes as appropriate, and until Benoît arrived with Caprien Marût, Hermione felt ready.

The potions witch and the - hopefully cured - *loup-garou* looked at each other, smiled with mutual sympathy, although for different reasons - and then the curse of Babylon kicked in.

Hermione didn't get a word Caprien Marût was saying. She hardly could follow Benoît, with the result that every remark had to pass three mouths before reaching the final pair of ears.

With respect to this cumbersome style of conversation, the participants at the two ends of the translation chain kept their remarks pretty short and to the point. Hermione gave the flask to Caprien Marût directly, sent the message through the chain that he might use the potion - please - at the last instant he felt master of his own decision, and to report whatever might happen until then, if it was the same as always, or different.

Then she announced a premium of twenty galleons if Caprien would come through without the potion - if he could return the flask still sealed. This promise raised a fierce determination in her candidate's face, and that was it - they all said goodbye, and a moment later, Harry and Hermione were alone under the trees.

Harry bought two cokes in the cafeteria across the street, passed one of them over to Hermione who had waited in the shadow. "Well," he said, "that's your success candidate ... What's your impression?"

Hermione took a long gulp, belched quite unladylike, and said, "I had no idea, Harry - this is so ... so totally different from what I'd expected. An island in the Caribbeans - sounds romantic and all, until you're there ... I owe you."

"I'll come back to that." Harry grinned. "But this was the simple part - Caprien looks meaner than he is ... What do you honestly expect - will it hold at full moon?"

Hermione sighed. "That's the kind of question at which every scientist is seriously tempted to look for some divination ... My best guess is - he'll feel a few symptoms, and if I'm lucky, that's all, and it won't be more the next month. This last touch - Harry, I'd need twenty or more werewolves to straighten out the last rough edges."

"You'll have to pay the premium, regardless of what happens - twenty galleons are a small fortune here. My advice - for the next times, reduce it to ten, and keep to Caprien Marût. He's reliable, and if you use signs and written words, you'll come through without a translator."

"You might be right." Then Hermione looked confident. "But who said there's still something to fine-tune? I mean, look at your portkey - you had this place in mind, and I came out right here, not across the street, not up in the trees. Why shouldn't the potion fit equally well?"

Harry chuckled. "Don't ask me - potions ain't my strongest. All I know is, a portkey is something that works or doesn't - there's nothing in-between. I never had trouble with addressing the wrong spot."

"We'll be wiser in a few days. Okay, Harry - then the Ile de la Tortue, please, and nothing in-between."

This place was more to Hermione's taste, with the fresh breeze from the sea and the view of the colonial-style house surrounded by trees. The door opened to show Beatrice, who greeted both of them with the same smile, much to Harry's relief.

Monsieur Armodéc looked extremely pleased. "Ah, Mademoiselle Granger, welcome in this house - I've been awaiting this encounter for quite a while."

"Good evening, Monsieur Armodéc. I've been waiting too - except that my waiting will still take a while, I'm afraid." Nothing in Hermione's face gave the slightest hint that, for all she expected, her waiting would come to a sudden end next morning.

The host's answer told Harry that any *haragei* he had suspected in this man could only be severely limited, unless Hermione's control extended even to her thoughts and feelings.

Which wasn't impossible, after all.

Today's dinner offered a novelty for Harry. Less from the food, which was excellent as usual, more from the conversation - he could sit, and watch, and listen. Of course he was involved every now and then, and Monsieur Armodéc asked him again for his progress in the search for Voldemort, apparently for reasons of politeness rather than true interest, because he didn't press when Harry answered evasively. Most of the time, however, Hermione was talking.

And she enjoyed it.

Naturally, the first subject was potions in general, the Wolfsbane potion in particular, and Hermione's way into this project as the real issue, because their host couldn't care less about this recipe versus the other. When Hermione confessed openly that she was aiming toward scientific success as much as toward fame, Monsieur Armodéc found an elegant course toward a more familiar topic. "Fame ... It's always fascinating for me to hear why people want to be famous. What is your motivation, Mademoiselle Granger?"

"Very simple - I want to know how it is to be famous."

The *loup-garou* smiled. "Just curiosity? - Forgive me if I don't believe that I already heard the full truth. Did it play a role being a student at Harry's side, like so many others?"

Taking the opportunity for supporting his friend as much as teasing her, Harry answered grinning, "Hermione isn't like so many others."

Into the laughter, Beatrice said, "Apparently not. This combination - I have to admit, Mademoiselle Granger, you surprised me a bit."

"Why's that?" Hermione's voice sounded friendly, though much *en garde* - this young woman was still unknown territory for her, aside from her obvious function in this household.

However, Beatrice's answer broke the ice. "Whatever I had expected, on the background of a complicated potion - not someone that attractive."

Hermione beamed.

Monsieur Armodéc used the momentum. "For most women, fame is inseparably linked with a man, or even with several of them. Is there a man at your side, Mademoiselle Granger?"

"Yes. His name is Viktor Krum."

"Aah - Monsieur Krum." The host looked satisfied. "I'd say - little by little, your aim toward your own fame becomes understandable. Monsieur Krum has made many headlines at his time."

Hermione shrugged. "Sure, but you follow the wrong track there. Quidditch doesn't impress me much, and fame didn't impress Viktor much. For him, this was a side-effect he couldn't avoid."

"Then maybe, for him, your fame will be another side-effect he cannot avoid."

Hermione's answer came with the speed of a returned Bludger, only with a bit more smile. "Viktor doesn't object a working brain, not in the library nor in another room ... Do you?"

Beatrice beamed.

Monsieur Armodéc took it with grace. "I'm not single-minded, my dear Mademoiselle, even though I might stress a subject more than usual - whether in conversation or otherwise ..."

Beatrice grinned, while Hermione kept her expression unchanged.

"... And certainly I don't think of a person as an object ... A term like *object of desire* may fit a piece of art, a collector's item - using it toward a woman is distasteful, a breach of taste."

Monsieur Armodéc had reached his favourite topic. And Hermione didn't let him wait. "So you'd prefer a subject of desire?"

Monsieur Armodéc indicated that words were an inadequate means to express his convictions - ah, satisfyingly. Hermione left no doubt that words were the only means within any realistic scope.

Monsieur Armodéc agreed that it might have been a bit premature to discuss such fundamental beliefs at this first meeting. Hermione earned Harry's admiration when she - even in the heat of this discussion - suppressed any hint that, for all she planned, this was a case of now or never.

Then Beatrice asked Harry how he, his friend Ron, and Hermione were going along in their discussions in Hogwarts.

"That's simple," answered Harry. "Hermione's our genius, so we sit and listen."

Beatrice didn't buy this picture.

"It's true," assured Harry. "Well - another question is whether we take the advice."

Monsieur Armodéc expressed doubts that these discussions would run as quiet as Harry was painting them. Harry confessed that his summary might have neglected the typical atmosphere a bit.

"And what happens if Mademoiselle Granger insists - or is driving her point too far?"

Harry looked with some astonishment at their host. This question could no longer be rated as close to a hidden insult - it had crossed an invisible borderline. Maybe the man wasn't as good a loser in discussions as in Go.

"Then we adjust the perspective," he replied.

"And how?"

"In a private conversation."

The moment of silence at the dinner table told everyone that the subject of driving a point too far had presented its own example. Then, as elegantly as before, Monsieur Armodéc switched to another topic - walking to a sideboard, returning with a carafe. "This red wine," he explained, "has been breathing since afternoon - I hope it's ready now, so we can celebrate this day." He filled four glasses to half, raised his own. "To a charming guest who can handle potions as well as points of perspective."

Hermione smiled, raised her glass. "To a generous host who can take them both."

Even for Harry's palate, not trained at all, the wine tasted delicious. Light at the first instant, developing a rich flavour after a moment, and a mild fire running down the throat. Origin and year didn't tell him anything, in contrast to Hermione who looked impressed, pleasing their host sufficiently.

While the carafe was emptied, the conversation kept barely above small talk level, circling around the question how close a skilled potions witch - or wizard - might come toward the

unique taste of a certain wine. Beatrice surprised Harry as well as Hermione with her own contributions, giving proof that she knew how to use a cauldron.

Then it was time to finish the evening, in particular with respect to two guests for whom it was six hours later.

In the guest suite, Hermione looked around. "Our host knows how to live - just the decent amount of luxury ... Only his own style isn't quite as decent."

"Don't tell me it came as a surprise."

"You've warned me, that's true - but I thought you were exaggerating." Hermione smiled archly. "You weren't - which raises the question what happened to you during all these visits. This suite here ..." her glance went around, returned to Harry, "is *very* inviting."

Harry watched her face, wondering if the invitation he saw there was only in his imagination. "I didn't stay overnight often, remember?"

"Yes - and I wonder why. Harry - does he carry both ways?"

Harry chuckled. "Not as far as I know - and that's my last comment on that issue."

"Pity ... In particular since I feel wide awake - which is a surprise, considering the time of day. Just in the mood for some stories - old ones or new ones ... Is this a portkey effect, Harry?"

"Definitely not. I figure it's a portwine effect - I mean this red wine, of course ... Unless it's your own chemistry."

But Hermione was right - Harry didn't feel sleepy either, more the opposite - this wine seemed to raise thoughts he couldn't welcome - for several reasons, each of them having its own first name and its own family name.

Apparently unimpressed from his reluctance, Hermione said, "My chemistry is fine - maybe doing a bit overtime ... By the way, you've been very kind during the dinner, not answering that question. I'm grateful for that."

"Of course I didn't, not him ..." Seeing Hermione's expression, Harry knew that there was nothing just in his imagination. He said, "And now, let's go to bed ..."

He had her full approval.

"... you in yours and me in mine, okay?"

Hermione responded his smile. "Well, then ... maybe you're right, Harry."

Lying in his bed, Harry tried to tell himself that it would be better this way - in the long run, regardless of the *few weeks of freedom* he'd been granted from a major authority in this regard. Unfortunately, he didn't have to convince his mind, while his body stubbornly kept a different opinion, emphasizing some benefits in the short run. And sleepiness would not come - lying with his eyes closed, Harry felt a storm of thoughts whirling through his mind.

And there was something else - something with the room.

Motionlessly, Harry scanned around with all his senses. Then he registered the irregularity - some noise, barely above audible level. Listening with concentration, he felt almost sure he could hear a woman's voice, sighing, moaning - stopping.

A moment later, it was back, more audibly. The moaning was growing stronger, longer, more rhythmic, and now it was unmistakable - the sounds of a woman making love, with this sharp outtake of breath at the end of each thrust.

Damn - somewhere, Monsieur Armodéc was using his virility with his flower of the night, and these walls were just too thin, or Beatrice too loud ... Harry couldn't keep his mind off, his hardness growing and growing.

A sound from the door. With a single motion, he switched on the light, seized for his wand. Startled, he saw Hermione entering the room.

She wore a loose fitting night dress - a shirt falling over short pants, shining silkily, perfect for the tropical night, opening here and there for viewing angles.

She reached the bed. "Harry, can you hear this ... Yes of course, it's here too." Hermione looked at him, her face flushed. "When did it start here?"

"Some minutes ago - maybe three, or five. Monsieur Armodéc's quite busy, huh?"

"Could be ... Only, to me it sounds more like tape recording."

"Tape recording?"

"Yes. It sounds real enough, but ... In my room, it started some minutes earlier. First, I had the same thought, was even suspecting you having a visitor ... Then, from second to second more, I felt sure that any moment my door would open and someone would come in - expecting me ready to ... That's why I came over. Can you close the door?"

Not daring to come out, Harry grabbed his wand again, pointed at the lock.

Click

"Great - thanks." Hermione's eyes sparkled. "You didn't want to come out, did you?"

"Erm - no ..."

"Save it - I'm not better off, not after five minutes listening ..."

The sound stopped. After a moment, it was back again - now with bass drums in the background, and the woman's voice on top, sobbing, groaning, a small outcry, then rapid gasping, accelerating more, changing to long, hoarse moans, rising in pitch.

Harry was trembling, the blood singing in his veins, his hardness almost painful. He glanced at Hermione, sitting on the bed, saw her nipples erect, peeking through the silky shirt, saw her face come around, her eyes meeting his'.

The voice was whimpering, loud and shrill. Then it stopped for an instant, in which only the drums could be heard, to return with a throaty grunt, and another, changing again to rapid gasps.

Hermione, her eyes not leaving Harry's face, seized for her shirt, started to move it over her head.

Until she had finished, Harry had pushed his own shirt off, his pants down, was out of the bed, stood before her, his trembling replaced by determination, his flesh twisting expectantly.

This moaning was Hermione's own. She leaned back, her elbows on the bedcover. Harry seized for her waistband, pushed the flimsy piece of silk down, suppressing the impulse to tear it apart, pushed her legs aside. Her own outcry almost drowned in the deep growl of the drums.

This was no time for artful manoeuvres. He felt her legs close around his hips, shortening his movements. Even so, his body pushed as hard as he could, banging against the body underneath, his grunts as well as her gasps lost in the hammering rhythm that filled the room.

Her orgasm rose, short, hard, just when his own had faded.

Breaking the lock of her legs, he moved her fully onto the bed, climbed between her legs. Kneeling, he looked at her, saw undiminished hunger in her face, a mirror of his own desire.

He moved her calves up, seized for her wrists. With her legs over his arms, she was lying fully exposed before him, curled up.

Regaining some mood for a more leisurely pace, he let his flesh slide along her and then drew himself back, only to resume the same path. Then, slowly, he moved into her. Out, and into her again. And out. And in.

Even though her response was strong, and her moaning louder than his own hard breathing - this game would push himself uphill much quicker than her. Retreating a bit, he dropped her legs, laid himself onto her, stroking in tiny movements, teasing a tiny spot, or pressing harder with the weight of his body.

Now he could balance himself for a time, while Hermione was wriggling under him, her breath coming in long jets. When he felt her close to the next peak, he dived again, finally moving quicker when her moaning became desperate, until her body arched up.

Withdrawing again, he moved her around until she was lying on her side. One leg between hers, his arms holding her back and her breast, he moved with her again, ready to travel without haste toward the clouds and the rain.

The drums had grown in volume, the woman's voice was coming through only with a short cry every now and then. Harry saw Hermione's mouth open and close in time to his movements, an expression of deepest concentration in her face.

Startled by something, he stopped, looked up.

A young woman, light brown, naked except for white ribbons around her wrists and ankles, her skin shimmering with some oil, was approaching them. Now she appeared in Hermione's view, raising a small cry of surprise.

Her voice was casual, husky. "Don't stop, 'arry." She climbed onto the bed, knelt with Hermione's head between her thighs, her arms stroking over Hermione's flanks, and back, then her hand was grabbing Hermione's breast, pressing hard.

Another cry from Hermione, pained as much as ecstatic.

The young woman met Harry's stare. "Go ahead, ride your mare."

He wasn't dreaming, this was reality, as real as his renewed hardness. He pushed, quicker than before, staring at the woman, her pointed breasts, as she pressed herself against Hermione's hair, and at Hermione's face, partly obscured, showing a total surrender to the sensations - from his thrusting and from the woman's hands which were kneading her breasts, pinching her nipples.

Moments later, he stopped, pressing himself against Hermione's body while his spasms rose, hard, almost painful.

The woman had taken over command. She ordered him to move himself and Hermione a bit downward, giving her more room. Then she turned Hermione onto her back. "Spread her legs, 'arry - and hold them."

He obeyed, watching Hermione's body twisting in anticipation of new, torturing pleasures.

The glistening body, Hermione's arms between her legs, was now kneeling over Hermione's head. Leaning forward, the ribbon-marked hands moved over Hermione's body, and toward Harry, the sensual mouth ordered, "Spread her wider."

The drums had reduced in volume. Harry saw the rapid rise and fall of Hermione's chest, heard the ragged gasps of her breath. Then the woman's hand, fingers stretched flat, hit Hermione's between her legs, raising a cry, followed by hoarse groans.

In spite of his climax only moments ago, Harry felt himself hardening again.

The woman's other hand caressed Hermione, stroking, then a gentle slap, and another, to continue with stroking.

Hermione's groaning changed to a long, sobbing cry, while her body twisted in sharp spasms, not stopping, as the woman's hand wasn't stopping either.

Then it was over - Hermione, eyes closed, still kept breathing noisily, while the woman moved off her, was approaching Harry.

Now she was behind him, her breasts at his shoulders, her mouth at his ear, her hand stroking his hardness, which made him groan. "It's your turn, 'arry."

Still in her grip, her nails digging into his pulsing flesh, he had to move forward, stretch his legs.

"Lie down." She pressed his shoulders onto the bed, had his arms between her legs, was over him.

Harry was lost, out of time, all his senses concentrating at the spots of stimulation across his body. He would have climaxed quickly, if not for the woman's skillful fingers prolonging this unbearable pleasure beyond imagination.

Even so - moments later, he started to tremble, felt his heat rise again, and then he was spent.

Eyes still closed, he felt the invader leave, and the thighs around his head go off. Too weak to check, Harry didn't see through which door the woman had entered the room, and now left.

* * *

In the silence, Hermione's movements seemed unnaturally loud when she stretched herself at his side, face-down, her cheeks flushed. "You still alive, Harry?"

"Almost ... And you?"

"More than ever. Watching this ... Knowing how it feels, after ... It was incredible, so ..." She was breathing hard.

Harry looked at her incredulously. "Wasn't it enough yet?"

"Enough yes ... Too much - it feels as if I cannot stop. Certainly I cannot climax again, and still, I'm so ..." Harry saw her right arm move under her stomach, between her legs, saw her expression change to a grimace of pain as much as pleasure.

Only now, he realized what had happened. This wine - it had been exposed to the air as much as to some spice with astonishing effects. They were both doped - in a mild version of what he'd experienced before.

"We're drugged - it was in the wine. I know this stuff ... Let me help you." Harry moved up, climbed over her left leg, pushed the other aside, pushed her arms away. His fingers stroked her intimately, slowly, gently, a quiet rhythm.

Almost as expected, Hermione calmed down, sighing only when his finger traced her most sensitive spot. Harry took it as a signal to stop, to stretch himself alongside her.

She smiled. "I knew there's been something - and I'm glad you know how to handle it ... Was it the same?"

"No - much worse. This is a mild version, so we can hope for some sleep before the night's over."

"Are you sleepy? I'm done and all, but I cannot sleep yet."

She was right. He was groggy, not sleepy.

After some minutes, Hermione turned around, to lie on her back.

Harry smiled. "Let's have a test - how about your sleepiness now." His hand moved over her breasts and down farther still. As an answer, Hermione moved her legs to offer more playground.

"You're an unsatiable want-it-all, huh?"

"No - that's not correct. I just go for opportunities, in particular when there's such a perfect excuse."

"Some opportunities turn out a fake, at closer inspection." Harry's hand stopped, however without leaving. Hermione lay motionlessly, savouring this touch.

They kept so for a while.

About to settle for sleep, Harry stiffened, feeling the same reaction from Hermione - the drums were back, faintly still, and this orgiastic voice.

"Oh no!"

For some minutes, they kept listening. Even now, these sounds were enough to send a slight tingling through Harry's groin. Apparently, the effect toward Hermione was still stronger.

Then the volume grew again, the slow bass rhythm accelerating.

Hermione stared at him, her mouth open, her breath quickening, an expression of helplessness in her face. "Harry ..."

Would this never end? His mind wanted to refuse, while his flesh was already responding. "Please, no ..."

Too late. Hermione was up, to put his arms over his head, to move on top of him, her thighs closing his view.

While he felt her hand stroking him, her other hand moving deeper, Harry heard her voice, hard, commanding, vibrating with lust. "Spread your legs ... wide, wider ..."

* * *

Harry came awake early, considering the events of the night, and the long day before. After having used the bathroom, climbing under the cover again, he knew why - the dope was still working, its effect apparently more stretched than reduced. Feeling and smelling Hermione's body so close to his own was enough to let his hardness grow again.

Was this the reason, or had he sent an involuntary wave? Hermione opened her eyes, murmured, "Just a sec ..." disappeared in the bathroom.

Returning, she stopped before the bed. "It surely's a mistake to come inside."

"You're totally right."

"Who wants to be right?" She climbed under the cover.

"Not me - all I have in mind is this particular mistake." Harry moved onto her, into her, feeling her warm and ready.

Her legs crossed over the small of his back. "That's the finish ... Take your time."

He did - moving slowly, pausing, savouring this sweet sensation which lacked the frenzy of the previous acts, still more thrilling because this time it was fully on purpose.

He knew that Hermione felt the same, that for her this was a forbidden game, raising her pleasure from the breaking of rules. And in addition to that, he used his trick - sending a mind wave which made him calm down just a bit while he felt Hermione's body go tense, erupt, and relax.

He whispered. "Finish is when I'm finished, right?"

Which happened sooner than expected, and planned, simply because this was just another challenge for Hermione, to be mastered with efficiency and for mutual pleasure.

When Harry was lying at her side, Hermione sighed. "That was a wonderful end to a wonderful night ... Not quite what I've been looking for, though no reason to complain."

"You mean this dope came in just handy?"

"Yes, pretty much so. It broke your resistance ... It increased the - er, fever, and it's a good excuse."

"Yeah, I noticed - there hasn't been much of a resistance from your side."

He felt more than he saw her smiling. "Absolutely not ... That's been on my mind for quite some time."

He pondered this unsurprising confession for a while. His eyes scanning the ceiling, he asked, "Hunting for a trophy?"

Hermione's hand trailed over his stomach. "Not a trophy - I just wanted to know ... It wasn't a general question, actually it was quite specific - only you."

Did he feel pleased? Maybe ... What he felt mostly was satisfaction, and calmness.

Although not everywhere, as Hermione's hand was trailing deeper. With his eyes closed, he heard her ask, "Is this still the dope or is it your normal standard for early morning?"

"It's non-standard, that's for sure ..." He issued a low moan. "Stop it, please - the excuse doesn't hold any longer."

"No, probably not." There was a trace of remorse in Hermione's voice, and defiance. "Which is a pity, because something else's holding, and getting longer ..."

A bad disciple of his own gospel, Harry let his hand explore the inside of her thighs, moving upward. Had been a mistake ... What he sensed was wiping off his calmness while Hermione started trembling, breathing harder.

Keeping a slight pressure, he asked, "When this woman was - ruling you, did you melt away?"

"Yes." It came in a small voice.

"It's domination and surrender, right?"

Her sharp groan was confirmation enough - response to his question as much as to his fingers.

"Turn onto your stomach."

With a trembling sigh, she obeyed.

He moved her arms onto her back, held them together, his lips touching her palms, whispering.

A gasp, and a helpless moan - Hermione's wrists were tied with some ribbon, soft but strong. Harry's hands stroked her flanks, caressed her buttocks. "You're defenseless ... at my mercy."

A whimpering.

"But I have no mercy." With a sharp twist, he spread her thighs with both hands.

A small outcry, followed by ragged breathing.

He inched closer, positioning himself, seized for her head, grabbing the curly mop of her hair. "You're my prisoner." Pressing her head onto the pillow, he pushed back into her.

A choked sound, a fluttering around him - if not for the previous efforts, they both would have collapsed instantly.

His fingers, claws again, moved over her breasts. Digging deeper, he found her nipples, held them, pinched with his fingers, then his nails.

Another wave, of pleasure almost finishing them off.

Digging his nails into the muscles of her thighs, he started again, then he felt her no longer fluttering, catching him, pressing a groan out of his lungs, and more out of his flesh.

He found the strength to untie her, so she could rest her arms more comfortably. Then, for a while, they were lying motionlessly - only his numb flesh was relaxing, shrinking. Finally, he withdrew to lie on her side again.

Hermione's head turned a bit, her eyes watching his face. "That's been you, not the dope."

"The game we played, yes - although, without the dope, it hadn't been possible."

"This game ..."

"It's terrific, isn't it? And addictive - but for all I know, it's not limited to any particular player."

A short grin, Hermione too exhausted to giggle. "And how do I teach some other player this trick with the manacles?"

"Oh ..." Harry grinned back. "Have a wand ready ... Besides, the real tying isn't really necessary - the imagination alone's enough, after you know how ..."

"Yes, I can imagine."

They both smiled about this joke as weakly as their bodies felt, then Hermione said, "Harry - I'll remember this, and I do believe you'll remember too, but otherwise - this night didn't take place."

"And this morning."

"In particular this morning ... To be precise - no mentioning to anyone - never. Okay?"

"Just so?"

Her head came up, showing the familiar expression - genius at work, maybe alienated a bit by the scene. "I wanted to be screwed by you - and I wanted to screw you. And you've been available, with body *and* with your mind. But only so much - I have no intention to break with Viktor, I don't want to hurt him ... And you, you're not gaining anything by answering certain questions."

Harry thought for a moment, grinned. "If I have a bad conscience, then only toward Viktor, because ... Anyway, you're right - this ought to be something that's ..."

"A dream."

"No!" Seeing her surprise, Harry added, "For some reason, I cannot think of it as a dream - but I know what you mean."

With a quick motion, Hermione moved onto him. "You're tempting my curiosity so much, Harry - tell me, who was it when you've been doped here for the first time?"

"That's none of your ..." His reply ended in a pained moan as Hermione was rubbing herself against him.

She smiled maliciously, still moving. "Please."

"No."

She sat up, kneeling over him. "This game you're bound to lose - you have no chance ..."

He knew she was right. "At that occasion, Armodéc had someone else - Désirée was her name ... He chose Beatrice after Désirée left."

"I thought so - something in the way she looked." With a triumphant smile, Hermione jumped up and out of the bed. "Okay, Harry - see you in a while."

* * *

No question - the dope had held regiment over all four people gathering for the breakfast. Yet as though in some common agreement, there was no remark or glance to hint anything unusual. Monsieur Armodéc asked, "What's the best time for your potion, Mademoiselle Granger - before or after the breakfast?"

"Before, I think."

"So be it then." The *loup-garou* took the flask, broke the seal to drink, and gulp. "Hmmm ... banana, I'd say - like a milk shake, which won't be rated as my first choice ..."

He froze for a second, coughed, looked at the flask, then - with widening eyes - at Hermione. "What did you ..."

The question never finished. Next moment, a grimace of pain distorted the man's face - his hands clutching toward his stomach, he bent forward like in a cramp, moaning.

Beatrice looked alarmed, her stare moving from the hunched figure to Hermione, and back.

Hermione's face showed a grim smile. "Does it hurt, Monsieur Armodéc?"

"Stupid question - can't you see what it does to me?" Their host seemed unable to sit upright, to take his hands off his stomach. "Did you poison me?"

"Not that I know of ... Yes, there's some new ingredient, but it should be well digestible with a werewolf's metabolism ..." Hermione showed no surprise. "Do you have an explanation for that, Monsieur Armodéc?"

"How could I?" The anger in the man's voice changed to pleading. "I'm no potions wizard - and I'm suffering, so can't you do something to help me?"

For all Harry knew, after having realized which plot Hermione was playing out, *suffering* had to be the only true part in their host's reply.

Hermione said, "I have an antidote - only, for a werewof, it's highly dangerous."

"I'M NO WEREWOLF!" After this outburst, Monsieur Armodéc nearly collapsed, losing all dignity. "You've figured it out ... Yes it's true - now please give me something to ease this terrible pain!"

After a short glance toward Harry, who nodded, Hermione extracted another flask from her bag, broke the seal, held it in front of the man's face. "Drink that."

Fabrice Armodéc did as instructed. Seconds later, he relaxed visibly - his head came up, his hands came to rest on the table. "That's ... thank you."

Hermione's voice was sharp. "Don't thank me - tell us the story, right away!"

There wasn't much of a story, according to what they were told in the next minutes - with pauses, with apologetic smiles, from a man no longer justifying to be addressed *Sire*. Young Fabrice, at the age of fourteen, had been bitten by what was suspected as a werewolf. His

parents took precautions immediately, preparing for the first time when this illness was expected to show its horrible effects.

Until the first full moon, the boy realized a dramatic change in attitude. Before the accident, his father had reprimanded him often enough for his laziness, sloppiness, for his overboarding fantasy - while now, everything he did, or said, seemed justified by his state, at least excused. It was intriguing ...

Then the night arrived. Alone in his quarter, locked inside, young Fabrice became aware that it had been no werewolf, just a wild dog probably. The howling the boy issued was that of disappointment and frustration - starting next morning, he would be made responsible again for all his actions. Unless ...

And so he became a *loup-garou*. Nobody showed surprise when he went for all literature about werewolves, about symptoms and typical signs. He was released from all his duties, could start a life of careful luxury with just one obligation - never to hurt an innocent witness of his state.

It worked extremely well, thanks to a society in which *loup-garous* were common, an accepted species, still more thanks to his parents' money. Fabrice had found a dream come true - girls were almost lining up to find out how it was with a *loup-garou*, in particular with this one - well educated, charming, rich.

Over the years, of course, Fabrice found out that he had a price to pay which included more than a bit of howling and rambling once every four weeks. The price was isolation and the lack of any close relationship. Then word came round that the Hogwarts school was looking for some volunteers to participate in a werewolf cure. For Fabrice Armodéc, desperate for human contact beyond the level of a paid mistress, the temptation was too much, in particular since he expected to come in touch with some people known to be in Hogwarts.

So at least this part had been true.

Harry regretted having come without Nagini. Although, the man's collapse seemed complete, Harry didn't suspect any lies in this story - save some skipped details of embarrassing nature, maybe. He asked, "Then why didn't you just pretend to feel some effect?"

"I knew I would never match the reports of the other candidates. And it was a kind of challenge - somehow, I couldn't give up my cover, hoped that this significant difference would send more people into this house ... I was right, wasn't I?"

The words, the face - Harry was looking at an old roué, no longer the impressive appearance of a dark-skinned grandseigneur with a preference for naughty topics. He turned to Beatrice. "And you?"

"What about me?"

"Did you know?"

"From what?" The young woman looked at the figure which seemed shrunk, then back to Harry. "I met him when this cure was already running - remember? ... Maybe I've been suspecting something, but ... It wasn't my business."

"No, it wasn't." Harry turned to Hermione. "Since when did you suspect him?"

"For months. But I had to wait until I'd be here personally - this test without me present, to give the antidote in time, and to be ready if something went wrong, that was too risky ... And I kept it to myself so he couldn't be forewarned."

Which made clear that Hermione's opinion of Harry as a spy was more limited than some other ... Well, she was right, wasn't she?

Harry nodded. "And now?"

Hermione's glance scanned over the old man, the young woman. "We're done here ... Let's go."

Fabrice Armodéc's head came up. "What are you going to do, now that you know about me?"

"You tricked me - I tricked you." Hermione shrugged. "So that's it ... Some people in Hogwarts will know, but I don't feel like running around and telling everybody." There was acid in her voice. "Who cares about you?"

The man twisted. "And what about you, Harry?"

"My name's Potter, Monsieur Armodéc ... Otherwise - I'm Hermione's messenger, and maybe you're lucky for that ... Her answer extends to me, anyway."

Their host made an attempt to regain some dignity. "But you ought to admit that I made your visits as agreeable as possible, with everything ..."

"Beatrice can say that - not you!" Harry almost spat the words. "Her intention was honest ... But why wasting time with a grudge against you? The lie of your life - how could that be topped with anything worse?"

He looked at Beatrice, smiled. "We won't see each other again. Adieu, Beatrice."

"Adieu, 'arry."

The permanent portkey back to Hogwarts, for which Harry hadn't found a safe place, no longer caused a problem. He made the one-timer for Hermione just outside, at the handrail.

26 - Ending Tracks

As every good spy knows - even a spy as mediocre as Harry - the best method for hiding a secret is to wrap it into another secret. Naturally, someone else's secret would be most convenient, in particular right after uncovering it. This was the reason why Harry and Hermione had no trouble when returning to Hogwarts, reporting that a fake werewolf had been unmasked.

Any unusual emotion, every glance could be interpreted that way.

It took Harry a day to feel master of working senses again. It took him another day to realize - in some sense, they were doing the same Fabrice Armodéc had done.

Which should be sufficient to feel ashamed. Except that Harry remembered the agreement with Hermione - no mentioning again, never. And no doubt - walking around feeling shame would have been the worst method of making it public.

Maybe Ginny had her thoughts. Once or twice, she looked at him and Ron and Hermione ... Only she knew from past experience that digging deeper would do no good, in a wider sense of the word, and probably felt bound by her own promise. Harry, on the other side, had the good sense not to investigate further.

To some degree, he felt grateful for the time of *freedom* to which Cho had condemned him ... And herself too, because this provided the basis on which he could store the memory away, together with a decent amount of guilt, just enough to conform with his ethics, not more than affordable ... This was the package from his mind's perspective.

While his body ...

It plainly refused to store the memory away, seemed to complain furiously about being spoiled first and kept starving then. Harry had some trouble looking at Hermione as usual, without thinking back - and he caught himself thinking that the modified recipe of this dope might be worth knowing.

Long exercises in the training hall didn't help much, more the opposite. Danielle suddenly represented a temptation - worse, she seemed to feel it ... Only the certain knowledge that this would get out of control right from the spot - simply because Danielle had no reason to discipline herself - prevented Harry from following an invitation that hadn't been cancelled ever, was renewed at each dance lesson with a glance, a slight touch.

He made the exercises nonetheless, actually trained more than ever. Partly to fill the time, to temper his impatience waiting for results from Francesco Lopez, and of course to be prepared when the detective's tele shots would present a known face.

Then the events pushed Harry's problem aside.

It was at suppertime. He sat down, started eating. His glance routinely swooping over the Gryffindor table, he realizing that Rahewa's seat was empty. So she would be visiting her mother.

Then he saw her coming in from the Entrance Hall. The girl didn't even look at the table, kept walking mechanically toward the staircase to the Gryffindor tower.

Scanning with his *haragei* was just for confirmation, Harry knew already without that, just trusting his eyes. He shot up, followed her, managed to reach Rahewa already out of sight from the hall.

She noticed him. "Harry ..."

"I know. Come upstairs."

In the Gryffindor tower, deserted at this time with all other students at supper downstairs, Harry walked to a chair, sat down, put her on his lap, her head at his shoulder. "So she's gone - her suffering's over. Now you can mourn."

And she did. Clutching to him, pressing her arms around his neck, sobbing more violently every now and then, while Harry was holding her, rocking her gently, stroking this long black mane which felt quite different from some other, saving words that couldn't help, saving mind waves for a better occasion - later, after this twelve-year-old had had her time to cry, when only the loneliness and the desperation were left.

Those who never cry do it seriously. Rahewa still was hiding her face at his throat when Harry heard noise from the door - a conversation between the Fat Lady and some Gryffindor students.

He murmured, "People are coming ... Let's go."

Rahewa didn't ask where, just kept following him, lacking any will of her own, no thought left to worry about being seen with a swollen, tear-stained face.

Harry led her downstairs, meeting a few younger students who looked at Rahewa curiously, and with disbelief, guided her through some more corridors until he reached his destination.

Some house elves looked up, started to smile, until they saw the girl in her misery. Then Dobby came hurrying. "Ah, Master Harry, what is giving Dobby the honour of this great wizard's visit?"

"Hello, Dobby - sorry to bother you at such a time ... This is Rahewa Lightfoot. Her mother died today, and that's why we couldn't join the supper table."

Quite on purpose, Harry's voice had been loud enough to be heard in the corners of the large kitchen. As expected, a moment later house elves came swarming, to comfort the girl, to find a hot chocolate, and some cake, just something light to nibble at, nibble some more until, after a while, it would be gone.

As a spin-off, Harry got enough leftovers from the supper he'd missed. Maybe it was a lack of reverence, only he didn't think so, and by all means - food always seemed at risk these days.

Rahewa came out of her trance, saw him chewing, decided to follow his example with something that would hold a bit longer than cake - youth was strong, and survival instincts kicked in.

Harry felt relieved. "I'd suggest to let Mr. Spinbottle handle the preparations for the funeral ... Is this okay with you?"

A nod.

"Did your mother specify anything - a particular wish?"

"She wanted to be burnt."

A cremation, then. Harry darkly remembered that this was a habit of Indians - or maybe of north-American ones, or some of them. "And where?"

A shrug. "The cemetery of our quarter."

"I'm sure some Gryffindors would like to attend to the funeral, and I'd provide a direct link - I guess I know a Ravenclaw too - and a Beauxbatons girl ..."

"No."

Harry looked at Rahewa with astonishment. "Why not?"

"No."

"Rahewa, they feel with you - they want to ..."

"They didn't know her. If it's me they feel with, they'll stay off."

The emphasis with which this - admittedly correct - argument was issued told Harry the reason. Her father ... The less people knew about him, the better.

After some more arguing, Rahewa accepted a compromise - the members of her Quidditch team, her co-dancers from the Grass Dance crew, and of course Professor McGonagall as the Gryffindor Headmistress.

When they had finished the negotiations, it seemed as though Rahewa felt quite pleased at the thought of this small crowd - for what Harry could sense, she had dreaded a lonely ceremony with a dead soul, a forlorn one, and a lost one, not counting the priest.

This done, and with their stomachs filled, they thanked the house elves for the help, and the sympathy, then left the kitchen. Outside in the corridor, Rahewa seemed at a loss to imagine what to do next.

Harry could. "Come with me."

When they entered the Gryffindor tower again, Harry's hand taking hold of a girl at the verge of panic, heads were turning to them. He took Rahewa's shoulders, moved her so she felt him present right behind her. "Hey, folks - gimme a minute!"

While the general attention was focusing on them, Harry held tight, sent a wave of soothing comfort. Not letting go, he said, "Most of you didn't know - Rahewa's mother has been very ill for quite a while. She had leukaemia - and this afternoon, she died."

He waited a few seconds. "That's why right now Rahewa isn't herself ... And if you come to her and she tells you to bugger off - maybe that's what she's thinking, or maybe she just doesn't know what else to say."

Some nods of understanding in the wall of stunned faces and sympathetic eyes.

"At any rate - leukaemia isn't contagious, and Rahewa isn't more dangerous than yesterday ... I thought it's the simplest way to tell you all - thank you."

Harry had barely finished when Rahewa's classmates came to escort her to a place - probably to give her company as much as to squeeze her for more details.

Well, youth was robust. Harry took the opportunity to gain his own small circle, to tell them that they had an appointment about three days from now, just as far apart as the Hogwarts Express platform.

Ginny and Hermione were looking at him with a tiny bit more than appreciation, while it was Ron who said, "Harry, you're doing bloody well in this matter."

"Small wonder - I've been prepared, and involved ... Tomorrow morning, I'll be off to meet Spinbottle."

"And then?" Ginny's question was obviously addressing more than the chores of a funeral.

"Spinbottle will handle the formalities."

The question had certainly included a pending offer, and a pending decision, however Ginny didn't press further, probably realizing that all this could be launched only after the legal path was free.

* * *

The ceremony was over. Calling it a funeral seemed wrong - yes, there had been a coffin disappearing out of sight, however horizontally into a cubicle that soon afterwards would be filled with a roaring firestorm, rather than vertically downward into earth and quietness.

Harry had used the time to examine Mr. Lightfoot, who had arrived sober and in a dress better than expected. Yet no dress could hide the destructive work of heavy drinking - in the man's face, in the stance of this body whose slenderness had been passed on to a daughter, keeping the uncontrolled trembling to itself.

Rahewa had been silent, almost motionless, all through the ceremony.

The other guests left, with Professor McGonagall somehow managing to be simultaneously head and tail of the row that went toward the flower pot outside, programmed earlier by Harry. Having noticed Mr. Spinbottle's pointed look, Harry separated from the group, waited until the lawyer met him at a bench.

"Mr. Potter, I spoke with my deceased client's husband about your intention to have his daughter adopted into another family - family's the term I used, whatever it means in detail."

"And?"

"He flatly refuses to agree."

Remembering what he had sensed from the man, something in Harry boiled up, ready to take action of the violent kind. Then he calmed down - wasn't he just speaking with a lawyer of the cunning kind?

"So, is he?"

"Yes. I think I know what's motivating him - and why he feels in a position to stand his ground."

"Which ground?"

"I told him he'd lose a legal battle, considering his habits, and his well-known reputation. He just laughed at me - so-to-speak. And he told me why we cannot use that threat."

"Why not?"

Mr. Spinbottle grimaced. "He would return to Canada, taking his daughter with him - at least claiming his right to have her ordered to follow. This return, Mr. Potter, would lead back into some tribe - with enough people, families, women to make our case lost instantly."

A devious plot - seen from Harry's perspective, still more from Rahewa's. "Is he serious?"

"Frankly, Mr. Potter - he's trying to save what he sees as his pension, I mean his daughter, and her ability to earn some money. And that's ..."

"Of course!" Harry registered his impoliteness. "Sorry, Mr. Spinbottle - but of course you're right. We can buy him."

"Exactly ... Although - right now it's a bit difficult, you'll have to expect some weeks before such an attempt might be successful."

"He's got some money??"

"Unfortunately so." The lawyer seemed embarrassed - a surprising emotion for all Harry knew. "There was an insurance with him as the beneficiary."

"A life insurance?" Harry felt surprised twice more - to find a life insurance in this household, and to hear it had been paid out so quickly.

"No, not exactly. It was a funeral insurance ... Two hundred and fifty galleons." And that made clear why Mr. Spinbottle didn't know how to look - all expenses of the funeral, or cremation, had been covered by Harry.

A true Zen joke - the first of black humour Harry could remember.

After a moment, he found his speech again. "I see ... But I wouldn't know how you could have prevented that, Mr. Spinbottle, so please don't feel - er, professionally offended, if you know what I mean ..."

The lawyer nodded, not bothering to stop being just that.

"... Would you have any guess how long it will keep him - er, liquid?"

Mr. Spinbottle hinted a smile at this involuntary joke. "If he'd be careful, several months - but normally, after some weeks, people in his situation lose discipline. So I'd say - four to six weeks, Mr. Potter."

Six weeks of burning uncertainty?

An idea started forming in Harry's mind, took shape. "Mr. Spinbottle, I'll follow your advice, and offer him money - but I'll do it in a style you - as a man of the law - needn't witness. Can you tell me where to find him?"

The lawyer gave Harry the names and addresses of three pubs, then said, "I dearly wish I could witness, Mr. Potter. A funeral insurance, really! ... Would you mind telling me afterwards?"

"I can tell you what I'll do - offer money, as I said, and make the offer a bit - er, urgent."

"Ah - an offer he cannot deny, then?"

Harry knew this term, grinned. "Not that bad. After all, someone has to be quite alive to suffer from nightmares, right?"

* * *

Next day, early evening, Harry entered the *Crooked Pirate* to find Mr. Lightfoot at the bar. Hardly a lucky hit - Harry had tried the *Happy Clown* and the *Round Corner* before.

The man examined him, and the snake around Harry's body, with limited surprise, nearly untraceable enthusiasm. "Yes?"

"We have to talk, Mr. Lightfoot."

"Not me. Leave me alone."

Somehow, as the bartender remembered, his regular had an attack of some sickness, making him pale first and flush then, while oily sweat was breaking out in that ruined face. The young man helped him to a table in a corner, ordered a double of the usual, and a wodka-spiced orange juice for himself. Some minutes later, when the young man signaled for another double, his regular looked a lot better, however quite afraid the attack might return.

Harry had changed from the opposite seat to one at the side, this way avoiding most of the man's breath. "Mr. Lightfoot, you know who I am?"

Sullen silence.

Harry's hands came together, making him look like a thoughtful student, whereas his opponent just had learned the hard way what it really meant - something to avoid under all circumstances.

"Yes," scowled Rahewa's father.

"I'm not entirely sure that you're fully aware who I am - in this issue, I mean. For starters, Mr. Lightfoot - I'm the one who paid the funeral cost..."

Oh yes, Mr. Lightfoot knew.

"... which total up to four hundred galleons. You owe me four hundred galleons, Mr. Lightfoot."

The glass, which just had been raised - with a steady hand, unsurprisingly so at this time of the day - sat down with a clank. Rahewa's father - a horrible thought, somehow, though undeniable after a short glance at him - stared thunderstruck.

"Four hundred galleons is nothing for me ..."

Harry took his time to let the message sink in, watching as the man's expression changed from desperate fright to a fretting expectation.

"... but it's enough to get you busted at the spot - we both know that you have received the funeral insurance payment ... By the way, the chief of police is my godfather."

Another message to sink in, raising quick changes between hope and fear in a face which surely had been as calm and strong as Rahewa's - at some time in some past.

"So this is one level we can work on - the legal one, the one that would be carried out by Mr. Spinbottle as the expert for business that's legal and public."

Could this wreck of a brain still read messages between the lines? Yes it could, as Harry registered, certainly if they came as blunt as this one.

"But I'm here to offer you a deal."

To emphasize this aspect, Harry signaled the waiter for another double shot to fill Mr. Lightfoot's glass. His own drink stood nearly untouched, Harry had ordered the vodka mainly because someone else's reek was easier to endure if you had drunk some booze by yourself.

When the waiter was gone, Harry continued, "Yes, a deal - money, I mean ... That's your intention, to live off your daughter's money - and that's your only interest in your daughter. Isn't that so, Mr. Lightfoot?"

The man opened his mouth to speak, was interrupted before his first word.

"I forgot to tell you - this snake here, Nagini's her name, knows when you're lying. Maybe Rahewa told about her - she certainly did, question is whether you've been around ... Anyway - if Nagini tells me you're lying, you'll feel pain, Mr. Lightfoot ... And this pain will be so

much that you'll regret having lied ... So, after this forewarning, do we agree that your only interest in Rahewa is to have a secure income?"

"I'm a sick man - er, Mr. Potter."

Harry suppressed his impulse to sneer in distaste, felt grateful to have prepared himself for this conversation so thoroughly with Samantha - regarding drunkyards - and with Hermione about potions and nasty tricks.

"Don't use that word, Mr. Lightfoot!" Harry's expression, his voice could have startled stronger men. "Not in this context - your wife was sick, really sick. You ... I know that alcoholism is considered an illness, only for me it isn't." Harry's voice changed to hissing. "I could cure you, Mr. Lightfoot - that's an alternative to a money offer ... You'd stop drinking within two weeks' time - and do you know why?"

Now the man really looked scared.

"We have some potions witches at Hogwarts, and I spoke with them. There's a potion, Mr. Lightfoot - it could be deposited in your body ... One gulp of liquor would make you throw up, and feel like burning to death inside for ten minutes ..."

The man looked at him in absolute horror, no doubt believing every word Harry said. Which meant his faith in potions was significantly stronger than Hermione's.

"... but I'm disgressing - as I said, I'm here to offer a deal."

Harry waited until the horror had faded from this map of burst vessels and lost hopes. Then he said, "My part is - you'll receive your pension, just what you had in mind, but from me. More exactly, from Gringotts ... Hundred galleons per month, Mr. Lightfoot ..."

Harry paused, letting the sound resonate.

"... as long as you live. I guess it's less than ten years, but that's up to you - at any rate, there'll be a fund behind that won't dry out. So, if you're going to see your seventies, it'll still feed you."

Numbers started to work in a face, and in a brain which - at this time of day and the current level of booze - was probably at its peak.

When the interest in his conversation partner had grown sufficiently, Harry placed the second navigation point in this promising future. "If you try to contact your daughter for more, for an add-on - if you contact Rahewa, the pension will break off for a month ... Any such attempt will cost you a month's worth of your money, Mr. Lightfoot."

His money ... the well-chosen term had the desired effect toward the man, as Harry could watch, so much so that Mr. Lightfoot went for his chance. "That's not enough. Two hundred."

"So that's my offer." Harry spoke as though he hadn't heard the reply. "Hundred a month - should allow you a life of your choice ... But maybe you don't like the offer, so let's come to another alternative ..." Harry interrupted himself, looking up sharply at something at the other side of the room.

* * *

Mr. Lightfoot, following Harry's example, craned his neck to see what was going on, found nothing of any particular interest. When his glance returned to his conversation partner, the young man held a tiny flask in his hand, and a nasty smile in his face.

"Won't you sip at your drink, Mr. Lightfoot?"

Frozen in shock, the man stared at his glass, at the flask in which a small rest of a colourless liquid was lapping.

"No I won't ... You're trying to poison me."

A harsh laugh, piercing in his ears, and suddenly a wave in his mind that felt like a bucket of ice water - Rahewa's father knew how that felt, his wife had used this terrible trick once to ...

"It can happen any time, Mr. Lightfoot - every day, every hour, in each bar you're going to visit ... I've hired some detectives - Pinkerton, the name may tell you something. And don't ever think these people won't agree to such a job, read their history - Pinkerton detectives have shot and killed hundreds of strikers, hired by people with money."

Mr. Lightfoot seemed to know - a sad remnant of a past in which he'd been a worker with an interest in social history, or just in the risk of cutting a strike on American ground.

"But I'm disgressing again ... Basically, as I said, I'm here to offer you a deal. Hundred galleons at the first of each month you manage to live, and to stay off your daughter's life - as soon as you've contacted Mr. Spinbottle to sign some papers."

With this money not farther away than the touch of a hand - a signing hand, Mr. Lightfoot suddenly found the courage to express his true feelings. He glared at his opponent. "You bloody bastard ..."

The bartender, looking up from some noise, saw that his regular seemed having another attack from the demons found at the bottom of liquor bottles, unusual only because these demons preferred the dark of the night while now it was just early evening. But the young man apparently found the means to comfort him - the pained yell faded, changed to a miserable sob, ended moments later.

Relieved, the bartender turned his attention back to his work.

"This offer, Mr. Lightfoot, stays open for the next four weeks. If you have signed until then, we're in business. If not - well, then I'll start some other business ..."

"You'd kill me - won't 'cha?"

"No, Mr. Lightfoot." An unsettling smile. "I'll make sure you'll live to remember - every minute of the few weeks it would take to drain you off the booze ... And then I would let Mr. Spinbottle hunt your money - four hundred for the funeral, fifty thousand for the medical cost, then the support for your daughter - you'll hate every minute of your life, but you'll live."

The stare from these green eyes alone, burning in a face too old for what looked like a graduate student, made Mr. Lightfoot shiver. But maybe it was the rush of cold air from the door.

"So we better concentrate on the bright side of things. Hundred galleons a month is what you can achieve, if you sign within the next four weeks ... Think it over, Mr. Lightfoot."

The young man left. Rahewa's father watched as he passed the waiter, to pay the bill and to point to his table. A moment later, the waiter arrived with another double shot.

"That's from your pal, buddy. I ought to tell you - it's clean, but it's the last clean drink from that source ... Whatever that means, as if I'd sell doped booze ..."

With a sickening twist in his stomach, Mr. Lightfoot realized how much could happen to a drink, on its way from the bottle to the mouth. He quickly took his glass to wash the thought off.

* * *

Hermione wanted to know what her remaining Haitian candidate had encountered in the recent full moon's night, and she seemed eager to manage alone. It raised a new problem for Harry, showing him that his portkey project wasn't completed yet - or if so, then only in the eyes of a state-of-the-art programmer while Hermione was judging from a user's perspective, not caring of technical constraints. A portkey to carry with you - her return ticket, what else?

Harry experimented with a coin, wrapped in paper, in a purse. The coin worked well, that was the unsurprising good news. Unfortunately, it worked through paper and purse.

How to wrap a portkey?

A Zen joke, by all means - a portkey was actually a non-portable key because the effect leaked through.

Then Harry had the right idea, tested it, felt pleased as much as intrigued.

He found Hermione, delivered a small bundle. "Here, your return ticket. If you want to jump, open it and feel through until you sense the coin ... Do it quickly, and please come back *with* that bundle, okay?"

"Why quickly?"

"Because of the wrapping - it has some side-effects."

Harry had found the right answer - a little challenge for Hermione, to be faced without asking more, to be mastered by a genius brain ...

Only this was exactly what made Harry quite nervous, so he waited near the Hogwarts Express platform, biting mental nails - until he saw Hermione's figure appear from nowhere.

She just stood there, didn't move.

Harry rushed over, took the bundle out of Hermione's hands, careful not to touch its contents.

Hermione came awake from her trance, looked at him with dreamy eyes - in spite of the cool March weather here outside, these were what anyone else would have called bedroom eyes.

"Hello, Hermione - did your visit go well?"

"Er - yes ... What is this, Harry?"

He grinned. "A Veela shawl - the only wrapping for a portkey ... Except that it has this peculiar side-effect."

Hermione was breathing a bit harder than the effort of walking toward Hogwarts justified. "A Veela shawl, huh? ... Where can you get something like that?"

"This question isn't really your average level." Harry grinned broader. "From a Veela, of course ... You're still suffering from the heat - Haitian heat, I mean."

A quick grin from Hermione. "Yes, must be that - because the other doesn't feel like suffering."

As Hermione reported, Caprien Marût had encountered a few slight symptoms, not more. She had her flask back, and twenty galleons less in her purse. The next step would be to check if these symptoms would increase. If not, her potion was proven to work permanently - just leaving a rough edge to be smoothened, only that Hermione wanted to start the last fine-tuning not before having proof of the basic success.

And for Harry, the Haitian episode was over. All he still had to do was programming two portkeys every four weeks and lending his Veela shawl ... It crossed his mind that this should be counted as the risky part.

* * *

With the local business settled, with the business of Rahewa's father in a bothering wait state, Harry could concentrate all his efforts on the open issue - Voldemort. Earlier than his next regular visit was due, he jumped to Boston.

Francesco Lopez wasn't in his flat. Harry could have entered the apartment in several ways, only it just felt too impolite - and besides, what if a Pinkerton agent stuck to the habit of building deadly traps by routine?

An hour later, Harry had more luck.

Francesco Lopez let him in. "Does sensing bad news across an ocean belong to your unusual skills, Harry?"

"No, I just didn't know what else to do. Why - what happened?"

"Maybe nothing - from our project's view. But you might have a look at what I've found."

Harry followed the detective into his office.

"One of the non-standard routines I developed for this task, Harry, is a weekly scan of the police reports ... Unusual deaths, unsolved cases - events which might smell like magic involved, dark magic in particular."

Thinking about, Harry found this a sensible thing to do, reminding him of this Indian proverb about following tracks.

"Well, and some days ago, there was such a case. A man has been found dead - in a hotel room. The hotel guests usually come without luggage, for one night, and the couples leave in different directions. But it's at the upper end of this particular scale."

"Did he die from a heart attack?"

It had been planned as a joke, but the Pinkerton detective didn't catch it. "Most unlikely. True - he must have been very agitated at the moment of his death, but what's so unusual is the cause of death ... By the way, this isn't public information."

So Francesco Lopez was feeding on federal - or maybe also local - channels. Following an impulse, Harry asked, "Has he been bitten to death by a werewolf?"

A perplexed expression appeared in the detective's face. "No - by a vampire, that's how the wounds look. The police still thinks it's a fake, but I've wised up a bit, thanks to some database ... For what I know, the man had a visitor who was ordered to ride him without a saddle, and she did, and just when he was about to reach what he wanted, she turned to a vampire and sucked him to death."

Remembering Drilencu's lessons, Harry nodded. "Yes, that fits. It's certainly magical - and fairly unusual."

Francesco Lopez extracted a large black-and-white photograph. "That's the guy."

The wound marks at the throat were clearly visible. The man's face looked very dead, frozen in an ecstatic grimace. It also looked very black, and very much like that of Fabrice Armodéc.

By the time Harry had recovered, the detective could hardly temper his impatience, with the expression of a gold digger seeing a nugget enclosed in stone. "Okay, Harry - tell me everything."

One hour later, Francesco Lopez knew - well, not everything, yet enough to proceed, apparently also enough not to squeeze his customer further. He looked genuinely happy. "Harry, you're right! We're on track, and we're close."

"Are we?"

"Sure - if we can track down this Armodéc's steps, and moves - that's simple platfoot's work ..."

"Platfoot?"

"Detective work - not thinking, just searching, collecting. Can you come up with a picture of the live Armodéc?"

"Hmmm ... Pretty unlik ..." Harry stopped, smiled. "Of course - do you know what a spectator mind recording is?"

Francesco Lopez didn't, whistled awestruck when Harry explained to him. "Golly - that's a detective's dream come true ... And where can you do that, and come out with a few colour pictures?"

"Here in Boston? Dunno ..." Again, Harry stopped himself, grinned, though somewhat wryly. "But I know a studio in Santa Monica which can do it."

"Ah, yes of course." The satirical undertone in the detective's voice died rather suddenly when Harry told him he'd be back in a while and disappeared, the air softly popping in.

Jesamine was in her office, thank God for medium favours. "A spectator recording - and a confidential one, am I right? ... C'mon, Harry, you get the special treat - the boss herself, because the boss owes you, and what's more important, I'm fed up with shuffling papers."

Forty minutes later, Harry had a cassette with the last dinner conversation on the Ile de la Tortue, plus some colour hardcopies. He beamed. "Thank you, Jesamine - that's help when I need it."

"For you any time, Harry ... Say - how confidential is this?" Jesamine's tone made clear that she was thinking of one particular spectator, rather than some public audience.

Harry grinned. "No need for censorship."

"Good to hear that. And how's it going?"

He examined Jesamine's face. "You know about our - er, latest agreement?"

"Sure thing."

Harry smiled, hearing this reply from an ex-teacher and now Cho's friend and business partner. "Well - might be my special friend has just made his one little big mistake."

"Be careful, Harry."

"Will do ... Say hello from me - and thank you, Jesamine." Off he went.

Francesco Lopez looked like a fifty-year-old seeing what could not possibly be - Santa Claus alive. "Harry, you make me wonder if there's a future for Muggle detectives."

"There is, Francesco - don't take me for standard."

The Pinkerton detective was still fighting a hysterical fit of giggles when Harry said goodbye, after promising to return for any news he could contribute, or just for the sheer hope of hearing them.

27 - Broke

Coming out on the Ile de la Tortue, Harry had his wand ready, checked around with eyes and ears and *haragei*. But there was nothing, of course, except the quiet house in front of him, some windows lighted. Keeping watchful, not feeling anything unusual, he moved closer, used the heavy metal knob to bang at the door.

Steps inside, then Beatrice's voice. "Ou-est lá?"

"Beatrice? It's me, Harry."

The door came open. Beatrice looked with astonishment at him, standing there in the last light of the day. "What are you doing here, 'arry? Fabrice isn't at home."

"I know - because I know where he is." Though not in the metaphorical sense, as Harry became aware.

The young woman's look grew alarmed. "What - pardon, come in." Inside, Beatrice said, "Something happened to him, right?"

"Yes - but why did you think so?"

"Because I'm not stupid ... Is he dead, 'arry?"

"Yes he is."

When Beatrice had heard Harry's story, she looked pitying. "Poor Armodéc ... Poor stupid little boy."

"He certainly was stupid to contact Voldemort. Do you know how he could get in touch with him?"

"No - he's been in touch with him already when I came here for the first time."

"Oh, dammit." Now Harry felt deeply alarmed. "Are you sure?"

Beatrice looked wondering. "He left for some visits every once in a while - and he was always so interested to hear how you were getting along ... That was so untypical of him, normally he didn't care of other people's doings - well, unless they had to do with ..."

Sex - what else, Harry could finish the sentence by himself easily. "And you knew all the time?"

Beatrice held his stare. "I had my thoughts - but it took a while for them to develop - remember, I came after Désirée left ... And then, when you didn't touch the issue at this breakfast, I was sure you knew."

"Knew?" Harry looked puzzled. "What made you think so?"

"But 'arry - you never told him anything really confidential, or what was currently going on ... And not asking in that direction - quite as if you didn't suspect him - was the cleverest move I could imagine."

Harry stared at the young woman, readjusting his perception of her - from a nice, and skilled, flower of the night to an experienced arbiter of plots, secrets, tactics.

He smiled ruefully. "I had no idea."

Beatrice shot him a consoling look. "Then you did the right thing just by reflex, 'arry - which doesn't surprise me a bit."

"So you didn't approve his doings?"

"With Voldemort?" Beatrice looked as if having heard a very stupid question. "Fabrice was a little boy, who'd never overcome his first sexual experiences - he just couldn't put real-world things into proportion, especially something as monstrous as the dark lord ..."

With eyes wide in surprise, Harry became aware that Beatrice was right, and that he himself had been blinded - well, maybe understandably so, but ...

"... and he has robbed me."

"Robbed you??"

"Yes - my potions."

Harry looked at Beatrice, trying to cope with the speed by which his vision of things was shattering to pieces.

"Two bottles of the ecstasy potion - the pure kind." Seeing Harry's look, Beatrice smiled. "Did you think it was his development, 'arry? ... Oh no, not Fabrice, not something into which you had to invest more than some nice words and a slow hand and a hard cock ... It's my recipe - he learned about it only after I came to him."

"So you and Hermione - you're both ..."

Beatrice's smile turned archly. "We're both potions witches - yes, 'arry, I think that's the common factor you were going to point out."

"And the night with me ..."

Beatrice flushed a bit. "Was the first real - er, field test ... And the result was that I changed the mixture, as you probably noticed by yourself the last time ... I'm sorry if I used you without warning - but believe me, I've been suffering as much as you, was sore as hell, and ..."

Harry started to giggle, stopped - after all, there was a death involved.

Beatrice had lighted up a bit. "I'm glad you're not mad at me, 'arry, because I need your help."

"What for?"

"I want to leave from here, as you can imagine - I don't think there's any sense in waiting for an inheritance, or for my payment ... I have no sickle, 'arry - so if you could make me a portkey to Port-au-Prince, you'd solve a problem for me."

He examined Beatrice again, from a totally different perspective. "Do you have any money there?"

"No."

Very much what he had expected. Probably Armodéc had promised the full payment at the end, or it was locked in some account that would never open again, now that the false *loup-garou* was dead.

Harry came to a decision, realizing that he had found it already moments before. "Port-au-Prince is your choice?"

"Yes."

"Alright ... I'll make a portkey to the linkport for you, that's about the only place I know in Port-au-Prince ..." Harry felt in his pockets. "I have twenty galleons with me - but tomorrow I'll contact Gringotts, and day after tomorrow, you can go to the local residence, then there'll be an account ready for you ... Ten thousand galleons - should be enough so you can pick your choice which of your talents to use for a profession."

Beatrice's eyes met his own, showing disbelief. "That's considerably more than Fabrice was owing me."

Harry shrugged. "I'm not paying Armodéc's debts ... I've got some money to be spent in the fight against Voldemort, and Armodéc's silliness may have helped me - whatever, it feels like a Zen equation, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't ... To me, it feels like ..." Beatrice stopped, came over, then slowly placed a kiss at both of his cheeks - the French welcome. "Thank you, 'arry."

He grinned. "It's no sacrifice at all - not even a small one."

Beatrice recognized the joke, smiled warmly. "You're very gentle, 'arry - but I knew that already before ... That's why I didn't ask for money - I felt sure you wouldn't let me starve." Her expression changed. "But you still surprised me - and that's why I want to ... Wait for me!"

She left the room, came back some minutes later, deposited two small bottles at the table - a half-bottle of red wine, and an even smaller bottle with a clear liquid.

"These are my last reserves, 'arry - the ones Fabrice didn't know about. Your offer allows me to come along without selling them, and to produce others in a while, so they're rightfully yours."

Harry inspected the bottles with mixed emotions. "The red wine - is it what I think it is?"

Beatrice smiled. "Yes - the ecstasy potion in the mixture that's been used the last time - just the right level, wouldn't you say so?"

Harry nodded. "Yes - provided you don't have to go into some office early next morning."

Beatrice laughed.

"And the clear one?"

The potions witch became serious. "It's a brain booster, 'arry. Very efficient - only slightly addictive - and when the effect's over, you'll feel like dead for a while." There was pride in her voice. "This is my first one - I used it by myself to master the other recipe."

Staring at the bottle again, remembering some other occasion and a white powder, Harry asked, "Do you know Giants?"

"No - why?"

"They have something similar. I know one - once, he gave me a sample for a certain purpose, and it had exactly the effects you just described."

Beatrice nodded. "This knowledge isn't unique - at least you know what to expect, so I don't have to worry that it knocks you down ... This bottle contains about two wine glasses - one glass is the proper quantity for a single trip."

Harry walked to her, planted kisses on both cheeks. "Thank you, Beatrice - I wish you luck in your future business."

She smiled. "Watch out - most likely, I'll be a competition for your 'ermione."

"She isn't mine - and she'll work at Hogwarts ... Before I forget - which keyword for the account?"

Beatrice needed just a second. "Ecstasy."

* * *

Harry programmed the next-best gate post for the Haitian capital. Some minutes later, with a last wave toward him, Beatrice disappeared with her astonishingly small bag. Now Harry stood under the trees, looking thoughtfully at the building. Was there any sense in scouring Armodéc's rooms for evidence?

Maybe so - though not for him. He should send Francesco Lopez here, who knew how to scan through rooms and desks ... Did the detective understand French? - Could be, with his name - and if not, any English term would stand out like a pimple on the forehead ... Or a scar, for that matter.

Harry felt like the only person on this island, the next living soul hundreds of miles away. It wasn't true, of course, he guessed the next town not further than three miles downhill. But it gave him the right feeling for the idea that was crossing his mind since the moment Beatrice had explained the nature of that clear liquid in the small bottle.

Room enough ... Nobody would watch him fail - still more importantly, nobody would watch him succeed.

Harry went inside, found a glass, filled it with the oily liquid, emptying the bottle almost to half. It didn't taste oily - cool, sharp, nearly tasteless, spreading an almost unbearable heat after a few seconds.

When he reached the plain outside, the burning had faded, giving way to a feeling of crystal-shaped fur covering his tongue, his throat.

His view widened, deepened, thickened. He recognized every single leaf in the tree across, the bark at the trunk, its structure ... He was part of a vibrating scene, in harmony with the surroundings.

His mind dropped the last doubt, kept only determination and knowing, and power, calm, so incredibly calm ... There was the narrow entrance to the sphere state - almost leisurely, Harry approached it, went through ...

The all-power state, matching every vision, crossing any level, a corridor through existence ...

The tree jumped into his view, like a zoom in a spectator globe - but it wasn't growing, seemed shrunk, a bonsai plant whose man-sized trunk felt just right to be snapped apart, should he need that space, or feel upset.

Only he felt no anger - quite the opposite, an incredibly high spirit, a sense of strength, and majesty ... And these smells - a bouquet richer than anything he'd ever sniffed before. Then this view - spanning almost a full circle, with a small sector out of sight, covered instantly with the flick of an eye ... They could move independently from each other - why hadn't he noticed before?

A few tentative steps ... Just in time, Harry remembered to leave these trees unbroken - he had no intention to provide traces which - by any wizard - would be put down to a dragon. Only there wasn't enough space for him.

Turning, he felt a powerful tail balance out the momentum, thereby blowing underbrush aside. Aiming for space ...

His body moved, soared up - mighty wings beating the air, kept in motion through strings like ship ropes, driven by muscles which felt tireless, strong enough to cross an ocean.

The tree tops fell below. Gliding forward, Harry recognized a shadow moving underneath, painted sharply in the bright moonlight. His shadow - a dragon shape!

A scream of triumph broke in his mind, boiling up, reaching his mouth - shooting out as a thundering jet of fire, seemingly short compared to his new body, even though he guessed its blast at thirty feet, maybe more.

Sailing over the trees, downhill toward the sea, Harry realized - tireless was just the feeling of the first moments, dragons were no long-distance fliers.

Reaching the beach, in fair distance from the closest town, he swerved down, his claws touching the wet sand. A perfect landing - part of his role, or the result of Quidditch training over years? ... Whatever.

And now, the second test.

Sphere state ... alright ... Harry stood at the beach, the waves lapping at his feet - human feet, and legs, feeling as if he'd run for miles, something he'd never done before.

The brain booster was still singing in his blood, forming a union with the triumph in his mind, in his soul ... The right time for another performance.

Relax ... sphere ... that zoom jump again, telling him quicker than any other sense that he had successfully transfigured. A short jet, roaring orange-yellow, erupted almost in a reflex.

Spreading his wings, climbing into the air, Harry learned - dragons paid a hefty price for every foot of air travel, and this time his course led uphill, no longer an effortless sailing.

Had he found a plain large enough, he would have touched down to travel the rest with apparition, so tired was he. But the forest stretched uphill without offering any gap before the top.

He almost crashed through the trees, bumping to the ground. A dragon couldn't gasp - but it could be too exhausted for the backward transfiguration.

Some minutes later, he had recovered, now feeling painfully hungry. Better he satisfied this need as a human ... Better he found the way back into his own shape.

And a dragon felt no doubt. A moment later, Harry could listen to the shrieking protest in the muscles of his own arms and legs. Well - not worse than three hours of *aikido*.

Wrong. Much worse.

Had to be the payment for the booster dope. His original plan - to fetch Francesco Lopez for a thorough search - had to wait till tomorrow. Harry jumped back to Hogwarts, told his alarm clock that he was deadly serious for ten o'clock, which left him six hours of ...

* * *

The drill sergeant's bellowing pulled Harry out of a thick, shapeless mist, abandoned only with reluctance because it was so warm and cosy. Then he was sufficiently awake to remember the previous day - and all the pending tasks.

He had slept in his clothes. And he felt pretty sure that his smell would be bad enough to frighten off any dragon.

After a long shower, burning hot followed by freezing cold, after dressing in fresh clothes, after a visit of the house elves to gain some food - so much actually that even Dobby had a strange look - Harry felt almost normal ... Normal for a return from the Ile de la Tortue, notorious for its various dopes and energy-draining events.

At this time of day, everybody else was in classes. So he jumped to London, first to talk with Gringotts about the account for Beatrice, then to check with Spinbottle whether Mr. Lightfoot already had come to terms.

He hadn't, not worrying the lawyer in the least. "He will, Mr. Potter - within the next two weeks, believe me ... Money's a sirens' song for him."

Harry arrived back in Hogwarts just in time for lunch. Even though his breakfast was less than two hours past, he felt ready for another pile of food.

Ron studied him. "Hello, Harry - long no see ... What happened to you? When I woke up this morning, I found you, fully dressed, on your bed ... I just put the cover over you."

"Thank you ... It's the effect of a brain dope I took to - er, find something out."

"Brain dope? ... That Giants' stuff?"

"Something similar - I got it from Beatrice, Armodéc's mistress."

Hermione tried to find the right expression of astonishment, innocence, amusement ...

Harry turned to her. "Armodéc's dead."

Hermione lost interest in fake emotions. "How? ... When? ... Where?"

"He's been found dead in a Boston hotel for happy hours - with a vampire bite in this throat, and with - er, all signs of an ecstatic death."

Without so much as a second's thought, Hermione said, "That's no suicide."

"No, it's not." Harry looked at her, wondering. "But how do you know?"

"He's a coward - was a coward, I mean, and cowards don't commit suicide ... And he's - was - a bad loser, so he went to someone for his revenge, and this someone saw fit to kill him ..."
Hermione's eyes widened - apparently registering the meaning of Boston, maybe also registering that this would not necessarily exclude revenge ... Involving herself.

Harry nodded. "Yes - probably Voldemort. Beatrice said he's been in some loose contact for quite some time, and that he's been trying to squeeze me for the current state of my search ... And I had no clue."

Ron asked, "Did you tell him?"

"No - for all he knew, we're stumbling through the mist."

Grinning, Ron turned to Hermione. "That's our Harry - thick as a brick and naive like the proverbial husband, but a set of world-class instincts."

Hermione choked, coughed, flushed - with a beaming Ron blaming it all to his remark, and nobody around to wise him up.

Harry explained what he had done to provide Francesco Lopez with information and pictures, and that he would jump to Boston as soon as he could expect the Pinkerton detective in his office.

Then Ron remembered where this conversation had started. "So where does this brain dope fit into the picture?"

"Beatrice was left without any money - her payment's probably lost in some legal abyss, if there's anything left ... Anyway, I told her I'd help, and spoke with Gringotts this morning ..."

The glances from Ron and Hermione, although showing much in common, felt nonetheless quite different.

"... and she wanted to return a favour for a favour ..."

The glances were asymptotically converging.

"... well, and it turns out Beatrice is a potions witch. So she gave me this bottle with the dope."

Poor Hermione, whose face showed a rapid succession of emotions, was condemned to keep silent while Ron's grin changed from naughty to appreciating, then apologetic.

"And then - well, I used it for a breakthrough in - er, Transfiguration."

Now Ron just gaped, while Hermione was beaming. "Did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Holy dragon ..." Ron's face was in awe.

Harry grinned. "Not holy, no - while otherwise, I'd agree ... I've been flying around a bit - boy oh boy, that's a stressful thing ... A Steel Wing's easier."

"And how's it otherwise?"

"Well, I've been under the influence of the dope, so you might ask me again in a few days. Basically ... I'd say, it feels perfectly normal, in a way - you can see almost three hundred and sixty degrees, you smell everything, the trees look small, and you wonder if you should snap a few to make room ... Aside from that, you feel yourself."

Hermione still beamed. "Congratulations, Harry ... Does Almyra know?"

"Not yet - I've been so busy ..."

Almyra had noticed the excitement at the Gryffindor table, was more than ready to talk with Harry in her office. The door was barely closed when she asked, "What's new, Harry?"

He smiled. "I've been flying yesterday."

"And what ..." Almyra stopped, her eyes growing, her hands grabbing him, her voice breathless. "Tell me - was it ..."

"Yes - a dragon."

Next moment, his sister in spirit hung at him, her arms around his neck, squeezing him with hands, arms, and some other parts of her anatomy. "Oh, Harry - you did it, you really ..."
Almyra stopped again, leaning back, looking anxiously. "Tell me it's true - it's no joke."

"It's true ... I came across some brain dope - don't ask me how, that's a longer story - and I took it, and tried - and I was a dragon."

Once more, Almyra tried to dance with him through her office.

"Al - I'm too weak for that - dragon flying is such a hard work, and that dope ..."

She let him go. "When can you show me?"

"Hopefully tomorrow - maybe at the old dragon camp." Harry grinned. "It's unbelievable how much space you need for that."

"Can ... can I invite Remus for this demo?"

Harry sobered up. "Let me test it without the dope, okay? Once it has worked just so, I'm ready ... Until then - " his finger went to his mouth, "psst."

Almyra smiled. "To everyone?"

"Especially to everyone."

Knowing this feeling so well, Almyra agreed to keep the news confidential, waiting for his okay. A failure in a demonstration - how ridiculous would that look, with such an unconventional aim.

* * *

Confronted with the alternatives of jumping to Boston or falling asleep, Harry jumped to Boston. Finding doors and windows closed, he decided to wait inside, jumped into the office.

Moments later, he felt a presence outside in the hall, called quickly, "It's me, Francesco."

The door opened, showing a Pinkerton detective in underpants and with an ugly-looking revolver in his hand. "Damn you - scaring honest people to death, that early in the morning."

"I'm sorry, but I have some trouble with my own sleep ... Tell me, how did you notice me?"

"An alarm system - what else? Motion, weight, body heat ... Gimme a few minutes." The figure disappeared toward the bathroom.

When Francesco Lopez was showered and dressed, Harry told him that they had time enough for a breakfast. While the detective was slowly settling for a new day, Harry explained what he had in mind, plus a censored summary of the previous evening.

Finishing his third cup of coffee, the detective asked, "Okay, then - can I spend money for a charter flight?"

"Charter?? ... Listen, Francesco, let's go outside and I'll make a portkey to ..."

"Wake up, Harry! I'm a Muggle, remember?"

"Oh dammit ..." Angry toward himself and his slow brain, Harry was just calculating the loss of time on a charter flight of eight hundred-odd miles when he suddenly stopped. "Did we ever try?"

Francesco showed angelic patience. "Linkports don't work for us."

"Linkports, yes ... Only I don't program linkports."

Suppressing any further comment, the detective followed Harry behind the house, to a large trash bin.

After a moment, Harry was ready.. "Okay - touch it, then we'll know."

"Whatever suits the custo ..." The last word was probably finished, though not here in Boston.

Jubilating inwardly, Harry jumped to the Ile de la Tortue, finding his conversation partner alright. "You see - either my portkeys are superior, or you're a hidden wizard."

"Yeah, great - but we're too late, unless you can do a time machine." The suspected wizard pointed past Harry.

Turning, Harry saw what the detective meant, could smell it now that he paid attention. Where he remembered a house in colonial style, a thin column of smoke rose from a pile of ashes and black-smouldered debris.

* * *

During the next days, Harry's hope to locate Voldemort within hours, days at the most, shrank to nil. As Francesco Lopez told him, any attempt to investigate into contract whores was hitting a brick wall - and where the detective could manage a dent in this wall, he was drawing blanks. Who was interested in callgirl rings? Maybe - if it had been a callvampire ring.

While this wasn't encouraging news, Harry felt at least sufficiently recovered to try his first *sober* dragon. For this purpose, he went to the former dragons' camp.

Sober he was, and unsuccessful too.

He returned to Hogwarts, spoke with Almyra who said, "That's pretty common, Harry - you're blocking yourself. I mean it doesn't help much knowing that, but ... And I don't think it's a simple transit anyway."

"No, it's not ... Did you have the same problem?"

Almyra looked uneasy. "No ... But so what - I just had to do an owl, and that's ..."

"A fraction of a percent of a dragon, I know - Al, who's trying to fool whom here? We both know it's not a question of quantity."

"But a dragon has magical power."

"And owls have magical skill ... C'mon, give me a break."

Almyra sighed. "Harry ... You did it the first time with some dope. It worked. And now, somewhere inside, you believe it works *only* with that dope ... That's simple psychology."

"But whan can I do to release this block?"

"You could use the stuff again - only, it would make things worse. You could ..." Almyra stopped, grinned, then blushed.

Harry saved her. "I could get laid, only it has some other bad side-effects."

"To the point, Harry. There's a certain ..." Almyra stopped again, beaming. "But that's the keyword - if you cannot visit one dragon - at least not for this purpose - just visit another ... Be social with dragons, Harry."

Rex was polite but busy. "Harry, old toothpick, you're at your own outside. The camp's moving soon - I'm in papers over my ears."

Which, altogether, didn't need that many papers, what for this dinosaur's size as well as for his fluency in administration tasks. While for Harry, who had only reluctantly warmed up to the idea of showing his - untrained - skill to that man, it was good news.

He greeted Carrie, said hello to Samuel, then went over to the young ones which almost had reached the size of a full-grown dragon.

Watching them for the quarter of an hour, Harry felt relaxed enough, and social enough - when his eyes followed their movements, their play, he was aware of his own thinking in dragon terms.

Allright, then ... Sphere - hold it, and ... The closest of the chicken dragons zoomed into his view. He'd managed!

Next moment, a high-pitched shriek filled the air, and the dragon child - suddenly looking small and quite its age - hurried off, seeking shelter at its mother.

And here she came - glaring, not even stopping to check, full attack right on the spot. A hot wave rushed over Harry's head - in an unconscious reflex, the protective folds had closed over

his eyes. When he opened them again, Carrie was moving alongside him to position herself for the neck-breaking blow of her tail.

"It's me," Harry felt like shouting, managing just a cloud of smoke from his nostrils. Still worse - over there, he could hear the crashing of some male, or males, approaching.

This was no scene to transfigure back. He lifted his wings, suppressing a moan when another roaring jet from Carrie taught him how sensitive they were to fire attacks - and fled.

Half a mile off the camp, Harry transfigured back, jumped to Hogwarts.

Almyra inspected him. "You look a bit ruffled."

"It's my pride." Harry told her what had happened.

She was fighting honestly ... Pressing her hands over her mouth - a familiar gesture from past times. Then she lost, bursting out in helpless laughter.

Harry looked as offended as he could. "That's infamous - only a duel can wash off this ignominy ... Meet me at the dragons' camp after supper, together with your second."

To his surprise, his performance had been so convincing that Almyra looked startled.

He winked at her. "I'll come with a second, a third, a fourth, and a fifth."

Almyra couldn't laugh any longer. "For an instant you really scared me."

"Let's say that's a good omen for another stage performance."

Challenging himself - this should do the trick. Collecting Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Rahewa, all of them with their broomsticks - for security reasons as much as to avoid the detour to the Hogwarts Express platform.

Almyra and Lupin greeted the others with a smile, and the new Animagus with an encouraging grin. "Harry," said Lupin, "hundred feet distance, please, for the better of us ... I won't call - I'll move my arms to the side, up, and down. Okay?"

Harry retreated - jumping, of course, this was no place for humble walk. He stood waiting, saw his friend's arms move aside, rise, fall down.

Sphere state - freedom enough to ... An eagle and a dog zoomed into his view, pretty close. The dog turned to run while the eagle spread its wings to climb into the air.

Without hesitation, Harry followed.

And seconds later, he saw four tiny figures on broomsticks closing in, while a dark spot at the ground turned its head up to issue a long howl.

Aiming carefully toward empty air, Harry expressed his wild joy in a thundering jet of fire - forever the subject of discussions between his four seconds - had this been thirty feet, or forty as Ron had it, or still more as Rahewa wasn't tiring to claim?

Harry didn't really care. But he wasn't tiring to listen this debate.

* * *

The Beauxbatons ball came due. It would take place without Harry. Almost, that was - the Grass Dance bit was scheduled, and Rahewa insisted. "I'll dance for my mother," she said.

But this would be all for her part, and so Harry felt sure not to do the same mistake as in the Hogwarts ball - not joining seriously, only to hang around.

It started okay. The conférencier was shouting " ... Grass Dance," Harry managed his spell which changed the parquet into a rug of prairie grass, his crew took positions, began to move.

Watching, Harry felt chills run down his spine. Nobody in the crew who wasn't aware, all of them contributing their own interpretation, astonishingly expressive for their age ... And in the middle, the formation slightly different - Rahewa, faced by Damon who was appealing to her, inviting her, encouraging her to live on ... While Rahewa was changing from demure to desperate in her movements, from radiant to rigid and back to rebellion against fate.

The others faded out, one after the other. Only Rahewa was left in the spotlight - any second now, she would fall down.

She didn't. With her last movement, she came to a standstill, then her arms moved up, hands covering the face, heavy sobs shaking the body of a twelve-year-old.

Harry's arm tried to signal toward the spotlight - without success, the man behind didn't know this was no part of the performance.

He just apparated to the spot, took Rahewa onto his arms, heading behind the stage. And mercifully, the hall went black.

Moments later - the parquet was back in place - Harry stood on the stage, a numb and powerless Rahewa at his side, the rest of the crew flanking them.

He turned toward the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, this Grass Dance has been danced in the memory of Naomi Lightfoot - the mother of our Rahewa here. She died some time ago - and the dance is supposed to tell you what Naomi Lightfoot would have said ... You're alive, so go and enjoy it! ... Thank you."

Guiding Rahewa, Harry pushed his way through people, down to the linkport. Back in Hogwarts, he said, "Get yourself a coat - I'm waiting here."

Then he realized that he'd be far better off with a coat of his own. When coming downstairs again, the girl was standing there as if delivered and forgotten.

"Let's have a walk."

They reached the spot near Hagrid's grave - and that of Lousy, despite a cold April night just the right place for what Harry had in mind. "Rahewa," he said, I have some candidates who'd be ready to adopt you at the spot."

She looked at him.

"I'm none of them - I'm too young, says the law. Anyway, that's delayed, because your father is refusing to let you go."

He had the full attention of two coal-black eyes, shimmering in the scarce moonlight.

"I offered him a deal. Mr. Spinbottle's sure he'll accept ... The offer's running out in about two weeks ... I told him there's an alternative he ought to avoid, because he won't like it, if he ..."

Rahewa came to life. "He'll accept."

"You sure?"

"Expect his agreement - er, day after tomorrow."

"Rahewa - what ..." Harry stopped, realizing the little sense in calling through the nightly air, or after a figure walking quickly toward the school building, not turning back.

Next evening, after supper, Rahewa signaled Harry to meet her in the Entrance Hall, deserted at this time of day. When he reached her, she said, "He signed the contract today, Harry."

"Super! Then ..." Harry stopped, examined Rahewa's face. "How did you convince him?"

Rahewa's answer came in a flat voice. "I told him that I'd fulfill the Indian tradition which forces me to support him, as long as he lives. And I told him that this life would last one more week - counting from yesterday ... He knew I was serious."

"But then ..."

"I told him - first I'd kill him, then myself, and then I'd come after him - wherever that might be." Rahewa didn't grin. "You must know - Indians are scared shitless of ghosts."

* * *

Harry's visit, next morning in Mr. Spinbottle's office, confirmed Rahewa's information. "You may talk with your bank," said the lawyer, "to set up the pension fund. Then leave Mr. Lightfoot to me."

At Gringotts, Harry was invited into a small office where Mr. Morony greeted him with the Goblin equivalent of a thin smile. "Good morning, Mr. Potter. The fund you have in mind - covering a monthly payment of hundred galleons - would be something around twenty thousand galleons."

"Is it? I didn't check."

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Unfortunately, after the last payments and by holding aside the guarantee for this month's bill from Pinkerton, your account is down to something of three thousand galleons."

An icy cold crept down Harry's back.

"Gringotts has followed up your transactions, Mr. Potter, and even though we are not supposed to comment on our customer's decisions, let me tell you that we - er, do not object yours."

No money left ... Harry felt numb.

"Gringotts - that is, the Goblins - would even go so far as to cover another month's payment for this agency." Mr. Morony smiled a bit broader. "We know of course the purpose, which we support wholeheartedly ... If this additional month won't be sufficient, I'm sure we might find a similar solution ... While for more private purposes, I'm afraid we have to handle your request according to standard rules."

Could a Goblin look embarrassed?

Like in trance, Harry stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Morony ... I didn't know ... I wasn't checking my account ..."

"Mr. Potter, please keep in mind though - it's not beyond question, there's no problem with some stupid rules ... You're certainly trustworthy for a credit."

Harry could smile. "I know, Mr. Morony - I never doubted that ... It's just that someone who can spill half a million that quickly might expect some closer investigation, and tighter control. Am I right?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter." Goblins definitely could look embarrassed.

"That's understood ... Thank you, Mr. Morony, but let me check another possibility first."

Harry had to bide some time before he could expect someone awake in Boston. He did so - partially - in *Swashbuckle Sweets*, asking carefully, learning that business was running great, that the twins were expanding still, so Harry's loans were in good hands but unlikely to be paid back soon, hopefully he didn't mind, did he?

No he didn't.

When Francesco Lopez heard that they had to strike a hit soon because Harry was running short of money, awfully short actually, the detective nodded. "That's not the only reason, Harry. We have checked almost everything within reach ... There isn't much left."

As promising as this sounded in financial terms, for the second time this day an icy cold was passing Harry's back.

Reason enough to reach warmer weather - Californian weather.

The secretary was all smile, which told Harry it was all fake - nobody could be that joyful so early in the morning, local time.

Cho was perplexed, looked at him uncertainly. "Hello, Harry ... It's not over yet, is it?"

"No ... I'm here for - er, business reasons."

"Business?" Cho smiled. "Not possibly spectors, huh? ... Then maybe movies?"

"No. It's about Rahewa. Her mother died some days ago, and when ..."

"Yes, I heard - too late for the funeral." There was some reproach in Cho's voice.

"I could talk Rahewa into accepting a few people at the funeral - not more than her teammates and McGonagall - I didn't exclude you on purpose."

"Oh ... I should have - sorry, forget it."

"Well, her father didn't want to let her go - for quite selfish reasons. After some conversations, we finally agreed on a deal - he'll get a pension, and Rahewa can pick her new family."

Cho beamed. "Clever Potter - for once using honey rather than the whip."

"Clever, yes ... The fund will be about twenty grand - galleons, I mean ... Cho - er, can you lend me twenty grand?"

She stared at him. Next moment, her face glowed in dark red. "You're broke?"

"No - not exactly. There's a rest, and Gringotts told me they won't let me hang with - with the Pinkerton bill. But for other purposes ..."

Cho had found her composure. "Harry - of course I'll ... No, I mean, you don't have to ..." She stopped, swallowed. "I can't remember having felt as ash ... Dammit!" She looked up. "Gimme a few minutes - you don't have to make debts for that."

Harry watched as Cho made a phone call to her bank, asking some Barney for some minutes of his time, right now - ten minutes from now, exactly.

Cho stood up, looking better. "Wait here, Harry - I'll be back in - er, thirty minutes, the road's free at this time." She pointed to the spector globe at the other end of the large office. "There's a cassette inside - might be of some interest for you."

Out she went, a beaming determination in her face.

Harry found the right controls without trouble, watched - unsurprised - Marie-Christine and her partner demonstrating tango from the basic steps to the most advanced figures.

When the door opened, he turned, about to tell Cho that the cassette was great. But it was Cho's secretary. "Mr. Potter - what exactly did Miss Chang tell you where she was planning to go?"

"To her bank - why?"

"Yes - er, the bank manager just called and asked whether she'd still come, or if she'd cancelled ..."

Harry checked his watch. Twenty-five minutes since Cho had left.

He looked at the woman. "Can it be the traffic?"

"No, that's too long - unless something ..."

He interrupted her. "Can you drive me that route?"

"Er - yes, of course ... Just a second, I'll inform one of the girls."

The secretary came back quickly, looking worried, guiding Harry to an elevator which carried them down into the basement, the park deck of the building.

Approaching a Japanese model, the woman stopped. "That's strange."

"What?"

"Here - that's her car. She didn't ... But then - she wouldn't walk, the bank's two miles downtown."

Harry stared at the shiny limousine, registering its size, the position of this parking lot - near the open entry, near the elevator ... Obviously the boss woman's car.

And for anyone still in doubt, the sign at the wall said *Cho Chang*.

28 - Closing In

Harry reacted like a submarine taking a hit. Some doors inside him closed to isolate the wounded section, mercilessly suppressing any emotion, most of all suppressing cries for help coming from that section. At the same time, power valves opened up, flooding the control center with energy.

Cho kidnapped ... No doubt about that.

First question - by whom? There was more than one possibility in this country in which administration and organized crime formed an inseparable mix, in which local police volunteered as paid servants of the local fat cats.

Harry couldn't detect any sign of a fight, or a struggle. But then, he could remember a kind of semi-kidnapping not far from here - it had taken place in full view of a hundred party guests.

Although - he had a fair guess how it had been done, and if he was right ... His eyes scanned over the car. Then, inhaling deeply, he touched the doorhandle.

Nothing.

He needed Nagini, needed her quickly. But first ... He turned to the woman. "Please - assume that's your car. Can you come from the elevator, like as if you'd be planning to drive to the bank?"

The woman looked at Harry. For an instant, her eyes widened, obviously taking in the implicit message. Then she nodded. "Yes, I know what ..." Without finishing her sentence, she headed for the elevator.

Thank God - a quickwit, not a helpless bundle of nerves like Sirius' Jessica.

The woman came from the elevator, turning straight toward the limousine. Walking, she opened her purse, extracted the key. Close to the door, she held it up, like pointing with a wand. Without stopping, she grabbed the handle, opened the door.

Now she turned to Harry. "That's it. With the real key, it would have clicked."

"Clicked?"

The woman presented the key for Harry to inspect. "It's an infra-red signal that opens the locks."

"Ah - that's why ... I was ... Can you do it again with your own car? There's something - I have to see this how it's done in perfect routine."

The woman walked toward a smaller car, not far away.

Following, Harry watched as she extracted the key, clicked the door open, grabbed the handle while the key was held securely in her right hand, her purse as securely in her left - the same hand which opened the door, touching the handle.

"Alright, that explains it. You know, I had been wondering why the key hadn't dropped, or ..."

"She's got kidnapped, right?"

"That's what I think."

The woman's lips trembled for a second, tightened. "I want to go upstairs - I have to call the police."

"Er - wait a second!"

The secretary bit her lips. "Mr. Potter, I know whom to call - not the local precinct, that's for sure. They'd make ..." She stopped, fighting her composure.

"I'll give you two other numbers for people to call, but first ..." Harry moved a step closer. "We'll have to do some work together in the next - er, time, so ... I'm Harry."

The shadow of a smile, gone. "Hello, Harry - I know about you, that you're good at something like that. Er - I'm Chrissy, like in 'For Chrissakes - do something'."

"Hello, Chrissy - I will, in a moment ... Are you a witch?"

The hint of a smile. "No, but my daughter is. I always thought that's been my real qualification for this job - I mean, after I found out."

"Maybe part of it - but a minor one, as you know pretty well by yourself ... Do you know what a portkey is?"

"Yes."

"The car - probably the doorhandle, has been made a portkey to kidnap her. I'm almost sure, and I'll be back in a while with a snake which can confirm that. Until then, the car shouldn't be moved. Touching doesn't matter."

"A snake which ... Nagini."

Only then Harry remembered that he'd been in Chrissy's office with Nagini and with his luggage, just after finishing the Dementor patrol. "Right," he said. "Question is who has ordered that - I have an idea, but there are several possibilities, and in a moment, I'm going to check one of them."

"Helix?"

A rush of confidence waved through Harry, caused by a woman showing brains and competence. "Yes - and when Cho's back, I'll make sure she's doubling your salary."

The woman didn't even bother to look pleased. "Harry - how much *when* is it? ... And how much *if*?"

"If it's the one I think it is - well, the odds ain't good, from the look of things. Only I once promised her something, and to hold my promise, she must be around as well, that's why ... Doesn't make sense, huh?"

"It's not Helix, is it?"

"Most likely not."

"So it's Voldemort?"

"I'm afraid so."

And how had Voldemort found out about Cho, *Groucho*, this building? ... With a knot forming in his stomach, Harry tried to remember exactly what he had told Armodéc, and through this channel Voldemort as well. It hadn't been very detailed, definitely not about *Groucho* ... Then how ...

Suddenly he knew. "The articles!"

"Huh?"

Harry looked up. "I just tried to figure out how Voldemort could know about this place. But it wasn't a secret, with the articles in *Time* and *Forbes*."

Chrissy nodded. "The odds, Harry - bad odds, I take this as a promising sign."

He stared at her, wondering if his impression had been right.

The woman seemed to feel his thought, blushed a bit. "Cho - er, she once said - she said, for the odds Harry has been killed five times. Only if the odds are looking good, there's reason to worry."

Harry felt comforted - for a short instant, then he realized that it was himself whom everybody expected to do the miracle.

"Yeah, that's sort of reassuring ... Now - there are two FBI agents - Wayne Ellis and Tracy Chipman. Please call them, tell them about me here, about the kidnapping, and that they should get in touch with your own police contact ... The keyword is *Terry Pritchard* - if they want to know another, give them - er, Six Flags. The numbers are ..." Harry stopped. "Can you remember all that?"

"Yes." Almost impatiently.

Harry said the numbers, listened as the woman rattled down the names and numbers in staccato. "Yep - see you then."

Chrissy, with the unknown family name, was already heading for the elevator when the air popped into the empty space from which a young man with a stony face had disappeared.

* * *

Alan Armstead, executive director of *Helix Inc.*, had entered his office only minutes ago - early hours were hardly the times of his best ideas. He had just finished getting familiar with this new day when his first visitor was standing before his desk - unplanned, unexpected, out of nowhere, while not unknown.

But Mr. Armstead had earned his position thanks to a cool mind, and fast reflexes. "Good morning, Mr. - er, Potter. I couldn't hear your knocking at the door."

"I didn't - I'm in a hurry. Miss Chang is missing - do you know where she is?"

"Missing? What ..." The man stopped, examined Harry's face. "You mean, she's been kidnapped?"

"That's what I think."

"And you came here because ..." Mr. Armstead sat back, careful to leave his hands openly visible on the desk plate. "No, Mr. Potter - not our work. You're on the wrong track here."

"I could be back in a few minutes to verify this."

Mr. Armstead, never having heard of *haragei*, sensed enough to know that any wisecrack in this situation would be one too much. "You'll be welcome, Mr. Potter. But let me tell you - it would be the wrong technique, the wrong time - totally counter-productive."

Harry was aware that the manager didn't bother to claim any morale which might forbid such an action. "Why's that?"

"Groucho's in business, very successfully so. To make a dollar, best you can do is doing business with them ... Actually, I've made an offer to Miss Chang, and in a way, it's still pending."

"What was her answer?"

Mr. Armstead suppressed a grimace. "She said she'll let me sweat on it for a while, just for the good old times - I'm quoting her, Mr. Potter ... But she'd think it's basically a good idea."

Harry's senses told him enough to know - maybe the man was colouring this negotiation a bit, but what he said had at least a true basis. Then another thought struck him. "Mr. Armstead, would you know of any - er, competition which has a different opinion of times and methods?"

"In the business? ... No - definitely not, I mean there isn't another. The train's running, Mr. Potter, any businessman would jump the wagon, rather than threatening the engineer ... I'm afraid this has an entirely criminal background."

At another time, Harry could have admired the man's choice of words.

Mr. Armstead hesitated. "Mr. Potter ..."

"Yes?"

"If that's the case - I might have a contact through which I could try to get some information."

Harry felt surprise, though not about the contact itself. "Why so supportive? A fit of bad conscience?"

"What's that?" Mr. Armstead could have bitten his tongue, quickly hurried on. "No, much simpler - Helix is steering through rough waters, and the deal with Groucho would solve a lot of problems for us ... But only Miss Chang can sign such a deal."

Suddenly, Harry knew how the man had manicured the details. "You mean - Cho's been busy to strangle you to death, just for the good old times, and you told her that Helix is about to break - and she said she'll think it over. Right?"

Mr. Armstead sighed. "You got it. If ... Only Miss Chang can change that - it's Narita crushing us, Groucho isn't big enough for that."

Which made clear that there was no need returning with Nagini.

"Okay, Mr. Armstead - thanks for the information, and for the offer. But now I think I have an idea."

"If we can help in any regard, Mr. Potter - just give me a - er, a visit."

Leaving, Harry felt a little pity for *Helix'* fate as he felt grateful for this offer. Still - somehow, it was kind of encouraging.

* * *

To reach the Gryffindor tower where Nagini was lying curled up close to the fireplace, Harry had to cross the Great Hall in which supper was going on. He saw Ron waving, waved back without stopping. Coming downstairs, a moment later, he saw the glances of his friends following him, a mix of worry and excitement in their faces.

Which wasn't wide off the mark, half of it.

Harry jumped straight into the basement of the *Groucho* building, saw Chrissy with a man standing near Cho's car. Into his first step toward them, he saw the man turning and simultaneously seizing for something at his hip.

Chrissy looked up. "That's Harry - Mr. Potter ... Harry, this is Lieutenant Garcia from the LAPD."

LAPD?

The man - slender body, dark tint, grey spots in short black hair - quickly let his gun disappear in its holster, saw the question in Harry's face. "Los Angeles Police Department, Mr. Potter - sorry for waving some metal around, but you scared me a bit."

Nagini hissed.

Harry suppressed a nod - even without Nagini's remark, he knew that the man wasn't scared at all, just watchful. Maybe for some irrational prejudice, from a Spanish name here like at the other side of this half-continent, Harry liked him instantly. He said, "My fault, Mr. Garcia - I just took the shortest route."

"Mrs. Vanzandt said you can check if the kidnapping has been done here. Is this correct?" The detective looked at Harry, then at Nagini with an expression that suggested politeness at the edge of disbelief.

"Yes - just a moment."

Harry reached the limousine. "Nagini - we're looking for a portkey - a one-time portkey, most likely this piece here ... What can you tell me?"

"There is something, Master. Would you order this man to step aside?"

"Sure - why?"

There seemed a stressed patience swinging in Nagini's voice. "Because he is a wizard unfamiliar to me, and it's difficult to filter him out."

Harry looked up, for the first time in the last hour close to a grin. "Mr. Garcia, of the *Muggle* police - would you please step back?"

The man obeyed, apparently grateful to find a natural reason for showing astonishment.

Nagini's head moved along the car's side, turned to Harry. "Yes, Master. There is a trace of magic in this piece. I cannot say it has been a portkey, but then I don't know of any other explanation."

"Thank you, Nagini."

Harry came up, moved a step toward the detective. "Who knows about you?"

Chrissy said, "Lieutenant Garcia's on our side, Harry - this here's not his territory, but ..."

Despite himself, Harry grinned. "He's very much on his territory - more than you're aware." He looked at the man. "So?"

"How did you find out?" Answering a question with a question seemed a reflex that held even in this situation.

Harry pointed at Nagini. "I didn't - she did."

Chrissy asked, "What are you talking about?"

Lieutenant Garcia had come to a decision. "I'm an undercover wizard in the Muggle police - only Mr. Potter just found out."

"Oh ..." Chrissy looked pleased. "That's good to know."

The detective sighed. "I'd be awfully glad if you could keep that knowledge to yourself."

After both Chrissy and Harry had assured him that his secret was in safe hands - er, minds, the lieutenant glanced at Nagini, then at Harry. "Some snake, really ... What else did she say?"

"Traces of magic in the doorhandle - that means, a portkey's the only explanation."

"Is it?"

"Not literally, but as good as. And that's exactly Voldemort's handwriting - he's done the same a year ago with someone else."

"For which purpose?"

"To kidnap a man, as hostage. He used a mailbox, then."

"What happened?"

"We got him back, alive and unhurt."

"And what's been the price to pay?"

Harry looked grim. "Letting Voldemort live."

The detective nodded thoughtfully. "So for all you know, Mr. Potter, Miss Chang has been kidnapped by Voldemort, using a portkey trick, to be held as hostage. Correct so far?"

"Yes."

"Other possibilities?"

"I checked one, some minutes ago. Nothing. No, it's Voldemort, I'm sure about that."

"Mr. Potter." The detective's voice sounded a bit desperate, a feeling Harry couldn't afford. "I tend to agree with you, as long as you're not going to quote me in public ... What do you expect me to do?"

Harry registered quite some remarks left unsaid, rather admitted silently - for once, he took profit from his fame. "What I have in mind is to go looking for her - for Voldemort, I mean. My idea is that you should handle this end here, maybe as a case of kidnapping - whatever, you know better than I, but so that there's not more damage than unavoidable, and most of all, so that nobody shouts *Voldemort*."

"And these FBI agents?"

"They've been handling a case in which Voldemort was the brain in the background - which means you can tell them what happened here ... We've been involved in this case, and these two and I, we have a deal running ..."

"A deal??" Lieutenant Garcia seemed genuinely shocked.

"Yes - mainly, to keep the FBI from hunting Voldemort and messing things up."

"What did you do for them? ... Saving Fort Knox?" Registering Harry's silence without surprise, the detective shrugged. "Never mind ... Mr. Potter, how close did you come to your target?"

"Good question." It was Harry's turn to sigh. "For all we know, it's something like just around the corner and up the other street."

Lieutenant Garcia, member of the police in the largest street jungle of the western hemisphere, found no reason to look happy, hearing this answer.

* * *

Almyra wasn't in her office. Harry headed for Lupin's office, knocked at the door, hardly waited until hearing an answer.

He had found her. She was standing so close to Lupin that Harry felt sure his intruding had interrupted them in some tête-a-tête.

No time for embarrassment. "Sorry ... Al, I need your help."

Something in his voice, or maybe his total lack of teasing remarks, brought Lupin to full alert. "What's going on, Harry?"

"Voldemort. He ..."

Still searching for any formulation that might ease the shock for Almyra, Harry was interrupted by her. "Did you find him?"

"No ... But he found Cho."

A gasp - never before had Harry seen a face turn ashen so suddenly. "What? Is she ..."

He chided himself for such a stupid remark. "She's been kidnapped." Then, in short jets of words, cutting it to less than headlines, Harry summarized the events of the last three hours.

Almyra had collapsed into a chair, unable to control her trembling. Lupin stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders, giving comfort and support. Now she steadied herself. "And what can I do? ... A trance?"

"Yes."

Lupin looked bewildered.

Harry saw it. "Some weeks ago, I tried to find Voldemort that way. What I found was her."

His teacher relaxed a bit. "Well, then ... Do you mind me being present?"

Nobody found the question funny - here in Lupin's office.

Harry shook his head. "Quite the opposite - seeing you steadying Al helps me too ... We can do it right here."

He leaned back in his chair, finding a comfortable position. "Don't worry if it takes longer - at any rate, don't interrupt."

Almyra nodded, her wand pointing. "*Mesmerisio*."

The room disappeared. Harry was in the familiar void. He registered how his worried state faded nearly instantly - it was impossible to experience the void in agitation and uproar.

Silence. Empty blackness ... Not a single sound, in the word's metaphorical sense as it applied here, at this level of existence.

He waited - it never had reached him immediately.

Still nothing. As difficult as any sense of time felt in the void, he couldn't help thinking that, after this long while, he should have recognized the slow beat ... Or a faster one.

He couldn't wander around. But he could expand himself, and he did. A state of omnipresence in the void, filling it like an atmosphere was filled with light.

No irregularity whatsoever.

Later, after waking up, he would feel desperation. Not here ... He intensified the power of this radiance all around, more, more, as a sun might change to a supernova.

There! Something ... Harry condensed around this phenomenon, with difficulty, from a strange weakness as much as from its slippery appearance. Then, with some effort, he coordinated his presence around this nowhere of a location.

And he could *hear* - a flurred, quick pulsing ... Once, in Care of Magical Creatures still with Hagrid, he had held a small rodent in his closed hand - the heartbeat of this little animal resurfaced in his memory when sensing this pulse.

Focusing, getting in touch - missed.

He tried again, and again, failing to reach a mental grip onto this presence. When catching it from several angles, it resisted any attack. When attacking in a high-focus spot, it simply danced away.

Harry came to the only possible conclusion - without hesitating, after every method available had failed. This was an artificial fortress, unbreakable for him, at least now.

Then so ... He abandoned any thought of entering, changed his intention to the concept of a non-violent message. This principle settled in his mind, he sent a wave - heat rather than light, passing barriers by infecting the barrier itself.

The pulsing felt as though accelerating, then slowing down, steadying. For Harry, this gave confirmation enough as there was no room for doubt in this spaceless void.

Releasing his grip, he relaxed, condensed into his own self, connected back to his physical being.

The room ... Lupin's office filled his vision, two figures opposite him, looking wretched - sweaty faces, sharp creases in the lamp light, glazing eyes.

"I'm back." His voice was croaky, weak - Harry the mini raven.

They both jumped.

Almyra was quicker. "Harry - oh my God, you're really back."

"How long ..." Checking his watch, Harry felt too weak for gasping. The trance had lasted three hours.

Lupin went up, came with a glass of water first, a shot of brandy then, and - after a look into Harry's eyes - headed for a good measure of Madam Pomfrey's anti-burnout medicine.

"She's there." After these words, raising new spirits in Almyra, they both waited until Lupin was back before Harry reported about his journey.

"Something came through," he finished. "I could feel how that pulsing relaxed - like you, Al, a moment ago."

His sister in spirit exhaled in a trembling sigh. "These three hours ... If you hadn't warned us, Harry ... Even so, Remus had to stop me every ten minutes from bursting into screaming panic."

Lupin also looked wary. "And I was telling myself - maybe he doesn't come back, but if so, and only because you interrupted, he'll be mad as hell."

Harry was sipping his mix of chocolate with hellfire. "Sorry - you just have no sense of time in there."

Lupin could smile. "What I really was telling myself - I thought, Harry knows what he's doing."

Harry felt too weak to giggle. "That's funny, because I don't."

Lupin grinned. "Doesn't matter - if it comes to you, the odds simply refuse to apply ... And now - up with you into your bed, after eight hours sleep, you can think straight again."

It was Lupin himself who helped Harry upstairs, made sure his alarm clock was set. Climbing the stairs - like a man of seventeen, going ninety - Harry was musing whether the odds had the decency to refuse also toward Cho. Somehow, still under the influence of this righteous void, he couldn't suppress a doubt.

But then again - right now he was unable to think straight, Lupin would swear on it.

* * *

Harry reached the Great Hall just at the end of breakfast, while the other students were already leaving for their classes. About to turn, and go for the house elves, he saw Ron and Hermione wave at him.

Ron manoeuvred him onto his seat as though guiding a blind cripple. "Sit down, Harry. I'll be back with your food in a minute."

Hermione said, "Almyra told us. We're going to skip classes, and help you as much as we can."

"Thanks." Harry felt like weeping any second.

A figure blocked his vision. Looking up, he saw it was Samantha. "Hi, pal," she said. "I hear you could locate her and she's alive?"

"Er - yes."

"So it's a case of hostage, and you're going to rescue her, right?"

"Ummh ..."

"Damn, Harry, everybody tells me you love her - so how come I don't hear a straight Yes sir, madam, sir?"

Harry tried to smile, telling her that he understood the good intentions, failed. "Sam, there's a problem - two, actually. We can't find Voldemort ..."

"Then you'll go and try seriously this time."

Rage boiled up in him, ready to burst out against Samantha. About to shout the worst insult he could come up with, Harry realized what she was trying, swallowed. "Yes ... Only last time, I promised him that next time no hostage will stop me."

Samantha sat down on the next chair. "Harry, nobody said you have to stop. Go - find him - kill him - fetch her ... Or the other way around."

"But ..."

"Listen, son - if it helps, you can weep now and I'll rock you like a baby ..."

The thought had appeal. Only Harry didn't think it would help.

"... but since there's nobody else who can do it, we have to finish after ten minutes, okay?"

He smiled, his eyes wet. "Thanks, Sam."

Ron had arrived. An instant later, plates appeared on the table, and a steaming pot of tea. Without asking, Ron filled a dish, placed it in front of Harry, apparently calculating for a three-day's period until the next meal.

Samantha said, "There's a story I have to tell you, Harry. There was this woman - stupid old bitch, couldn't keep her nose out of trouble, or her mouth shut. So someone shot her ... She was as good as dead - only there was this young man, pretty stubborn actually, a real pain in the ass. He didn't believe she was dead - he downright refused to accept it ... What shall I say - in the end, it was easier to agree with him ..."

Harry didn't know how to look, kept his eyes at his food.

"... and if you don't find that stubbornness back until the end of your breakfast, you'll learn what a Texan bitch is really like. Did I make myself clear?"

At least Harry knew what to say. "Yessir, madam, sir."

"That's better ... See you, partner." Samantha left.

Hermione asked, "What's the earliest time for us to visit your Pinkerton guy?"

"Francesco Lopez? ... Noon - that's six o'clock for him."

"We'll do that. After breakfast, you have an hour free - mostly to digest. Ron said we should use the time for a Go match ... I guess he's right."

Harry stared at her, at Ron. "And then?"

"Then you're booked for a round or two with Kenzo. Ron and I, we'll watch."

Harry examined his two friends again.

Hermione's voice was a bit self-conscious. "The schedule's been made by Ron, but we agreed that you do better with a girl dragging your feet - er, sort of."

Harry found a smile. "Maybe you ought to have another breakfast - looks like a long day's beginning."

The Go match should have been an easy win for Ron. For a while, it looked that way. Then, without any sudden improvement in Harry's play, Ron's game lost momentum, his moves seemed quite awkward.

Harry glared up. "What's this? Are you trying to lose under my eyes?"

"No - er, honestly, it wasn't on purpose." Ron swallowed. "I just - er, when I saw that I can drive it home without sweat, I didn't concentrate so hard, and then I thought how it would be if he'd kidnapped Janine."

Harry felt startled. "Did you check?"

Ron's reaction told him this had been a very stupid question, but only in one sense. "This game's a mess - go and do it now."

After a while, Ron was back, grinned wryly. "I must have looked like a fool, only I didn't feel so ... I figure Janine's mad at me."

"You didn't talk with her?"

"No - when I saw her in the classroom, I said sorry, and left. The other students were already giggling - you should have seen her look."

Hermione said, "Better this way than telling her."

Both Ron and Harry nodded, probably thinking the same - with some luck ... Had to be quite some luck.

Kenzo made Harry sit down - lotus position - and then sat down opposite. For the next fifteen minutes, nothing happened from the untrained spectator's view.

Then Kenzo asked, "Are you ready, Harry?"

"Yes, *sensei*."

For almost five more minutes, again nothing happened, looking from outside. Then, without any forewarning, Kenzo curled, stretched like a rubber toy, his leg coming flat, hard, in a half-arc, aiming at Harry's head.

It seemed part of the same movement when Harry's head and torso fell back, his body jerking up like a spring, his own leg kicking hard at the *sensei* who was already out of reach.

A moment later, they were both standing upright, facing each other.

Kenzo smiled. "Let us get you prepared, Harry."

About two hours later, Harry had finished with shower, hot water, steam room, cold water, after light training into which, once every ten minutes or so, Kenzo had dashed a sudden attack at full force. Now Harry felt alive, ready, and pretty close to the state Samantha had demanded.

* * *

Harry walked with his two oldest friends - counting those alive - toward the Hogwarts Express platform. Using the plate which had served Rahewa for so long, he programmed a permanent portkey to Francesco Lopez' flat in Boston.

They came out in front of the house. Harry jumped inside, waited until the sleepy but armed detective appeared, then went for the door to let his friends in.

Seeing Hermione enter the hall, Francesco Lopez uttered something Spanish and disappeared to dress with a bit more than his underpants.

Some time later, when they were sitting around a table, the detective said, "Simply speaking, we've reached the end of the rainbow, only there hasn't been a pot of gold. We've scanned the area, even extended it - nothing."

Hermione asked, "Then what's your conclusion, Mr. Lopez?"

"Well - either we started on the wrong premises, which means Voldemort's somewhere else, or we used the wrong search pattern."

"No other options?"

The detective looked at her openly. "No, Miss Granger. We didn't foul up - more exactly, I used the last two days to check that, found two dubious spots, and investigated them. Nothing."

Hermione looked around. "Does anyone believe Voldemort's living somewhere else?"

Harry answered before the detective could. "No - he got Armodéc killed here in Boston."

"Okay, then." Hermione turned to Ron. "Can you jump to Hogwarts and fetch - er, Almyra, Lupin, and Ginny?" Toward Harry. "And you go to Santa Monica to fetch Marie-Christine."

"What for?"

"A brainstorming. We need a new search pattern - no, we need a new way how to interpret the data Mr. Lopez has collected."

A brainstorming, moderated by Hermione ... It made Harry's stomach tingling with expectation. "Bloody good idea - only, in California it's four in the morning."

"Shit."

Harry and Ron looked with astonishment at Hermione, using such language in front of an almost stranger, while Francesco Lopez didn't so much as blink an eye.

Hermione looked at Harry. "What's more important - speed or Marie-Christine?"

Harry tempered the urge to shout and scream for every minute lost. "We have to do it right ... Cho's life isn't at risk right now."

"Good, then. That gives us about three hours to roast Mr. Lopez and let him prove he didn't overlook anything."

The detective nodded. "Young ladies toasting me are entitled to call me Francesco."

Hermione's lips twisted. "Latin gentlemen with such a fashionable underwear are entitled to call me Hermione."

Three hours later, Francesco's face showed an expression of sad satisfaction - they hadn't found a glitch, or gap.

Ron stood up. "I'll go and fetch them."

Harry said, "Plus Rahewa."

"Yep." Ron disappeared with a soft pop.

Francesco gasped. "Fuck it - I'm not used to that." He looked guiltily at Hermione. "Sorry."

Harry grinned. "Then look here." The last word was finished in the cool air of Santa Monica.

He had to wait still a while until Chrissy turned up. Then he had to wait another while until Marie-Christine's car came down the ramp into the *Groucho* park deck.

Marie-Christine climbed out, hugged him. "Morning, 'arry. What do you know? What can I do?"

"She's alive - we have to find her, and for that, we have to think a little ... A brainstorming."

Then, in some sense of symbolism, he programmed the portkey toward Boston right into her car's doorhandle.

Marie-Christine whispered, "Mon dieu," then touched the handle.

* * *

The room was hardly large enough for the nine people, but nobody paid attention to anything other than Hermione's words.

"The search for Voldemort," began Hermione, "has brought a lot of data which tells us - wherever he is, he himself isn't showing, and Wormtail isn't showing either. But we know he's somewhere around. ... What we need is a new search grid to interpret the data anew. Thank goodness, Francesco is a Muggle and works with a computer."

For a moment, heads turned toward the detective who was sitting at his system, listening with his back to Hermione.

"My suggestion is - first we define the ideal place for him - then we add what's needed to hide in full public, I mean so close to a city like Boston ... And all the while, Francesco runs our criteria against his data ... Does anyone have a better idea?"

Nobody had.

"Then - tell me how the ideal home for Voldemort looks."

"A house." It came from Almyra.

Ginny grinned, realized that nobody else was grinning while her brother, the protocoller for today's meeting, was writing it down, and got the idea. "More toward a castle," she said.

"But nothing pretentious." That was Lupin.

"Secluded. Nothing closer than - er, half a mile. Like a smuggler's nest." There was nothing tentative in Marie-Christine's voice.

A pause.

Hermione looked toward Francesco at the computer. "Where are we?"

"Pretty much the complete database."

Hermione asked into the round, "Where is this house?"

Harry said, "Here in Boston, or close to it."

Lupin asked, "How far apart is Salem?"

Without turning his head from the monitor screen, Francesco replied, "Thirty miles."

"Then it's near Salem."

Ron looked from Harry to Lupin. But the decision came from Marie-Christine. "Yes - near Salem. So that he can look down at night at the lights of the town, and can be contemptuous and despise all the wizards of the world."

Ginny looked with some awe at her while Ron wrote.

Hermione asked, "Francesco, where are we now?"

"Well, that cuts us down to ... yeah, sixty-odd. I cannot guarantee that view for all houses, but ..."

"That's okay," said Hermione. "Now - how does he hide?"

A pause, then the Pinkerton detective's voice came slow, thoughtful, while he kept looking toward the screen. "He's taken over something established ... Something that's well known for its shrewdness, its unsocial habits ... And he's kept that facade. He could use it like a sailor's using a hostel ..."

Marie-Christine's voice interrupted him. "No. He's taken over control - inside."

No one objected that.

Hermione asked, "How does the cover look from outside?"

Marie-Christine said, "A single person."

"A woman," said Lupin.

"A mean old bitch ..." Ginny blushed at her contribution, continued. "Hated by the others, hating them by herself. He's not controlling her in the sense of an Imperius - he's persuading her that she's getting her revenge."

Both Ron and Harry looked at Francesco, waiting for a sign of puzzlement from the word *Imperius*. But there was none - the detective apparently had milked the FBI database thoroughly.

Hermione asked, "Where are we now?"

"Fifteen."

The round was baffled.

"That's New England here," said Francesco as though apologizing for his own database.
"Mean old bitches - there in Salem? A dime a dozen."

"What's a dime?" asked Ginny, getting the answer from several sides.

"That woman's buying more food than a single person would eat," said Harry, "but nobody's wondering."

For an instant, a grin appeared at Ron's face, while his glance went to Harry, then he nodded.

Almyra said, "Either she's playing the samaritan ..."

"No." It came from Marie-Christine.

"... or she has animals for which human food is suitable, and she spoils them with that."

"Dogs or cats," said Lupin.

Hermione asked, "And now, Francesco?"

"Still four."

A pause.

Rahewa spoke - for the first time. "Cats - their sounds from fighting, and while on heat, and when - er, mating, you'd think that's someone screaming under torture."

Into the silence, Hermione asked, "Francesco?"

"Wait a sec ... here we go. That fits one - Hattie Hawking, called Hattie the hangman's bride. Has a reputation as an abortion witch, while not for love potions ... If you'd look for a poison to kill your husband, she'd be just the right place, or so the closest neighbours have it - closest means downhill, quite a distance ... Twenty-some cats, easily."

People were looking at each other.

Almyra turned to Lupin. "We'll check the house - when it's dark. Owl and dog - but you'll have to keep some distance, with all these cats."

Francesco Lopez stared at them.

Before someone could enlighten him, Rahewa said, "I need a kitten."

Heads turned toward her.

"I'm new around - we moved in just recently, and the new landlord doesn't allow cats in the house - and someone told me, that old Hattie - er, sorry, madam, but my kitten would have a better life here."

It came so rapidly, Harry was almost sure this story had taken place somewhere, some time.

Francesco Lopez had terror in his face. "No."

Two dark eyes stared at him. "You better get a mike that fits in a collar, or in a small locket, and you should be around with your equipment to listen."

The detective's mouth dropped open. But the terror in his face had faded.

Lupin said, "Rahewa - do you know what ..."

Ron interrupted him. "Yes she does - and Cho's the one who gave her a Firebolt Two, and a contract - I mean aside from ..." His voice trailed off.

Lupin, an expression of helplessness in his face, looked at Almyra.

Almyra turned to the girl. "I'll be in a tree, and Remus in the bushes, and the others out of sight. If things start going awry, reach that kitten and say - er ..."

"Oh Kitty, poor me, to be alone." Rahewa beamed at her Transfiguration teacher.

* * *

Harry sat in the back of the battered panel truck which showed, among a lot of rust, the writing *Coastal Gas & Electric* to the accidental passer-by. Except there wasn't any. Inside, the truck was crammed with high-tech equipment of which Harry couldn't even guess the purpose in detail.

All he knew - Francesco and he himself were waiting to hear Rahewa's stunt.

"... then, Kitty, make a good impression, because that's your new home."

A pause.

"Nobody at ... Ah, here it comes, Kitty."

The sound of something opening - probably a window, certainly no door. Then another sound, scratchy.

Rahewa's next words told Harry the latter had been some question from Hattie the hangman's bride. "Good afternoon, madam. I ... er, this kitten here - my Kitty ..." Suddenly, the voice changed to a sobbing misery, telling that she had to give her pet away, and she couldn't but she had to, and ...

Francesco whispered, "The kid's incredible."

Kid? ... Yes, probably he was right.

Another scratchy sound, then a door was opening. Footsteps. Then, for the first time clearly audible, a woman's voice. "Here, put her down ... What's your name?"

Rahewa's voice, small, tear-coated. "Patricia, but my friends call me Catricia ... Patricia Pillwater."

"Your kitty will be fine here - I have more than twenty ..." A scratch, then a sharp noise, then the voice again. "Here, keep the collar, that will remind you, and my cats don't wear collars."

Harry felt Francesco stiffen, cramping inwardly while waiting for the seemingly inevitable - Rahewa refusing, blowing the stunt.

"Yes, madam ... I'll wear it myself."

The detective relaxed while more scratching told them that the collar was wrapped, probably around the girl's wrist.

"Thank you, madam. Er - I'm so glad ..."

"Yes, my little. I'll escort you downstairs."

Footsteps, then, "Madam, do you have only cats?"

"Why, yes."

A sigh of relief. "Good. Kitty's so afraid of dogs, smaller animals too - I wonder if she'll ever catch mice."

"Oh no, no dogs ... Just my cats." A cackle. "And mice of course, but only for minutes."

Another cackle. "And a cute little rat - with this paw of his, like silver."

29 - Attack

Hearing the last remark from Hattie the hangman's bride transmitted into the loudspeaker, it took Harry a lot of self-discipline not to storm up the hill and right into the building. Wormtail there - then Voldemort was there too, and all Harry had to do was ...

Francesco's presence helped him to gather his senses. This here was teamwork, and no matter how the final encounter would take place, the next steps had to do with team coordination. Even so, Harry was trembling in suspension while they waited for Rahewa to come downhill the half-mile, to the place where the panel truck was parking.

Then Rahewa had reached the car, climbed the front cabin after checking around to make sure nobody was watching, and squeezed herself through between the seats, into the panel cabin.

Despite the narrow space, Harry grabbed her, hugged her hard, for relief, seeing her unharmed, and as a surrogate for his urgent desire to stomp in a war dance - impossible inside, unthinkable outside.

Rahewa beamed. "Silver paw - that's him, isn't it?"

"Yes - Wormtail. We're dead right."

Francesco had dropped his earphones, looked at Rahewa. "You're some girl - giving an old man a heartstroke ... You should come to Pinkerton, except then I have to resign to get a day or two older."

Rahewa nodded, acknowledging the message, unsurprised, unflattered, uninterested. "What now?"

"Pictures of the house," replied the Pinkerton detective. "Front, side, back - then off to Boston."

Three hours later, the crowd waiting in the Boston flat heard the door opening - Francesco was arriving with his prey - the result of careful walking, of a tele lens, and of a well-maintained contact to a photoshop.

Initially, Harry had intended to accompany Francesco, while the detective had only laughed. "Young hotshots to blow my cover - thank you very much." So Harry had jumped back, calming down while the others arrived, thinking about strategies for the final blow.

Then he had sat down on the rug, lotus position, to meditate - no, to develop his plan. Only half awake, in the special sense of the word, he had registered how Rahewa was joining him leftside and, some time later, Almyra at the other side.

Now Harry's vision cleared, filled. He rose, stretching his legs, to join the others. They were inspecting the shots on the large table, showing a weather-beaten building from three sides.

"No way from the back," said Francesco. "It's nearly built into the hillside."

Lupin looked at Harry. "Do you have any idea how to attack?"

"Yes I do." Harry smiled. "Let's find something to eat - then I'll explain."

While they were waiting for the mind-numbing quantities of pizza Francesco had ordered, Harry studied the pictures. A three-storey house, lots of large windows, a small balcony, another one - and a very large one, almost a platform, reminding him of the tower platform in Hogwarts, which had served so well in two battles.

It was this memory which closed the last gap in Harry's planning.

Eventually, minor leftovers and a huge pile of empty boxes gave testimony of the accumulated pizza capacity from nine people. Lupin said, "Well, then, Harry - what's your plan? Going inside and ask for Cho?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"First I'm going to kill Voldemort."

The others stared at him. Then Marie-Christine asked, "And how will you find her?"

"Afterwards."

Almyra said, "What if you cannot find her? What if she's not in that building?"

"I don't think she's in the building anyway. Remember how it's been with Sirius - he was held prisoner somewhere else. I don't think Voldemort has changed his technique."

"But then ..." Almyra looked alarmed. "You take the risk that you'll never be able to find her, Harry ... Please think it over - you must ..." She stopped, silenced by a gentle hand from Lupin on her shoulder.

Harry looked at Almyra while speaking. "I've made two promises. The last one's that toward Voldemort - never again to negotiate, to come for a kill next time ... The older one's that toward Cho - to come back to her after it's done ... All the time, we thought it means something like coming home after the battle, only now we can see an entirely new meaning, this coming back to her ... Anyway - these two promises span up the range of my strategy, they mark the fixpoints. I have to keep them - otherwise I'd fail. It's ... I just know."

Harry saw Lupin nodding in agreement.

He continued, "The task is somehow impossible - forcing Voldemort to tell me where Cho is, killing him, saving her, or the other way around. I've been thinking it over and over for the last two hours - there's no way to do it ... That means, it's a Zen riddle, and a Zen riddle has no solution."

Almyra had heard Harry often enough droning on about this topic. Even so, she barely mastered the urge to scream in despair.

"You must laugh it away."

Almyra knew. Only she couldn't remember how it worked, laughing.

"In terms of *aikido* or *kenjutsu*," explained Harry, "this is a well-known situation. Your enemy presents a challenge, and you know you cannot master the challenge because that's impossible ... Just - no - way."

Ron asked, "And how do you win, then?"

Harry looked at his friend, a shining in his eyes. "You ignore the challenge. You master the master of the challenge."

"And then?"

"Then you make do with the situation at hand, how it looks afterwards."

Almyra still looked desperate, but it was Marie-Christine who said, "Alright, 'arry ... And how?"

Harry told them what he himself planned to do, and what the others were expected to do.

Lupin said, "It's daring, no less, but ... And there's still a minor problem - I don't know that spell." He turned to Almyra. "Do you?"

"No." Almost a sob.

Several people looked at Hermione. She shook her head. "Me neither."

Harry felt like screaming when he realized that they had to delay the attack, that there was no way of jumping to Salem now - unless he was ready to try it without this particular twist.

Lupin had followed the thought, looked at Harry expectantly. "It means a full day, right?"

"Yes." Harry swallowed. "But we need that - it's the only way I can see to trick him into believing."

For a few minutes, the others were straining their minds to offer an alternative. No one found any.

They rose - to return to Hogwarts, have a few hours sleep, and then a very special lesson from Dumbledore, a lesson to be held outside, probably in one of the two abandoned camps.

Harry looked at Marie-Christine. "Back to Santa Monica?"

"Oh no - I'll learn with all of you, and I'll be here to do my share, when it's time."

Harry nodded, went out to program the portkey back to Hogwarts.

In the school, running at British time, it was long past midnight. The others headed for their dormitories, after Lupin had promised to fetch Dumbledore for his task and to wake them in due time. Marie-Christine turned to Harry. "Can I do something to get you ready for your task tomorrow?"

"Something?"

"Anything."

Harry smiled. "I know. It was meant as a joke - wasn't my best, somehow. But no, I'm ... Not relaxed, but balanced. I know what to do, and I need all my energy for that ... Thanks for the offer."

Marie-Christine smiled back. "Maybe it's been more a plea than an offer, but I guess you're right. Good night, 'arry."

* * *

Dusk was falling over Salem. In the fading light of the day, the house uphill stood painted sharply against the sky, still light toward north-west while the darkness came crawling from the flat horizon over the sea in the south-east. A slight breeze from the seaside moved the bushes on the hillside behind the dark, neglected-looking building.

A while ago, the sky had cleared from the last birds. Right now, however, a single bird could be seen, rather large, certainly no seagull. It sailed across the sky, as if circling along an imaginary line whose center spot would fall right onto the roof of that house.

Quietness, otherwise. Downhill, the first lights could be seen in the windows. The distant traffic's noise hardly reached this peaceful spot, playground for a dozen or more cats in the small front garden. Even their occasional hissing against each other had fallen silent.

Some of the feline heads stirred.

Before they could recognize the origin of their startling, a flash, almost spheric, hung in the air right in front of the windowed brick walls. A split second later, a deafening bang rolled downhill and up into the sky, sending the cats spinning like black and grey sparks toward cover.

The last fragments of the broken windowpanes were still falling, issuing light pings as they hit metal, when a second flash erupted, slightly lower at the housefront, and a second bang was mingling with the echo of the first. This second explosion stripped quite some leaves from the evergreen bushes near the entrance, while it avoided ruffling a single cat's fur - there wasn't any left. after the first shot higher up.

The last trail of smoke dissipated in the sea breeze. But now the air filled with clouds of black shapes - small, winged, fluttering toward the house ... Bats.

A figure in motion - screaming in rage, yet apparently more toward the inside while the first bats reached the broken windows, to disappear in the house.

More clouds appeared, pretty low, had to climb some height to approach the windows.

Suddenly a second figure appeared on the platform up below the roof. A man - staring at the clouds, waving a wand with one hand, the other, somehow discoloured, clutching to the railing. The man seemed almost helpless, facing this large number of winged targets.

Moments later, a second figure appeared on the platform. Although smaller than the first, this man stood calm, his wand pointing toward the clouds. A thin flash erupted from his wand, and the closest cloud was gone, leaving a sphere of empty air.

With some more flashes, the man cleared the house front almost completely. New clouds were fluttering closer, in a moment they would be within reach of these flashes which meanwhile erupted from the first man's wand as well.

But next moment, the two figures stopped, for an instant like frozen in shock, staring into the sky behind the clouds where another winged shape had manifested, was coming toward them.

A dragon.

* * *

Harry felt the power in his wings like a stream of hot oil rushing through pipes. Even though he had decided against using the last brain booster, his mind was as clear as his vision - determination filled his senses, drove him forward.

A dragon's view was no less than magnificent. Harry saw the two figures waking from the moment of stunned disbelief, no longer caring about the bat clouds, their attention quite obviously at him.

Voldemort's wand came up, pointed at him - no, slightly higher. A ball erupted from its tip, dark-yellow fume whirling, whooshing in a flat arc toward the largest bird ever seen in Salem's sky.

A short moment of stalling, a slight side-swing was sufficient to avoid the hit. Thanks to his nearly full-circle view, Harry could watch how behind and below another ball came shooting, to meet the yellow fume low above ground, merging into a harmless conglomerate of chemicals.

Another ball had erupted from Voldemort's wand, grew in his view. Harry danced it out, ignoring its fate past his dragon body. The scene ahead took all his attention.

The next ball, no longer ballistic - a direct shot toward his gigantic shape, already too close for side-stepping. Harry's dragon head moved a bit, then a jet of fire erupted from his nostrils, met the fuming ball, closing around, sucking it up, burning the acidic fume to oxides meaningless for dragon hide.

Harry was pretty close to the platform - any second now, the spot with the two men would be within reach of his roaring firestorm.

He saw Wormtail staring up in frozen horror.

Harry's wings spread, stiffened, as though next moment his dragon body might touch down on the platform, no doubt crashing it to debris.

Rage and disbelief in Voldemort's face ... A distorted grimace, full of hate, lips baring clenched teeth ... The wand reduced to a tip, point blank toward Harry's head, his eyes ... A

flash erupting, green, this deadly green, closing the distance at thought's speed, hitting right between Harry's dragon eyes ...

White-hot pain. All his senses screaming, burning in a state beyond sensation ... He was linked with Voldemort's mind, was simultaneously target and origin, remembering again, suffering again a previous occasion with such a timeless, all-encompassing instant, not ending ...

A scream ... Someone was screaming, though not in Harry's ears. Definitely not his parents - couldn't possibly be a human voice, worse than a Dementor's high-pitched shriek at dying ...

The link broke.

His vision back, recovering quicker than any human-shaped body could have mastered, Harry saw Voldemort collapse, fall down like an imploding structure.

Wormtail was staring at the crumpled figure, numb with disbelief. Just when Harry's front paws had reached the railing, Wormtail recovered from his shock, about to turn and flee, or maybe to shrink into rat shape ...

A red flash from above hit him, stupefied him, made him collapse feet apart from Voldemort's dead body.

Where the flash had erupted, a young woman, moments before still a falcon, inspected the path down from the roof to the platform, looked at the dreading dragon body, shrank to a falcon again, ready to take off.

His head at the rear end of the platform, the front part of his torso filling the space, his wings flapping against railings and housefront, Harry aimed for the sphere state ... reached it ... shot through into his own shape.

The momentum sent him flying, falling. He rolled around, came up in a single motion, an instant before his head, human again, might have crashed into the old brickwork.

His wand ready, he checked around, sensing. But there was no immediate danger. Just an unconscious Wormtail.

And Voldemort, the misshaped mortal body dead as dead could be. Only a corpse, no presence else, no more ... The dark lord had ceased to exist.

* * *

Coldness hung in the room - small wonder with all windows at the front side blown to pieces, and the cold air of an April night in Maine creeping through every crack, even into this room at the backside, with its window unruptured and its door closed.

Though unsuccessful in keeping the cold out, door and windows were good enough to keep a rat in.

There was little furniture, nothing to give hide for a rodent of the human kind, guarded by two large black dogs. Although - this particular rat still had human shape, and still was stunned.

In the other rooms, Hermione, Ginny, and Rahewa were busy placating an old bitch, also her cats. They kept to the *safe* part of the house - Harry had warned them to touch anything outside the woman's territory before he had found the time to fetch Nagini and to check with his snake for hidden traps, portkeys in particular.

Ron, Marie-Christine, and Francesco Lopez worked outside, to satisfy the curiosity of authorities that might come to investigate the explosions, and to chase off any unwelcome spectator.

Harry turned to Wormtail, inhaled deeply, pointed his wand. "*Enervate*."

The man came awake, groaning. He looked terrible, considerably worse than Harry remembered from that small Caribbean island - the last year hadn't been friendly to Voldemort's servant, and the evening so far had done little to improve his appearance.

Nor would the next half hour.

Peter Pettigrew, known as Wormtail, recognized the two dogs, with their amber eyes staring at him in unblinking guard, and twisted.

Harry became aware that Wormtail surely was confusing one of them with Sirius Black. He saw no reason to resolve this misunderstanding, in particular because he felt certain - the female dog would be fastest to attack, would make the killing rip through the throat.

But not before they had gathered all information they needed.

"Hello, Wormtail."

Flickering eyes, trembling hands, sweaty face. "Er - hello, Harry. Is ... is Voldemort ..."

"He's dead. Dead and gone."

A hesitant stare into Harry's face, then something like fresh spirit swept through Wormtail's stance. A kind of submissive admiration in his face, he looked up at Harry.

The white flash of the Cruciatus hit him without forewarning.

For the next two minutes, Wormtail's screams filled the room while his body twisted and jerked on the floor.

Harry waited until the sobbing had ebbed so that he could be heard with a normal voice. "Where's Cho?"

"I ... I don't know, Harry. She ..."

The man was screaming already while Harry's wand came up, sending the next Cruciatus, this time for thirty seconds.

The whimpering wouldn't stop.

"Wormtail, you're just too loud. In two minutes' time, these two friends of yours will spill your blood all over here - and if you're going to transfigure, they'll do it right away. You have two minutes left. Use them as good as you can."

Harry leaned back.

Wormtail kept wailing still for a few seconds, slow to realize that Harry wasn't going to ask him any specific question. Then he gasped, registering his mistake.

"Harry - Harry, I swear, I don't know where she is. Yes she's been captured by Voldemort, and I saw her, and she's been in this house, but ... He has put her in some kind of prison - there's no way in, and no way out ... Nobody can pass around all the traps - you cannot even come close ... Voldemort himself included ... Believe me, Harry, that's all I know ... Could be in the cellar of this building, or in - I don't know, in England where we've moved out, or ... He took her out twice a day too feed her, and ..." Wormtail stopped, a mask of horror in his face.

Harry stopped himself not to ask - how had Cho been taken out?

Wormtail hurried on. "... and then he summoned her back into her cell, but he says it's a suite, the Queen Suite he calls it - er, did call it, I mean ... I never saw it, but I know there's a bathroom ... And yes, there's no window, she complained about not seeing daylight ... And ... And she's not - not ..."

"Your two minutes are over."

Wormtail was twisting in spasms. "No! Harry, no please no, don't let them get me ..."

The flash cut the plea silent, sent the man into stupefaction.

Harry nodded toward the two dogs. An instant later, Lupin and Almyra stood before him.

"I'm going to fetch Nagini. Then we'll scan the house from top to bottom."

* * *

Two hours later, Harry slumped down into a chair, sending up a cloud of dust as well as a cat next place - the animals had quickly found their way to the warmer spots in the house, though still edgy and ready to jump at the slightest clank.

They had scanned the house thoroughly. Yes, they had found some traps - mostly portkeys, plus some poison bombs ready to blow at the faintest touch. But at each new passage, Ron's first step had been to send a miniature ball of nitroglycerine - a "safety pill" as he called them - to blow in the air, the pressure sending off any touch-sensitive trap. And Nagini had sensed all the portkeys, to be disempowered by Harry. Fortunately, you didn't need to know the destination for that.

The chance that one of them would lead to Cho's prison had unanimously been rated as that of a snowball in hell. In contrast, the chance to die at the other end rather suddenly could be taken as a given.

After all the little bangs through halls and corridors, Hattie's house looked about as inviting as ground zero. Yet now it was a safe place.

Without any trace of a prison suite.

Harry closed his eyes. He was hardly seeing any dark nothing, knew the world around him was real - still, it felt somehow familiar to the void. Then he became aware why - desperation was lurking somewhere, in a sense close, but not here, not now, not before ... He refused even to think of defeat.

One promise kept, one to go.

"Okay, Harry - the house is under control, we can check that off the list ... What comes next?"

Harry opened his eyes. Ron stood in front of him, staring coldly into his eyes.

Harry smiled, acknowledging his friend's intention as understood, accepted, not yet necessary. "I'll jump to Hogwarts and get a few things ... A drink in particular."

Ron nodded, went off.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry was back, a small bottle in his hand. He found Almyra in Voldemort's office, now the cosiest room with its huge fireplace in which some pieces were burning without falling to ashes. Almyra was scanning through books and folders.

She looked up, saw the bottle. "Time to get drunk?"

"Only me. When I say Ready, send me in trance, okay?"

New adrenaline seemed rushing through Almyra. She watched Harry raise the bottle, gulp the ice-hot liquid down.

"Ready."

Her wand pointed. "*Mesmerisio*."

The void opened. Harry's presence shot out, beaming, radiating, filling this zerosphere with his self.

And there it was - a steady pulse.

He contracted, trapping it, grabbing it, making touch, all in a single fluid thought.

Without hesitation, he pierced.

It wasn't succumbing, hardened as he pushed.

Don't master the impossible challenge ...

Harry stopped his attack instantly, then did the Zen trick - without letting go, he *ignored* the barrier.

A room ... Not spacious, though more than a cell. A door at the other side, probably to this bathroom Wormtail had talked about. A bed. On it, fully dressed, a figure, long black mane, her face a tense mask - suddenly startled, her eyes flickering ...

"Cho!"

"Harry??"

"Yes, it's me. Can you see me?"

Her face scanning around in a frenzy. "No - I think I don't even hear you, but ... Where are you?"

Harry had nearly said *Here*. "In Hattie's house, with all our friends."

"All? That means ..."

"Yes - Voldemort's dead. He died from his own Killing Curse, sent against me."

Hope, still disbelief. "How did you make him try?"

"What he saw coming was a dragon. He didn't know it was me."

"A dra ..." Cho's expression, for an instant at the edge of hysterics, lighted up in a wild grin. "Harry, you're ... I'm speechless."

"Don't. Do you know where you are?"

"No."

"How did Voldemort get you to and fro?"

A mask closed over Cho's face. "Summoning."

"Into Hattie's house?"

"Yes."

"Well ... Anything else that might give a hint?"

The mask was breaking, steadied. "There are no doors to anywhere here."

"But the bathroom's water goes someplace, right?"

A smile, gone. "Of course! I didn't ... Clever Potter."

"Okay, Cho. I'm running on dope, and I have to use the time. I'll come back ... I love you."

The face softened, which seemed to call tears waiting somewhere. "I love you, Harry."

Without even thinking how to exit, he faded out, back, reverse, into his living self.

The late Voldemort's office filled his vision. "Here I am."

Almyra gasped. "Harry - that's been a quick one ... Fifteen minutes."

He nodded. "Greetings from Cho."

This gasp was more a sob. "Thank God. How ..."

"Later, Al. Time's running. Get ..." Harry stopped, seeing Almyra's widening eyes. "No - sorry, she's not drowning or something of that sort - I have to use the doped state. Where's Wormtail?"

"Next door."

A minute later, they had him in the office, dropped the stunned body on the rug. Without waiting for Almyra to transfigure, Harry sent the de-stunning spell.

The figure came awake, realized it wasn't dead.

"Wormtail," said Harry, "tell me every detail of what happened from the moment Cho was caught. And talk fast."

"Er - yes, Harry ... Er - we had the portkey in place, and we thought it would take till her lunch break until she'd appear, and I was still preparing things here ..."

The door opened, Ginny in the frame. "Ah, here you are. Harry, what ..."

The figure on the rug disappeared. From its spot, a rat was scurrying toward the open door.

Harry saw Almyra transfigure into a dog, saw her leap, looked at the door in which Ginny was at a loss to get the events in order, realized that the dog would reach the door too late ...

Rage and fury boiled up in him, his stare piercing the rat ...

Next instant, the rat was twisting at Harry's feet, keeled over, struggling to get on its paws.

"Al, here!"

The dog stopped, wheeled around, had reached the rat with a single leap, its teeth closing around the animal's neck ... A sharp twisting of the head, and another. Harry heard the snapping when the spine broke.

The rat, dropped from the dog's fang, was falling to the rug, never reaching it ... With a thump, Petter Pettigrew's dead body hit the floor, his head dangling in an impossible angle toward the right shoulder.

A sound from the door. Glancing, Harry saw that Ginny finally had closed the door, was staring at the corpse.

The dog disappeared. Almyra stood there, her face grim. "Harry, did I mess up?"

"No, you didn't."

She was looking at him, unbelieving. "How did he come from the door into the middle of the room?"

Reconsidering the last seconds, Harry said slowly, "I figure it's been me who ..." He stopped, fighting a wave of surreality, his mind coming to the only possible conclusion, while Almyra's face showed his own feelings like in a mirror.

Voldemort had served him a last present ... Summoning.

He and Almyra were looking at each other, seeing the same thought in the other's face that was forming in their heads.

Harry filled his mind with the image of this room he'd visited minutes before, his heart already full with the longing for the person on the bed, his spirit reaching out ...

A squeak. Ginny stared at the figure which was sitting on the rug, recovering from the shock, glancing up, still fighting to accept what her eyes were telling her ... Cho.

Almyra was closer but chanceless. In a single motion, Harry flung himself at Cho's side, grabbed her, pressed her to himself, feeling how the slackness in her arms gave way to purposeful flexing.

Still, Almyra was second, winning easily against Ginny who came flying, to prop herself against Cho's back while trying to embrace all three of them together.

* * *

Harry looked around in the spacious living room. Cho's bungalow - he was here for the first time, and that was the reason why they had been forced to use the car for the route from *Groucho* to this show-off piece up in the hills.

Cho's car. However, Marie-Christine had done the driving. Cho had been unable to enter through the driver's door.

They had left Hattie's house pretty quickly, considering the circumstances. After the others had joined them in the office, while excited chatting still was filling the air, Hermione had glanced at Cho, had stopped in mid-sentence, to whisper something in Ron's ear.

Then Ron had said, "Okay, folks, party's over." Toward Harry, he had added, "You and Cho and Marie-Christine - off to California, now. Leave this to us."

Harry, feeling numb and dizzy in the aftermath of the dope more than from the events, had obeyed. He had even left Nagini behind, after Rahewa promised to take care of her.

Now he was sitting here, watched as Marie-Christine busied herself doing her nurse bit for two zombie-like figures.

For him, who felt tired, so tired, too exhausted even to close his eyes.

For Cho, staring ahead, mechanically following Marie-Christine's orders.

Then Harry's nurse guided him into a guest room, told him to hold still while she was undressing him. He couldn't even remember whether he'd managed to climb under the cover.

He came awake from an alarm clock, for a moment unable to realize where he was, or where this damned alarm came from. With arms like lead, he touched around.

Was no alarm clock ... Was an alarm alright, but it ringed only in his mind, not in his ears. Next second, he was awake.

In his underpants Marie-Christine had left him, he headed for the door, looked around, saw other doors, a staircase. Following his senses, he opened one of the doors.

Yes, Cho's bedroom. Cho in bed, murmuring, groaning. Coming closer, he saw her pyjama was wet from sweat, her face also. Could as well be tears.

He reached her, touched her shoulders. "Cho?"

She came up screaming.

He pressed her against his body, needed a moment to find the mental energy for a calming wave.

The scream ebbed, turned into sobbing. Then the sobbing stopped. Without looking up, Cho said, "Okay ... I'm okay. Please leave me alone."

"The hell you're okay."

"Well, maybe not, but better. Please go."

It startled Harry enough to come fully awake, to register something familiar in this scene ... There was still some dope in his brain, had to be, because suddenly a rapid succession of events, remarks, expressions clicked into place.

Rather than answering, he walked to the other side of the bed, lifted the cover, climbed in, careful not to touch her.

"What do you think you're doing here?" It was still a far cry from the Cho Harry knew, while at least a promising sign.

"I'm here to be here."

Without a word, Cho climbed out, walked toward the door.

Her arm reached for the handle when, suddenly, she found herself lying on the bed again, this time on top of the cover.

She came around like a cat, claws outstretched. "You bastard ..." With an inarticulate snarl, her hands came down on Harry.

He used his hands to cover his eyes, nose, lips. Otherwise, he kept passive, feeling how sharp nails were cutting his flesh, tearing off small pieces of skin.

After a while, Cho stopped, breathing heavily.

Harry took his hands from his face. "You couldn't do that with him, could you?"

The blow came fast, for Harry still like in slow motion. He moved his face just an inch, so as to take it with his cheeks, not with his nose. Then he went into double cover again.

The blows came weaker. Then Cho collapsed onto him, her face buried at his shoulder, small sobs ripping through her body.

Harry put his arms around her. "And I know why you couldn't do anything."

"Why?" It came flat, bare any emotion, hardly a question.

"Some days ago, Armodéc was found dead - killed by a vampire. He must have met Voldemort - to tell him that he couldn't find out where I was heading, and to offer a deal for compensation. And Beatrice told me that Armodéc stole her two bottles of ecstasy potion."

A shudder ran through Cho's body. Harry held her tightly, without sending another wave.

Cho's voice sounded muffled, carrying a trace of disbelief. "And this together with finding me in a nightmare's enough to think ..."

"No, there's a bit more. Something Wormtail didn't say, your face in that room at some question ... And I'm still under brain dope, don't forget ... But most of all, it's ..." Harry's voice trailed.

"It's what? Mind-reading?"

"No. I know how this emotion feels - that of a girl that's been sexually abused - with more than simple rape."

Another stiffening, then Harry felt her relaxing a bit. After a moment, Cho's voice was slightly more vivid. "Is rape simple?"

"Beats me ... No - Samantha says, it's not, but compared to humiliation, it is."

"Clever Potter ... I never would have told you, would have died first."

"Yes, I know."

"He ... He said it's not just rape - the idea was to get his own super wizard child, after his plan to get ours failed so badly. That's why ... He didn't catch me as a hostage for his protection against you, or maybe for both."

After a moment, Cho continued. "He did a poor job ... He needed that stuff for himself still more than ... Even so, all he managed was ..." Her voice broke, then she started crying seriously while her arms held Harry with all the little force she could muster.

He waited until it had ebbed a bit. "Come under the cover - you're getting a cold, with this sweat-soaked pyjama. Best you take it off."

Cho stiffened. "I can't - I feel like screaming at the thought of my bare skin against ..."

"Then change into another one."

"Close your eyes, please."

"Okay."

Harry heard drawers opened, closed, heard Cho go for the bathroom, saw her return. She came into the bed, moving carefully closer. "Let's try - hold me, Harry - and please don't be upset if ..."

"No, I'm not ... Actually, I'm too tired to get upset, or anything else in that direction."

"That's good."

They were lying at some distance for a few minutes, then Cho inched closer, huddling toward him. "It's you ... it's you, and you've killed him."

"Did I? ... I wonder if it's true."

"Oh yes, you did ... When I was lying in this room, I thought - Harry has tracked him down, he's close, it's a matter of days ... That's what saved me from going nuts."

"We've been lucky - I mean that it happened while I've been sitting in your office. And there's been still more luck - what with the right search pattern, and the dope ..."

"Luck? ... It was fate."

"You're probably right."

Another pause. Then, "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"How ... How does it feel for you - the thought that he's - he's been inside me?"

"It's something ... The physical bit itself's meaningless - if that's worth any thought, I could even say it's been my blood he used to ... Sure, I'd like to kill him for that, but it's too late."

His joke didn't catch with Cho. "But ... I wanted it, I was pushing him to go on ..."

"Of course you did - there's no defense against this stuff."

Another silence.

Then a thought came up in Harry's mind, a weird similarity, and the thought was so strong he couldn't suppress an inaudible chuckle.

"What's so funny? I want to laugh too."

"Maybe it's not funny, just crazy, but ... A minute ago, you said, inside me. And then you said that about pushing him. When - when he tried to kill me, in a way he was inside me too, only it was my mind. And I had to push him too - it wasn't easy at all ... It's crazy - forget it."

"No, I won't. It's not the least bit crazy."

"Yeah, maybe not, but there's a big difference. I did it on purpose while you - you had no choice."

"I wonder if you really had a choice, but I see your point ... So you think mine doesn't count as intention?"

"No, definitely not."

"It's hard for me thinking that way ... The idea of ... Right now, I cannot imagine doing it with you, Harry - the thought alone's giving me ..."

"Shshsh ... That's only natural. Don't push it."

Another pause.

"But I don't want to feel that way."

Harry stroked Cho's back. "I know a doctor ... He happens to have some experience with such cases ... Right now he's a bit out of combat, but that's no problem anyway since you should expect some days before the thought stops making you feel like throwing up."

"This doctor - what would he do?"

"He'd use patience, and sympathy, and some other senses."

"And if that's not enough?"

"Well ... This doctor has a Veela shawl - ever heard of that? And he has a bottle with a sensible version of that potion ..."

He felt Cho going tense.

"... which doesn't switch off your mind, keeps your own will intact - anyway, that'd be a last resort, I could imagine the doctor finds a way without that, maybe just the shawl."

A shorter pause. "Strange people you know ... How did that doctor come across that bottle?"

"Together with the brain dope - after Armodéc was found dead, that doctor went back, and found a Beatrice who's been left without a sickle, and told her she'd find an account with enough money to start her business as a potions witch ... Well, and she gave him these two bottles in exchange."

"So that's how the doctor went broke."

"He wasn't aware then - and besides, what he gave her hadn't been enough to ... But I figure he didn't feel sorry - the first glass of the brain dope helped him to his first transfiguration, and the second helped him to break through into a room with a lovely princess ..."

"Ah, I see - dragons, princesses ... A fairytale."

"Yeah, kind of." Feeling Cho calming down, together with his own tiredness, had Harry close to falling asleep.

"Then how come this doctor knows so damn well how the sensible version of that stuff works?"

The blow out of nowhere.

This time, though, it sent a rush of joy through Harry. "Yes, I've been asking that question myself, so I asked him about that. And he said - he said, he'll tell this story, but only to a girl, not to me, and only after this girl has managed to - er, seduce him successfully ... That's what he said."

"Then he shouldn't hold his breath, waiting for that."

"Yeah, he's been aware of that. But the doctor said, it's a trick because - he said, if there's ever a desire that can compete with sex, then it's curiosity."

"You mean - no sex, no story?"

"That's right - er, that's what he means. And this doctor is famous for holding his promises."

Harry heard the smile in Cho's voice. "Clever Potter - er, doctor, I mean."

30 - Family and Other Bonds

The phoenix sitting on Harry's shoulder looked like death warmed over, which meant just that was due soon, in the literal sense of the word. Even so, bird and boy seemed at ease.

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, couldn't claim the same state for himself - strange as it seemed, now that a dark cloud had faded forever. This mood had little to do with the issue at hand, more with the knowledge that this conversation would cover more. However, Harry's immediate request was the item to start with, and so Dumbledore said, "A sick leave of two weeks, Harry? You don't look sick to me."

"I didn't say I'm sick, Professor."

The long-haired wizard, for the last twenty-four hours the unrivaled champion of the magical world - or so this world thought, without himself agreeing any longer - registered how the joke was presented without the slightest hint of a smile. Which was answer enough for him. "And if I don't agree, you're going to leave without my permission. Am I right?"

The green eyes, which kept staring into the Headmaster's face, darkened, unblinking. "Yes, Professor."

Suddenly, Dumbledore laughed out loudly. "That's a Zen joke, if there was ever any."

The hard stare softened. The young face with this remarkable scar - lightning-shaped until recently, now symmetrical and looking like the pictogram of a preaching messiah - showed bafflement.

"I'd be forced to expel you, Harry, less than three months before your end of terms in Hogwarts. Minerva - Professor McGonagall - would never forgive me, not in a lifetime." Dumbledore chuckled. "So I can keep her good mood only by bending the rules, more shamelessly than ever."

The young face looked self-conscious. "I'm sorry, Professor."

"Don't - I'm joking, Harry, because that's the least I have to do. It wouldn't seem fit if the Headmaster was found jumping and dancing through the school, yelling in triumph, what do you think?"

Harry's face lighted up in a beaming grin. "Maybe you should try, Professor."

"Yes, maybe ... For the record but off the record - yes, Harry, you have my permission, and please tell her my best wishes for a quick recovery."

"Thank you, Professor - and I'm sure she will."

The Headmaster nodded. "And there's a quid pro quo - in exchange for this favour, you must allow me to go public with the events."

Harry grimaced.

"You know why - for the morale of the wizarding world, for the support of the good forces, and to encourage those who still have to fight some dark wizards. Voldemort was the worst, though not the only one."

"Yes - you're right, Professor."

"It will be published as what it's been - the work of Hogwarts students and teachers, with you, Harry Potter, as the centre force."

"And with Muggles - Francesco Lopez and his people."

The Headmaster beamed. "Yes. At long last, Voldemort has done us the greatest service - he's brought the two worlds together, has united them in the fight against his own evil. This process cannot be reversed, and I believe that's progress."

"Me too - and Ron, and of course Cho - I don't know anyone who'd like to turn back the wheel."

"Oh, I do." Dumbledore grinned maliciously. "And I really should think you'd know some of them too, quite ..."

"Arrggh ..." Harry slapped his forehead, grimacing again at the thought of the Dursleys, his relatives who were likely to develop an ulcer from this coming together. "Yes of course. Sorry - I'm still a bit slow - I was only looking at the wizarding side."

The Headmaster grew serious, forced himself for the next sentences. Not that he expected reproaches - certainly not from his young conversation partner, only that meant he would have to stand his own judgement even in the future. He said, "Anyway, it's too late for these separatists, or racists ... Harry - your task is performed, you're free to guide your own life. This is the time to ask you for forgiveness."

Harry looked flabbergasted.

"Yes - for my own doing in this matter. I always felt like a tool of fate, but I certainly did my share in steering you toward this encounter."

Recovering from his surprise, Harry grinned. "That's okay, Professor - only Cho would probably like to run you through the Chinese pardon ritual, no doubt in the long version." The grin deepened. "I never saw this version."

"I'm ready for it - in public, if that suits her."

Harry giggled at the picture. "I'm sure she takes your will for the real thing - but I for myself still have a few questions."

The Headmaster smiled. "Today I won't flinch."

"Why did I have to live in Privet Drive?"

Dumbledore looked astonished. "I thought you know, Harry. Someone had to raise a baby boy in the first place. You should develop your magical power against the strongest opposition I

can imagine, short of violence. Then your fame - it had to be kept off your knowing, so you could grow without this burden ... You had to learn the perspective of the Muggle world - actually, I thought it would be your task also to bring the worlds together ... And last but not least, you had to experience injustice, to know how it feels, to become the most determined crusader the world ever saw."

"Hmm ... And what about special protection there?"

The Headmaster blushed, raising astonishment in Harry who never before had witnessed such an event. "I have to confess - there hasn't been any."

"What??"

"Yes, Harry. At first, there was no need. Then, later - after thinking it through, I realized that whatever I'd do would be insufficient, so I just did the greatest bluff of my life ... There's only one defense that's indestructible, Harry - you've been taught enough *bushido* to know the answer, do you?"

After a moment, Harry's eyes widened in understanding. "The one that doesn't exist."

"Exactly - and it held."

Another giggle rose from the young face. "That's ... Brilliant, Professor."

The Headmaster smiled. "In all humbleness, I tend to agree."

"My blood in Voldemort, Professor - what was the effect?"

"Now that's really obvious - he couldn't kill you without killing himself."

"But he tried less than an hour into his new body."

"He was blinded by rage, Harry. And maybe he wasn't quite as clever as he thought he was - but eventually, he realized."

"Then what about - er, the love between Cho and me?"

"Harry - he couldn't kill you without dying - does that mean he couldn't kill you?"

For an instant, Harry looked perplexed.

"Your love was the winning factor, the advantage Voldemort never could compensate ... As simple as that."

"Okay ... Then, my last question - you said my letting Wormtail survive formed a bond. Which bond should that have been?"

Dumbledore looked solemn. "Nothing in particular - except that you weren't likely to feel guilt, once the day would come, while you were much too young for condemning someone to death then ... I said it to console you, Harry - another bluff, you might say."

"But in the end, it was Wormtail who led us the right track."

"Yes it was, wasn't it? Only - do you really think I could foresee all the details, Harry? I hope you don't suspect me of divination."

Harry giggled again. "Erm - well, no, Professor."

When his most remarkable student had left the office, was safely away, the Headmaster allowed himself a cunning smile while he walked to his pensieve to store a few treacherous memories. No, he hadn't flinched - but what if the boy had come with his snake?

He, Dumbledore, would stand trial any time. It was just that, by habit, he disliked the thought of telling all his tricks of the trade. After all - this young man was his closest competitor, no denying that, no sir ...

* * *

Harry used the supper table to sit with his friends, to exchange beaming grins, and to hear about the details he'd missed. Hattie the hangman's bride had obviously sided with Voldemort, so nobody felt pity when leaving the house in that damaged state. Still, they had found quite some money in Voldemort's office, had handed it over to the mean old bitch as a compensation.

They also had found proof of Voldemort's role as the brain behind the Dementor attacks, and Francesco Lopez had promised to inform the two FBI agents. It hadn't been much - brochures of the six parks, a few notes, nothing that would hold as evidence in front of a jury. But then - if Ellis and Chipman couldn't see the relevance of amusement park brochures in the office of the darkest wizard ever, they had to be thick beyond measure.

And this wasn't how they'd struck Harry.

Hogwarts hummed with excitement. None of Harry's fellow warriors had seen reason to hide their knowledge. Students were looking at him, toasting to him with their cups, almost hooraying.

Harry grinned wryly. "Dumbledore will run it through the press, with all he can come up with."

Ron seemed looking forward to that. "Anything we should keep out, Harry?"

"No - just the FBI connection ... And don't forget to emphasize the cooperation with the Muggles."

Hermione said, "Don't worry. Francesco will be the hero of the Muggle world."

"Yes - and make sure Deborah gets her exclusive interviews."

Ginny grinned. "Can we send her to Santa Monica?"

"Er - I'll come over to Hogwarts for that."

Ginny's grin faded, made room for a worried look seeing Harry's expression, and sensing something with her own *haragei*. When Harry glanced at her sharply, she looked away.

Seeing Rahewa farther down the table, Harry felt a rush of guilt - the deal with her father was still pending. After supper, he hurried to her. "Rahewa - sorry for the delay, I'll handle the deal first thing tomorrow, and then we'll talk, okay?"

The dark eyes were sparkling. "There's nothing wrong in letting him sweat for a few days ... How is she, Harry?"

"Probably her old self in a short while - I'll be off for two weeks to help her, but I'll be around at supper or so."

The girl nodded. Her old self - young as she was, Rahewa could translate this message.

"Harry!"

He turned, saw a Texan thoroughbred closing in on him. Reaching his place, Samantha said, "You're a damn hero, did anyone tell you that?"

Harry grinned. "Now that you mention it ..."

"Come with me - I have to show you why you're my own hero in particular."

With some surprise, and more than a bit flattered, Harry followed Samantha into her office. What he saw there made him smile broadly.

Snape.

The teacher returned the smile for an instant, became serious again. "Harry, I want to tell you something, only I can't find the words."

"That's ..."

Snape's wave stopped him. "No - let me try. Harry, until yesterday, I was pretty sure that I'd die soon. I didn't really believe I could escape Voldemort's revenge - actually I wondered that I was still alive ... For all I knew, I was condemned - and thanks to you, this is past. Harry, I owe you ..."

"It wasn't me alone! It was a Hogwarts task, and Muggles have helped too."

Samantha looked like the proverbial Cheshire cat, except that there was a lot of cat behind the grin. "Harry, let me explain what he's too shy to confess - until yesterday, he refused to make a serious move toward a decent woman, said he was doomed, and ... Well, now he has no more excuse."

Harry beamed. "That's super - I'm so happy with you, although, to be honest, that's an extraordinarily small surprise - I mean, after I saw you in Madam Pomfrey's rooms ..."

A blushing Snape tried to show his old self, failing happily. "Mr. Potter, you're too damn clever."

Samantha showed no embarrassment. "You know that you've earned yourself a job, Harry, do you?"

"A job?"

"Sure - best man, in due time, that is."

Harry's smile faded. "That reminds me - tomorrow or so, I'll have to talk with Rahewa. Erm - what can I tell her? Are you going to hold your offer?"

Samantha's glance met that of Snape, then both looked at Harry. "Yes."

"Thank you." Harry turned to Snape. "Prof - er, would you show me the mark?"

Rather than answering, the former Death-Eater presented his wrist. The skull had faded to a faint discolouration.

Harry grabbed Snape's hand. "May I?"

"What?" It sounded alarmed.

Harry didn't answer, instead concentrated on his doing ... He still felt a weakness, was confident though he could manage this clean-up task. After a minute, in which nobody spoke, he let go. "That'll do."

Snape checked his wrist, checked it again, looked up. "It's gone. You've wiped off my dark past, Harry."

"Oh no." Harry shook his head. "That's been you, Prof, with your own doing. I just healed a scar." He grinned. "You know - nobody but me's supposed to carry Voldemort's mark."

* * *

When Chrissy Vanzandt saw Harry entering her room, she almost sent her chair flying in her hurry to reach him. "Harry, oh Harry - you've found her."

Harry felt himself gripped in a tight hug. Then a familiar voice called from behind, "Now, really! In my own office - that's cheeky, by all means!"

The woman let him go, looked at Cho, smiling. "Hi boss - I'm really glad you've found the mood for jokes again."

"Jokes?" Cho seemed genuinely mad. "This isn't a damned joke - you're the sexiest woman over forty in the valley, and Harry's notorious for a knack toward grown women!"

Her secretary glanced at her with an uncertain expression, then at Harry.

Harry feigned guilt. "I'm afraid she's right." Then he followed a deviously grinning Cho into her office, leaving the woman to get rid of a deep blushing. Inside, Cho asked, "How's Hogwarts?"

"All smiles and roses - they get along without me, for the next days."

"Good." Cho's expression didn't quite match her reply.

"I talked with Rahewa - told her I'd settle the deal as quickly as I can ..."

"Oh - yes, of course ... Let's do it now."

While Cho was making her phone call, Harry had a feeling of déjà-vu. Apparently, he wasn't alone with that, as Cho's face told him. "Would you mind coming with me?"

"Quite the opposite."

Arriving at the car in the basement, Cho's arm went for the doorhandle, stopped. "I ... I'm ... It's stupid, I know ..."

Harry had reached her, his hands on her shoulders. "No, it's not. Touch it - if it's a portkey, we'll be moved together."

Of course it wasn't. Minutes later, Harry shook hands with a pot-bellied man who was introduced as Barney, Cho's banker - so far by her introduction - and as her devoted admirer, by a single look at his face when talking with her.

The transaction of twenty thousand galleons took another minute, then Harry followed Barney and Cho into a room that looked like a collection of several hundred mailboxes, except that all of them were missing the slot.

Barney switched his own key in one of them, watched as Cho did the same with hers, disappeared.

Cho extracted a cassette, put it on a table, opened it, seized a document. "Here, Harry - that's yours."

It was a certificate for twenty-six percent of *Groucho* shares.

Harry looked at a Cho who seemed very much at ease with herself. "That's not mine. Remember what I said ..."

"I never accepted it - legally, I mean, I'm just a solicitor, or whatever's the term."

"But I've been serious, Cho - it was a mistake, and I corrected it."

"You passed it over in a rage, it was meant as a punishment rather than a present. Take it."

Harry examined Cho's face. Then he took the document, held it. "You're right. I take it back."

Cho, about to close the cassette, was stopped by him. "Hold on."

"What ..."

"I, young Potter, happier than ever and still looking for more, declare myself free of wrath and bad intentions. While in this volatile state, I ask you to accept this property, free of obligations, and to use it for righteous purpose ... Please."

Cho stared at him.

"It's a matter of precaution. We know both - I just can't handle money."

Cho took the document, dropped it into the cassette, stepped closer. "No you can't." Then she took his head in both hands to bend him still closer for a long kiss.

* * *

Back in Cho's office, Harry looked around. "Where do you want me to mount it?"

"Mount what?"

"The portkey into your bungalow."

A flicker crossed Cho's face. "Nowhere ... Forget it - I mean, thanks but no thanks."

"You ought to get used to it."

"The same's true for opening my car door." Then Cho smiled. "Listen - I don't like the idea that someone else could use it too. Once you've figured out how to make a personal portkey, which only works for me, we can talk about it." Her grin widened. "Until then - I'll give you a call, and you can summon me."

But she didn't call him, used her car as usual.

Later, lying teaspoon-style in bed, she said, "Tell me, doctor - whom should I tell about what happened?"

"Whomever you trust - as much as you can handle."

Feeling her tremble, Harry added, "Not now - maybe never. But you should know that each one knowing is a help for you, a burden less. If you say so, I'll be the one to tell ... It's your decision."

"But nobody knows as yet?"

"No ... Ginny had a look - she might suspect something ..."

Cho stiffened.

"... but that's unavoidable - she's an expert since a certain crash course. On the other side, that makes her the last person wo'd leak it out, not even by accident."

After some silence, Cho asked, "How is she - now, after all these months?"

"There's a scar, and sometimes it hurts. At Christmas, she could make a joke." Harry told Cho about the Wheel of Fortune and Ginny's role as the fisherwoman.

"And her sex life?"

"I've lost track, for - er, some reason. My guess is, it's sort of limited, if any, but only because she lost the taste for adventures, is looking for something steady ... And once we two are - er, back in track ..."

He felt Cho smiling.

"... the topic's probably open again in conversations between her and myself."

"But the cure was - er, successful?"

"Oh yes, definitely."

"How do you know? - Aside from male overestimation, I mean."

"Well - er, next morning, we - er, agreed that the night's over when the blinds are up."

Cho's voice sounded like a cat's purring - this animal with long, sharp claws. "That's good to hear, doctor."

* * *

Mr. Spinbottle took the information about the fund with satisfaction, confirmed that yes, Mr. Lightfoot had signed the papers and, in doing so, had crossed the point of no return in that matter. "The girl's free," said the lawyer.

"Perfect. I'm going to talk with her right away."

"Mr. Potter ... What about the idea of a lawsuit against that nuclear plant?"

"Well - the question's been answered by itself, somehow." Seeing the lawyer's glance, Harry added, "I'm broke."

"Literally?"

"No, it's not that bad." Harry smiled. "But I have no fifty grand any more."

"Hmm ... Then please tell Miss Lightfoot that I'd be ready to give it a try on a provision base."

Harry felt slightly surprised. "Why'd you do that, Mr. Spinbottle?"

"It's common practice in the States, where the complaint would be filed." Then Mr. Spinbottle laughed. "But frankly - I'm pretty sure to win, and the provision would of course be higher. Thirty percent, so you might call it plainright greed, Mr. Potter."

For the second time in as many days, Harry had the feeling of being told the truth and still missing the essential point. "Okay, I'll ask her."

Rahewa wanted to talk on a walk. She came down the staircase with two snow-white balls dancing around and ahead, and the four of them set off toward the lake.

Harry let a few minutes pass during which the poodles, their owner, and he himself settled to a leveled rhythm of breath and emotion. Then he said, "Before we start with the main issue - Spinbottle's asking whether you want to file a lawsuit against the nuclear plant."

"No."

"You're sure? You didn't even ask for details, or chances."

"I don't want to get money for my mother dying ..." Rahewa stopped, apparently considering a new thought.

Trying to find the bothering item by himself, Harry could locate only one candidate, though a likely one. "If you think about the hospital cost, forget it. We have a deal, remember?"

"Er - yes. Sorry."

"So your answer is no?"

"Right."

"Good. Then let's come to the main thing. I looked for adoption parents for you, and I found some candidates. I thought you should be the one to pick your choice - by the way, your mother thought the same, and she was pleased to know that this will take place when she's gone."

"You talked with her about that?"

"Yes. It helped her to see some purpose in the sequence of events."

For a moment, the girl felt in no mood to hear about the candidates. Then she said, "Okay, Harry."

"Well - there are four ... Don't bother with the order in which I'm telling you - they all are - er, a bit breathless at the thought - like you, I'd ..."

"Get on, Harry!"

"Er - yes. First, there's the Weasley family."

"Yes, of course."

Of course? ... Maybe so.

"Then there's Sirius Black and Deborah Beckett. They'll marry sooner or later."

"Really?"

Was this question about his candidate couple or their wedding plans? Harry didn't dare to ask. "Yep. Then there's Samantha who pretty soon will be together with someone else."

"Snape." It came matter-of-fact.

"Oh ... How do you know?"

Rahewa giggled. "Everybody knows - only they don't know we know."

So it had to be true love - blinding those fallen to it, radiating out so nobody else could miss.

"That leaves one candidate, and this is ..." Harry felt the girl's expectation like a gush of hot air in his *haragei*. "... the Changs - Cho's parents."

"Oh."

Something had gone wrong - awfully wrong. Harry sensed bitter disappointment. He stopped, turned to her. "Rahewa, what's wrong?"

Silence.

He took her. "Which name have you been waiting to hear?"

Silence.

He just took her closer, bent to her ear. "Tell me."

Her head was shaking.

"If you can't tell me, I cannot ask them. The worst that can happen is that they say no."

This seemed exactly what a twelve-year-old was dreading.

He pushed her gently. "C'mon, dreadnought."

A whisper. "It's ... Almyra and Lupin."

Harry stared at her. Next moment, his hand hit his forehead right at his re-shaped scar.

"Arrggh - stupid me ... How can one be such a blockhead? You're staring at it all the time and ..."

The girl's tension broke in a giggle.

"Rahewa - I'm sorry ... I'm going to ask them right away - let's go back."

"You do. I can't - I'm too ..."

Harry found Almyra where he'd expected her - in Lupin's office. The two looked at him, then Almyra asked, "What's the matter, Harry? You look so upset?"

"Do I? I just had a walk, probably it's the cold air."

"Could it possibly have been a walk with some poodles?"

"Er - yes."

Almyra nodded, her smile a bit strained. "So I figure you've been discussing Rahewa's future with her - am I right?"

"Yes."

"And - did she pick her choice?"

"Er - no, not yet." Harry looked from Almyra to Lupin, saw them both biting their lips, holding their breath. Suddenly, he was pretty sure he'd been the only blockhead around. He blurted out, "She wants to live with you."

When their wide smiles seemed impossible to stretch any further, Harry said, "I'm sorry - I just was too stupid ..."

Almyra interrupted him. "I've been biting my tongue more than once, I just couldn't ..."

"And why didn't you ask?"

Lupin answered. "We didn't know about the state - might have been a done thing ... I guess we had our own kind of short-sighting."

Harry sighed. "That's some consolation ... Okay, don your coats - your daughter's outside at the lake, and if she's trembling this time it's not from the cold."

The two were reaching for their garments at once. About to leave, Harry was stopped by Lupin's voice. "Before you go, Harry ..."

He turned. "Yes?"

"Remember the medal of honour? Somehow, you've found something much better than that ..."

"It wasn't me - this obligation's still pending."

Lupin grinned. "Who said it wasn't? ... Pending, I mean. But while on the subject - our daughter needs a godfather, if you get my bearing."

* * *

The sooner he did it, the better - so Harry started his journey along his failed candidates immediately, earning relief and disappointment in alternating patterns, and most often both of them from the same person.

Ma Weasley said, "The girl has found what she wants, and that's what matters. Harry, I'm so happy that you've finished your task, and you and Cho ..."

He had to hug her a moment until Ma Weasley could master her emotions.

Sirius was very busy to knock Harry's ribs. "You bloody - you bloody ..." His voice cracked.

Harry hugged him back hard for sheer survival, quickly turned to Deborah when his godfather let go.

Deborah's composure held better. "You're alive, Cho's alive - and we'll get our own child under way in due time ... But I think we should get the story properly finished, Harry."

"What do you mean?"

"Well - remember how you've done this talkshow in exchange for our candidacy? So now that we're off the hook, I'd think that's worth an exclusive interview with the heroes of Salem, what do you say?"

Harry smiled. "Sure thing, Deborah - with Paul at whichever side of the table. Contact Ron, I'm in touch with him."

His last candidates had been lingering heaviest in his mind. When the door opened, Harry was hoping it would be Cho's mother. But of course it was Mr. Chang.

The man bowed rather deeply. "Harry, my house is at your command."

"Good evening, Mr. Chang - I feel privileged ..."

He didn't get any further because Mrs. Chang had reached them and simply drowned his reply with her hugging.

Then she asked, "You're with Cho?"

"Yes, madam."

"How is she?"

"Pretty much her old self. In a few days ..."

Mrs. Chang seemed to hear something in his voice. Then she seemed to have a wordless conversation with her husband - at any rate, suddenly Harry was alone with her. "Is she hurt, Harry?"

"No - not physically, I mean."

"Torture?"

"No."

The question Harry was waiting for didn't come. He looked up. "Mrs. Chang, it - er, it wasn't rape. But somehow it was worse. Anyway ..."

"Like with that other girl, your stepsister?"

"Not really ... But it's similar enough so I know what to - er, how to handle it."

Mrs. Chang nodded. "I'm so glad, Harry, that ..."

Before another composure went scattering, Harry quickly took the opportunity to tell his candidate about Rahewa's choice.

Mrs. Chang smiled. "I didn't really expect to rate high, Harry. For all I heard, she's too much like you."

Harry stared at Cho's mother, not trusting his ears. Didn't she know how he felt about her, how ...

"She knows little about us ..." Mrs. Chang saw his expression, was in a hurry to solve the misunderstanding. "I mean - money doesn't impress her at all."

* * *

Back in Santa Monica, Harry found the press all over the place. It gave him a lesson about the true meaning of *pain in the ass*. However, Cho knew that the best way was to play along, also from the business perspective, and asked him to help her in that.

So Harry kept patiently still while cameras clicked, flashes flashed, stupid and not so stupid questions were asked. He sang the praise of Pinkerton, Mr. Lopez, Mr. Garcia, and kept an FBI connection out of the picture.

Then he was asked for an interview. He refused by hinting an exclusive deal with a British newspaper. To his surprise, this was accepted without further pressure.

In the evening, he had dinner with Cho - and with Marie-Christine. Afterwards, the three of them went to Cho's house for a drink and a chat.

Harry reported the events of his day in England. By now, he was getting used to a day rhythm which comprised a short morning and two long evenings.

Cho looked pleased. "So Al has stopped you collecting daughters, huh? Snatched away your most precious girl."

"Yes, but only so much. I'm supposed to be her godfather. And my first task was to inform the four losers."

"What did they say?"

"Well, mostly the other events dominated in our conversations. I wasn't staying for long with any of them."

"And my parents?"

"Asked how you were doing."

"And?"

"Your mother was glad to hear that - er, that we're together for some days."

This was nowhere close to answering her question, and Cho realized it, realized that Harry was watching her realizing, while Marie-Christine kept a neutral expression in a face that lacked any surprise about the remarks.

Cho looked at her, then at Harry. "Please tell her." She jumped up, left the room.

It took Harry little time to summarize the events for Marie-Christine, from Armodéc's death over Beatrice's report to Cho admitting Voldemort's doing.

Marie-Christine's face showed sickness. "I knew something was wrong, but ... Please excuse me, 'arry." She was up, and Harry knew she was looking for Cho.

Fifteen minutes later, both women returned, took their seats again. Cho turned to Harry. "So what exactly was it my parents said?"

"Just your mother. She sensed something, then she sent your father off, then asked me whether you were hurt. I said no, not physically. Then she, 'Tortured?' I said no ... Well - she didn't ask more.

"And you?"

"I said it wasn't rape."

"And then?"

"Then she asked if it was like with Ginny, and I said no, only the effects were the same, and she said - but I told you already what she said. That's all - then I left."

Cho stared at Harry. "How does my mother know about Ginny?"

"From me."

"You?? ... When did you tell her?"

"That's been - yes, day before New Year, when we met in London Linkport."

Cho opened her mouth, closed it - at a loss to decide whether she should be pleased, or furious.

Marie-Christine smiled. "Cho, make sure to keep him at a short leash." She looked at Harry. "You're just too frighteningly honest."

Later, in bed, Harry asked, "Are you sure about your choice of doctor?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe ... maybe a female doctor would make things easier."

Cho smiled. "That's kind of you, thinking of it as an option ... But you know, with a female doctor, I could do it any time - only, it wouldn't solve the problem."

* * *

Checking things in Hogwarts, Harry heard that Deborah was asking for her interview, agreed for the next day. As it turned out, there was more of an individual interview with each of the rescuers than a single one with all of them together. Harry pressed the issue of interviewing Francesco Lopez as well, with the effect that he had to portkey Deborah all along the way.

Returning to Santa Monica, he realized that he had to find something to fill his time until Cho would return from her work. Just hanging around was no good.

When Cho arrived, she had a letter for him. "It came to Hogwarts, and Ron jumped to our office to deliver it ... Sometimes I think I really should learn apparating."

Harry examined the letter. Envelope and handwriting didn't tell him anything. So he opened it, read.

Dear Harry,
congratulations for your victory over Voldemort,
with the help of your friends. I have the feeling
my brain dope has helped a bit, and I feel very
proud about that.
My business will take a while before it will pay
off. But thanks to your generosity, I can look
ahead. It is definitely potions, I am done with
alternatives.
You have changed my life, Harry. I thank you for
that, and I hope you and your love are well.
Beatrice

Checking the stamps, Harry could see that the letter came from Port-au-Prince. Otherwise, there was nothing to hint Beatrice's address.

Cho's voice was casual. "Fan mail?"

Harry passed the letter over, watched Cho's face while she was reading. Eventually, the arm with letter fell down. "Potions, huh?"

"Yes."

The alternative, abandoned by Beatrice, hung in the air as an unspoken argument. Then, as though making clear how she was judging Beatrice's choice, Cho muttered, "I could have done without her stuff - really, I could."

"Yeah, I can imagine. Only it was her other stuff that saved us. Without that ... I don't even dare thinking what I'd have done. I didn't tell you - when I knew you were kidnapped, I made a try to reach you, but I couldn't break the barrier. It was ..." Harry stopped before losing control of his voice.

Cho came closer. "Hey, doctor - need a nurse?"

"No." Next moment, Harry was crying.

Cho came to his side, took his head, put it into her lap. "Come, my little hero, come here."

After a while, his painful sobbing had ebbed just so Harry could speak. "This moment - when I felt you inside the sphere and couldn't get through - that's been the worst. There was ... Then I knew - I mustn't think what was lying ahead, just go forward, not ... It was impossible, and I just thought, it's Zen, like this man hanging over the abyss." He looked at her. "Then Samantha - she gave me sort of a lesson, what I had to do, to be as stubborn ... And I did, I just locked tight ... Kept my first promise - no, the second first, and then my first one ... But in a way, it's been you to fulfill it - you came back to me."

Cho kissed his forehead, his eyes which were brimming with tears. Then she took his hand. "Come up."

In the bedroom, she let go of his hand. "Okay, here we are. C'mon, doctor, time for a cure."

Harry looked alarmed. "Cho - I'm so shaken, I'm not sure ... I'm afraid I won't be - er ..."

She showed a wicked smile. "That's just fine - so I'm the one to get things going, right?"

She was indeed, although without clinging to her role, after Harry had found some new spirit, realizing that his softening up was just the basis for a mutual cure - only the basis, while the cure itself demanded a bit more toughness, which manifested without significant trouble.

Later, lying side by side, Cho asked, "This Beatrice - you don't know where to find her, do you?"

"No - why?"

"I was thinking of a new branch ... Groucho Biochemicals - how does that sound?"

Harry gasped. "Just so?"

"What do you mean, just so? It'll be a lot of work, to get it running."

"Yes, sure - I mean, is this just a business idea, or is there more to it?"

Cho looked innocent. "What else should there be?"

"Well - the thought is ... I think I owe her, as much as all the other rescuers, but I don't know how it's for you."

"Maybe I'm curious."

"Ah - yes of course, curious."

Cho grinned. "It's a strong motivator, you said so yourself ... And you've been right - it can make you think a bit harder."

Harry glanced at her.

"Groucho Biochemicals - yes, I figure it's more than business. It's a signal, giving every potions witch a bit of a challenge, actually more than a bit, there's little doubt Beatrice is up to her - er, reputation, as we both can confirm."

Harry swallowed.

Cho's glance inspected the ceiling. "It wasn't that difficult - with the information I had. There was only one thing I couldn't get straight - you said, the new stuff leaves your will intact. Somehow, that doesn't fit."

She was no longer inspecting the ceiling.

"There was something else ... Sounds, that of a woman at ... and drums - after a while, it got to you."

Cho looked satisfied. "That's why ... Maybe some day I want to hear the full story, but not today."

Harry didn't feel like looking forward to that day.

"Right now I'm just too balanced - and that's what it's all about, isn't it? ... Balance - balancing a potions witch with a potions witch. I wonder which of them's better."

Harry looked innocent. "You mean - with potions?"

Next moment, he felt Cho's claws at an awfully sensitive part of his anatomy, heard her snarling, "I'm going to make you suffer for that."

Harry gasped. "Yes, please."

31 - Looking Forward

Cho seemed bursting from energy. The most urgent task on her agenda was to get her rescuing party organized, and for good measure, she left the work to a doctor who had lost his employment - in some sense, though somehow still keeping to the habit.

Cho also left it to Harry's decision whom to invite - so long as Almyra, Marie-Christine, and Chrissy would be found among the guests. And of course Sylvie and Jesamine. Yes, and Beatrice - wasn't a party the best opportunity to talk business?

Harry went to Pinkerton, met his preferred detective in Lopez' office. "Francesco, the good news - you're invited to a rescuer party."

The detective looked startled. "All wizards, huh?"

"Not quite." Harry grinned deviously. "Some of them are witches." Into Francesco's groan, he added, "No, there are some other Muggles - two FBI agents, for instance."

The detective eyed him suspiciously. "So if this was the good news, then I have a bad feeling about the others."

"No, it's not that bad. You have to find Beatrice."

"I knew it!"

"We know where she is - somewhere in Port-au-Prince."

Two days later, coming into Francesco's office, Harry was shown an issue of the *Haiti Soir*, with an ad spanning half a page.

**• Beatrice
I need your help
but not your dope
Please call me**

This was followed by the phone number of Francesco's office. Harry had the strong feeling it was just a matter of hours until the call would arrive, and he was right - coming next day, Francesco had an address for him.

Beatrice looked horrified, hearing about the invitation. She looked panic-stricken when Harry told her that yes, Cho knew what had happened. Harry, not authorized to reveal anything, said, "Please, Beatrice. Aside from your role in the rescuing - she wants to talk with you."

"I bet. No, 'arry - please ..."

"She's very determined. If you don't come, I'm sure she'll order me to summon you - imagine that, you'd arrive as you are, maybe in a night dress ..."

Beatrice stared at him. "Are you blackmailing me?"

Harry smiled. "No - as I said, that's what she'll order me, and I'm in no position to object, not in this particular case, if you know what I mean."

"Oh my God ... Alright, 'arry - better I do it voluntarily, so I'm dressed ... Tell me, what would be the proper dressing for this occasion?"

And that to him.

Then Harry knew. "Show off - you must know, you're not even the only guest from the Caribbeans - Almyra's from Jamaica, bit lighter than you ..."

Harry could feel Beatrice's relief, not being the only black woman.

"... remember that dress you wore at that evening? That'd be just right."

She didn't think so.

"Beatrice, please - imagine, they look at you and think, blimey, Harry's taste really needs some improvement, or just the other way around, like, she certainly looks better undressed ..."

Beatrice twisted again, while otherwise this argument seemed convincingly enough.

* * *

Harry also had trouble with some other people in his guest list. Chrissy argued she was none of the rescuers, however agreed quickly and with pleasure when hearing that her presence was a must.

Lieutenant Garcia was a bit reluctant, still more intrigued. "Alright, Mr. Potter - although I'm afraid my cover will be blown to pieces."

"Well - I won't be surprised if some other people find out, but they'll keep their mouths shut."

Wayne Ellis and Tracy Chipman flatly refused. Harry declared this as not acceptable. The answer was sorry, but no. Only when Harry threatened to explain in public that two people were missing, and why they rated as rescuers, the two agents agreed to come, after giving Harry a short but informative lesson about bad language, American style, sub-category detective curses.

Sirius and Deborah were torn apart by their emotions - they didn't qualify as rescuers, they said, but quite obviously their desire to join the party was overwhelming.

"Deborah, you're the one who recommended Paul for the research." Harry thought for a second. "And you, Sirius - I mean, as Deborah's partner, you'd be booked anyway ..."

"I'm flattered," grumbled Sirius.

"... and in addition, it's been your party where I pursued for the first time ..."

"That's so awfully thin, Harry, you'd need a ..."

"... and you've been the one who brought me into the Dementor patrol. Remember?"

Sirius wanted to know what this might have to do with rescuing Cho.

Harry told him he could find out only at the party, because there he'd meet the people involved.

Still pretty sure the answer would be "Nothing whatsoever," Sirius at least had no more objections.

The twins wanted to know what they had to do with rescuing Cho. Harry asked them whether they'd forgotten their lessons in the basics which eventually led to nitroglycerine balls and other niceties.

Fred said, "Yes we did. With your performance, Harry, we thought it an act of mercy to forget."

George said, "Well, no, but - that's pretty far-fetched, Harry."

"Then it just fits. I had to fetch her from pretty far."

Fred looked at his brother. "We have to come. If that's the average level of jokes on that party ..."

Rex Ballantine and Ray Purcell both found their qualification wanting but, come to think of it, sufficient.

Fleur couldn't find a trace of qualification in herself or her husband - which was meaningless, wasn't it, because she felt tremendously high qualified to celebrate the rescuing.

Samantha frowned. "Wouldn't know what I had to do with rescuing your girl ..."

"Of course you know! You've been the ..."

"Shut up! Don't interrupt grown women, that's an awfully bad habit of yours." Seeing Harry's twist, Samantha grinned. "But I certainly qualify as someone rescued, and I'm dying to meet your Cho."

"Very good. Then you won't object being the one who has to tell Snape, right? So we're sure it's not me who's interrupting you." Harry quickly stepped out of reach - after all, Samantha had this nasty habit in common with Cho - hitting without forewarning.

* * *

The other people simply said yes of course, started to get excited and - as far as they were female - to talk about party dresses.

Checking his list, Harry felt pleased seeing a nearly perfect balance. He and Cho, Ron and Janine, Hermione and Viktor, Almyra and Lupin, Sirius and Deborah, Bill and Fleur, Samantha and Snape were the - er, genuine couples. Then the twins with their girl-friends - Fred and Mary-Ann, George and Katie, ranking somewhere close. Then Ellis and Chipman

who balanced out by different sex but equal profession. Five single women or girls - Ginny, Marie-Christine, Sylvie, Jesamine, and Chrissy who had announced to come alone - were balanced out by five single men - Paul, Francesco, Garcia, Rex, and Ray. Only Rahewa had no counterpart which, somehow, felt right too.

Oops - he'd almost forgotten Beatrice. But this was balanced too, as he'd almost forgotten someone else.

Kenzo simply bowed, smiled, accepted, not bothering with useless remarks about qualification. They would have been ridiculous anyway, as they both knew.

Counting the people in his list, Harry realized that, for some reason, he didn't like the resulting number at all. It felt too unbalanced. Then who ...

Mr. Spinbottle found the idea rather absurd yet very appealing, yes indeed. After all, facing absurdities was a lawyer's daily business, wasn't it?

Checking again, Harry became aware that there still were two rough edges in his list - arguably so, maybe, but Cho had said it was his decision.

The Headmaster found the idea ridiculous. Yes he'd qualify as a rescuer, but still more as the one who'd helped to cause the trouble, so ... And with so many teachers and ex-teachers around, they'd feel embarrassed ... Although ... At closer inspection - if Harry was sure ... Well, then, perhaps, for a little while ...

The Gryffindor Headmistress seemed pleased and disappointed at the same time. Pleased for being invited, disappointed for having to put him down. "It's impossible, Harry - there won't be any teacher left in Hogwarts ... We cannot do that."

Staring at her, Harry felt pretty sure the disappointment was genuine. "If I'd asked you first, you'd have agreed, right?"

Professor McGonagall smiled. "Harry, what's the sense in hypothetical questions?"

"Okay, then let me ask you a real one. If, like, next weekend there's another invitation, and maybe Sylvie and Jesamine will be around, will you come?"

The witch beamed. "Yes, Harry - to be honest, I'd come even to you and Cho alone."

So this was settled, but suddenly the list looked unbalanced again. Harry should have asked McGonagall first and Dumbledore then, the Headmaster had no problem leaving the students to themselves for an evening - and wasn't Binns a teacher?

But wait - there was someone else, someone who'd level it out, someone who'd never forgiven him if ... Harry swallowed at the thought - a lifetime of reproaches barely avoided.

Gabrielle seemed ready to show him how this would have been. "You didn't come to tell me, Harry - I had to hear it from others, the newspapers knew earlier than I."

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. It wasn't on purpose - I couldn't leave Cho alone, for a few days."

A twelve-year-old Veela looked at him. "Has she been raped, 'arry?"

"Erm - something similar."

The girl nodded. "Yes, that's a reason not to come." Then she smiled. "Of course I'll come - I'll ask Cho how you made her recover from that."

"Urgh - well, as long as you don't ask in public ..."

This glance was really detestful. "Sometimes I wonder about you, 'arry."

Harry inspected Cho's bungalow, this time from the perspective of stuffing thirty-six people in, and food, and drinks ... Bit tight, there wouldn't be much of dancing - unless they used the porch for that purpose, except the noise would reach all through the neighbourhood ... Then Harry remembered that noise from a party crowd counted as a status symbol here in the hills above Santa Monica. So then, they could come.

They came.

* * *

It was Harry's first opportunity for playing the role of the host. Well, maybe opportunity wasn't quite the right term, felt more like a duty - still, Harry enjoyed standing with Cho near the entrance, ready to welcome their guests.

Cho looked splendid, radiant in her dress. Red, of course, entirely Muggle style of the Western fashion but with a strong emphasis on attributes found otherwise at kimonos, or cheong-sams. The long slit, for example.

Marie-Christine was already there. She and Cho had been busy to ease each other's nervousness, and to make sure their appearances were in perfect trim.

Chrissy, Sylvie, and Jesamine came together, pretty early, apparently anxious to lend a helping hand, not finding much to do - Harry had made sure of that.

Then came the Hogwarts bulk at once, including Rex and Ray. With so many people together, Harry found no opportunity to watch any particular remark, for example between Cho and Hermione, and he was distracted because Janine used this moment to deliver her own hugging and kissing to him.

But Samantha took her time, letting the crowd pass, not responding at all when Snape tried to send her forward and quickly leave the focus of attention - with him of course. Samantha examined Cho with appreciation. "I've been looking forward to this moment, really, I did, because - until now, I could admire you only from the distance."

"How's that?"

"Well - everybody tells me only you can teach Harry how it feels to be scared ... Although I'm the last to complain."

Cho wasn't quite used to welcomes Texan style. Snape stepped in. "Hello, Miss Chang. I feel a bit displaced, among all the heroes and victims, but Samantha's been very determined."

"Hello, Prof." Cho grinned. "I remember a story with a train and some Muggle-born students, in case you forgot - and I'm very pleased to see you in such company."

Snape's cheeks flushed a bit while Samantha grinned back. "Me too, honey, me too."

Then came Sirius and Deborah, Spinbottle with them, and Paul. Harry said, "Cho, this is the genius who tracked Voldemort down to the Boston area."

"Hello, Paul - I owe you more than this party, that's for sure."

"Nonsense - not after this incredible premium from Harry."

"Premium?"

"Yes, sure - er, didn't he tell you?" Paul looked embarrassed.

Cho smiled. "He's very secretive - about money, that is."

People around started to snort with laughter, though some of them with a bit unease. At this moment, the twins arrived, and Cho and Katie had to exchange a few remarks.

Then came the FBI agents together with Francesco Lopez. Harry introduced them.

Cho examined the Pinkerton detective. "Mr. Lopez, I've been looking forward, learning to know the Muggle who's done what you did. I'm burning to talk with you."

"Hello, Miss Chang." The detective grinned. "It might violate Pinkerton policy, but so what - after all this publicity ..."

"Yes, you're the new hero - and mine in particular."

Francesco smiled, looked at Harry. "I'd know someone who's better suited for that role - for me, publicity's always bad publicity."

"Why's that so?"

"How to sneak around and asking people if everybody knows your face? Maybe I should look for a beauty surgery."

Into the laughter, Cho said, "Let's talk later. Until then, you might want to think about how you'd like to be Chief of Security for Groucho. Recently, I've come to think about this issue."

Cho and Harry seemed the only people who could laugh about this joke. At this moment, Lieutenant Garcia arrived, a moment later Bill and Fleur with Gabrielle.

Cho and Fleur were still talking when Harry saw the last guest arrive - Beatrice. For him, if not for the others, her nervousness was palpable.

He stepped forward. "Hello, Beatrice - you look great."

She did - wearing not exactly the same dress Harry remembered, however a similar one. Beatrice and Almyra would have run a tight race, had there been a contest. Fleur studied her with great interest, showing no intention whatsoever to get lost inside. Gabrielle, not knowing anything but owner of some Veela senses, followed her example.

Cho smiled evenly. "Hello, Beatrice. I only know your first name, which is just fine. I'm Cho."

"Good evening - er, Cho. It's Chagrin."

Which meant trouble, or sorrow, probably the reason why it took Cho a second to register that this was Beatrice's family name.

Then Cho started to giggle, steadied again. "I think Beatrice suits better. Come inside and have a drink before we talk. There's something I want to discuss with you."

There was indeed not much of dancing - the most likely candidates were too busy with eating, drinking, talking, probably also suffering a bit from the time difference. At any rate, talking seemed everybody's favourite. Checking around, Harry saw people sitting, standing, absorbed in some conversation. It was totally different from another party which had taken place in these hills, almost a year ago.

Cho was talking with Beatrice. Harry remembered that this particular conversation had started a while before, and that Sylvie and Jesamine had joined them for a few minutes. Then Sylvie joined Lupin and Almyra while Jesamine moved over to Rex, probably to talk about dragons.

Sirius was talking with the two FBI agents and Francesco Lopez. Police talk, no doubt. Harry checked around to locate the detective missing in this group, saw him sitting with Marie-Christine, apparently giving a damn for professional talk, considerably more interested in some other topic.

Driven by curiosity, Harry stepped closer.

Marie-Christine looked up, saw him, smiled. "Ramon just told me how you two met in the Groucho basement ..."

Ramon, huh?

"... must have been quite a scene, you with Nagini ..."

"No," protested Lieutenant Garcia, "his Parseltongue wasn't the worst ..." He stopped, looked as if biting his own tongue.

Marie-Christine waited a second for him to continue, suddenly frowned. "Parseltongue? How come you know about Parseltongue?"

Harry started to laugh. Marie-Christine looked at him with astonishment, then at the detective. Next moment, her eyes went wide. "Don't tell me you're a wizard."

Lieutenant Garcia had blushed. "I'm afraid so, yes."

With little surprise, Harry watched as Marie-Christine lacked any sign of disappointment, quite the opposite, seemed rather pleased. He turned to the detective. "Well, you've been forewarned, haven't you?"

Ramon Garcia shook his head in disbelief. "And then it was my own mistake."

Harry looked at Marie-Christine, back at the detective. "Mistake? I don't think so."

Bewildered, the lieutenant looked at him, at Marie-Christine. What he saw made him blush deeper.

Harry stood up. "I'll get me a new drink."

* * *

Walking to the bar, Harry passed another pair lost in a conversation - Ginny and Paul. The two didn't look up, and for all Harry could sense without snooping too intimately, they didn't register anything else in the room.

With a fresh glass, he walked out onto the porch, found it empty from dancers. Next moment, Viktor stood at his side. "Harry, it's a real shame you didn't call me to help in the fight, together with the others."

Harry felt his cheeks flush. "I'm sorry, Viktor. At this morning - when Hermione called for the brainstorming, I couldn't think too straight. And then, somehow the group had formed ..."

"And Hermione didn't bother to call me either." Which seemed upsetting Viktor even more.

While Harry knew why. "Oh, that's quite obvious."

"Is it?" Viktor stared at him.

"Remember the fight against the crazy Muggles? There was ... You were up on the tower, we were at supper, and Ron and I were talking about what to do against them outside. Then Hermione made a remark, toward Ron - it was something really bad, and Ron went white, got up and left ..."

Viktor listened with full attention.

"... And I was about to say something to her, and just in time, I realized ... I've never seen Hermione so close to hysterics. I asked her, and - well, she said yes, that was the reason, and then I told her to go talk with Ron, to tell him, so he knew why she had said that."

Harry looked at Viktor. "She was scared - for you. She said if we start something, you'd be found right in front ... She said - she said Harry, he's as reckless as you, only he's not as lucky as you ... That's why - well ..."

"I didn't know that." There was wondering in Viktor's voice.

Harry kept silent.

"She never told me. She's very reluctant to talk about certain things." Viktor's voice was almost casual. "While for others, she's surprisingly frank - honest, you might say."

Harry felt his stomach twist.

"She had a weird story the other day ... And now you come with this story ..." Viktors voice became sharper. "What did she say to Ron?"

"Er - Ron and I, we were talking about what to do, and Ron said something that we should use acid balls, because they wouldn't make much noise, only the Muggles would when hit, and - then she said, Charlie didn't say much when that ball came."

"That's ..." Viktor nodded. "She was beyond herself, huh?"

"Yes. You were commander of defense, and she said our rescuing Samantha had already consumed all luck that was around, probably more."

Viktor smiled. "She'd bite her tongue before ... Harry, I owe you for that ..."

Harry swallowed.

"... while I'd owe you something totally different, according to Bulgarian standards, only that these standards are somewhat stupid, and besides, you've saved my life once, which raises a conflict with some other Bulgarian standards, so I'd say, it balances out."

Harry looked at him. "I feel guilty toward you, Viktor."

"Well - you didn't say I'm sorry, which is just good, because it would have been an insult, and ..." Viktor grinned. "It would have been a lie too, right?"

Harry nodded.

"You're something, Harry ... Anyway, I don't think you're luckier than me."

"No. She loves you."

Viktor looked pleased. "Your story counts more. But please tell nobody that I didn't kill you - it's bad for my reputation."

"I won't." Harry hesitated, then added, "But there's one more person who knows."

Viktor looked curious. "And?"

"Well - I'm alive ... Still."

People looked wondering, seeing the two coming inside, giggling madly.

* * *

The guests from England started showing signs of a tribute to the time difference. The first of them had been a twelve-year-old, her dark eyes now closed. Rahewa sat crammed tightly between Almyra and Lupin, totally relaxed in her sleep.

Harry looked at the picture, smiling. "How's life with a daughter?"

"Great." Almyra's face confirmed it. "And she'll set a new record in transfiguration, no doubt."

"Really?"

Lupin said, "Well, not in size - I figure there you have an all-timer. No - in speed. You know why?"

"Why?"

"She has this picture - all five of us, running around as dogs. The other day, we transfigured, to play with the poodles, and she was the only one left human. Since then, she's working day and night. Harry - within the next year, she'll manage, mark my words."

Harry felt pretty sure Lupin was right. Looking over, he saw another twelve-year-old losing the fight against sleep.

The small groups had gathered to a larger round. They were talking about the future, what with a dark cloud gone, a new challenge between two worlds, and with some students who would finish school within a few weeks.

Fleur said, "Remember the dinner in my parents' house, 'arry? We were talking about your plans. That's been - yes, two years ago. You said you had a task to perform. Now it's done. So what are your plans, 'arry?"

"I don't know yet."

Fleur looked in the round. "Then let's hear the others, what they think you should do."

Nobody spoke.

Fred said, "C'mon - ladies first."

George said, "No - Muggles first."

Paul grinned. "Muggle ladies first."

Into the laughter, Tracy Chipman said, "If I had a saying, he'd join the FBI."

"No," said Francesco Lopez. "Pinkerton - the salary's better."

"That's no argument for him," protested Ginny.

"Then he must work for Hogwarts," said Samantha. "Their salary is the worst."

More laughter, most of all from Dumbledore.

Snape said, "Albus, did you ever think of retiring? That might be your chance."

The Headmaster stopped laughing. "I've been thinking about that quite a lot."

People were looking at him, then at Harry.

Harry said, "No way. And besides, there's a much better candidate."

"Who?" The question came from several people.

Harry looked astonished. "Ron. He's the perfect administrator."

Ron blushed. "What a nonsense. I'm not playing in the same league as Professor Dumbledore or Harry."

Lupin said, "Harry's right. The greatest wizard isn't necessarily the best Headmaster ..." he grinned toward Dumbledore, "... which doesn't mean it's impossible. But the challenges of the next time have a lot to do with administration and coordination."

Ron muttered, "I was planning to go into politics."

Dumbledore said, "Hogwarts *is* politics. Within the next years, the wizarding world will be integrated into the Muggle world, which means they'll keep their individual part of politics only in the essential nucleus. And this is of course the education. The European Magical Education Council will be a centerpiece of wizard politics, and they'll recruit people from the schools."

Ron giggled. "You mean three years Headmaster, and then - up and away toward higher aims?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Why not? The same leader for decades, that may be a bit outdated."

Janine said, "Not necessarily, while for Ron, that sounds about right. And then it's time for the first Hogwarts Headmistress."

Sensing glances toward her, Almyra said, "Not me."

Viktor said, "Then it's between Minerva and Hermione."

Cho said, "Then it's Hermione."

Everybody looked at a deeply blushed face under a curly mop of brown hairs, not hearing a denial of such ambition.

Fleur said, "Now that this is settled, let's come back to Harry's job for the future. Who's going to suggest more?"

Sirius said, "Just for the record - Law Enforcement Squad pays better than Pinkerton, but we're ready to let him pay instead."

Sylvie interrupted the laughter. "And when he's broke, we send him on tour with a Quidditch team."

Ray said, "Portkey programming. Harry's portkeys carry Muggles - imagine the chances."

"No," protested Cho. "First he has to find out how to program a personal portkey."

Another laughter, joined neither by Harry nor by Ray.

Deborah asked, "Cho - what's your choice?"

"For my choice, first I have to explain something."

Everybody was looking at her.

"Groucho's going to expand. We'll found a new branch - Groucho Biochemicals. It's about potions, and Beatrice here ..."

Heads were turning toward a beautiful young woman, right now looking a bit uneasy.

"... is our main scientist and probably the one to run that daughter company. Competition's hard in the potions business ..."

Cho was staring at Hermione who looked at her like stunned.

"... so maybe we have to split these jobs. Anyway - that would make four daughter companies altogether, each of them run by a woman. Somehow, I'd say, now it's time for a chairman."

Laughter, applause. Bill asked, "Harry, what do you think of it?"

"Erm - comes a bit of a sudden, and quite surprising, in a way." Harry had to wait until Jesamine and Sylvie had recovered from a bad fit of laughter. "I could imagine myself as a consultant for unconventional ideas, or dirty tricks, while for day-to-day money business - come to think of it, it might be better to talk Ron out of politics and catch him for that job. If Professor Dumbledore keeps a while longer, he might pass it over directly to Hermione."

Heads were turning again to Hermione.

She was looking at Cho. "That's pie in the sky, this way or the other. Right now, I'm just a potions witch ..."

Cho interrupted her. "With a new and unexpected competition, right?"

Hermione smiled. "Sometimes you see competition while at closer inspection, there's none. What I can see right now is a company which is going to do potions business, and I'm looking for someone who's doing the marketing for a new Wolfsbane potion. It needs a bit honing, but otherwise it's perfect."

Cho looked at her, then at Beatrice, then back at Hermione. "I guess you're right. The more I think of it - yes, that sounds like a very good idea."

People had noticed that some more messages had been exchanged. Into the moment of silence, Marie-Christine said, "Well, 'arry, after so many suggestions, you should come up with your own. Normally you're not that slow."

Another laughter.

"Yes, I'd know something." Harry looked at Cho. "Something nice and simple - at least for a while ... Something with little responsibility, like a vacation in a way. There's a guy, Tony Chee, who offered me a role in a movie - as an *aikido* fighter. I think I'd like to give it a try."

Cho started to smile.

Sylvie said, "I can see it right before my eyes - he's the young caucasian hero, and the slitfaces are the bad guys, except of course that he falls in love with a slitface girl - brother of the gangleader or so ..."

More laughter. Beatrice said, "And the brother is of course mad, only then 'arry saves his life, so his *aikido* honour forces him to support them, but he has to do it secretly against the others, and then 'arry is in danger, and only the brother can save him, and he's torn apart ..."

"Hey, Beatrice - movie's my branch!" Sylvie glared as upset as she could. "You keep to your potions."

The young woman from Haiti looked a bit uncertain, but the laughter and Sylvie's grin put her quickly at ease.

Jesamine said, "It's obvious - that's good for a sequel, and another - although, I'd know a better role for Harry."

Cho said, "Me too - the bad guy with the sister."

Next second, some people were bent over in helpless fits of laughter, most of all Ginny. Jesamine waited impatiently to place her punch line, when Almyra, another sister, stopped laughing, stared at her. "Yes of course!"

"What?"

Almyra grinned. "Jesamine, tell them."

"Well - it's obvious, isn't it? ... A dragon - a real dragon who's following orders of the director."

People looked baffled.

Ron said, "The idea is great, yes - but what makes you think he'd follow orders?"

Into the new laughter, Dumbledore said, "That reminds me - Harry, there was a letter for you. I took the liberty to bring it with me." He extracted a letter which obviously had been carried by an owl.

Harry stared wonderingly at his Headmaster. Dumbledore forgetting something like that, remembering only through some association - that was highly unusual. Then he inspected the letter. It didn't look unusual at all - no, it looked somehow familiar.

He opened the letter, read. Short as it was, it took him a moment to register what he was reading.

Expectant silence around. Cho, her voice evenly, asked, "Fan mail?"

"Huh? ... Er - no ... It's from Gringotts."

"Ah - you've lost another hundred grand, and now they're asking you ..."

"Never," said Katie. "He's got another Goblin Request."

Harry stared at her. "Yes ... How did you know?"

After a moment of stunned perplexion, people where applauding, shouting. Hermione said, "Harry - for God's sake, tell us which one."

Cho said, "Must be a Personal - for spending money so rapidly." The joke didn't catch, in particular since Cho didn't look too joyful.

"No," said Spinbottle. "It's a Classified - his provision for Voldemort's money the Goblins can keep now."

Chrissy looked pleadingly into the round. "Please - can somebody tell me what's a Goblin Request?"

Cho answered. "It's like a free wish, only that the Goblins must be able to fulfill it. His last one was a Privileged - cut them short a million or two - galleons, mind." She turned to Harry. "So it's another Privileged, huh?"

Harry's face showed confusion. "I don't know - the letter doesn't say which."

"What??" Bill's head jerked up. "That's impossible - Harry, may I have a look?" Bill reached for the letter, read, stiffened. Then his arms with the parchment sank down, revealing a face gone pale.

"What is it??" The shout came simultaneously from Cho and Fleur.

"A Request."

"Goddammit, yes - we know that already. WHICH ONE??"

Bill swallowed. "What I - wait wait," his hand came up, stopping a Cho who seemed ready to strangle him. "It's the real one - you might call it unspecified ... You must know, originally a Goblin Request wasn't further categorized. Then - but that's been so long ago, nobody knows when - they categorized them as a help to know how it was meant. These titles - Personal, Classified, Privileged - they're all some kind of restriction. This one," Bill pointed at the letter, "that's a full one - unrestricted, I mean."

Kenzo broke the silence. "Could you try to quantify it, Mr. Weasley?"

"Quantify?" Bill gave a harsh laugh. "There's nothing to quantify. The last one I know something about was a kind of order, to come to terms with the wizards. The result was - they founded Gringotts and made themselves indispensable for us."

A choked sound - maybe from Harry, maybe from Cho, or both.

Dumbledore asked, "Bill - what else do you know?"

"Well - it's unique. I mean, there's always just one. Here," Bill pointed the letter again, "they don't say *a Request*, they say *the Request*. There's just one Request pending at any time, and it's the current holder's obligation to select his successor - maybe even without claiming it. I figure the previous holder was more than happy to have found someone."

Said someone saw his chance, looked around. "Anyone interested in a Goblin Request?"

Nobody dared to look at him. More than one face seemed genuinely scared.

Harry leaned back. "Well, could have been." This joke didn't catch either. Then he muttered, "Oh, shit! ... I just thought now it's time to stretch your legs ..."

Dumbledore looked at Cho, at Harry. "I'm sorry - I didn't know what I did, presenting the letter now. But then - Harry, I don't think it's an urgent matter, sounds more like a lifetime job."

Bill nodded. "Definitely." Then he grinned. "Hey, Harry - I just realized, that settles the issue with the godfather for our next child."

"Huh?"

"You're a Goblin. A Request can only pass over to Goblins."

Harry nodded. Then he held his hands at his temples, forming two flap ears, and snarled, "Gobble-di-gook, gobble-di-gook."

The tension broke in hysterical giggles.

Harry looked at Cho. "C'mon, it's not that bad - could be ..." He stopped, his eyes growing, then a wide grin spread his face. "Yes, of course - that's it. No sweat - not at all." He looked up. "Hey folks - listen, we just ..."

----- The End -----