

Presents from the Past

By

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01 - First Day

The teacher, a Monsieur Thionnay, made the tip of his wand glow, then lit a cigarette. While his suit wasn't looking special, might not have raised an eyebrow out in the streets of Paris, maybe except for its flawless cut, his gestures were those of an artist on stage.

Only the applause didn't come - mostly because the students didn't dare, and partly because they wouldn't dream of it.

Still, at this moment, the teacher had the full attention of the entire class. Which he failed to notice because for him, it had looked as though he had it already for the last twenty minutes, since starting this nice introduction of his course - *Magique Générale*.

He'd been wrong.

While at this moment, even Sandra Chang was watching the small spectacle, until a moment later the teacher stubbed the cigarette - after all, smoking wasn't allowed in the classrooms of the *Beauxbatons Ecole d'Education Magique*.

This name was somewhat new. Until recently, there still had been the addendum '*... of France*'. To the great dismay of the Beauxbatons officials, this suffix had to be dropped. There were quite some other schools in France that had established magical courses, and they had hinted that either Beauxbatons would drop its implicit claim of a monopoly, or it might get prepared by hiring a lawyer.

Sandra Chang couldn't care less about the school's loss in name size. She cared a bit more about her own loss in that matter, although not much, even if it was more than a loss in size - it was a change.

For good reason.

Her true name, as recorded in the birth register of Santa Monica, California, USA, was Sandra Catherine Potter. Over the ten years of her lifetime, she had developed a kind of respect toward this name, because each time she was called that way it meant serious business, if not trouble.

For more mundane matters, which meant most of the time, she was called by some abbreviations - "Sandy" by her father and by most other people, "Cass" by her mother, and "Little Dragon" by anybody who wanted to express affection as much as a bit of teasing.

And - not to forget - who felt privileged enough to address her that way.

Without this important prerequisite, any such attempt had to be rated as a very bad idea. Invariably, it would result in a quick and unpleasant clarification of the misunderstanding between Sandra's own view of things and that of the other person. The efforts in such a case were equally shared among the two people involved - Sandra took care of the quickness, and the other person couldn't help but providing the unpleasant feeling.

However, the list of nicknames was much longer. Héloïse for example, Sandra's closest friend, sitting next chair and listening to Monsieur Thionnay with more attention, sometimes

called her "Sandrine" - a creation formed from *Sandra* and *Dragonine*, which meant something like Little Dragon in French. Most often, however, Héloïse used "Dra" because it gave a perfect example of their relationship - with a public outside, according to which this was a mutilation of *Sandra*, and a private inside where this of course was a mutilation of *Dragon*.

That was to say, if Héloïse used a spoken word at all to gain her friend's attention. The most common technique used by his half-quarter Veela was a mind call, recognized instantly by Sandra within a certain range. And when Héloïse felt in the mood for a little joke, she sent a tiny dash of her Veela power - quickly followed by a smile and the first spoken words, just to make sure Sandra was listening, rather than taking offence and returning this questionable favour with something out of her own repertoire.

Monsieur Thionnay's little presentation had caught Sandra's full attention because she realized - sometimes, a wand really was the better choice. Yes, of course she had a wand, a very nice piece of cedar wood, twelve inches, except that most of the time she didn't bother, just using her fingertips instead.

Which, here in Beauxbatons, wasn't suitable, as her father Harry had told her time and again. Sandra only could hope she wouldn't forget. Not that she had any trouble with her memory - no, sir or madam, not the least. It was just a tiny problem with her patience.

Although - the wand was easily the most remarkable piece in the magical community. Its magical core was a phoenix feather, so far outstanding while not unique. The feather once belonged to Fawkes, a phoenix that previously had contributed only two feathers, both of them integrated in her father's twin-coloured sibling wand, and none thereafter. Still, Sandra felt no doubt that Fawkes would provide a fourth and probably last feather - once her brother Gabriel was due for his first wand.

No, what made her own wand unique was something at the outside. It looked like a handle, created with a few hairs that originated from the mane of a light-coloured centaur. Sandra knew him well, his name was Firenze, and this centaur was something like an old friend of her parents.

The handle provided three effects, each of them quite handy.

The centaur hair, wound tightly round the wood across a span of four inches, offered a nice touch, no matter whether Sandra's fingers were dry or sweaty. There was nothing wrong with touching cedar wood, contrary to the fact that her mother Cho, for reasons unknown to Sandra, had expressed some sharp remarks about this choice when Sandra and her father had returned from that weird wand shop in London. Actually, this short conversation had been the trigger for the enhancement with the centaur hair. Since then, the wand felt totally natural in Sandra's hands, except that any attempt to find out more about her mother's aversion against cedar wood had failed.

As well as any attempt to squeeze her father, quite unprecedented, in a way.

At any rate, the second effect was that nobody could take the wand away from Sandra. Trying to cast *Expelliarmus* on her wand had a nasty backfiring on the caster while her own wand would remain calm and unmoving.

Third and last, nobody but Sandra herself could use that wand. In other hands, it was just a useless piece of wood, while touching the handle would quickly create blisters like from a burning.

Nobody - well, that wasn't quite correct. There were two exceptions from the rule. One was Aram'chee, the High Priestess, and also Sandra's most important teacher - which didn't mean Aram'chee would be found on any of the schools Sandra had joined so far, ha ha. About once a week, Sandra visited her for something between two and four hours, and these visits had more of a meeting because the two of them would pick a nice place, according to the season, for sitting and talking. It could be somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, where Firenze lived, or a nice beach under palms somewhere in the Far East, or an ordinary ice-cream parlour - preferably in Italy, there you'd find the best ice-cream.

And the other exception, as Sandra had found out, was her brother Gabriel. When she showed him her handle-enhanced wand, she said, "Look here - but don't touch it, for other people it's burning."

"Really?" Her brother smiled this disarming smile toward her, took the wand and drew a circle around Sandra's face, creating something like a smoke ring. The smoke quickly disappeared, but while it faded, Sandra could hear a faint sound - somewhere in the middle between a whinnying horse and Christmas bells. Then Gabriel returned the wand to her and said, "It didn't burn, but at least there was smoke, wasn't it?"

It gave her another of these maddening examples - according to all Sandra knew, had heard from her father, her magical power was unrivaled around the globe. Yes, Aram'chee was more powerful, only that went with her role as the High Priestess. While otherwise ...

This was the official version - within the family, that was, otherwise kept as a secret. Well - as good as possible, what with Sandra's occasional outbursts in more public places. But when watching her brother's doing, she had her doubts. Serious doubts.

Of course, she had asked him how he'd done this smoke ring, wanted to do it by herself. "Doesn't work with you, Cassie," he'd said, "because in your hands it doesn't burn, right?"

Sandra could have sworn he was teasing her. Only - try as she might, scanning his mind with her own, she couldn't detect the slightest trace of joking. Just the seriousness of a seven-year-old. Or, more exactly, seven and a half. Still ...

Gabriel could tease her. Sometimes, with nobody else around, he called her "Little Priestess", with a deep grin in his face, despite the fact that she was bigger than him.

And once, after a scene in which she had shown a severe lack of discipline, Gabriel had called her "Low Priestess". Burning in rage, mostly because he was totally right with his description at that moment, Sandra sent him a mind blow that would have driven her father to his limits in blocking.

Gabriel didn't even twist. Only his face ... So deeply hurt, the short moment before he turned to walk away, Sandra had felt like crying in misery and shame. She made two quick steps, reached him and grabbed his shoulder. "Please, Gabby ..."

Her hand jerked off by itself - the touch had been like a sting, however fading at the same instant. Her brother stopped, turned, still avoiding her eyes.

Tentatively, she touched him again. Not feeling resistance of any kind, mental or otherwise, she hugged him. "I'm sorry, Gabe, I didn't mean it ... You're right, I'm what you said, a ..."

"No!" In a calmer tone of reproach toward himself, Gabriel added, "I shouldn't have said that."

Sandra hadn't heard it again, probably never would. If they were angry at each other, which happened rarely enough, she was careful to keep her remarks within certain boundaries, not to mention her mental attacks.

Of course, she had a weapon Gabriel couldn't parry. But, as she had learned soon, such ultimate measures had to be used with care. This weapon was Sandra's friend - when Héloïse used her Veela power toward Gabriel, her brother turned to a helpless bundle of giggling, flushed and breathless - and very embarrassed afterwards. Every now and then, Sandra couldn't resist the temptation to use this weapon in a little blackmailing.

Which was kind of dancing on a high wire. Not only for Gabriel's reaction, whose most effective weapon toward her was polite coolness, but also because Héloïse was even more careful. Treating Gabriel that way for her own reasons was okay, maybe because Gabriel granted Héloïse the natural right of being a half-quarter Veela and behaving as such. Only when it seemed as if Héloïse was doing that for Sandra's purpose, she would risk her own benefit - and Gabriel hardly ever guessed wrong about her motives.

Because Héloïse played a Goblin harp, and Gabriel played several other instruments - harmonica, bamboo flute since recently, also keyboard instruments fitting in size to his limited reach - and they loved playing together. After Héloïse had carried out an order from Sandra, it could happen that she would hear a "No" once or twice from her partner, before Gabriel grudgingly agreed to the next session. At this occasion, the first minutes would be spent on a competition of instruments before the chords again matched in harmony. Gabriel himself loved this music too much to stay off longer.

Nonetheless, Héloïse then had to ask. Once, after earning the second "No", first she blamed Sandra for this stupid favour and then announced she wouldn't ask again, Gabriel himself had to ask - after all, Veela had their pride, hadn't they?

Except that two days later Harry came into this magnificent old house in the Goblin quarter of Paris, the family residence of the Veela branch in the Weasley tribe, and begged Héloïse to ask again.

"Why should I?"

"Because he's sitting in the garden, playing his flute all the time, and that ... He's gaining expertise quickly, yes, but it's the saddest music I ever heard. Cho is nearly desperate, she can't listen more than ten minutes without starting to cry."

"Really?" Héloïse seemed impressed, nevertheless still too proud. "But I won't ask him personally."

Harry had suppressed a sigh, as well as any remark. The rescue came from Michel, Héloïse's brother, who was one and a half years older than Gabriel. "I'll ask him," he said and, toward his sister, "for you - okay?"

Héloïse didn't respond. However, when Michel turned toward Harry, obviously to be summoned into the Potter house, she didn't protest either. And when Gabriel arrived, when he and Héloïse were looking at each other, none of them ready to start the first tune, Michel came along with something - until then - considered as a toy, and asked, "Can we try together?"

The other two musicians looked at him and his *instrument* - three Goblin war drums in different sizes, a gift from Wynor the Whistler to Michel's fourth birthday. Still reluctant, they watched how Michel took a single drumstick, shaped like a bone with two thicker ends, and started a slow-pounding rhythm. Too surprised to hold their reluctance any longer, they joined him, tentatively first, more enthusiastically after a few minutes.

Since then, they were playing together more often. Not every session included Michel - on the other side, once Héloïse had caught Gabriel and Michel playing flute and drums without a harp. She hadn't complained, she only had informed Sandra that her friend might fight these rows with her brother alone.

Except, of course, for very, very good reasons. After all, girls had to stay together, hadn't they, and friendship wasn't supposed to be outperformed by music.

Sandra stopped paying serious attention to Monsieur Thionnay. Instead, she reconsidered the courses so far on this first day in her new school. Joining Héloïse in class - as soon as possible - that never had been a question. Aram'chee wasn't happy about Sandra appearing in a public magic school, and her mother Cho, although for totally different reasons, didn't appreciate Beauxbatons too much. Her father, however, had only asked whether Sandra could muster the discipline, and she had promised.

And so the pseudonym Sandra Chang was created, because the name Potter seemed a bit too known in France, and what's more, it would carry an unwelcome memory in Beauxbatons where Potter senior killed a student. During a ball. For good reasons. Still, there was no need refreshing old stories.

The first course had been French, except that the time was over, consumed by organizational issues, before they could come to the real topic. Sandra had learned French in a two-weeks crash course from two fairies, after Cho had accepted the vote for Beauxbatons with a lot of muttering, part of it even in Chinese, stopping only after Harry had howled in laughter. Not that he understood a single word, only the meaning.

The second course was *Histoire*. Sandra, fully prepared to keep a low profile in magical faculties, failed miserably to keep her mouth shut when the teacher, a Monsieur Fresnel, started to talk nonsense about the Assyrians and their relationships with other peoples of that time. Nobody else would have noticed, particularly so because it wasn't recorded any different in the books - only Sandra knew better. From stories told by Aram'chee.

Registering that, Sandra stopped quickly. Still, it was her first public appearance, a very unlucky one, resulting in unfriendly glances from the classmates and thoughtful glances from

the teacher. At least, he wasn't mad at her - maybe because her own version was entirely free of contradictions. It only missed scientific proof.

And now they were sitting in *Magique Générale* which - in British schools - might have been some conglomerate of Charms, Transfiguration, and Defence against the Dark Arts, although the latter was considered an obsolete art. Sandra wondered whether she should go as far as failing once or twice with these primitive spells, while at the same time feeling profoundly challenged by the magical pattern that rested over the entire school, preventing apparition as well as summoning and pursuing. For her, it didn't feel as if it couldn't be deciphered, this complicated pattern. Maybe she should ask Aram'chee for help, although it wasn't unlikely that the High Priestess might be extremely hesitant in that matter, might even ask her father first before ...

"... Chang? ... Mademoiselle Chang?"

Sandra came up with a twist. "Yes, Monsieur le Professeur?" For a short moment, she had forgotten that this was her name here. What had looked so simple at first thought, joining the school with Héloïse, had its tricky ...

"Would you please have the generosity to repeat what I just said?"

The teacher was looking at her with confident calmness, no doubt awaiting the flush-faced confession that she couldn't.

Quickly, Sandra scanned the tiny part of her mind that had been devoted to his droning. "Er, yes, Monsieur le Professeur ... You said, *If you happen to use your wands against each other in the halls and corridors of this school, messieurs 'dames, you will be sorry. I promise you.*"

It was correct of course, unfortunately so to the last syllable and intonation. Some snorting in the class, while Monsieur Thionnay was glaring at her. "And what does that mean, young lady?"

"Isn't that obvious, Monsieur le Professeur? We're supposed to use our wands only in classes, and only if you feel like it."

She should have saved the last part; Sandra knew the moment she had finished. True, she only had promised to keep a low profile in magical expertise, not in politeness ... Especially not toward teachers apparently prejudiced against foreigners, or Chinese, or whatever. Still, it hadn't been an improvement, so much for sure.

Right she was. "Mademoiselle Chang, your impertinence is entirely inappropriate and out of place here in my class. That's why right now, I *do not* feel like it ... Please show me your wand."

With a sick feeling in her stomach - knowing exactly what would happen - Sandra held her wand up. "Monsieur, please ..."

"Tais-toi!" The teacher raised his own wand. "*Expelliarmus!*"

As expected - if only by herself - Sandra's own wand remained calm while, at the same time, Monsieur Thionnay's wand twisted up, leaving fingers too numb to hold, and fell to the floor.

"Monsieur, pardon, Monsieur le Professeur, but my wand has a built-in resistance against expelling ... Er, that's what I was trying to explain a moment ago."

"It has what??" The teacher looked incredulous, in spite of his obvious failure. "How can this be?"

"Er - I don't know, Monsieur le Professeur."

Which was a flat-out lie. Thionnay knew it - Sandra hadn't bothered to sound convincingly, quite the opposite.

"Where does this wand come from?"

"From London."

The teacher's head snapped up, probably because Sandra's answer was lacking this ridiculously long title, and also because her answer could easily be rated as very unspecific. Only that Thionnay himself hadn't addressed her as *Mademoiselle* either - and that she had answered his question as literal as possible.

And besides - was there any other wand maker in London, aside from this weird Mr. Ollivander? Sandra didn't know.

Monsieur Thionnay seemed to know. Or he had lost his interest in fighting a lost battle. After some muttering, he continued in his lesson.

Only his glances left no doubt - this had been hardly more than a little skirmish, while the war had only just begun.

* * *

Cho Chang-Potter stood at the window of her family room in this cute little castle that, for the last two years, served as the Potter residence, and watched the rain pouring down.

Rain ... Rain, day in, day out. It was depressing.

And it wasn't the weather alone. The same went for this rathole here, overlooking a small bay that opened to the Irish Sea. Opening eastward, that was, because this here was Ireland, and each member of the Potter family was a registered citizen of this country so full of poets and musicians.

Jerks, all of them, cultivating incompetence as a matter of style. The green island - what a bad joke, why hadn't she noticed from the beginning where all this green came from? Rain, what else.

It was a laugh, except Cho couldn't. She felt as Irish as Fleur. Only less Veela.

She was a child of the city, always had been. And now - Sórd, which was Irish for Swords, the next town three miles to the south. Some town ... And twenty miles further southward was Dublin, and in one of its nicer streets, with lots of trees and a small park around, you could find the world headquarters of *Groucho Industries*.

So she could use the car, if she felt like it. Which she hardly ever did, except for when shopping by herself. Although - shopping in Dublin, wasn't that a joke in itself?

Otherwise, Cho used the portkeys installed by Harry. When other people were watching her with them, they smiled admiringly, only that Cho herself couldn't help thinking they were rolling over inwardly. Because she still couldn't apparate ... Yes, maybe it was shameful, only this would need training time she hadn't.

Because she, the CEO of Groucho, had an enterprise to run. And in the time left, she had a husband and two children to take care of. Or the other way around.

These two children were the reason why the Groucho headquarters now was found in Ireland, and the Potter gang too. Even in a double sense.

More than once in the past, after Gabriel was born, Cho had run into conflicts between her children and Groucho. Less often, still more than once, Harry had told her that she would be able to manage family and business - provided she kept herself to her nominal position, rather than dealing with issues from the daughter companies, only because all of them resided in the same complex of buildings, inviting everybody and his uncle to reach Cho personally in her office.

She used to agree, with a guilty smile. They both knew - everybody, maybe except for his uncle, knew that she welcomed to be *in touch*, thereby jeopardizing the attempts of Chrissy, her assistant, to support the interests of her family.

Then several things came together. The United States encountered one of the deepest shocks in their history, when terrorists hijacked passenger jets to use them as living bombs toward famous buildings, crashing them to debris spattered with the flesh and blood of several thousands of casualties. The effect was a change in the behaviours and beliefs that went beyond anything tolerable - what the US citizens considered as patriotism was - in the eyes of her house-husband Harry - prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and megalomania.

Even Laila, ex-sergeant of the Israeli army and now assistant of Ramon, the *Groucho Biochemicals* CEO, supported his point of view. Maybe not entirely, only that Laila full-heartedly agreed to Harry's second concern - this puritanical country wasn't suited to raise children above the age of six, eight at the most.

And when this patriotic culture wave hit the schools, among them Cass' school, Harry had started to put pressure on Cho.

Then, one day, he came with a project plan. Business and tax regulations in Ireland were the best within the European Community, almost as enterprise-friendly as here in California. The time zone was the same as in France, so their children, both of them having mastered apparition with the mother's milk - so-to-speak, ha ha - would be able to join their closest friends, Héloïse for Sandy and Michel for Gabriel. And she, Cho, would deal with global matters only - plus her own, voluntary involvements in local matters, supported by portkeys from him.

Cho studied the plan, said, "Let me think it over."

"Of course," came Harry's answer. "Take your time - Gabriel's due in school three months from now."

Well, except for the noise, that had been that. Although the noise turned out considerable. For example the piercing shouts of hooray from her own children, treacherous pack that, when Harry, three weeks later, told them about the planning. For example her own, toward Harry, later the same day.

Finally accepting the inevitable, Cho talked with her assistant. "Chrissy, I can offer you two options. The first is a chair here in Santa Monica, as the CEO of any daughter company of your ..."

"No thanks."

"Well, erm, the other ... The good news is, you'll continue as my assistant. The bad news - it'll be in Ireland."

Chrissy Vanzandt, a Muggle woman past her forties with a witch daughter, thought for ten seconds, then nodded. "Okay."

"And your family?" With desperation, Cho registered that not even this woman would share her mixed feelings.

"Well, with Chuck ... you know how it is, and that'll be the final punch ..."

Chuck was Chrissy's husband, and this marriage had been at the verge of breaking for a while, for reasons all too familiar - Chrissy more successful, earning more money, spending too much time in the office, and so on, and so on.

"... While with Beverly - erm, I'm sure I know what she'll say."

Like Cho herself, among some other people. Beverly, a girl of seventeen, would melt into Ireland like sugar into tea - she was shy, having trouble with Californian style in school, she loved poetry, music ... And maybe something else, because each time this girl met her husband, she lost speech in favour of a flushed face. Beverly had volunteered as babysitter for Gabriel, at the very few occasions when this job was offered, which had caused Cho to issue a remark about killing two birds with the same stone. But only once - Harry hadn't taken well to that, his reply giving proof that Cho might find reason to regret such a comment, would it be given again.

Truth to be told - this behaviour, called the Beverly syndrome - if only by Cho and Chrissy - was different from previous cases. Beverly wasn't Ginny, whose love for her adopted stepbrother was no longer prominent while no doubt still present somewhere inside. She wasn't Rahewa either, who wouldn't need more than a phony call to kill or be killed for her godfather. And she wasn't Gabrielle, Fleur's sister, for whom Harry was a simple hero, just good for about every impossible task you could imagine. Beverly was something else - maybe a mix of all the others.

And now they lived here, in this castle nobody but Cho herself would have called a rathole. Because it had been reconstructed, renovated, refurnished through and through - the walls, the

gates, the towers, and of course every building. Within days, it had stopped being a place for breeding a flu, and the view from this window was grandiose, even in this grisly weather.

To nobody's surprise, Cho had found a way to enhance the limited sphere of influence that was offered by a purely administrative corporate structure like a world headquarters. When the joined efforts of Harry and Ray Purcell, Groucho's chief scientist for portkeys and related matters, had brought some promising results, Cho instantly created a new daughter company - *Groucho Transport and Security*, short GTS. And she created it right next door from the headquarters.

This branch manufactured three different items, although in many variations. The surname *Security* referred to protective spheres that prevented apparition and similar techniques - the only means to guard vaults, offices, or laboratories against intrusions from skilled wizards.

Outside Goblin territory, that was. Goblins had their own ways to keep out unwelcome people.

Then there were the *lifts* - a kind of magazine portkey. A lift offered a certain list of destinations, and you had to press one of several buttons or enter a number into a keypad to select and activate the destination of choice. The term *lift* was used because ordinary lifts in high-rise buildings were the first market they had started to conquer.

Running a high-price policy, of course. Conventional lifts were considerably cheaper, only that, for a global player in the business, it quickly had become a matter of style and reputation to use Groucho lifts.

The little old *Groucho Triple-P* - Personal Portkey Programming - had been incorporated into the new daughter company. After all - without Ray Purcell, who had moved from California to Ireland with great delight, this branch was literally empty.

But the personal portkeys were just an add-on. The true item number three was the newest, the hottest, and the most challenging development. Technically too, though mostly in terms of marketing conquest and legal issues. Basically, it was no more than developing the idea of the magazine portkey a bit further - just one step, from resident to moveable.

And the result was a device that, to the outside, looked very much like a phony - a display, a keypad, some buttons more. Except each key combination represented an apparition target, and the *Go* button had to be interpreted literally.

The final touch, just a matter of manufacturing, had been the integration of phony and magazine portkey into one small device. It was called porty.

They had only just begun. This device challenged so many industries - from bad experience in the past, when the phonies hit the market of ordinary mobile phones, they knew what to expect.

Right in the middle of the birth process for Cho's newest daughter, Harry had placed his counter attack. A brilliant one, as Cho had to admit, which didn't mean she hadn't given him his decent share of hell for interfering with her business. Especially because he had made herself doing it - only the Groucho CEO could assign people to such ranks in the enterprise.

It had started with Ray Purcell's unmistakable statement that he was an engineer, not a businessman, period. In the search for someone else, Harry had suggested a triumvirate - Ray for the scientific and manufacturing part, good old Spinbottle for the legal part, which would remain the most critical for years to come, yes ... and someone else for the tactical part.

Rahewa, his goddaughter.

The head of GTS would have to fight toe and nail for quite some time, no question about that. Young as she was, Rahewa met the qualification, Cho would be the first to admit. Or maybe the second, whatever. So she had agreed. And Rahewa had agreed, since she and her husband Clemens, another potions genius in the Groucho services, could pick their choice of residence between Ireland and England.

It had taken the triumvirate less than a week to realize that they needed a clear ranking. Not a pecking order, agreed, but ... And the outcome of this vote had been clear from the beginning - Rahewa as the new CEO, with Ray and Spinbottle as her two deputies.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise to Cho. When herself, Jesamine, and Sylvie founded *Groucho*, they had encountered a decision deadlock more than once, before tricky Potter had found a way to pass the majority over to Cho, even with the full approval of the other two. Only that the new ranking had a side-effect that shouldn't have been surprising Cho either ...

Harry had known what would happen. He didn't hide his broad grin when Cho returned home to report what his brat - Almyra's brat, as he corrected her - had said. "Cho, I can offer you two options ... You can fire me, but if not, you get lost - now."

To be honest, Rahewa didn't mind taking Cho's advice. Only that Cho had to wait until Rahewa came asking, for example by inviting her to a decision meeting. Harry's comment had been good to shut her up. "I wonder where she's got that from. It's so unprecedented in the Groucho history - isn't it?"

No, of course not. Rahewa treated Cho with exactly the same medicine she had used against Harry, different only in minor aspects like the situation, and the scope of enemies they were facing.

So Cho had left the office earlier today. She had sworn to herself - she would be at home when Cass returned from her first day in Beauxbatons. Well, except that her daughter's first jump would end in the Weasley house in Paris, naturally so, and it was an open question when they'd return home. They, that was the rest of her family, because Gabriel would jump the same path, and no-longer-so-young Potter, first name Harry, probably was waiting in that house - fully unaware that his loving wife awaited them at home.

Cho felt like an idiot. Pondering the idea to use the portkey to that house and to join the party, she declined it in a reflex - still more feeling like an idiot.

In a traditional Chinese household, she would have gathered her servants to give them hell. After all, what was a servant good for if not to blame him whenever fate struck ... Only, such an approach toward Dobby and Winky, the house elf couple that happily had followed to Ireland, was unacceptable even in such a black mood.

There was just one idea similarly bad - jumping back into the office. Why? Because Chrissy would see her, and would know.

Or - still worse - Rahewa.

02 - School's Out

Fleur Weasley, quarter Veela and mother of three children in which this nature was halved again, due to their father being an ordinary human, sat in her kitchen, waiting. She did so together with her brother-in-law Harry. The title wasn't quite correct, Harry was only a kind of adopted step-brother of her husband Bill, but Fleur wouldn't bother with such meaningless differences. Especially not toward Harry.

Basically, they were waiting for their children to return from school. The older ones, the girls, would return from Beauxbatons, where Cho herself had been a student. The boys, in contrast, would return from the *Ecole Publique d'Amitié* - the Public School of Friendship.

The attribute *public* was a kind of joke. True, this school stood open to everybody, except that it was run by Goblins and designed for two strings of pupils, Goblins and humans. The idea was to let them meet during breaks, while eating, and - as much as possible - in classes. Of course, the language in these courses could only be French because there was rarely a human speaking Goblin, and certainly not at that age.

Actually, with one notable exception, baptized as Gabriel Uriah Potter. That boy, closest friend of Fleur's son Michel, was fluent in Goblin, better than his own father. Which might be related to the fact that Gabriel's godfather was Urion the Unique, leaving it to everybody's guess whether the boy's second name could be counted as the human equivalent of this Goblin name. At any rate, Gabriel had started teaching Michel that language, reporting a progress which, for everybody except the two boys, was no less than astonishing.

Socializing with Goblins that close seemed a habit with a limited number of fans. As a result, this school appeared truly elitarian - needless to say, the Goblins hired only the best teachers, won them easily with fantastic salaries, and saw no reason to cancel a course only because there were just three pupils in a year.

As with the girls, the boys joined the same class although Gabriel was one and a half year younger than Michel. The Potter children had skipped a year, balancing with the help of various people. If they were superior, then only regarding their magical potential which for Fleur, being used to special powers all through her life, gave no reason feeling awe.

A bit more reason for awesome feelings could be watched in front of her - Harry, with Fleur's youngest daughter in his arms.

Harry coming over and grabbing the next-best child from her, so-to-speak - so far, there was nothing unusual. He had done so with Michel, until Gabriel appeared, however not stopping afterwards since Harry could manage even with two children in his arms. And in these arms, they kept quiet come heat or hay fever.

The boys, that was. While her daughter ...

Ismène was the name of that angel. Two years old, capricious as a stage diva, and merciless as any Veela. She treated Harry like dirt, and with great pleasure. Twisting like an eel, stomping on him, even beating him wherever her small fists would hit ... Well, they never hit parts as sensitive as Harry's nose or his eyes, because Harry was too quick with his movements - only that her failing toward these targets again and again would still increase Ismène's frenzy.

So, to the unknowing spectator, it looked as if for Ismène, Harry's lap was the worst place she could imagine. Except, of course, that Fleur's daughter couldn't reach this place fast enough, a moment after Harry had entered the room.

This beating, the bad treatment altogether - Ismène didn't behave that way toward anyone else. Not toward her mother, not toward her older siblings or the Potter children ... It looked as though she saved up all her temper until Harry was back in town. Fleur suspected an unspoken agreement between the two, had even asked in that direction once - well, she could have saved her breath, actually had known in advance.

Once, Ismène had tried her style toward Cho. "I'm not Harry," Cho had said, "either you stop playing devil, or I'm going to play devil myself."

Ismène had stopped.

Now Fleur watched as Harry managed to take a gulp from his Orangina, just between a tender stroke and a harder blow, because her daughter had seen a chance where none had been. With a voice casual and lightly, Fleur asked, "Harry, do you mind a private question?"

He glanced at her, put his lips at the head of this little devil, and hummed something. An instant later, Ismène relaxed, resting her cheek at Harry's left shoulder, nuzzling his skin closest to her mouth. Then he said, "The main problem is - she's at her time limit."

As much as Fleur was used to this habit of Harry - skipping all the obvious and thus unnecessary remarks in a conversation - she still twisted. "Dammit - you really deserve all this beating, did you know that? It's very impolite to prevent a woman from saying what's on her mind, especially after she asked so nicely."

Harry smiled. "Allright then, for the slow of mind ... No."

Fleur sighed. "You've spoiled it - now it feels ridiculous to say it, and I had prepared myself so carefully ..."

"Like - say, what about you and Cho? Wouldn't you like to come on a par with us, regarding the number of children? Sure - Ron and Janine are beyond reach, now that they've started producing them in pairs, but ..."

Fleur felt pleased. "Exactly, Harry - not quite my choice of words, still no complaint."

"And I would have said, yes we would, basically speaking, only there are two problems, a minor one and a major one. Then you'd have ..."

"May I take my part by myself, if you please?" Fleur's faked hissing would have passed most exams - of course with Cho out of competition. "So I'd have said, what's the minor problem?"

Harry nodded, his faked glance of angelic patience scoring equally well, in particular since Fleur wouldn't know of any competition, maybe except for the two boys still in school. "And I then - well, the minor problem is that Cho doesn't warm up too much for another pregnancy - it's not the most agreeable state, it takes her out of the play too long ..."

Fleur couldn't resist. "Which play?"

"The business, what else?" Harry looked innocent. "This problem is minor because - well, first we don't feel a serious urge to confront this world with another magic monster, and then - we never recoiled from the idea of adopting a child, as you can imagine."

Yes, Fleur could. Harry, whose parents were killed by Voldemort when he was one year old, had been raised by relatives. At the age of sixteen, Harry was adopted by the Weasley family - full-scope, to be correct, because the emotional adoption had taken place five years earlier. Harry himself had failed to adopt Rahewa only because he'd been too young. As a replacement, he had taken the job of her godfather.

At this moment, Fleur realized that Harry was waiting for her next sentence, hurried to say, "Er - yes, and I then, so what's the major problem?"

"Right - that's where we've been a moment ago, so we can change to present tense ..."

Looking concerned, Harry pointed at Ismène, indicating that Fleur wouldn't hit him with her own daughter at his shoulder, would she?

"... well, the major problem is that any additional child would rob some essential quota of time - from Sandy, from Gabe, or from Groucho, in whatever sequence and priority. And for an adopted child, the effect might be even worse." Harry smiled lightly, which told Fleur better than anything else that he was dead serious. Then he added, "And she's right, Fleur - as simple as that."

Fleur knew - Harry was not going to challenge Cho's business. He had done that once, in the past, for totally different reasons, with disastrous effects. Since then, he knew better. The movement from California to Ireland had been a stress test, however it had worked. Just barely.

Fleur also knew that - despite her remark about a *private* question - this information wasn't really confidential. She hadn't known about Cho discarding another pregnancy so completely, although she felt little surprise. This fact, like the others, could be passed further - provided the other conversation partner met the implicit qualifications.

First - he, or she, wouldn't find the bad sense to pity Harry, or Cho. Second - this person wouldn't play judge against Cho and her motives, which would be still worse, so the second should be first. Third and last - this conversation partner would treat the information like Fleur herself.

That left still some people, while not Ma Weasley, her mother-in-law and Harry's adopted step-mother. Molly Weasley wasn't the person to keep her mouth shut - certainly toward Cho, while not toward Harry. Not her, mother of seven children, who had taken measures to adopt Harry the day after her second-oldest son Charlie died in the Battle of Hogwarts.

"... come along any time, and ..."

"Huh?" Fleur twisted up, feeling guilty because she just had committed the first crime - pitying Harry, and of course he'd sensed it.

"I was trying to say, there's no shortage of children." Harry's broad grin confirmed her embarrassing suspicion, and his forgiving too. "If it's not this little power bundle here, I can come to Janine any time."

Which he did anyway. Janine was the mother in the second branch of the Weasley tribe, counting only those found in Paris. Ron and Janine, the child factory, subject to many jokes, and for several reasons.

The names, for example. They claimed to select the names in perfect balance between English and French, so everybody - the children themselves in first place - could pick his choice in preference. Other people, however, with Rahewa as an experienced dog breeder on top, said they'd just run the alphabet, as well as a time table.

Alan, or Alain, was the oldest, eight years and therefore one class below Michel and Gabriel. Two years later, Bernhard had arrived, or Bernard for the French. Two years later, like a damn clockwork, Janine had been pregnant again. When everybody was convinced this would be a Charles, equal writing in both languages, Janine had given birth to twins - girls, Carole and Diane, once and forever killing the myth Ron could do only boys.

It was a major surprise for everyone - with one exception of course. Janine had asked Harry to let his snake Nagini determine the sex as soon as possible, and after she had mastered her own surprise, she made him promise to keep the secret till the end.

That was four years ago. Two years later, everybody said yes, this is a skip, twins count for two, don't they? And this year, Ron and Janine were truly fed up from hearing the question time and again whether they'd lost interest.

For Bernard, today was the first day in school, which meant Janine would find more time for the girl twins, Weasleys down to the bone, who could drive a saint nuts. So Janine had welcomed Harry's help whenever it was offered, wouldn't object it in the future.

Fleur's head came up again - a low chuckling was rising in Harry. For an instant, she suspected her daughter, halfway asleep, sending the childish version of Veela power toward him, then Harry registered her movement and said, "Remember the Deirdre disaster?"

"Like yesterday."

Fleur grinned at the memory of this particular scene. Calling it disaster was maybe a bit strong, but then, Almyra might not agree, not at all, he he.

Because Almyra was the mother of said Deirdre, now at the age of three, and also of Donovan who was three years older. About two years ago, after the renovation of the Potter castle, Harry and Cho invited all their friends. When the party had settled a bit, all people sitting together, chatting lightly, the discussion turned to the issue of Ireland, of all places, as the location for the Potter residence.

Responding to a teasing remark from her friend Almyra, Cho snarled, "Didn't Harry tell you why?"

"No."

"Yeah, of course not, so it's me to break the news to you. Remember that he once lost a daughter to you and that werewolf of yours, just because he was too young?"

That werewolf of hers was Remus, Almyra's husband.

"Well, and now he's old enough, and it just so happens you have a daughter with such a nice Irish name - to make a long story short, Al, he's going to come and claim it from you."

A gasp in the round. The laughter, ready to rise, died in anyone's mouth at the sight of a chalk-white Almyra and her horrified glance toward the scene in front of her - Harry with a sleeping Deirdre in his arms.

Nobody remembered seeing him move. But next instant, Harry reached his sister-in-spirit, deposited the girl in her lap, whispered something into her ears, probably also sending a calming mind wave, because Almyra recovered immediately - to watch how Harry, this time at a traceable speed, walked over to Cho, to stand in front of her, visibly trembling.

"Please ... I'm ... don't ..." Nobody could see much of Cho's face at that moment, with Harry obscuring most of it, however it seemed a duplicate of Almyra's expression a moment ago.

Calming down, Harry murmured something like, "Can't believe it," shaking his head, and returned to his seat. A few seconds later, Cho came over to Almyra, to whisper something in her ear before trying to leave the room.

Remus saved the scene. Giving a nice example of good memory and quick movement, he caught Cho. "Okay, young lady ... Say, 'I won't do it again!'"

It took Cho a second or two to realize what was going on. "I won't do it again."

"I feel deep regret and - er, yes, bitter shame."

Still very subdued, Cho repeated, "I feel deep regret and bitter shame."

Hugging her, Remus looked around. "Okay, folks, in case you didn't notice - that's been the Chinese pardon ritual, the short version." When the laughter didn't come yet, Remus guided Cho to Harry and asked him whether Harry would like to claim a little Chinese devil instead.

And Harry said yes, he would.

It had been Ron's job to muster the courage of dubbing this scene the *Deirdre disaster*. He did so the same evening, taking the opportunity as Cho still felt too embarrassed for protesting much. While nobody used this name in public, which meant in some public including Cho, since then Ron could stop bad remarks from her side quickly by shaking his head and murmuring, "Dee dee dee ...", always good to raise an alarmed look in Cho's face.

Harry made a movement, looked at Fleur. Next moment, she could hear noises downstairs. These had to be their sons - while Gabriel could apparate as well as summon Michel, while there was of course a direct portkey link which accepted only Weasleys and Potters, the boys liked walking the streets, particularly so because then they could pass the Goblin twin guard down the street, exchanging a few remarks.

The noise grew louder, then the door at the staircase was rattling, and a second later the two boys came storming into the kitchen. And as expected, after the welcomes, Michel was sitting next to Harry, equally close to Ismène, while Gabriel had taken a seat at Fleur's side.

Asked about the news, the boys said there weren't much, apparently more interested in their café au lait and the sweet bread Fleur had prepared. When the first pieces were wolfed down, however, it became obvious there was indeed something new. It was Gabriel who started. "Dad?"

"Yes, my boy?"

"Today we had music."

Listening to the kid, one could think his father had a terrible temper, and the only method of talking with him unhurt would require sending the words a piece a time. Which was utter nonsense. However, Fleur knew that she could follow only the audible part of the conversation, and that she couldn't even guess what her own son was registering of the unspoken part.

Harry, apparently not feeling the need for any encouragement, at least none Fleur would hear, kept silent.

"Well, and Monsieur Préssard, er - he showed us something new."

Harry nodded. "An instrument."

"Yes."

In a month or so, Fleur thought, these two might have reached the full topic of their conversation, decided to satisfy her curiosity somewhat earlier. "Which one?"

The answer was given by Michel. "A xylophone."

"A xylophone?" Fleur looked at her son in bewilderment. "But don't we have one already?" Had to be somewhere in this house, maybe in Héloïse's room, one of these pieces with a dozen or so metal bars, and a small ...

"No we haven't." Gabriel looked at her. "Monsieur Préssard showed us a real one ... Wood - altogether a bit bigger than this table here."

"Ah, of course." Fleur felt slightly embarrassed about her stupid remark, consoled quickly by the smile that came and went in the face of her step-nephew-in-law.

Harry turned to the boy at his side. "So where would such a xylophone rank, Michel - closer to a keyboard or closer to a drum?"

Michel, not famous for shying off from answering his godfather, shot a glance toward Gabriel, who reacted instantly. "That's what we asked the teacher ourselves, Dad. And he showed us something else - in a catalogue, that is, and then in a spector with real playing. You know, there's something similar to the outside, only it's made of metal, and then there's

another one with electronic support, and as it seems, this one's more percussion, while the xylophone itself, that's more like a keyboard."

As Gabriel explained further, the metal version of a xylophone existed in different versions and with different names - glockenspiel, Turkish crescent, what in French was called *pavillon chinois*, raising a smile in everybody at the thought of another Chinese, while the electronically enhanced version was the only one with the bars arranged like on a table, and this instrument was called vibraphone.

Harry had listened attentively. "And what would you two like to try first?"

"Well," answered his son hesitantly, "for playing together with Hély, it'd be the xylophone, I think that fits great ... But for Michel and me - er, me with the flute, we think the vibraphone would be really cool - you know, it's not as dry as the drums, much more resonant."

"Like a twelve-string guitar, for example."

Gabriel smiled, nodded. "Yes."

Harry's remark had been a reference to another music player - Michael, a former schoolmate of Rahewa, now living in the States and therefore out of reach most of the time. Which told Fleur that this was already part of the negotiating between father and son, could be translated to, *If you can't manage to have Michael around when we need him, you're obliged to buy us a vibraphone.*

And this was the reason why Fleur suppressed her urge to cut in and offer a shared deal - the xylophone from Harry, the vibraphone from herself. As much as Harry enjoyed the ping-pong conversation between the boys and the parents - once the serious part had started, he'd turn furious in an instant if someone else was pushing in ... Of course with the notable exception of his wife - Cho was the only one who could do that without risking her peace of mind.

Although, come to think of it - did Cho know at all what that meant, peace of mind?

"Does Héloïse have a saying?" Harry's voice was neutral.

The two boys exchanged another glance, answered in unison. "Yes."

Which meant the xylophone was as much as a given, while the vibraphone ... Suddenly Fleur realized that the argumentation so far lacked a significant detail, decided to ask. "Say - wouldn't you need two of them?"

"Yes, probably." Michel had answered her question, while the lack of any surprise in the other three faces told Fleur - they'd known all the time, something as obvious as that not worth mentioning, only that her son was too polite for answering *Of course, you dummy, what else?*.

She laughed. "Thanks for your patience with my slow brain ..." Then a thought struck her. "But you know, if it's that big, it counts as furniture, right?"

"Wha ..." The two boys looked uncomprehending, only Harry's half-suppressed grin told her that he could follow.

"What it means? ... Isn't that obvious? If its's furniture - well, you don't think I'd accept furniture in this house that's bought by anyone outside, would you?"

Gabriel looked at her with some reproach. "Is Dad an outsider??"

Before Fleur could answer, there was a slight stirring in the air, as though a window had been opened or closed. At the same instant, three faces turned toward the door, just in time to save her from twisting.

"Hello, everybody." That was Sandra.

"Salu, copains." That was Héloïse.

Michel shot a warning glance toward his mother - the topic of the last minutes was banned until they knew for sure about his sister's mood, and maybe even longer. So Fleur went for more cups while the kids started asking each other about this first day in the new school year.

Back on the table, Fleur asked Sandra, "Wasn't it boring for you, in Magique Générale?"

"Er - no."

The girl was looking under herself, the glances of her brother and her father resting on her. Before Fleur could ask further, her daughter blurted out, "That teacher - he's an asshole, that's what ..."

"Héloïse!"

"But really, maman, he is - know what he did? No, he didn't, but he tried, only it didn't work ..." And Héloïse was spreading the news, to the great delight of the two boys.

While not to that of Sandra, nor her father's.

When Héloïse had finished with her report, enhanced by some more remarks expressing her opinion, Fleur patted Sandra's arm. "Save it, my dear, something like that happens ... At least, he cannot pester you because you won't be up to the task, can he?"

As impossible as the thought was, Sandra's face seemed to indicate just that. Then she said, "I've got a letter."

Her remark had been directed toward Fleur. But now Sandra turned to her father, and after a moment's hesitation, she passed an envelope to him.

While Harry opened the letter, was reading it, Fleur became aware - the genuine outrage of her own daughter might not have been genuine at all, presented only to prepare the ground toward some parents ... One, in particular.

This one looked up. "He's asking for one of the parents to visit him in that matter ..." And then, no doubt fully on purpose, Harry muttered, "That asshole."

"arry!"

"Sorry, Fleur - won't happen again." Toward his beaming daughter, Harry added, "I hope it won't happen again, if you get my bearing."

Oh yes she did, nodding, looking not totally happy yet, however much relieved.

* * *

Harry gave his children a few more minutes, then, after returning Ismène to her mother, he said, "I'm pretty sure there's someone waiting in Carron Lough, so - shall we go?"

His son hesitated a second, probably because the delicate topic of the xylophone had not been discussed yet toward Héloïse, and mentioning it with Harry around was certainly more agreeable than alone. But then Gabriel nodded, looking pleased - time with his mother was precious, and losing some of it even involuntarily counted as nearly intolerable.

Sandra could have waited longer, only at the current state of things, what with this letter, she didn't even suggest a split. So they said goodbye to the Weasleys, then Harry nodded to his daughter because it was Sandra's task to count them down.

Sandra looked at her brother, said, "C'mon, shorty ..." Seeing his attention, she counted, "Three ... two ... one ... go!"

Registering the contours of their dinner room around him, Harry had to grin inwardly. Was Fleur cursing them right now? Because that kind of formation apparition caused quite some air movement - once, they'd done it right into Cho's office, with the sudden air pressure sending papers everywhere. Since then, they were ordered to use only this room here as the target. For triples, that was, while a single person could apparate anywhere in this castle - provided it worked.

Failing to reach the planned destination didn't indicate a lack of expertise. Both Sandra and Gabriel could apparate, which was fine with Harry, and both of them could pursue and summon, the latter of which wasn't quite as fine with him, only what could he do? And besides, they claimed it necessary to carry their friends.

No, the failure would be caused by a protector field, creating a kind of patterned wave that blocked all these techniques within the field sphere. *Groucho Transport & Security*, Cho's newest daughter, was the sole manufacturer of these protectors. True, other wizards could create them locally, but there was a significant difference, aside from the fact that the GTS pieces could be installed anywhere - they could be switched on and off. Which was a kind of waste in the two models protecting Cho's offices, one in the Groucho headquarters and the other here in the castle - they weren't switched off ever.

The two children stormed ahead, having sensed their mother already. When Harry reached the group with a beaming Cho in the middle, Sandra felt a sudden hurry to say hello to her snake - Nagini, formerly Harry's snake and still calling him *Master*, but that was past, definitely so. The snake had stopped calling Sandra *Missy* a while ago, called her *Mistress* since then and would - some day - change once more, to the final title - *High Priestess*.

This knowledge was also in Cho's eyes when she watched her daughter leave. Then she turned to Harry. "Hi, big dragon. Your timing's perfect - say, can you sense me waiting here across that distance?"

"Hi, beauty." He kissed her, suppressing a grin - by old habit, she should have called him *beau*, only that the presence of Gabriel at her side had raised a slight embarrassment. "Yes of course - and not me alone, Gabe sensed it too ... Isn't that so, son?"

"No."

Sometimes the boy was just too serious. True, at this age, Harry hadn't felt inclined for jokes either, but his own situation at that time, with the dreadful Dursleys, had been totally different. Therefore ...

"And you couldn't either," said Cho. "It was just guesswork, although a flawless one."

"Guessing, sensing - what's the difference? At least we're ..."

"Yes there is," protested Gabriel. "Quite a lot, actually, because with guess ..." He stopped, flushed, bowed. "I'm sorry - I interrupted you."

Harry ruffled his hair. "That's okay, my little wizard, because it was a joke ... Know what that is, a joke? I wonder when it'll appear on your class schedule, because then you'll improve quickly in that matter, no question about ..."

"That's unfair - look at him, how embarrassed he feels." This interruption came from Cho, whose time table would crash instantly if she would apologize like her son, each time she did it.

Gabriel glanced at her. "No, it's not. That's another joke."

Harry grinned triumphantly. "Right you are - and what's more, you just made clear what's the difference between guessing and sensing. Because your mother guessed you were embarrassed, and wrong she was, while I - sensing the exact nature of your emotion ..." He quickly dodged a blow from Cho, jumped out of reach, shouted, "although your mother just reminded me of what I missed to explain."

"What?" Cho, apparently at a loss to follow, whether physically or in thinking, stopped. "What reminder was that?"

Harry stepped forward, in perfect combat stance, thus raising an admiring glance from his son and a pleased grin from his wife, until he had reached the two. Then he grabbed Gabriel, turned him around so they both could look at Cho, and held him tight. "That's a living shield, but this is not the reminder I meant ..."

Harry could sense the pleasure in the boy, on top of a deep adoration for him, the reckless warrior Gabriel was protecting at this moment.

"... No, it's about interrupting in a joke." Harry bent closer to his son's ear, looking at Cho while speaking. "You must know, there's just one crime when someone tells a joke - blurring out the punch line."

When Cho's face still kept blank, Harry added, "Got it? ... Punching was the keyword."

Into his mother's chuckling, Gabriel turned to Harry and asked, "But Dad, didn't you do just that? Right now?"

Harry knew what was coming, blocked his mind as hard as he could, looked innocent. "Did I? ... How?"

Probably he could have saved his effort. Beaming of pride, Gabriel said, "You just interrupted her punch line."

Harry's own beaming was genuine. "Hey, Gabe - you can joke!" He made a step back, bowed, looking serious. "I'm sorry ... I was too impatient with you."

His son's smile faded, made room for wondering. "Has ... has this been a joke?"

Harry shook his head, the smile only in his eyes. "Not really."

Looking up, he saw the expression in Cho's face which hardly required any guesswork - not to mention his inner senses - after she had watched this exchange between her two men.

* * *

Sitting in the dinner room - the same in which her family had arrived from the Weasleys - never failed to let Cho feel at peace with this castle which overlooked the Carron Lough Bay. The room a perfect circle, occupying an entire floor in the south tower, with the table as another perfect circle in the middle. Today they used the small version - with guests, this family size would be surrounded by a ring that triplicated the number of seats.

With its oak parquet, the room could also have served as a dance floor, or as an *aikido* training hall for Harry and Tony - removing the table and the large rug would have been a matter of seconds. Only this castle wasn't quite as little as Cho used to think of it, and there was a dance hall in the main building and a training hall underground, carved into the solid rock first by Harry and then, after some careful instructions, by her two children as well.

One of them was chatting along between bites - Cass, having gained speed and joy pretty quickly, now that this story with the Charms teacher was out of the way ... No, not Charms, but that's what it was, wasn't it? Cho felt little patience with the French pickiness regarding titles and names. And language ... Save French from being flattened out by English - ha!

"... and then, after lunch, we had Flying - " Sandra turned toward her mother, "what they call *Aerosport* ..."

Look there - little missy was still on full alert, watching her mother's emotions with everything not required for talking. Cho couldn't help but feeling admiration, raising a very short flush in her daughter's face.

"... these broomsticks, the finest you can find, they say, only you can fall asleep waiting for them getting speed ... Omniair J, they're called, and the J stands for *jeunesse*, and Hély and I had ours ready at once, but some of the others ..."

This part, as Cho knew for sure, was for her husband, giving proof that Cass still was taking pains to mollify her father. Because her daughter gave a damn for broomsticks, flying,

Quidditch ... Yes, she could handle a Firebolt Lightning any time, not even worrying her mother because today, safety belts and helmets were standard among all broomsticks. This was thanks to the impact of the Muggle world toward the magical community and, according to Cho's own opinion, just in time before this community would reveal its true size.

Because, for the last eight years, the number of wizard children was growing every day, caused by a plot in which two people could be found right in the middle. Young Potter the one. The High Priestess the other.

Cho preferred the title. True, she called her Aram'chee when they met, which didn't happen often because Cho really could do without that woman. Too preoccupied with her goddamn job, to be taken over eventually by Cass. Too honest, too friendly - you just couldn't give her hell, no matter how you felt. And a bit too sexy for her taste regarding women near Harry.

"... next was Math. The teacher, that's a Madame Clairvaux, she's nice, younger than the other teachers, and there wasn't anything new because today, she wanted to figure out what we'd done in the other schools ..."

A shadow had fallen over Gabriel's face, and Cho knew why. Math was his weak spot. Had to be inherited from Harry, she herself never had felt trouble with that, too much her father's daughter ...

Harry's voice, still more his words, made her twist. "... didn't you pick her for that letter? Imagine, visiting this nice young teacher would probably be much more entertaining ..."

Harry stopped, looked at Cho. "Wouldn't you say so?"

About to leave no doubt what she thought of it, Cho stopped herself - avoiding a nasty trap just in time. Because it was a very skillful manoeuvre - first to lift their son's spirit away from Math, with that obvious joke, and also to cut Cass a bit short. While Gabriel didn't mind keeping silent through his sister's chatting, Harry felt obliged to balance a bit.

So Cho asked her daughter, "Is she good-looking?"

Sandra shrugged. "So, so ... Not compared to you."

Harry laughed. "That was great, Sandy - a perfect Zen joke."

The girl looked pleased, while Gabriel asked, "Dad, what is a Zen joke?"

"As you know, Zen is something like the impossible in itself, raising all kinds of contradictions. And what your sister just said - I'm sure it's true, but at the same time, it's shameless flattery because that little witch does what she can to make for good weather."

Sandra looked unimpressed. "So? ... I'm doing it for Gabby too."

"Oh, really?" Cho met her daughter's eyes. "How kind of you ... And for which purpose?"

"He ..."

Sandra stopped, looking nearly scared for an instant. And right she was - blurting out other people's business was an almost unforgivable crime in this household ... Not Cho's own rule, of course not. But Harry's.

Said ruler looked at his daughter, murmured, "Good timing, that," was rewarded with a quick, apologetic smile, turned to Cho. "Our son has something new," and finally nodded to the boy.

Cho listened to the story of xylophones and vibraphones, and who'd said what so far in this issue. Only when Gabriel reported that they hadn't asked Héloïse yet, Cho couldn't hold her temper. "Don't tell me that little Veela has a saying about what's installed here!"

Gabriel twisted. "No."

Into the moment of silence, Harry started laughing out loudly, to the relief of two children, while not to Cho's own. "What's so funny about that?"

"Can't you see it?" Harry had trouble with his breath. "Gabe just made the second joke this evening, and an excellent one - you said don't tell me, and he didn't."

In spite of such praise, Gabriel looked more guilty than pleased, while Sandra's expression toward her mother could be described with only one word - gloating.

Calming down, Harry added. "You didn't seriously expect him going cross with his musical partner, known also as that little Veela ... Did you?"

Beaten, disarmed, Cho sighed. "No, I didn't." Recovering, she grinned toward her son. "But even so, sweetheart - mine wasn't a joke, if you know what I mean."

His "Yes" was enough to let the family join in laughter.

03 - Unpleasant Visits

Héloise Weasley watched her mother chewing absent-mindedly while reading the morning newspaper. She herself felt hungry too, cursed inwardly at her friend Sandra who was late for fetching her.

They used to have breakfast in school. Beauxbatons presented a mix between a boarding school - what it solely had been in the past - and a daily school for students preferring to live at home. Breakfast and other meals of the day, however, were offered to all students interested. The only drawback - something like reserved seats didn't exist.

Then, as if Sandra had sensed the impulse - the moment Héloïse was about to grab the croissant that looked so inviting, her friend's figure appeared in the kitchen doorframe. Héloïse rose quickly. "At last! ... Au revoir, maman."

"voir ..." Fleur hardly raised her eyes from the newspaper.

"What's been holding you so long?" Knowing the reason perfectly well, sleepiness, what else, Héloïse didn't really expect an answer. As predicted, she got none while first Sandra disappeared and, still before Héloïse could feel the air move, her own body was sucked through the void, coming out in front of the school building.

And of course - all seats occupied. Héloïse turned to her friend. "Look what you did! ... And now? Am I supposed to eat my breakfast standing up?"

Sandra lacked all signs of guilt. "Use your power to make us room somewhere."

An intriguing idea, only that Fleur's reaction would be worse than anything Sandra had to face when playing her kind of games here in Beauxbatons. "Very clever," snarled Héloïse. "And what about a nice little smile on your face, for a change? ... This, together with my looks, should be enough ..."

"Need a seat?"

Looking up, Héloïse registered the face that belonged to the voice. A boy, black hair, might have been a first-year too, except she was sure he was none of their own course. However, Beauxbatons ran two parallel courses with first-years, due to the large number of students joining this famous school.

Héloïse showed the smile Sandra wouldn't offer. "Two, actually."

"No issue. Frédy, c'mon, shift a bit on your side, will you?"

The head opposite, dark blonde, jerked up to turn around, saw them standing, turned back. Then the entire body put some pressure toward muttering neighbours, and the boy at the other side did the same.

Héloïse waited until the two of them, sitting at the end of the table, had pushed enough to offer two seats. It might have worked somewhat quicker if they hadn't made sure the offered

seats would be outside, with those two as their only neighbors. Seemed hardly by accident, that.

"Thank you." Héloïse sat down at the side of the one who'd asked, watched as Sandra muttered something short and inaudible to the other boy, and went for her first bite of this morning.

Apparently, Héloïse's neighbour had already completed his own task of nourishing - at least, he had the time and the tool for asking questions, used them at once. "You're in the parallel course, right?"

Which confirmed Héloïse's assumption. She managed a "Mhm" between chewing.

"By the way, I'm Benoît." The boy's head nodded toward the other side of the table. "And this here's is my friend Frédéric. We're both sleepers."

Which meant, they used Beauxbatons for boarding too.

She gulped. "Hi. I'm Héloïse ... And this is my friend Sandra - like me, she only comes for the day, which doesn't prevent her from being sleepy, quite the opposite, actually."

Benoît was about to reward this remark with some chuckling when his friend, after a short glance to a sour-looking girl at his side, opened his mouth for the first time. "Really? ... We heard differently."

The sullen eyes shot around, sent him a very short flash, turned back to hide behind a large cup.

Benoît had watched the exchange. "Uh-oh, that wasn't sleepy at all ... So it's true, huh?"

True what? Oh, of course - had this been the reason for the invitation? Héloïse could have imagined a better topic, herself, for example. But for starters ... "If you think what I think you think - yes, it's true."

Frédéric looked at her. "You sound as if we're discussing something naughty here." He turned to Sandra. "What we heard is - you had a dispute with Thionnite, and ..."

"Thionnite?" Sandra looked astonished.

Benoît answered. "Yes, Thionnite - you know, sounds almost like cyanide ... Everybody's waiting for the day someone's using that name into his face."

A smile, small and grim, appeared in Sandra's face.

Héloïse said, "That'd be the day - although, I could imagine, it's not that far away any longer, if you get my bearing."

Frédéric, apparently used to interruptions from his friend, had waited patiently. "Well, to finish my sentence, then something with wands took place, and quite obviously you know the details much better than we do."

Héloïse decided to play to her strengths, and one of them was her friend. "Yes it's true - he tried to expel her wand, and he failed - you should have seen the face he made ... Hey, Dra, c'mon, show us your wand."

Sandra glared at her. "Why? ... Am I a show-piece?"

"Yes." That was Benoît.

"No." That was Frédéric, blushing slightly, maybe because his voice had been so imploringly.

Héloïse raised her hands, holding them together. For the boys, her gesture had to look as though she was begging Sandra, with her friend as the only one who could follow this insider joke - that Héloïse was showing the Potter equivalent of a wand.

Her manoeuver scored success. After a second's hesitation, flushing probably from a suppressed grin, Sandra seized for her wand and put it on the table. "Here - don't touch the handle, it'd burn you."

"Yeah, sure." Benoît reached for the wand, took it up, gasped, "Ouch - dammit," threw it on the table.

Frédéric's hand shot forward to stop the wand from falling to the floor, his fingers keeping to the wood. He looked at his friend, said calmly, "Stupid fool." Then he examined the wand closer, looked at Sandra. "It's the handle that does it, right?"

When she nodded, he asked, "What is it?"

Héloïse saw the moment right for her own contributing to this conversation. About to open her mouth, she closed it again - an unmistakable warning sign in her mind, something like a very short and very cold wave, had taught her better. Next moment, to her astonishment, Sandra said, "Some mane hairs from a centaur ... From a certain centaur."

The slight fury Héloïse had mustered an instant before, if only to compensate for this cold wave, faded. Listen there - young missy had seen reason to answer, had seen it probably right at her side ...

"A centaur??" Frédéric turned the wand between his fingers. "And a light one ..." He laid the piece down in front its owner, looked across the table, for a change. "Héloïse? ... Please, what's your family name?"

Héloïse smiled. "Delacour ... No, it's not true, that's my mother's maiden name. It's Weasley."

Frédéric turned to Sandra. "And yours?"

Sandra hesitated for a moment. "Chang ... Sandra Chang."

Frédéric still looked attentive, as though expecting some continuation, when Benoît smiled toward Héloïse. "Before we wait forever for my friend's politeness - mine is Malavin, Benoît Malavin, and this nosy buddy here is Frédéric Pouilly."

Héloïse, in contrast to her friend, was unable to suppress a short jerking of her head. Pouilly - this had been the family name of Gérard, the student that was killed by Harry, right in this room, about fourteen years ago. And how many families with that name could be found in France?

Glancing over to the boy, Héloïse saw a thoughtful face, lacking any surprise, on a head which, for an instant, had looked as if nodding.

* * *

Harry watched how the teacher sat down behind his large desk. Then, after a polite movement from Monsieur Thionnay, he seated himself in front of the desk, in a chair as precious as uncomfortable. Harry knew that such outdated conversation arrangements still were French style, most of all here in Beauxbatons, only it was also a perfect fit of what he'd felt in the man - a deep dislike, bordering to hate.

Exactly at the moment Monsieur Thionnay had recognized him, from his double scar at the forehead, a moment before Harry had introduced himself.

"Monsieur Pottère," began the teacher, "I am surprised to meet you here in the issue of Mademoiselle Chang. I had intended to talk with one of her parents."

"Certainly so, Monsieur Thionnay. Sandra told me, and that's why I'm here."

The teacher, with perfect manners to the outside, looked questioningly. "You are ..."

"Her father, yes."

"I see." The intonation, as well as the slight pause that followed, formed a very French insult, maybe except that in France such seemingly criss-crossed parentages could hardly be rated as insulting. "And the name of Mademoiselle Chang ..."

"Is that of her mother."

The teacher showed a polite smile, not revealing any of the satisfaction Harry could feel. "In this case, Monsieur Pottère, I'm supposed to ask whether you are entitled to speak for your daughter in educational matters."

Harry's eyes widened for an instant. This was heavy artillery, by all means - there seemed little doubt that this man knew exactly about him and Cho. "Yes I am."

"Can you prove it?"

No matter what the Beauxbatons book of rules said, this was definitely an insult. Harry knew it, this man knew it, and also knew that he knew. He stared into this hint of a polite smile. "Yes."

"Then, would you please ..."

"You may ask your Headmistress for that - Monsieur Thionnay." The addressing, after the slight pause, sent Harry's first signal that he could play French politeness equally well - and that the time of pleasantries was over.

"Very well ... May I ask why your daughter is not recorded here under her regular name, Monsieur Pottère? ... It's Sandra Catherine Potter, isn't it?"

This man had fun, as Harry could register. The teacher had dropped the ridiculous issue of Harry's qualification instantly, only to prove that he knew perfectly well about the Potter family - and obviously also about the reasons he was asking for. Harry felt growing rage, tempered only by the thought that he would do his daughter no favour when losing his manners in this situation.

However, it was time to strike back. "For several reasons, Monsieur Thionnay ..."

Just when the man was about to ask for one of them, Harry continued, "... for example, to avoid obvious problems that would occur with this name here in France ..."

Again he waited an instant, and when the teacher's lips started to move, he finished, "like the pronunciation. Her name is Potter, not Pottère."

Monsieur Thionnay, whose own name was easily suited to reveal any accent less than perfect - less than Harry's, for example - closed his lips to a thin line, opened them again. "Yes, of course ... Alors, Monsieur Pottère, the reason for this invitation is your daughter's wand."

Harry waited, looking expectantly.

"I take it she told you about this scene yesterday in class. As it turns out, her wand has some special feature which prevents it to be handled like those of the other students ... Unfortunately, this is not acceptable from a Beauxbatons student - for several reasons."

"Such as?"

"Security, for example." The teacher managed an apologetic look, quite different from what Harry could feel. "To protect the students from accidents, it is mandatory that the teachers can supervise them in all magical regards."

Harry suppressed the sneering remark that was trying to force its way on his tongue - that'd be the day, he himself blowing Sandra's diminishing cover completely. "I take it, this is a Beauxbatons rule, Monsieur Thionnay?"

"Oh yes, of course."

"Fine ... Would you please prove it."

The teacher smiled triumphantly. "You may ask our Headmistress for that."

With unmoving face, Harry pressed a button at his phony, clipped to his belt and still outside the teacher's view. A second later, the unmistakable voice of Madame Maxime filled the room. "Yes? ... 'arry, is that you?"

"Yes, Madame Maxime - sorry to bother you, but there's a certain question about ..."

"But 'arry, I told you already - please call me Olympe." The woman's voice was flirtatious.

Smiling into the teacher's growing uneasiness, Harry said, "I know, Olympe - sorry, it was just because I'm sitting here with a colleague of yours. There was a question about wands with special features. Is there some Beauxbatons rule about what a wand is supposed to be, or not to be?"

A growling laughter, stressing the phony's speaker to its limits. "What nonsense is this, 'arry? That question from you, of all people? After ... Is this a joke?"

"Yes, probably so - and I fell for it ... Sorry, Olympe, won't happen again ... Bye."

Harry stored the phony, looked into the teacher's face, kept his voice light, nearly intimate. "Monsieur Thionnay, now that this misunderstanding is out of the way, you are one of three people knowing Sandra's full name here in Beauxbatons ... This, as you'll certainly agree, will make perfectly sure that the knowledge won't spread any further ..."

He waited, his glance suddenly piercing, until a small nod confirmed this particular kind of agreement.

"... Aside from that, I told Sandra in advance that rules and manners are somewhat different from what she's used to, after her previous time in American or British schools ..."

Harry paused again, waiting until the teacher eventually registered the double meaning in these words.

"... If this adapting to new standards takes a day or two longer, I apologize in the name of my daughter, Monsieur Thionnay, feeling sure you won't bother too much about a little impoliteness from a ten-year-old ..."

This nod took a moment longer, however it came.

"... who basically is ready to play along, and to keep her temper." Harry smiled sweetly. "You must know, she inherited that temper from her mother - actually another reason why we selected that name for classes here ... Sandra can manage quite well ..."

Harry waited an instant, finished with his voice suddenly vibrating like steel. "... unless she's provoked."

After a moment, in which the teacher didn't respond, he added, "Sandra is an eidetic. When being asked after a course, or later at home, she could report every word that was spoken ... I think she gave a little example, right?"

When it was clear this nod would not come, Harry continued, "Using this ability of hers, I will follow up my daughter's progress here in Beauxbatons and will help her to reach full approval - according to the standards of this magnificent school."

Rising from the uncomfortable chair, he finished, "Sandra took this as a warning, and I did too ... Thank you for the invitation, Monsieur Thionnay - and let's hope there won't be any other reason for such a meeting, from Sandra's reports - er, I mean, behaviour."

The bluntness of Harry's last remark showed a breach of style, enough to count as the reason for the teacher's face. However, Harry knew his daughter's weak spot too well - she simply wasn't built to tolerate the French version of what, for himself in Hogwarts, had been a Professor Snape at his worst.

Leaving, he wondered about the origin of the teacher's feelings toward Sandra. For a simple prejudice, it seemed a bit too much. Had the man recognized her instantly - maybe from some pictures published somewhere?

In this case, why did Monsieur Thionnay hold a grudge against anyone listening to the name Potter?

* * *

Janine Weasley saw herself confronted with a riddle. Until two days ago, she had been busy with three children from which school, and school business, did not suck up some energy yet. And now that Bernard could be found in school every day, now that only Carole and Diane were left to be watched and guided and treated and endured, it seemed more difficult than ever.

Maybe the answer was pretty obvious - maybe she simply had ignored certain things before, while the released capacity of time and attention, invested instantly in the girl twins, intensified the subjective pressure.

Except the pressure wasn't subjective, no sir, everybody would have agreed to that. The girls, right at this moment busy with paper and finger paint, and probably also with wallpaper a second after Janine would turn her eyes, had earned the temper from the Weasley side and the swiftness from the Baillard side.

To multiply them - twice, for sharing equally.

As bad as the thought seemed - sometimes Janine wished they would waste some energy in a row against each other. Then she would be able to watch, listen to the arguments, have a little break before cutting in to prevent serious trouble. But no such luck.

Of course, she could have asked her mother for help. Only - Janine's parents and Ron, her husband, that wasn't the most joyful relationship. If Ron had been a farmer, like the Baillards ... If he'd been ready to steer a more conventional course in his public appearances as a politician and representative of the Education Committee ... But for the last eight years, Ron was beating the drums in favour of a union between Muggle schools and wizarding schools, putting himself cross with both sides.

In her parent's eyes, he was a maniac and a loser.

Which was a laugh, if Janine ever found the time and the mood to laugh about that. Because Ron was among the hardest workers in the Great Plot, a kind of undercover agent in full public. And he got paid for that - when Ron himself refused to accept a secret salary for his

sailing under this crazy flag, Harry had asked Janine. And she had agreed to an account in the name of Alain, growing steadily and well hidden from all grandparents.

And when Bernard arrived, suddenly another account appeared, growing with the same speed.

Janine argued with Harry, saying this hadn't been her agreement. "Sorry, Janine," he answered, "but you know - that money comes from Groucho, it's not mine. So why don't you discuss it with Cho?"

Clever trick, that. Janine knew better than following his advice. And when the twins arrived - yes, you guessed it, two more accounts started to provide balance sheets regularly, discernible from the others only by the names and the totals.

The pressure on herself, from this slight coolness between her husband and her parents, was bearable, though a pressure nonetheless. Ron knew it, feeling grateful Janine wasn't raising the topic ever. This burden had been taken over by Harry, who encouraged her to complain and to whine a bit during his visits to herself and the children.

And Molly, her mother-in-law, wasn't a better choice for help either. The problem here wasn't coolness, not at all, more the other way around, a kind of - well, stickyness. However, now that Fred and George had sons to offer, this was mostly a question for their wives Katie and Bonnie, not for herself.

The doorbell rang.

Lost in her thoughts, Janine also lost the race against her daughters. They were off at once, racing toward the door, their fingers of course still smeared with all colours of the rainbow. Sighing, she followed, saving the fruitless effort to stop them - a little charm would clean the ...

Two piercing shouts.

Janine started to smile, suddenly feeling joyful. When she reached the scene, she met a grin already spotted by several colours, framed by her daughters, one to each side. Grinning herself, she said, "Salu, 'arry ... You're the sunshine of my day."

"Hello, Janine - then why didn't you tell them to use yellow instead?"

Some moments later, Harry was sitting in lotus position on the floor, his shirt stripped off, while the girls were working on him, the beaming in their faces as brilliant as the colours they applied.

He smiled at her. "Could you do me a favour, Janine?"

"Hopefully so." With him, simply saying *Yes* felt a bit dangerous.

Harry had to wait an instant until Diane was done with his red moustache. "If you ever tell Cho about this visit, please don't quote yourself by adding, 'And then he stripped off his shirt'."

Janine grinned. "Under one condition, 'arry."

Seeing the sparkling in her eyes, he said, "No way, Juanita. I don't feel the need for these colours *there*."

"And no other need either?" Too late, Janine realized that this had been an invitation to one of these jokes she could do without - about Ron and herself losing interest.

Except that Harry just grinned. And when it was clear he'd registered her glitch, when Janine knew for sure this joke wasn't coming, he said, "I'd never believe it."

"Thanks, 'arry, for your unwavering trust ..." they laughed both, "and your support. Is this your social day? Visiting neglected housewives, to hear their complaints about family stress?"

"Yeah, kind of ..."

Janine became aware that there was really something on his agenda, only at this moment Harry already asked, "How's Bernard doing?"

"But, 'arry, it's the second day ... At least, he has warmed up a bit to that school, so we can hope the issue will be settled soon."

The issue - Janine's remark referred to the choice of elementary school for the sons of her own Weasley branch. Both of them would have preferred the Goblins' school visited by Michel and Gabriel, with Bernard torn a bit more apart than Alain two years ago, but Ron's verdict was ironclad. With him shouting *Union* twice a day, his children had just one choice - a Muggle school, in particular one that supported his ideas.

Ron was right, no denying that. Only that this consequence put another little burden on Janine's shoulders ... And Harry knew of course, and that's why he'd asked. She said, "It's really your social day, huh? ... But if I got that right, a moment ago, there's some other issue to be settled, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, although a transient one, I hope." Harry's voice changed to a quizmaster's style. "Just the second day, you said? ... Now, Janine, could you imagine someone for whom just one day's enough to find the ..."

"Sandra?"

"Bingo!" Then Harry told his sister-in-law about this teacher, about Sandra's response, and what he himself had done this morning. "Maybe he's just a genuine asshole, Janine, but I remember too well how it's been with Snape. This Thionnay better believes he's under tight surveillance."

Harry's tone had been growling for an instant, raising astonished glances from the girls, who never would think he meant them.

Janine searched for the proper words. "Er, 'arry, are you sure? ... I mean, a bit of unfairness every now and then ..." His look made her falter for a second, then she finished, "Isn't that a preparation for later?"

"Up to a point, yes." It didn't sound too convincing. "But such a scene on the very first day, and calling for the parents because he made a fool of himself - that's an egomaniac, if I ever

saw any ... And besides, Janine - what's fair in Sandy's situation? She has to hide so much ..." Harry stopped, grinned. "Whom am I telling that? ... You've tricked me, Janine, switching roles."

It was flatright flattery, still not failing to make her feel pleased. "We all have to hide, so ... By the way, while on the subject, how's Gabriel doing?"

"What subject is that? ... What does Gabby need to hide?"

Janine chuckled. "Oh c'mon, 'arry - you know exactly what I mean. Isn't he the hidden power par excellence? ... Well, okay, he does it voluntarily, but otherwise ..."

Seeing Harry's face, Janine changed to a teasing tone. "Poor 'arry, is there someone challenging your precious girl?"

His expression was still fierce.

"... even your own son, of all people?"

She was rewarded with a laugh, carrying a slight trace of guilt. "Alright, Janine, you've made your point ... Yes, just between you and me, I too suspect him to be at least as powerful as Sandy - except that he uses that power differently. - Anyway, right now he's busy with something new ..."

Janine listened to the story of the new instruments, then asked, "And what's Héloïse's comment?"

"She doesn't know yet. Maybe in the meantime ... Anyway, the xylophone isn't the tricky part - only when it starts to look as though a certain harp is no longer a mandatory part ... So it's mostly Michel's problem, I think."

Janine nodded. "Which you can't await to solve for him, right?"

Harry glanced at her. "Hey - somehow I feel like being in parents' school, here."

"Purely coincidence, 'Harry." Janine moved her head from side to side. "Parents' school ... Uncles' school ..."

Harry nodded, earning an angry remark from Carole, who was greening his ear. "Got the message, Janine - I'm not deaf, you know ... Although, I might, in a moment, if my sweet little nieces start painting my inner ear ... Say, what about some colours you'd suffer less from itching?"

Janine grinned mischievously. "You have a problem with some itching, 'arry?"

* * *

Sandra Catherine Potter, locally known as Sandra Chang, found herself caught in a heavy process of learning. Although Sandra was sitting in class, the teacher's contribution to that process could only be called little. Still - Madama Galladier, Beauxbatons' *Biologie* teacher

for first-years, was not to be blamed for that, aside from the fact that she had a nice style and an interesting topic ... Cell structures, protoplasm, that stuff.

No, Sandra just had detected the uncertainty, and this struck her as a breathtaking experience. She was used to people like Harry and Aram'chee, and what they did - as well as the stories they told - always had occurred to herself as the logical consequence of some conditions, or events, a straight line from cause to effect to measures. Same with her mother, actually.

While now - there was this Frédéric Pouilly, and Sandra just couldn't come to terms about what to think of him ... Was he a risk, an enemy? His name said yes, her natural reflexes said of course, only that her senses said something else. The same senses actually which told her - this boy knew something, the mental uproar in him had been unmistakable.

What was she to do? Keeping on guard, yes - and otherwise? Telling her father? ... Maybe so, but then what? Harry couldn't tell her more than she already knew. He couldn't examine the boy's mind closer than Sandra already did by herself. Her father could - no, he would talk with her mother, and with Aram'chee, and the most likely outcome was that she'd be taken off Beauxbatons.

Which was unacceptable - despite the other problem Sandra was facing, teaching her new lessons every break this morning ... Héloïse.

Her friend, the one to blame for this unhappy encounter in first place, had found a quick method to shake off her own concerns. "So he's a Pouilly - okay, so what? Are you sure he knows about that old story?"

Well, not quite, but almost.

"Even so - he doesn't know who you are ..."

Sandra had her doubts ... Hell, that was a bloody uncool feeling, not being sure.

"... and besides, what can he do? Do you think he'll attack you?" Héloïse had laughed, quite teasingly so. "That's ridiculous, my dear Sandrine." And then, in the breaks, Héloïse had been busy to look around where this Benoît might be found.

If Sandra could come with Nagini ... Her snake would tell her more, maybe not about this Frédéric's emotions, but certainly whether he was honest. Which would require her talking with him, asking him questions ...

The thought was nonsense. The moment she'd appear with the snake at her shoulders - supported by some levitation charm, Sandra wasn't an athlete like her father - the moment she'd talk with Nagini, she might as well place herself on a table in the great hall, shouting, "Look here, it's me - Harry Potter's daughter."

Another thought struck her. Not telling Harry - was this a breach of trust and confidence? But on the other side - was she supposed to tell him everything that kept her mind busy? Her father could keep things to himself quite well, his ability to hide emotions had upset Sandra often enough - more than once, only her mother's uncontrolled feelings had revealed a hint so she could start pestering her father ... Successfully so, eventually.

She would talk with Aram'chee first. The High Priestess never told her what to do or not to do - sure, she had her own way with questions and remarks, but still ... Talking with her was mandatory anyway, Aram'chee would sense her nagging concerns instantly. Only that the next visit wasn't due till the end of the week.

Madame Galladier finished her lesson just in time before the bell chimed. This had been the last course of the morning, now it was lunch break. Sandra followed Héloïse, who moved in a hurry to reach some seats in the hall - the advantage gained from a teacher finishing in time was not to be wasted here in Beauxbatons with its shortness of seats.

They sat down side by side. About to seize for her dish, Sandra registered her friend waving at someone. Next moment, a panting figure sat down opposite, putting his arms to both sides, thereby holding another seat reserved against the competition - Benoît, and some seconds later, a more composed figure filled that space, shifting him to the seat opposite Héloïse, and releasing his arms to the task of gathering food.

Frédéric.

Damn Héloïse looked joyful. "That was tight ... But you made it - very good."

Benoît interrupted his work long enough to assure yes, they'd go to extremes in favour of such nice company, then started to eat, thank God for this kind of favour.

Although - Sandra would have found a remark or two about his eating manners ... Bit greedy for her taste. Still, she seemed alone with her opinion. Benoît's friend, in contrast, took his time ...

Stopped even, to ask her, "How was it with Thionnay?"

Still chewing, Sandra thought she had a second to formulate her answer when Héloïse, smiling toward Benoît, said, "She gave him a pager ... He just had to press a button, and a minute later his visitor would be there - like some jack-out-of-the-box." And these two were laughing like crazy.

Sandra couldn't even swallow, just barely suppressing the murderous impulse to send her friend a hard one. Mentally, of course. And then she realized - Héloïse knew exactly that she was safe, here in public, which somehow felt even worse ...

"Is she your spokesperson?" Frédéric's eyes were resting on Sandra.

It helped her to recover. "Sometimes ... more by self-appointment, that is."

"And - does she get paid?" Frédéric's tone was casual. "Later, I mean?"

Sandra felt herself smile. "Most unlikely - ever tried to be mad at a Veela? ... Just doesn't work, she'll use her power, and that's it."

Benoît found this idea great, asked Héloïse what they could do so he'd be mad at her, and she'd use her power toward him. This raised an open grin in Frédéric's face, followed by a chuckling.

"You think that's funny?" Héloïse glared at him. "Wanna me make you look really ridiculous? Just say please."

Frédéric smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry - that's a misunderstanding, Héloïse. I wasn't sneering about Veela - no, I was just trying to figure something that would turn Benoît mad at you ... Well, and - er, try as I might, I couldn't ..." Frédéric looked at his side. "Mad yes, but ..."

Benoît, his cheeks flushed, busied himself with his food, while Héloïse lacked any embarrassment.

To her astonishment, Sandra felt a slight sting of something totally unfamiliar to her, at any rate good enough to ask Frédéric, "Are you *his* spokesperson?"

Frédéric shook his head. "Not generally ... Only when it speaks for itself."

For a fleeting instant, Sandra didn't know how to continue - repeating the same sequence seemed just too stupid, while not responding anything wasn't her real choice either. Then, driven by a devil that had to be of Chinese origin, she said, "You mean, it's nothing personal - just her Veela nature?"

Two heads snapped up. One of them, across the table, was about to protest, even with a full mouth, while the other at her side hissed, "Why don't you mind your own business, isn't that enough to keep your mouth shut?"

Sandra saw Héloïse's eyes widen, apparently registering that her remark fell a bit close to this particular business. Tempering herself, she answered, "Maybe we should drop that habit with the spokesperson."

Frédéric kept his tone neutral. "Probably - this would clear the issue of the payment." It earned him a sharp glance from Héloïse.

Benoît saw it, gulped, looked at the table. "Well, I for my part had no complaints, in a way ... Er - maybe it's not the best time to address this issue, but - er, well, I was considering the idea of a change - er, from one parallel course to the other."

Still furious, Héloïse said, "I might think about the same - for myself, that is, right now that seems a great idea." Looking at Frédéric, she added, "And if this requires a swap partner, I might know whom to ask."

Sandra froze somewhere inwardly. What sounded like a little row between girls, about boys, what else, and also a natural remark with Frédéric's ostensible interest in herself, had a hidden quality of threatening - with Héloïse no doubt aware of it, doing it on purpose.

Frédéric held Héloïse's stare. "Let's see if this is still on the agenda tomorrow ... At any rate, if this offer ever comes, I certainly know someone else to ask first."

Benoît, of course - Sandra thought it most unlikely that some other student in the parallel course would like to change after just two days. They almost had finished lunch when she realized - there was still another possibility.

He could have meant herself.

* * *

Tony Chee kept sitting at the breakfast table while his wife Ireen prepared herself with hand bag and suitcase to leave for her business meeting. The little suitcase contained the traditional clothes of a *geisha*, and this was exactly Ireen's role in that meeting - welcoming some business partners from Japan, serving tea, and soon afterwards disappearing before the money talk would start.

She liked these jobs a great deal, enough to leave him alone with Tanitha. She also held evening courses, which wasn't a problem either as long as Tony could be found at home, rather than on the set.

For him as a movie director and producer without a current project, nine o'clock in the morning was an early time of the day. Only that he'd grown used to it, for the last one and a half years. The reason was sitting in a high chair, playing with the remainder of a roll - their daughter Tanitha.

For years, after his marriage with Ireen who was so much younger, Tony pushed off the idea of a child, just couldn't imagine himself as a father. Ireen - well, she had mentioned the topic several times, but she never pressed.

Someone else started pressing. To be precise, as Tony learned later, it had been a chain reaction. First, Ireen confessed to Cho how deeply she longed for a child. Cho didn't lose time telling Harry, ordered him to make his friend Tony see reason. And of course, Harry obeyed.

So, eventually, Tony too obeyed.

Because Harry used convincing arguments. He talked about duty and obligation. He hinted that it would be dishonest, keeping to an *aikido* partner who showed so little loyalty to his wife. And he promised to accept another movie contract the moment Ireen would be pregnant.

The latter was supposed to be kept a secret ... As if they'd been able to hide this obvious coincidence from their wives. When Cho heard about this movie project, she said, "I always thought there's just one way to make women pregnant, but I guess Harry has found a new method - well, with a little help from his friend."

And he, Tony, jumped for his chance. "This is such a deep insult, Cho - there's just one way to keep you alive, and me afterwards - you have to be the godmother."

Cho looked trapped. She glanced toward her husband, only that everybody knew - Harry insisted to be one child's godfather only, and that was Michel. So he responded to his wife's search for help by keeping silent and motionless. However, when Cho said, "But only if you accept to be my deputy - you know, for daily business," Harry had agreed instantly.

Ireen delivered a kiss to Tony and another one to Tanitha. Tony accompanied her to the door, to exchange another kiss and to shut the locks again. Since Tanitha was around, still more so since the recent news, they kept much tighter to security standards than before.

Ireen would use the opportunity for some shopping afterwards. That was fine with Tony - in a while, he expected Harry for a training session, and Tanitha would spend the time in her playpen down in the training hall.

She was a jewel in this regard, almost never complaining. And of course she was a witch, even if it didn't show yet - like almost every other child her age here in Santa Monica.

While Tony himself was still a Muggle, felt little temptation to become a wizard. It would be no problem, not with the help of that High Priestess, only what should he do with this ability? Waving a wand on the set?

Ireen, on the other side ... Tony had asked her whether she was interested. No, she'd said, not without him. Only, sometimes she was just too Japanese, Tony suspected her longing for witchcraft more than she would admit. Maybe once Tanitha was a bit older, so they could learn together ... Could well turn out his job, this time, to start a chain reaction.

The sound of Ireen's car hadn't faded long when Tony heard another engine - that of the lawn mower. Glancing through the window, he saw the bulky figure with the unmistakable baseball cap - Sammy, a kid from the neighbourhood who'd taken this job a while ago.

Tony started to clean the kitchen, his thoughts lost in some planning. He would like to win Harry for another movie, only this was a difficult task. Sure, the last one had been a success, still more so than the *Eagle* sequels from years ago, but you just couldn't attract Harry with money ... Even less with fame, come to think of it.

Tony pondered the idea to play a trick of questionable morale - questionable to the outside, that was. What he had in mind seemed almost the same as the last time, only with changed roles - well, not changing *that much*, he he. But a new movie and another child, wouldn't that be a very nice ...

The doorbell chimed.

Only now, Tony registered that the sound of the lawn mower had stopped moments earlier. Sammy could impossibly be done already - had that damn vehicle another breakdown?

He went to the door. Seeing the fire engine-red cap in the viewer, Tony shut the bolts back, opened. "Hi, Sammy, please don't tell me that piece of ..."

The face coming up wasn't Sammy's. It wasn't a face at all, it was a Halloween mask. But the gun was real, and the silencer mounted in front of the muzzle too.

Shit! Ten years earlier, Tony would have used this first second already for his attack, while now it was too late, this guy had caught him totally off balance, pushing him inside and stepping back immediately, after closing the door.

So that shithead knew about him and his skill in combat without weapons. And this mask meant, Tony's life wasn't at risk, as long as he played along. But even so, a very cold feeling crept up his spine ... Because of the recent news. But then, he felt confident to find another chance.

"Okay, Mister, what ..." Tony stopped, interrupted by the doorbell.

The figure said, "Don't move. I'm not warning you again."

Calm voice, businesslike, slightly muffled under the mask. Tony obeyed while the figure opened the door without ever turning - for another masked figure which stepped forward, passing him, stopping somewhere behind and to the side.

They had him in crossfire, would he try something.

"Alright. Listen." The figure at the door was speaking again. "This is money business, as far as we're concerned. Play it cool, then we can keep it that way, and nobody gets hurt."

"What do you ..."

A soft pop, the muzzle in front of Tony twisting upward, and a splintering noise from behind.

"Don't talk, unless you're asked. This was really the last warning."

Tony gave a small nod, not revealing any of his feelings, any of the thoughts racing through his mind. This was exactly what he'd dreaded in his worst dreams, this was what had made headlines several times in the last months, and why they had increased security that much - only that he himself had blown it ...

"We're going to take your daughter for a ride. You reading newspapers?"

Tony nodded again, fighting the sickness in his stomach. He'd known since this mask had come up.

"Then you know - she'll return safely and unhurt. Would be bad for our business otherwise. This guarantee doesn't include yourself, if you're going to try something clever."

Which was true, for all Tony knew. In the published kidnapping cases of the past months, all children had come back. There had been killings nonetheless - for example in one case where the parents had involved the police, which had tried a trap at passing over the money. The kidnapers had offered one last chance.

"So you know the rules. When we're gone, you might get prepared by gathering the fee ... Two millions, actually. And now - where's your daughter?"

"In ... in the kitchen." Tony wasn't losing a second's thought about the money, that was meaningless right now, even if they'd be broke afterwards, which wasn't the case. Tanitha with these bastards - he wasn't ready to let that happen, he had prepared for this day, in more than one sense, and the slightest chance ...

"Okay. You'll dress her for a journey, and pack some more clothes. There's a nurse waiting for her. If you can fetch the money quickly enough, she might be back within three days. What do you think?"

"Er - yes, I think I can manage."

"No police, no press, nothing. Otherwise ... Is she allergic somehow? Does she need some medication?"

Again, Tony was caught off balance from this quick change between threatening and something which, for him, sounded like the most pervert kind of care he'd ever heard. "Er - no, nothing. She's healthy."

"Then let's keep it that way. Get moving."

Tony nodded, swallowed, turned. Walking toward the kitchen, he had a few seconds to think his decision over. He had dropped any thought of attacking these figures - one of them would always be out of reach. But he still had a defense, installed after the second case had been published.

Was it the right thing to do? On one side - the loss of two millions, forget it, and a nightmare of a few days they'd never forget. And what about Tanitha during these days?

Tony wasn't going to let it happen. His decision was taken.

He reached the kitchen, saw her sitting in the high chair, her smiling face, looking expectantly toward the figure closely behind him. He bent over her head, murmured, "I love you, my angel." As if seizing for her arms, Tony's fingers found the bracelet around her left wrist, found the button, pressed it.

An almost inaudible pop. The high chair was empty.

"Hey! What's ... Where is she?"

Tony came up, feeling better than ever in his life - and most likely better than he would ever feel again. "Somewhere safe, you piece of shit."

The silencer hit him at the temple, sending sparks in his view and nausea in his throat. He broke to his knees.

"You're a real wise-ass. You have ten seconds to tell us where she is - and pray she's within reach."

Tony glanced up, clenched his teeth. "Go fuck your nurse."

Pop. The pain in his left shoulder told him where the bullet had hit.

"Time's running short, buddy. It's your choice."

"Burn in hell."

Tony saw the muzzle move, and at the same moment, he heard the wailing of the first siren outside. This very personal portkey around Tanitha's wrist had done a bit more than sending her into the playpen down in the training hall - it had locked the doors of the hall, and it had rung an alarm in the next precinct.

The muzzle twisted. A hammer hit Tony in the chest, too hard to be painful at all. He felt numb, not registering the second hit nor his falling to the floor. *I'm sorry, Ireen, I hope I did right.*

Something touched his head, blackening his vision. He thought of his daughter in the hall behind heavy doors, and that Harry would arrive within a few minutes, and how it would have been if ... Then he stopped thinking.

04 - Traces

Harry was a bit late for his training session with Tony. He had a perfect excuse, at least it would have been perfect for Cho, because the reason could be found in Groucho business. While for him ...

Ray had held him back, with that old issue - how safe was safe, how protective was a protector? Harry wished they had a deadline to hold - in periods of aimless basic research as currently, Ray could be annoying with his endless quest for perfection ... The engineering principle, as he called it. Sometimes, Harry found it hard not to shout, *Get yourself laid by something soft and voluptuous, that'll teach you engineering!*

But then, who knew? Maybe Ray got his tireless energy from just that source.

At any rate, Tony would come with a triple-encoded remark about people mixing *bushido* with business, had honed this skill over the years with Ireen, who always felt pleased telling her husband about Japanese ethics. And Harry - he would take the remark and bow.

For an instant, he felt tempted to jump directly into the training hall, to come up and ask innocently what was taking Tony that long. Maybe he would have done it when arriving in time. While now, being late, it seemed cheap, spoiling Tony's fun while searching for something subtle.

So Harry came out in the garden.

Police cruisers in the driveway, one of them with the lights still flickering. Cops walking around, their habit that of people belonging there. Harry felt a choking in his throat, a pressure growing worse with every step he was hurrying toward the building.

One figure looked up, froze, regained movement, a hand flying to the holster, coming up, aiming at him. "Stop! ... Don't move, buddy."

Harry stopped.

"Grab the air - and slowly, if ..."

He'd had his share of police slang, probably most of it on the set with Tony, knew what he was supposed to do. Carefully, Harry spread his arms, raised them, his hands coming together over his head.

Three other figures had registered the scene, had followed the example of their colleague, except that they were using some cover behind a car or a tree. Now four guns were aiming at him.

"Get on your knees, then kiss the grass."

That was a bad sign - not even letting him reach a car where he would stand off balance, his legs spread apart, to be checked, the way it was done in these movies ... Harry knelt down, flung himself forward, not even using his arms to temper the low fall.

"You're used to that, huh? Know the drill ..." A muzzle was pressing in his neck while hands scanned his belt, armpits.

"Move around - slowly."

Harry turned around, looking into two faces a bit less strained than a moment ago. Sensing, he felt some relief and a lot of burning rage, together with the frustration from being forever too late ... For what?

He was scanned in front. The man felt his wand, stiffened, pulled it out, examined it, looked at him. "You're a magic?"

"Yes."

"Now you're as magic as a flat tire." The cop stepped back. "You can sit up ... Who are you? What's your business here?"

Harry came up, resting his arms on his knees. Now he was armed better than this cop could even dream of, only it didn't feel like an improvement. "My name is Harry Potter, I'm a friend of the family. What happened here?"

"Leave the questions to me. Some ID card with you?"

"No, none. Please - what about Tony? Ireen? Tanitha?"

"That the family? ... There's ..." Into the cop's still pending suspicion, Harry could feel something new growing - uneasiness, a desperation of a new quality. "The lieutenant'll be there any moment, he may answer you. In the meantime ..."

"Please, Officer - I need to know! What did ... What's in there?"

Something like pity, or sympathy, he'd touched a spot. "A body ... and two more outside, except ..."

"Three? - All three?" Harry felt his claws tightening ...

"No - the two outside were ours."

"And - the one inside?"

"Male."

Harry's face turned to the house. "Tony ..." Next instant, he became aware that there was no time yet. "And what about Ireen? And Tanitha?" Sensing the man's hesitation, he added, "Ireen's his wife, and Tanitha is their daughter - can you tell me something?"

A door closed in the man's head. "Sorry, no ... The lieutenant will ask you more, but - how did you come to that place? Where have you been a moment before?"

"I jumped - apparated, I mean. From Ireland. Now - can I move?"

"Ireland??" The cop's suspicion was rising again. "So you haven't been around when - when this took place?"

"No, officer. Please - I'd like to play along, but I'm not sitting here in the grass while Ireen and Tanitha ..."

The cop's hand moved to his holster. "Keep cool - we've found two cops dead, that makes for itching fingers, so for your own ..."

Harry saw a figure in civil clothes walking toward the entrance. "Is this the lieutenant? Please tell him about the woman and the child, now!"

"I guess he ..."

The cop didn't continue, and something Harry felt in that man made him lose patience. "I'm in the house."

"No you ..."

The rest couldn't be heard from the entrance hall to which Harry had jumped. Hearing noises from the kitchen, he stepped forward, reached the doorframe, saw the scene.

The lieutenant, bending low over the crumpled figure of Harry's former friend Tony, now a corpse lying still, blood on his chest, another trickle at the side of his head, his sightless eyes staring ahead, his face showing something surprisingly close to satisfaction.

And another cop, standing, at this moment turning. "What the hell ..." His hand moved to his holster - had these cops just one reflex in their two brain cells?

The lieutenant registered the movement, turned around. Seeing Harry, he turned back to the cop. "Who's that clown?" Not getting an answer, he looked at Harry again. "This is a crime scene. Wait outside."

"I'm not touching anything. The woman and the child - that's my concern." Staring at the corpse again, Harry registered the particular arrangement - Tony at the feet of an empty high chair, a small piece of bread, wet, probably from munching and nuzzling ...

The lieutenant had followed Harry's glance. "You know the family?"

"Yes - that's Tony Chee, Ireen is his wife and Tanitha is their ..." Harry's reply, given almost mechanically, stopped. "How did your people - I mean, why did they come?"

The lieutenant seemed to register something in Harry's face. "Alarm in the precinct."

"Then ..." Suddenly Harry felt a lack of breath, swallowed. "There's a chance that - I'll be back in a moment, don't shoot at me when I appear again, okay?" Not waiting for confirmation, feeling sure this lieutenant would take the obvious conclusion, he jumped ... Into the training hall.

And there - in her playpen, a tiny light above, illuminating a face which right now was turning from miserable to smiling ... Tanitha.

Harry reached her, took her up, felt like crying, steadied. "C'mon, my angel, I'm with you."

A trembling sigh in her throat signaled deep relief.

Harry decided to use the entrance hall again - that cop had felt a bit twisty. Coming out, he made a step toward the kitchen, stopped. "Lieutenant? ... I'm here."

Quick steps, the lieutenant's figure appearing, stopping cold - then, for an instant, it looked as if the man's knees would go slack. "Sweet Jesus - oh, whew ... She isn't ... And I thought ... Where have you been?"

"In the training hall." Harry pointed at Tanitha's bracelet. "See that piece? That's why ... And Tony died for it."

A moment later, they were sitting in the family room, and Harry explained toward the detective, who introduced himself as Lieutenant Seeger, how the bracelet had come around Tanitha's wrist, and what it did. "Tony must have activated it with the kidnappers at his back - that's why he looks so satisfied ... And that's why they killed him."

The lieutenant examined the bracelet. "Never heard about models like that."

"They ain't offered in public. That's the only one so far." Seeing the detective's look, Harry added, "I'm a member of the development team."

"You're an engineer?"

"Not really - the engineer is Ray, Ray Purcell. I was the one for the magical part."

The lieutenant examined him. "That explains why - still, you were pretty quick there in the kitchen ... You've seen corpses before, huh?"

"Yes. Of friends and of others. But I still wonder ..." Harry stopped, remembering a more urgent question. "We still don't know about Ireen."

"It might ..." Lieutenant Seeger looked hopeful. "What car does she drive?"

"A Lexus."

"Wait a minute." The detective stood up, headed out, came back shortly afterwards. "An empty slot in the garage, and no Lexus. Seems we are ..." He didn't finish, kept looking at Tanitha.

Harry seized for his phony, pressed a button, checked the display when getting no answer. "If she has a business appointment, she locks down her device. I'll try again in fifteen minutes."

"What's her profession?"

"She's a geisha."

"A geisha??" Harry saw an expression of surprise and disgust in the lieutenant's face.

He tempered himself - some minutes ago, he had cursed inwardly at some cops and their attempt to find a target for their frustration, and now he felt dangerously close to the same idea. "Lieutenant Seeger, I think you haven't the faintest idea what a geisha is."

"No? ... What's she doing?"

"Pouring tea." The rage shot up in Harry. "And if she's fucking, then only ..." His head, having turned toward the kitchen an instant ago, tilted forward.

"Sorry, Mr. Potter ... And where might she be doing that? ... Er, I mean ..."

"Anywhere in the valley, in some company that has high-rank visitors from Japan." Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I shouldn't have said that."

"That's okay, so we have that in common ... How long did you know Mr. Chee?"

"How long?" Harry counted in his mind. "Fourteen years - first as a movie director, then as a friend and ..." He looked at the lieutenant. "What I cannot understand - how did they manage to come inside? That close to him? And even so - he's ... He was my aikido partner, he was good, a man with a gun wouldn't have impressed him that much - at close range, I mean."

"Mr. Potter ..." The lieutenant hesitated. "This is the first case of a failed kidnapping we know about, and I dearly hope our luck strikes for the second time today - I mean, we might learn something new. We'll have to talk a lot more, except first I wanna make sure these - er, they're not blowing the traces ... You won't mind staying a while?"

"Mind?" Harry stared at him. "I'm not going to leave before Ireen is found." Then another thought struck him. "And I want to be the one who's going to tell her."

"Then you're one in a million ... Please hold that place till the forensic guys are done, okay?" Lieutenant Seeger left to supervise his uniformed colleagues, if that was the term he'd used.

Harry waited five more minutes before trying the phony again. No response.

Then some other people entered the house, apparently the forensics, and maybe also a pathologist. One of them asked him whether his fingerprints could be found in the house. When Harry said yes, they asked him for samples, and he filled a page with prints of his fingers.

Tanitha found this interesting and wanted to contribute her own, only they weren't required.

Harry walked outside. He intended to be visible, with the girl on his arm, should the Lexus appear.

Some minutes later, Lieutenant Seeger found him in the garden. "Inside, you were about saying something you wonder how the kidnappers could come into the house, right?"

"Yes, and why Tony found no chance for more defense. Maybe because ..." Harry fell silent.

"Maybe what?"

"You know, I was thinking about magic. You can spell someone so he'll do what you want. Only, such a spell doesn't pass a closed door, and then - if Tony had been spelled, he'd never been able to press the button ... Still, for me, something here smells of magic."

The lieutenant waited another moment, then said, "Mr. Potter, let me tell you that much - from the known cases, we've learned that there are always several people, I think that's why your friend found no chance, even if some of them came close to him. These are professionals."

Harry looked wondering. "Of course - what else? But ..."

"No - there's no of course, Mr. Potter. Kidnapping, as we knew it until recently, has been an amateur crime. But these cases here are a different style."

"What do you mean, amateur crime?"

Lieutenant Seeger made a pacifying gesture. "Can we delay that, please? There's something else - if I'm not much mistaken, I guess I know how they managed coming inside ... We've found a young man, has been anaesthetized with ether or whatever, he's still pretty dizzy, but he said something about lawn mowing - well, and we found the lawn mower standing in the grass. So it looks as if one of the kidnappers pretended to be him and made his way inside."

"Wait a sec - Tony was very careful with opening his door ..." Harry looked around. "Where is this young man?"

"He's still too dazed - we have to wait some more time before we can interrogate him."

"No, we don't. We can speed up things - where is he?"

The lieutenant eyed him somewhat suspiciously. "It won't help to strangle him, Mr. Potter."

"Certainly not, but I can do a bit more than jumping around - and can we *now* ..."

"C'mon."

Harry followed, stopped. "Can someone watch for that Lexus? I want to be seen by her and talk with her before she has time to figure out what happened."

"Sure, Mr. Potter, except ..." The lieutenant examined him once more.

Feeling impatience, Harry was about to urge again when he sensed another wave of suspicion rise in the detective. For an instant, he was at a loss to interpret this, then he knew what it meant, exhaled deeply. "Lieutenant Seeger, do you remember an ex-colleague of yours by the name of Ramon Garcia?"

"No, not at the moment - why?"

"Well, I'm trying to find a way to raise my credentials, so we can stop losing time on that, and Ramon could have ..."

"Ah - wait a sec ..." The detective snapped his fingers. "Garcia, huh? ... And Potter - yes, that rings a bell somewhere - er, wasn't it a kidnapping case too? And he was - er ..."

"Yes, he's a wizard. And for Ireen - remember what I shouted at you inside? ... It still holds true. You can suspect me if you find a dead kidnapper, and rightfully so - and can we *now* ask that young man?"

Without another word, the lieutenant spoke with a uniformed figure, then winked at Harry to follow toward an ambulance car.

The young man stood at the open backside, his arms put on the platform to support him, giving the view of someone trying - or desperately avoiding - to throw up. Registering the scene, Harry offered Tanitha to the lieutenant. "Can you hold her for a second?"

"What ..." A flash from dark eyes stopped the question.

Harry touched the shoulders of the young man, started his mind wave gently, increased a bit, then more, raising a gasp and a deep inhaling. Then he let go.

The figure turned. "Whoa ... How ..."

Harry showed his teeth, the closest thing to a smile he could manage. "Kind of acupuncture without needles, you know."

No, the young man didn't, seemed grateful nevertheless, felt ready to answer Seeger's questions - about his name, and whether he still was wearing all his clothes.

"Yeah, sure, why ..."

"Nothing missing?"

The young man scanned himself, checked around. "No - er, wait - my cap ... Maybe it's where I fell down."

Harry asked, "How does it look?"

"Just a cap ..." The young man shrugged. "A red one - from the Cardinals."

The lieutenant, visible only for Harry, pointed down the street and shook his head. Following a suspicion, Harry asked, "Say, er, Sammy, how did it feel when they stunned you?"

"Dunno ... not at all, somehow ... Can't remember well."

"How did it smell?"

"Smell? ... There was no smell. I was walking, and next thing I remember, I was lying in the underbrush."

Examining the bulky figure, a solid layer of fat over an equally unmistakable layer of muscles, Harry felt sure to know what had happened. "That's all, thank you."

Walking back, he was quickly caught by the lieutenant. "What do you make of it?"

"He's been stunned."

"Yes, sure, that's why we had ..."

"No - I mean, in the literal ... Sorry, that's wizardese - He's been anaesthetized only as the second measure ..." Harry explained the stunning spell. "They didn't want taking any chances of noise, or a shout - they stunned him with this spell, and then they made him breathe some of that chloroform or what it was."

"Why? - In addition to that spell?"

"Stunning isn't time-limited. Either someone had to come back to destun him, or he'd been found still stunned - and every wizard would have recognized that state instantly. These are wizards."

"Bastards ..." Lieutenant Seeger twisted. "Sorry, that wasn't meant - er ..."

"I know. Is this the first proof of magic involved?"

"Yes."

"Who checked it?"

The lieutenant stared at Harry. "You asking for some homework, Mr. Potter? ... Might be an idea - only it's gruesome, and there might be a problem with clearance and whatnot ..."

Harry felt something like a *déjà-vu*. "I'm pretty sure we'll find a way, Lieutenant Seeger, I can offer some credentials."

"Such as? ... Aside from ..."

"The FBI - aside from."

The lieutenant's face showed a mix of enthusiasm and sourness. "I might prefer the aside more."

"Whatever." Harry didn't care much about these local authority conflicts, only that they were badly suited to improve his mood. "What's bothering me - why did they only stun him? ... I mean, why's he still alive? They killed Tony, they killed your men ... Why not this Sammy?"

"Their *modus operandi*." The lieutenant checked Harry's face to see whether he was following. "They don't kill as a rule. The kidnapping went as planned until Mr. Chee managed to send the girl off. Then ... There's a gunshot in his shoulder, I can't help thinking that's been a last warning. Does that copy with your knowledge of him?"

"Tony was a fighter. And for Tanitha, they could have ..." Harry swallowed. "When we installed this portkey, we were discussing alternatives." He looked at the lieutenant. "Tony knew what was coming."

The detective nodded. "What I thought ... Well, the cruiser team that got killed - they were pretty close when the alarm came, my guess is they found them still there, blocked the exit ... Although it's strange they couldn't fire a single shot - the only traces of a gunfight are the shots in their bodies."

"Not strange at all - they were stunned first, and shot then. They must have seen something."

"Shit ..." The lieutenant's face flushed. "Then I have to apologize once more."

"Why?"

"Because - well, you know, these cruiser teams ain't always the cleverest, particularly not in a quarter as quiet as this one here ... And what I saw made me think ..."

"They messed up - yes, I see."

The lieutenant had a desperate look in his face. "Mr. Potter, how can you fight magic criminals with just a gun?"

"Not at all - you can fight fire only with fire, you need wizards in your ..."

Harry stopped, froze for an instant, steadied himself for the next moments - a Lexus was coming up the street.

* * *

Gabriel Uriah Potter was sitting at his desk, trying to come to terms with this math stuff. Unfortunately, he had trouble with it.

Part of his problem was the temptation to drop the books, jump down to the beach in the bay, and play his flute. In this room, found in the north tower just below Sandra's suite, a look through the window was enough to lose all interest in homework. However, Gabriel felt fiercely determined to solve this stupid riddle, so mastering this temptation was easy play.

Another part of the trouble was the choice of media. He could use his computer, only that typing on the keyboard still caused some problems - he felt slow, pretty ridiculous actually, considering his fluency on musical keyboards. Or he could use the dictapen, with the unlucky effect that his wrong calculations would be inked into the paper, staring at him accusingly. Undoing a line on the computer screen worked much faster - why couldn't he type with the pen and undo with the keyboard?

The major problem, however, was the topic. Math. Such an unimaginative collection of numbers ... They didn't live, they couldn't be felt like people or instruments ... When the class was dealing with sets, unions, disjunctions, Gabriel could follow easily, caught the idea from the teacher's drawing instantly. But as soon as it came to weird operations such as division, he felt nearly helpless.

Maybe it was a question of terminology. Division - Gabriel could divide any set into its subsets at a flick of an eye. Only the teacher said, this was a split, not a division, and a subset was totally different from a fraction.

Gabriel could handle fractions, quite expertly so. One fraction of his mind listened to the sound from the sea, waves lapping up the beach and dying. Another fraction was constantly registering the presence of the other people in the castle - his mother, his sister, Dobby and Winky, Nagini ... While not his father.

Harry absent, this state always gave him a special feeling of freedom. Which seemed strange, somehow, because Gabriel didn't feel trapped when his father was at home. Maybe it was because Harry could be found in or around the castle most of the time, at least after school hours - in contrast to Gabriels mother, whose presence always felt like an enrichment, even if she kept working in her office like now.

Hadn't there been the time difference, Harry's training sessions with Tony would have taken place in the morning. But with seven hours between Ireland and California, Harry left before supertime and returned - well, sometimes just after the training, sometimes later, depending on what Tony and Ireen had cooked up to hold him there. And Tanitha, of course, except she wasn't cooking up anything by herself - not counting her sheer presence, that was.

This would come in the future, Gabriel felt sure. Harry, the deputy godfather, he he. The boy had learned not to use this term with his mother around - she felt embarrassed instantly, and Gabriel had no intention to make her feel that way. Grinning inwardly was okay, but otherwise ...

Was this a joke? He would have liked to ask, but whom? Not his mother, for obvious reasons. Not his father, because Harry's answer might not be completely objective. Not Sandra - an older sister was a tricky knowledge base, to be used with care.

Actually, this was another temptation to master - Gabriel had sensed something new and disturbing in his sister, would have liked to spy a bit more, just to give this sensation some kind of outline. Only problem was, this would be dishonest.

He knew she wouldn't catch him. Long ago, Gabriel had evaluated the level at which Sandra could register his attention, kept just below since then. Still ... Listening to the stray effects was okay, it wasn't him to blame if people couldn't hide their ...

He froze for an instant. His father was back, much earlier than expected. And he had brought guests - two actually, Ireen and Tanitha. Normally, this would have been reason to get excited, only today there was something dark and heavy in these emanations ... In Ireen's, while the baby nearly felt as always.

And Gabriel's father felt like a white wall, which meant his guard was up to maximum.

These news were enough to drop the books and go downstairs - walking, using the time to gather more information. To Gabriel's surprise, Sandra did not follow. Maybe her own concern was keeping her so busy that she hadn't noticed.

He found the two guests in the family room, his father apparently on his way to tell Cho. Ireen looked like stunned, her face almost blank, only the girl was smiling at him.

Scanning stronger, Gabriel felt shock, emptiness, loss, still beyond grasp, and ... Tony! It had to do with her husband, and that left little choice in what the reason for her stupor might be.

Gabriel sat down at her side. "Ireen? ... What happened to Tony?"

Her head turned, registering him, maybe not fully, although her face showed no surprise. "He's dead ..."

That was exactly what Gabriel had thought. Death ... What did it mean, to be dead? What did it mean for the survivors? This was the first time he faced such a situation, and he was determined to use the opportunity. "How?"

A flicker in Ireen's eyes - she felt uncertain, probably whether she should tell this boy, young as he was, dropped the concern as meaningless. "They shot him. He saved her from them, and they shot him."

Her - that was Tanitha. So Tony saved the girl - from what? From them, yes, only what had *they* planned to ...

Harry came in, looked at Gabriel, not smiling, not showing surprise either. "Hello, son. Where's Sandy?"

"Upstairs."

"Can you fetch her, please?"

"Sure."

Maybe his father had intended to make him leave the room for a moment, but then, maybe not. At any rate, Gabriel sent the mind equivalent of a whistle blow, without moving, watching as his mother entered the room.

She looked consternated, still more so when Ireen responded to her entrance not stronger than to his own, a moment ago. Then Cho said, "C'mon, Ireen - leave the girl here, and come with me."

Ireen seemed to understand, except that she held Tanitha still tighter.

Harry made a step, but for once Gabriel was faster than his father. He touched Ireen with one hand, the girl with the other. "We'll look after her ... She'll be here when you come back." At the same time, he sent the same message with his mind, feeling Ireen listen to him, understand, finally believe. He took the girl from her arms, put Tanitha into his lap.

Looking up, Gabriel saw his father's eyes resting on him, and for an instant he felt a door opening, to send him a message of approval and satisfaction - enough so he would have beamed, if not for the other feelings he had sensed in the background ... Sorrow, rage, white-hot fury.

Sandra stood in the room. "What's up? ... What happened to Ireen?"

Harry sat down and told them what Tony had done, paying with his own life.

Gabriel asked, "What is kidnapping, Dad?"

His father's lips went thin. "Stealing a child from the parents, and returning it only for a lot of money."

"So they pick rich parents, right?"

"Yes."

"Could they pick us?"

His father's eyes closed for an instant, opened again, in a face like stone. "They might come up with the idea."

Sandra said, "Then they'd be in for a surprise."

Gabriel thought it over. "No - two of them."

Harry nodded. "Yes, definitely so, but still - they might not know, and that's what makes it dangerous. Anyway - these people operate in the States, not here."

Sandra asked, "Are you going to find them?"

"I talked with the police detective. We'll talk again, and ..." Harry fell silent.

Gabriel glanced at his sister, back at his father. "How did it happen? I mean, with Tony, and ..."

"I wonder if this really's a good idea, telling the details to both of you ..."

There was a look in his sister's face as though she was going to say something like, *Maybe not him, he's too young for that*, only she wouldn't, while Gabriel would. "Sandy thinks I'm not old enough for that, but she's wrong - unless it's true for both of us."

"Okay," sighed Harry, "a clear picture can't be worse than what you might imagine otherwise." Then he explained how Tony had been tricked. Coming to the end, he looked at Tanitha. "He died to save her, and it worked ... I wish she'd be a bit older, so we could ask her."

Gabriel, his mind suddenly in fast forward, looked at his sister. "Shall we try?"

Sandra glanced at the girl, back at him, her eyes widening. "I wouldn't see enough."

"Could be, me neither, but ... Only, how to recall the memory?"

Sandra examined the girl again. "I have an idea - let's go into the kitchen."

Following her thought, Gabriel nodded appreciatively. In practical matters, his sister was clearly ahead, no doubt about that. He looked at his father. "Can you guard the door? ... For Ireen, I mean."

A fleeting shadow of a smile in Harry's face. "You meant someone else too, son ... Allright."

Gabriel walked into the kitchen, already feeling the weight of the girl. When he arrived, Sandra had the high chair present.

He placed Tanitha in the seat, thought for a second, grabbed another chair to place it behind, to sit down, his hands lightly at Tanitha's neck. He exhaled deeply. About to nod toward

Sandra, he saw her reaching Harry, hidden behind the door. A moment later, she went to a cabinet, opened it, and came back with a small piece of bread, offering it to Tanitha.

After a second, Gabriel realized - this had to be some detail missing in his father's report.

Sandra waited for his nod, then looked at the girl. "Where's Tony?"

Gabriel was somewhere deep inside her mind, felt uncertain with the girl, hearing that question, heard then Sandra asking, "What happened, Tanitha? ... What happened with Tony?"

Still - no, here it came, a mix of déjà-vu and curiosity, lack of understanding, surprise, suddenly a change of the scene, and after a moment, the feeling of being alone, unpleasantly so.

Gabriel stopped his trance-like concentration. "Okay."

In a rush, his father was there to grab Tanitha, to soothe the girl who had started whimpering a bit, while Sandra made the high chair disappear. Gabriel followed his father back into the family room, waited until Sandra had joined them.

"She remembered how he came to her, and how she suddenly was somewhere else - in the hall, that is. And there were two other people, one close to Tony and the other farther off."

"Probably at the door," said his father, whose eyes were fixed on him.

"The closer figure - there was a moment of pleasant feeling, as if she'd welcomed him ... As if she'd known him - and then, something like a surprise, as if he wasn't what she thought he was ..."

Harry's voice showed suppressed excitement. "Could be the red cap - she thought she saw this Sammy, because that was the one wearing the cap ..." He looked forcibly neutral. "Was it clear enough for colours?"

"No, not that much. But there was ... When she realized it wasn't what she'd thought, the change was - somehow, it didn't feel as if this was someone else, instead, it felt like something totally foreign - a tiny bit frightening ..."

"A black one?" asked Sandra.

"Dunno ..." Gabriel looked at his father. "Do you know whether she's seen blacks?" Next instant, he shook his head. "No, that doesn't fit somehow - a normal stranger, that would have felt like curiosity, but it was something else - something that made her a bit frightful."

Sandra said, "Maybe his expression."

"No," replied his father, "such people look horrible only in bad movies, while ..." He stopped, his face lighting up. "I guess I know."

"What?" From two sides.

"Masks." Harry looked at Tanitha. "What we all learn first - to distinguish between a face and something else. Everybody registers the difference between a face and a mask. And these masks - of course!" He looked triumphant. "Over there, they sell masks for halloween - the more gruesome, the better."

Then he beamed. "You were great, you two. But please, no word as long as Ireen's around."

Gabriel felt like bursting of pride, couldn't imagine anything that might feel better, despite of the situation.

A moment later, however, he could. That was when his sister said, "Well, okay, but - you know, that's been him. Because me - er, I'd been chanceless."

* * *

For a while, Cho had to treat Ireen like a child. No, worse - like a zombie, walking when pulled, sitting down when pushed, doing nothing from her own impulse. And as if that wasn't enough, Cho had to deal with her own feelings.

Shock, the moment Harry had entered her office to tell her. Rage, thinking about faceless figures in a house far away yet well known. Something dark and unbearable in the short moment she tried to imagine herself in this situation, dropped quickly, to be replaced by a kind of thankfulness she wasn't, followed by guilt about this relief, seeing Ireen.

And, somewhere in her mind, a growing uneasiness at the thought of what Harry might be thinking right now, more importantly, might be planning. His friend killed ... The father of Cho's goddaughter, raising another sting of guilt.

She guided Ireen to one of the guest rooms, had to carry the bag Ireen had come with by herself, had to unpack by herself while Ireen was sitting in a chair, staring ahead mindlessly. What Cho found in the bag had been gathered in a haste, seemed halfway sufficient for Tanitha's needs while not for Ireen's.

Didn't matter. These cabinets were a jump away - although, come to think of it, Cho would go shopping for Ireen before she would ask Harry to fetch something from that house ...

As if this would prevent him from doing so - only, Cho wasn't going to be the one who sent him.

Finished with the bag, she stepped to Ireen, put her hands on the woman's shoulders. Had she been Harry, she would have sent a wave. But she wasn't, and maybe the thought was wrong - he had passed Ireen over to her, for these first minutes that started to feel like a bad eternity.

Bending closer, Cho realized - although Ireen still was in some kind of stupor, the events had left their traces outwardly. A sour smell, for instance, cold sweat dried on a skin lacking life.

"What about a shower, Ireen?"

Had this been a nod? ... Whatever, the fresh widow didn't move.

Cho became aware that the shower would not work. Ireen would be standing there, getting a cold or a skin burn before mustering any reaction. "I've got a better idea. C'mon, up with you."

She guided Ireen to the next bathroom, one of many in this castle, offering a luxurious bathtub, as well as other installations, and room enough to enjoy a cleansing ritual, and maybe more.

While now it was about cleansing only. Cho undressed Ireen, ordered her to sit down and to pee before she let her climb into the water she had scented with some oil.

Sitting there, waiting for Ireen to taw from her shock in the hot water, Cho thought - wasn't it a kind of joke, this bathing in the midst of summer while down at the bay the most refreshing waves would welcome them? Except that Ireen would drown instantly, while here she was fully under control.

Cho seized for a sponge, started to wipe Ireen's skin from the shoulders to the legs, trying to remember where, according to the rules of acupuncture, the nerve nodes might be located that were worth stimulating. The soles of the feet - that was all she felt sure about, so she took one of Ireen's legs, stroking the soles, the feet, the calves upward, then the other.

And all the time, she could examine a fine body, slender, very different from others she'd seen. Slim legs, narrow hips, small breasts - under different circumstances, these administrations might have been more entertaining. Even so, Cho felt a slight tingling in her groin.

Realizing where her thoughts were drifting off, she chided herself inwardly, with the only effect that this tingling increased in strength. This body, not showing any impulse of its own, not resisting any of her ministrations, was intriguing.

Feeling like a naughty girl, Cho moved the sponge from Ireen's throat downward, between her breasts, over her belly, into the black triangle, and still a bit further down, pressing gently.

The response from that body was faintly more than zero - an intaking of breath, while Cho's own reaction came much stronger, a quivering as though her own body had been touched there, and a sudden need for more air.

High time to stop, before ... She took Ireen's hand. "Come up." When the body was standing upright, Cho grabbed the shower nozzle, shifted the handle to cold water, and pulled the tap. "Turn ... round, and round."

And finally, a reaction - Ireen gasping, raising her arms, uttering a word. "Enough."

Cho helped her climbing out, trying to unlock her glance from the sight of two large nipples, fully erect after the sharp treatment from the cold water. Seizing for a towel, she started to rub her dry.

"Okay - gimme ... lemme ... thanks." Ireen, sufficiently awake, took the towel to finish the task by herself. However, moments later, the towel was hanging from her hands, forgotten, her eyes staring at the wall.

"C'mon - take that bathrobe, then let's get dressed."

"Er - yes."

Back in the guest room, for an instant it looked as though Ireen had lost track again. Then she focused at Cho, nodded, dropped the bathrobe, looked around, found the way to the cabinet.

Cho watched Ireen dressing in panties and a kimono, perfectly suited for the season while not for the thoughts still crossing Cho's mind. Then she walked ahead, just in time having the good sense to steer toward the dinner room, rather than the kitchen.

At first, Ireen was just sitting there, sipping her tea. Only when Harry joined them with Tanitha on his arm, when the girl started munching a piece of toast, she grabbed some food, started chewing, slowly, mechanically.

Then she looked at Harry. "Did he suffer?"

"No ... He was shot in the shoulder first, probably after he made Tanitha disappear, and as an attempt to make him follow orders ..."

For a second, Cho wasn't trusting her ears, hearing Harry's report of these cruel details. His next words told her - he knew exactly what he was doing.

"... without hurting him so much that he'd be unable to obey. Only he didn't. It has been only seconds before the first police cruiser came along, with sirens and all. The other shots were deadly - at an instant."

"If he ..." Ireen looked at her daughter, back into Harry's face. "If he'd obeyed, he'd be alive, right?"

"In the physical sense, yes." Harry held her stare. "Only he'd be dying every minute that's passing now, and he never would have regained that loss."

Ireen nodded. "Me neither. He ..." A dry sob. "He didn't expect to come through, did he?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "He knew. He had performed the task of saving her, you could see it in his face - and nothing else mattered for him in this moment."

Another nod. "Would that they'd waited still a bit."

"Huh?" Cho couldn't imagine this being a joke, found no other interpretation.

Ireen turned to her. "He felt ready for another child ... Some remarks he made. Only ... That's why."

Cho didn't know what to reply, felt sure there was none. Ireen's voice had been flat, matter-of-fact, a total lack of the longing that might come in time.

After a moment's silence, Ireen started to speak. Telling scenes, of yesterday, of a month ago, or a year - what Tony had done, what he'd said, how he used to be, and to behave in certain situations. She spoke to no one in particular, mostly to herself, as it seemed.

Cho knew most of it, while some habits were new to her. Listening to Ireen, she wondered if she could describe her own husband as precisely as that, in such minute details. Probably not - but then, maybe because Harry was so much younger, still changing ... Or because he was predictable only in his motivations, while not his doings.

At some point, Ireen looked up, fixed her stare at Harry. "You were his only friend, did you know that?"

"Yes."

"Still, there is no obligation, Harry ... Do you hear me?"

"I know, Ireen ..."

Cho saw his eyes darken when he finished, "... not from Tony's side."

Then she saw Ireen suppress a reply, looking under herself, ostensibly also avoiding a glance in her own direction. So Cho said, "And not from your side, Ireen, and certainly not from mine ... And all this just doesn't matter - am I right?"

Harry's voice was calm. "Ireen's here for many reasons, but mostly for Tanitha's security, and for her own. As much as she's welcome - right now, this is a matter of necessity, while I want to make it a matter of choice."

Yeah, what else.

Cho rose. "What about a matter of sleep?"

Ireen glanced up, surprise in her face. "You - oh, yes of course." Next moment, she looked worried. "Can I sit here still a while? ... I'm not sleepy at all."

Little surprise - for her, it had to be late afternoon. Only that Cho didn't feel too happy with the idea of Ireen sitting alone - and meeting her husband's eyes, she knew he felt the same.

Holding his look for another second, she felt sure he agreed about something else, and whether it was his own idea or him reading her emotions wasn't really important. She took Ireen's arm. "Not here - come with me."

In the guestroom, feeling Ireen's look of wondering and worry, Cho asked, "Is there some night dress in the stuff you came with?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because we're not going to let you hang around alone - not today, and tomorrow we'll see. So why don't you change into that dress now?"

Something like relief, and embarrassment. "But ... And Tanitha?"

"For all I know, she's already in that small bed in the adjacent room - and most probably, she's already fast asleep." Cho showed a faint smile. "You know, Harry's quite good in making little girls sleepy."

Maybe she should have saved that, because the effect toward Ireen wasn't calming. At any rate, Ireen went to the cabinet, and Cho left to prepare herself.

Some minutes later, they were lying in the large bed - Ireen in the middle, Cho at one side, Harry at the other. Cho's own day had been long enough, still, she felt as wide awake as Ireen had claimed. And maybe as expectant, if not more, only less tense.

There was a way to ease the tension. Her hand came forward under the light bedcover, found Ireen's arm.

The first reaction was more stiffening, pretty much as expected. Cho started to stroke her - arm, shoulder, hair, flanks, registering that Harry was a bit more reluctant, but maybe only with his movement, not with his mind wave, because Ireen relaxed.

Cho took this as a good sign, found the silken belt of this thin night kimono, unfastened it, shifting the fabric aside, her hand resting on Ireen's belly. A slight trembling - looking up, Cho saw her eyes closed.

Soft skin, not as smooth as the thin garment she was slowly moving off, still the better choice for her own taste. She let her hand trail up, cupping a small breast, feeling a nipple respond to her caressing, which in turn made her own buds follow this example.

For some minutes, she continued that way, restricting her hand to a throat in which she could feel some pulsing, to a belly that had lost all tension, and to two breasts which seemed eager to take this burden. At the same time, she had to temper her own greed, barely mustering enough patience to play it slowly.

Then she took Ireen's arm, inched a bit closer, put this arm between her legs, the hand right where she felt more impatient than anywhere else. It was heightening her arousal considerably, while it also accelerated Ireen's breathing - just the proper moment to part her legs, fondling the tender flesh of her inner thighs.

Cho could only guess which of them was awaiting it more urgently - the moment when her fingers finally reached the soft swelling she had avoided all the while, to play around and along now, simultaneously raising a moan from Ireen's mouth and a gasping from her own.

She captured Ireen's leg under her own, recognized how Harry did the same at the other side, feeling pleasure as he kept his hand to these delicately shaped breasts, leaving this wonderful playfield to her alone.

And playing she did. Circling, exploring, testing for reactions. A short tap onto a tiny bud was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath, avoiding the playground for a few seconds altogether raised a twisting and an impatient groan.

At the same time, savouring her own growing excitement, Cho was playing in her mind with alternatives how to finish the game. After all, there was no hurry, save from her own desires.

Ever so slowly, she let her finger intensify the exploration, let her thumb rest on a sensible spot, and issued a short, sharp pressure. At this moment, she realized two misjudgements.

The first had to do with Harry. Almost too late, in a way, Cho became aware that he too had suffered a traumatic encounter, finding his friend shot down at the kitchen floor, while this short period of not knowing, before Tanitha was found in the training hall, could only have been an agonizing experience. And this meant - he deserved better than his passive role so far in this game.

A sharp sting of guilt shot through her entire body, miraculously concentrating just where Ireen's hand was tensing, releasing, and both effects together were pushing her almost beyond control.

Only - and this was the second misjudgement - this hand between her legs failed to relax once more, while her own hand could feel that her playing had sent Ireen already beyond the point of no return.

Too late for stopping now - Cho wasn't going to be cruel, quite the opposite, so she kept playing, concentrating a bit more while Ireen's body turned rigid, started to tremble, arching up the short span allowed with her legs imprisoned under two others, to fall down again with a ragged moaning.

Her face flushed from arousal and shame, Cho released Ireen's leg, pulled at Harry's arm. "Get moving - now!"

For an instant, she felt unsure whether her command had been clear enough - after all, there were two possibilities. But he'd caught her right, quickly took position between these trembling legs which currently seemed unable to resist, or to help in his efforts.

Even so, he found his way, was covering Ireen, his upper torso resting on his elbows, was moving slowly, taking his time ...

These legs had lost their slackness, were coming up, closing around Harry's thighs, apparently in an attempt to push him into a sharper pace.

Only this appeal seemed lost. What Cho could feel and see was a leisurely canter, rather than the feverish galloping down the last lane. And every movement was accompanied by Ireen's groaning, which sounded a bit desperate from overstimulation, otherwise quite passionate.

Cho knelt up, seized Ireen's slim ankles with thumbs and index fingers, to shift them farther upward, her other fingers resting on Harry's skin. And suddenly it felt as though the sensations of these two entwined bodies were duplicated in herself - a rippling inside her, a sensoric hallucination indiscernible from reality.

Her husband and his tricks ... He was sending his own waves of ecstasy into herself, or most of them - that much she registered before drowning in a fire that was burning her to ashes, unaware of her nails digging into the flesh of ankles and buttocks, when the flames roared up to peak level, to shrink in size and heat before another breeze started blowing into them, sending sparks everywhere.

She held tight, having lost the knowledge how to let go.

05 - Profiles

This morning, Sandra was up a bit earlier, would be in time to fetch Héloïse, just right to find breakfast seats in Beauxbatons. And, as she felt sure, certain neighbors. However, avoiding Héloïse's complaints was just a spin-off, the main reasons for waking early were yesterday's events in this house.

To some degree, it was simple curiosity. Death - what was that? Not the death coming to old people, after a lifespan one could be content with. No, sudden death. It held some fascination.

It would be a major topic in Sandra's next discussion with the High Priestess, if possible ... Or would this be like asking the blind for colours? After all, Aram'chee's state implied that death was not an issue - not for her.

Wasn't true. The topic would be sudden death, something the High Priestess was fully aware of, had caused it by herself at occasions. And the sub-topic would be not reaching an expected age, to which Aram'chee could be considered an expert from the opposite angle, being older than any living person - in one sense, while still waiting for her own time to grow old in freedom.

In a way, Tony had been old, from Sandra's perspective. Older than her parents, at least. Only he hadn't behaved old, quite the opposite. More boyish than her own father, so much for sure.

For a moment, Sandra tried to imagine Harry being boyish. She couldn't. He was young, compared to parents of other children her age, she was fully aware of that, but ... There was something in his usual manner which placed him closer to Aram'chee than to anyone else.

Which didn't mean adult, that would be something different. Sandra's mother appeared more adult, often enough, particularly so when worrying about things, while Harry didn't mind herself and Gabe storming forward in a way that seemed careless, at least according to Cho's remarks. So maybe her father was childlike, while not boyish. And definitely not childish, although Sandra's own experience with infantile behaviour appeared extremely limited.

Maybe with the exception of Héloïse, lately.

Not seeing Tony again - Sandra didn't know what it meant. An unclear feeling of a loss still to be encountered, that was the most accurate description of what she felt. More than anything else, Tony had been her father's training partner, and she had watched them umpteen times. He had treated her with friendliness and also with respect, fully aware of her power and her destiny, but sometimes - sometimes he'd said, "Know what? Let's do as if you were just an ordinary six-year-old." Or eight, or nine. And then he had treated her with ice cones, or a cart ride, something like that.

One day, she confessed to her father, "It's funny with him. He really can play it, like I'm really that girl, and then he goes, like, 'What are you going to do when you're big and have titties,' and then he laughs so much, the other people are looking at us, and then I have to laugh too."

And Harry said, "Of course he can. He's a movie director, he can make people do all things that are inside them. And somewhere inside yourself, there is just that little girl, and he tickles it and makes it show."

Sandra remembered her father's face at this occasion. Pleased, yes, but something else too - as if he was yearning to be treated the same way, that someone would tickle the small boy in him and make it show.

And now Tony would tickle no one ever again, a thought still quite unfathomable.

Coming into the kitchen, Sandra found her mother - and Gabriel, who'd been awake still earlier than herself, who right at this moment was declaring he'd be back as quickly as possible, to play his flute for Ireen, and for Tanitha.

"That's a very good idea," said Cho, "maybe down at the beach - and you know, you can play as sadly as you like, because if she starts crying, that's just good for her."

Gabriel digested this. "Did she cry yesterday?"

"Not at first," was the answer, "but after a while, yes." A faint smile was playing in her mother's face.

There was another concern on Sandra's mind. "Mummy, can we tell the Weasleys?"

"Why, yes, sure - but maybe not with other people around. When the newspapers are going to report the story, I'm pretty sure the name Potter will be mentioned if they list Tony's most successful movies, which they'll do ... So, connecting yourself with his widow in public isn't the best idea."

She'd never guessed. Only this wasn't a wise reply toward her mother, not in the morning and, at closer inspection, not in the evening either. And Sandra knew already that Héloïse would make trouble in this regard.

Not appearing under her own name had been a stupid idea. Except this remark wasn't suitable either, because her mother would most likely retort something about Beauxbatons altogether being a stupid idea - and Sandra could do without that, quite well actually, thank you very much.

She looked at Gabriel. "That's not your problem - but let's wait with the news till we're in school."

"Then Fleur will ask us why we didn't tell her instantly."

Now that was the least of Sandra's worries, and besides, Fleur would ask alright but only her brother - which meant for him, this prospect had some weight. Still, there was a solution. "Okay - you wait till Hély and I are gone, then you can tell."

Gabriel nodded, looking satisfied that his sister had solved this problem so quickly and efficiently.

While their mother - there was a look in her face, like after hearing something worth to be examined further. Although Sandra had tried to sound as casual as possible. But Cho's ears were really sharp - astonishingly so for someone with such a limited sensoric system.

It only confirmed the old wisdom both her father and Aram'chee were telling her often enough - powerful magic was just one way, other people got along with alternative techniques.

Under different circumstances, Sandra would have felt pride of her mother's sharp senses while at the current state of things, it was a bit bothering. Because now seemed a bad time to come with the news about some member of the Pouilly family.

They jumped. Héloïse looked pleased, even managing to avoid a remark whether she'd fallen out of bed, and moments later they were sitting in the Beauxbatons hall.

And guess what? They'd hardly started eating when the opposite seats filled with two other figures, known as Benoît and Frédéric.

Héloïse greeted them with a smile, giving Sandra a lesson in the fine art of letting boys dangle low. First, because her smile - if there was any difference at all - seemed friendlier toward Frédéric. Second, because she continued the conversation she'd started, coming in short sentences between bites.

Although it was more of a monologue. Although, somehow, it hadn't started at all, at least not before the boys' arrival.

Then it dawned on Sandra. Héloïse was talking about music, and how Michel had told her about xylophones and vibraphones, and what she thought about it, that this was a great idea - and while this might have been a perfectly natural topic, the main goal was to show off.

And Benoît caught it, with sinker and all. "You're a musician?"

"I play music, if that's what you mean."

Héloïse's voice sounded somewhat dismissive, quite as though there was little sense in discussing such superior matters with him. Sandra had a moment to muse about how much this might be closer to the truth than her friend would be willing to agree.

At any rate, Benoît took it as an invitation. "What do you play? Guitar?"

He was hit by a very contemptuous glance. At the same time, Sandra felt something like a plea in her mind, taking her a bit by surprise, maybe because her own thoughts had lingered on something else, on a picture of Gabriel waiting to come home again, to play a lone flute at a beach.

But then she caught the idea, gladly accepting this role - that of a herald for her friend's shine and glory. "She plays a harp. A Goblin harp."

"Goblin, huh?"

Benoît seemed desperate to find a sensible remark, while suddenly Frédéric looked very attentive.

"It's a Felison," continued Sandra. "Know what that means? ... There are just six of them, and you cannot own such an instrument, you can only have it for playing, and when you're old,

you have to find another player to receive your harp ... Héloïse got her own when she was three - from her godfather, who is a Goblin pretty high in the ranks."

Her friend's beaming kept mostly hidden - to the outside, that was, while not toward Sandra's senses.

Frédéric asked, "And the other guy you mentioned, what's his instrument?"

"You mean Gabriel?" Héloïse had taken over quickly. "Flute, mostly ... By the way, he's Sandra's brother, so it's of course a Chinese bamboo flute."

"That must sound great," said Frédéric. "A harp and a flute ..."

Benoît glanced at him, back at Héloïse. "Sounds pretty weird to me - why don't you try something serious? To play in a band, you'd be better off with more modern stuff - guitar, keyboard, drums, that's what you'd need to hit the charts."

"You're the expert, huh?" Héloïse's voice showed more teasing than detest. "And besides - Gabriel can play keyboards too, and for drums, Michel, that's my own brother, he has Goblin war drums - and who said we'd be interested in playing for an audience?"

Benoît looked flabbergasted. "Not? ... But then, what's the sense in playing music at all?"

Héloïse shot a glance of mock desperation toward her friend, which made Sandra suppress a grin, and a considerably more appreciating look toward Frédéric, which seemed astonishingly helpful to lose that grin instantly.

Looking at Benoît again, Héloïse said, "There is - but what's the sense in telling you?"

Frédéric laughed. "There is, Héloïse - he's an open mind, even though it doesn't look that way, sometimes." He pushed his friend's shoulder. "Benoît hasn't had some advantages like other people - " Frédéric looked at Héloïse, then at Sandra, "like you two, or your younger brothers ..."

Sandra tensed instantly. "What makes you think they're younger?"

"But ..." Frédéric stopped, flushed, hurried on after a second, "Well - if they'd been older, they'd be here in Beauxbatons, won't they? ... But they're not, so they must be younger."

Seeing two thoughtful faces staring at him, he added, "Yeah, maybe it sounds crazy, normally you'd expect music players to be older, but ..." He looked at Sandra. "Mozart was playing the piano at the age of four, right? And you said Héloïse got that harp when she was three."

His arguments seemed flawless. Well concluded, in a way. Just what you'd expect from a Pouilly, famous for their minds nothing short of brilliant.

Which meant - it might as well have been sure knowledge, to be hidden behind convincing arguments that were found in a fraction of a second.

* * *

Ramon Garcia, chief executive officer of *Groucho Biochemicals*, sat down at the breakfast table, seized for his cup with steaming coffee. Basically, he was still half asleep, waiting for the moment when the better half of this cup would burn him awake, so he could have a look into the morning newspaper.

Then he would grab a piece of this French bread, and while topping it with butter and confiture, he would ask his wife Marie-Christine why she was looking so tense.

Oh yes, he'd noticed her face - only they had learned to do things in order, at these first serious minutes of a new day. It had been her own advice, after several less successful exchanges of remarks and complaints.

Actually, having breakfast altogether had been her advice, if this was the proper term, because it had come with quite some pressure before Ramon finally agreed to spend these minutes in an orderly fashion and to treat his body with some food, that early in the morning.

When Marie-Christine came with this suggestion for the first time, shortly after she had started playing housewife rather than on some movie set, Ramon just laughed. "Forget it, honey - I've been a cop for too long. Cops have breakfast around eleven, some doughnut and a styrofoam in the car ... Except today, it's my desk or some conference room."

"Maybe you've been a cop for too long, but that's past." Marie-Christine looked very determined. "And now you're facing your fifties, and I have to keep my men in shape."

At that time, she had been breastfeeding Carlos, which was good for a remark at that occasion and several times later, but Ramon had settled to watching this spectacle - and to eat, because he wasn't allowed to do what he would have liked better.

It had stuck, even after her blouse kept closed at the breakfast table, and of course Marie-Christine was right, Ramon had noticed the difference in his morning hours' mood already by himself, although scoring only second place - Laila, his assistant, had been first.

And, after a while, he started enjoying it. Marie-Christine would have preferred him eating cheese or sausage instead of this jelly, but Ramon just had a sweet tooth, hadn't he, and - well, her own croissants weren't exactly the best arguments to work with in this matter.

Carlos, now at the age of five, shared his father's preference, and Ramon couldn't help thinking the boy's taste was the true reason why these sweets weren't banned from the breakfast table. Although - blackberry jam, or cherry, wasn't as sweet as what he'd found in these jars some time ago ... Still, the taste was delicious.

Esmeralda, in contrast, was a sausage freak. Well, little surprise that, considering her past. Because this past had taken place somewhere in Mexico, in some village with the poorest of the poor, with meat of any kind almost unknown as food, be it breakfast or supper.

When Esmeralda was three, her parents joined a group of other desperate people planning an illegal immigration at night. They came past the border while not much further. Because the truck contained more than people, drugs for example, a shooting started, and at the end, both her parents were dead.

Ramon had read about the accident in the newspaper. A drug shooting and some Mexicans didn't make headlines while an orphan girl of three made a good picture. Seeing that photo, eyes too big in a thin face, had touched a spot in him.

Three years ... As old as their own son, who was likely to remain a single child, after a difficult birth and what the doctor had told them afterwards. Ramon had placed the paper in front of Marie-Christine. "Seen that?"

"Yes." Her eyes, widening, had locked with his own.

"So what do you think?"

It had taken no efforts at all to convince Marie-Christine, little more to get things going - who'd be interested in some dirty three-year-old not speaking a word of English?

They had been - interested. Had fetched her from that orphanage, and Carlos himself became the one to break the barriers of mistrust. Halfway bilingual before - English and French - their son had traded language with his adopted sister, Spanish for English. By now, Esmeralda was truly bilingual while Carlos could balance her skill with one language fully mastered and two others halfway through. And the challenge still was up - Esmeralda didn't like being put out when Carlos and Marie-Christine exchanged remarks in French, did what she could to close the gap.

Today's headlines had to do with another kidnapping - a failed one, although with some casualties. For a moment, Ramon had a very unpleasant thought - were they famous or well-known enough to count as a possible target? ... Not he himself, for all he knew, while Marie-Christine - although, her last movie dated years back, and now her family name was Garcia rather than Thérroux ...

Then this thought was pushed aside because Ramon's eyes fell onto some names in the underlines. He gasped, let the newspaper fall down, looked at his wife - and then he knew where the strained expression in her face came from. "So you read it already, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And ..." Ramon studied the article again. "He managed to send the girl off, and that's why they killed him." His lips thinned. "A movie director, at his age - my God, why didn't he ..."

"You know why!" Marie-Christine flared at him.

"Yeah, sure - only, he still could be alive, the girl would be back in a day or two ... And the two cops still had their life."

"That's what you'd do?" Marie-Christine's glance was almost hostile.

Ramon kept silent for a moment. "Dunno ... What you can hear is a cop talking, not a father - play along, don't take chances ... 'specially not if there isn't a chance at all - their pattern is known by now ..."

After another moment's silence, he asked, "You didn't call him already, did you?"

"You mean 'arry? ... No, it'd feel so - so pushy, somehow. Like those people that can't get their eyes off an accident ... Maybe tomorrow."

"And Ireen?"

"Neither, for the same reason, still more so. Although ..." Marie-Christine's face looked softer now, "I think I know where to find her, and I guess she won't be back for a while - not before they're caught."

Ramon knew what she meant. An underemployed super wizard's friend had been killed, while it just so happened this wizard's wife was the godmother of the girl they'd failed to kidnap ... Cho would be in a hell of a mood, and for good reason.

Ramon kept his voice neutral. "That might take time."

"Doesn't matter." Marie-Christine shrugged. "Last time it took him - how long? Three years? Seven? ... Seventeen, depending on how you'd count." She looked at her husband. "It's not that he feels in charge of every crime in the world - it's a matter of friendship and obligation. He and Cho - they value that pretty high - almost incredibly so ..."

Ramon flushed. "Whom are you telling that?"

To himself, said her eyes, to himself who had been caught by Cho, probably a few weeks before blowing his head off with his own service revolver, to be hired as the Biochemicals CEO, and for what? For himself too, yes, but mostly for the benefit of Marie-Christine.

Ramon looked into the newspaper once more. "A Lieutenant Seeger's in charge - I wonder whether I should call him."

"What for?" Marie-Christine looked alarmed.

"Just to give him a fair warning whom he's dealing with - at his friendly side, I mean." Ramon grinned thinly. "Did you think I'd feel called to arms? ... Well, I've got my own kind of some delicate operation."

If this wasn't an understatement, then he wouldn't know. Two years from now, the world was in for a real surprise - when people would become aware how many of their children had magical power. There was already some rumour every now and then, some six-year-old or another showing strange capabilities. Sooner or later, someone would do a bit of research, would come up with astounding results.

Although - statistics and extrapolation were just another kind of magical art, untrustworthy in the eyes of everyone recoiling from the necessary consequences, when assuming these numbers were true. It had been like that for decades with ecological statistics - even now, with every country's face hit squarely by the weather, from spring to autumn, the facts were denied vigorously, and most of all from this country, supposedly God's own.

"I'm going to call Cho anyway," Ramon said. "If you want - I can ask Laila to check around, whether in Tony's place ..."

He faltered for an instant - it was no longer Tony's place, was Ireen's now.

"... or in the headquarters, or maybe nearby."

Today, the remark didn't raise a smile. Laila's feelings for the people in the Carron Lough castle were a public secret, maybe excluding just the snake, Nagini, but even that wasn't sure. Only this occasion was too sorrowful.

Marie-Christine studied her husband's face. "Ain't you tempted at all, to check that place by yourself? Or to have a word with the investigation team?"

"Oh no, no thanks - been there, seen that. I'm done with it, honey, believe me - and besides, for them, I'd be as useful as another hole in the head."

Marie-Christine made a face of disgust, and only then Ramon realized how distasteful this particular remark had been. Well, yes, except cop's language died harder than cop's habit.

And maybe cop's instincts died hardest. Sitting and chewing, Ramon had a bad feeling about this case - the last bullet hadn't flown yet, and everybody close to the scene could become a target - without even realizing, which was the nasty part of such a position.

* * *

Harry came out in the garden, a bit farther off the house than the previous day. It was a kind of precaution, should there still be police around - but as expected, the place looked empty.

Walking toward the house, his glance fell on the magnificent pool. This had been the place of many joyful meetings, with children splashing through the water - and Nagini too, serving as a water scooter first for Sandra and later for Gabriel. And Tony ... He hadn't been in swimming much, had used the pool mostly as an open air stage for watching bikini figures, having fun in playing the role of the moviemaker for whom casting was an issue to be discussed in a large bed.

Which he wasn't, without being too narrow-minded to discuss some things in a large bed, even with starlets.

Until Ireen appeared, that was. Afterwards, the pool had been used mostly by Tony's many guests, with Potters and Weasleys contributing to their number considerably. Some starlet or another still could be found there, in a way for the same reason as before, only that now well-formed legs weren't enough to get an invitation.

Because Ireen wasn't narrow-minded either, had a strong sense for nice decorations.

She hadn't been narrow-minded yesterday. In the afterglow of their lovemaking, Ireen had found the mood for some tenderness, had finally been relaxed enough to weep heartbreakingly - which was a relief, because now they could leave her alone.

Harry reached the entrance, found it sealed by the police. Well, he'd checked it only for the sake of completeness, not really expecting anything new.

He jumped inside. There was fingerprint powder everywhere, nothing remarkable else. He seized for his phony, called Ireen, and let her direct him toward some drawers and cabinets,

until he had collected all items she wanted at hand in the castle, had missed to gather yesterday.

Then Harry became aware that there was still room for new developments of *Groucho Transport & Security*, because what he'd liked to use now was a transporter key to send this bag home. He planned visiting the detective lieutenant, didn't want to appear with a bag - on the other hand, as short a time his jumping back home had taken, there was a psychological barrier ... Evolution hadn't foreseen magic, as it seemed, or the human mind still lacked a bit of adjustment.

But then, as an ex-Muggle by the name of Laila used to quote, evolution hadn't foreseen jet pilots flying turns of six g. Only this argument seemed proof that magic was something artificial.

In contrast to a mind evil enough to kidnap two-year-olds, kill their parents, and cops too.

Harry dropped the bag in the entrance hall, jumped downtown, walked the few steps to the building in which the detective would be found - hopefully.

Yes, Lieutenant Seeger was there, however in a meeting, and if he could leave his phone number ...

Harry decided to leave himself. This wasn't exactly to the satisfaction of that desk lady - worse, wherever he tried to fade into the furniture, he was sitting in someone's way. So he solved the problem by sitting down in Seeger's office - after mastering the wisdom not to ask for permit.

Through the glass walls, Harry could watch how the lady was glancing over every two minutes.

He could also watch how the detective entered the hall, how he was stopped by her, listening, looking up, then coming over and through the door.

"Mr. Potter." The man seemed to fight for some politeness in his voice. "You've picked a bad time for your visit - I'd rather we'd fix another time for our conversation - maybe this evening, although ..."

What Harry felt was a slight anger to find himself here in this office, little interest to talk with him now, then exhaustion, frustration - and something in addition which he considered promising. "Lieutenant Seeger, sorry to bother you so unannounced. I'd like to balance that, and in order not to waste time - can I treat you with a late lunch?"

"Lunch?" To Harry's small surprise, the thought seemed to find appeal, then the detective checked the large clock at the wall. "Fat chance at this time of the day - and besides, it just takes too long till we've found a place, and a parking lot ..."

"Then let's speed up things a bit." Harry touched the triangular wood on the desk, which showed the lieutenant's rank and name, murmured something. "Okay - would you please put your hand here?"

"And then?"

"Then you'll find yourself at the entrance of a restaurant, and myself too."

The look from the widening eyes didn't express belief, more a response to some challenge. The man's arm stretched, a hand coming down onto the wood ... Into the soft pop, Harry followed.

He came out in front of Luiz Pereira's restaurant, a gasping detective at his side. Harry said, "Is this fine with you? ... Then let's find a seat."

About to enter the restaurant, he was stopped by Seeger's voice. "Wait a sec - what if someone else touches that sign? I mean, I never saw it happen, but, you know, things always tend to pick the worst moment ..."

"It was a one-timer - you touching it neutralized the power."

"A one-timer ..." The lieutenant clapped his forehead. "Foolish me - why didn't I notice?"

They were welcomed by a middle-aged woman, who presented first a very polite smile, then a real one when she recognized Harry. "Oh - Mr. Potter, what a pleasant surprise ..." Next moment, her face turned solemn. "I was so sorry hearing the news about Mr. Chee. It's a real loss."

Harry made a small bow. "Yes it is, Senora Pereira - thank you for your sympathy, I'll tell Ireen ... By the way, this is Lieutenant Seeger, he's the investigating officer in this case."

The woman showed another smile. "Nice to meet you, Lieutenant." Then she guided them to a table in a corner.

The detective glanced around. "Pereira, huh?"

"Our usual place," said Harry. "This is truly neutral territory, as you'll certainly agree ..."

Luiz Pereira's career as a successful restaurant owner had started after his less successful time in circles for which members of the LAPD were most unwelcome. Ramon Garcia had played a role in the transit, he was also the one who introduced Harry and his friends. During the past years, Luiz had established a reputation as someone offering excellent food, quiet tables for some negotiations, and strict neutrality toward the various groups - counting the police as just another group in his clientele. All this combined with prices high enough to keep off the lower ranks.

"... but I have to admit, Luiz isn't entirely neutral toward myself."

"How's that?"

At this moment, a man was approaching them with a tablet of drinks. He deposited two glasses at the table, looked at Harry. "Mr. Potter, my condolences for the loss of your friend, and please express them also toward Mrs. Chee."

Harry stood up, shook the man's hand. "Thank you, Senor Pereira, and I certainly will." He introduced the host with his new guest.

Then Luiz asked, "As always, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, please."

When they were alone again, Harry turned to the lieutenant. "It means, we leave it to Luiz which courses to select. It's kind of a game - he's supposed to go for the most expensive ones ... Only these drinks here, they're on the house." Harry raised his glass. "To a good teamwork, lieutenant."

"Teamwork ..." For a moment, the detective seemed reluctant, then he followed Harry's example. "Why not, that's still subject to interpretation - cheers, Mr. Potter."

Setting down his glass, he said, "Let me put it straight - for this invitation, you get my time and my comments. Anything else is an open issue."

"That's agreed, Lieutenant Seeger. And to keep it straight from my side too - I'd really like to team up, because otherwise, I had to work alone."

"Then ..." The detective tempered himself. "I haven't found the time yet to complete my picture of your person, Mr. Potter. So, if you don't mind - what's your relation with our host? I had the feeling you're a bit more to him than just a regular."

"That's right. One reason is Ramon Garcia - he's a friend of mine and also a friend of Luiz. They helped each other to keep at the dry side of the street, so-to-speak."

The lieutenant nodded. "Garcia, yes - I looked that name up this morning, so I can follow your drift. But he dried himself, quitting the service came afterwards - or so I heard."

"That's correct. It was something like, ex-cop sees ex-gangster every once in a while, to remind each other ... Anyway, some time after Luiz had started his business here, was working hard to establish his reputation as neutral ground, clean to all sides, he ran into a problem. And he asked Ramon for advice."

They were interrupted by a waitress, serving plates with salad and seafood.

The lieutenant examined his plate. "That looks just what the doctor had in mind ... So he had a problem, huh? What kind?"

"Let's say, his neutrality was at risk. Some people had started coming with business cases, leaving without, and some people were telling Luiz his list of insurance policies was a bit incomplete."

The detective grinned between bites. "That's unavoidable in this business, isn't it?"

"Well, yes and no." Harry smiled back. "Ramon came to me, and we asked Luiz to arrange a meeting, here in his restaurant. Well, to make it short, so we can come to our own topic - we could convince the other side that Luiz' protection was *very* complete, and we agreed that, from then on, this place would be restricted to table conversations."

"Just so, huh?" The lieutenant's glance seemed more expectant than incredulous.

"Almost. I was a bit late that evening. I had checked the protection of another building, came just in time to realize it wasn't as good as expected, and to witness a limited but otherwise impressive damage." Harry showed a light smile. "I reported my findings, and - well, that was that."

Lieutenant Seeger had some fun for a moment, grew serious again. "Nice story, Mr. Potter, only it's not particularly helpful in the matter at hand." He made a gesture as if to stop a protest. "Don't get me wrong - I'm not objecting your qualities as an - er, witness, but there's little hope to come any further by renewing your old contacts."

Harry remembered the lieutenant's remarks from the day before. "Yesterday, you said something in that direction, something about amateurs. Only - the way this crime was committed doesn't strike me as amateurs' work."

"What do you know about kidnapping, Mr. Potter?"

The question was asked in a neutral tone, not dismissive at all. Maybe it was Seeger's method to prepare for a little monologue, or maybe it was just to gain a bit more time for emptying his dish - but then, wasn't this a preparation as well? At any rate, Harry took a moment before answering - his own experiences were limited, in a way, otherwise quite detailed. Then he said, "It's a technique to make someone doing something, and basically it's as simple as efficient."

"Really?" The detective studied Harry's face. "This isn't your first kidnapping, right?"

Harry counted with his fingers while scanning his memory. "I saw five - this one's the sixth."

A short widening of the detective's eyes gave the only sign of his surprise. "And how often did the kidnappers achieve their goal?"

"Never."

"And still you call it an efficient technique?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Yes - provided the kidnappers can keep anonymous. The cases I mentioned were different because they were known. Their common mistake was always the same - they saw themselves in a strong position ... Like in the story about this place here."

A sigh. "Mr. Potter, you seem the wrong person to be outmanoeuvred by statistics, your own numbers don't fit any pattern ... Which doesn't mean I'd doubt them. But let me make a last try - how often have there been casualties?"

"Not counting the kidnapper himself?"

Lieutenant Seeger rolled his eyes. "I should have known ... No."

"Then this is the first time."

"Well ... Now let me forget what I just heard, for my own peace of mind and because this food here's just too good, and come to my own view of things, from a professional - er, I

mean, from a cop's perspective ..." The detective stopped because the waitress arrived with the next course, and also because of Harry's short grin.

Harry said, "I can bring you in touch with a wizard police chief in England, who knows about all these cases - and maybe we should devote our next minutes to our lunch, before Luiz takes us for barbarians."

They both concentrated on their steaks. Between bites, the detective asked, "This police chief, I take it he's as neutral to you as Mr. Pereira here, isn't he?"

"Well ..." Harry smiled. "He's been the victim in one of these cases."

"Yeah, of course." Then the lieutenant saved his breath for eating, managing considerably faster than Harry.

With his dish empty, he started, "Okay, so why's kidnapping an amateur crime? ... I'm discussing only the cases where money's the goal, first because that's the motive in the current case, and also because if it's done for other reasons, all that I'm going to say might be wrong. Now let's look at it from the perspective of the organized crime - and for them, kidnapping's a nightmare."

Registering Harry's attention, the detective continued, "To see what I mean, look at their standard sources of income. The protection racket - " he grinned, "with some notable exception, okay, but otherwise it works. Then drugs, and finally gambling in all variations, including sports with all kinds of animals - dogs, horses, humans ... That's the standard business."

Harry asked, "And the rest - are the others all unorganized?"

"Mostly, yes. Weapons - either it's the state itself, or some international dealers - that's a different league - or a small street dealer. Prostitution - small entrepreneurs, and they're paying hefty protection fees. And robbery, or theft - even if it's big style, usually these are independents, going for an occasion ... The ideal racket works like a tax system, Mr. Potter - smoothly, noiselessly, nobody getting hurt, nobody bleeding so much he'd start some trouble, that's how they like it."

The detective leaned back, lit a cigarette, now that Harry had finished his own dish. "Kidnapping is too much trouble. Everybody hates a kidnapper. Almost always, a reward is offered which turns every lowlife into a spy. You can get away with murder, but a case of kidnapping is never closed. The money transfer is always the riskiest part, and letting the victim alive is even riskier, somehow, maybe except for babies. That's why in most kidnappings, the victim is killed instantly."

Harry said, "So this is the standard profile, except it doesn't fit in the recent cases, right?"

"Exactly. But still, it's not the work of our usual clientele."

"What makes you so sure?"

The lieutenant grimaced. "Cops don't fight crime in general. They fight the ugly crime, the extraordinary crime, and - every now and then - the cases that are upsetting our righteous

citizens. But when there's a serial crime, like now, without the cops getting results, the press starts giving them pressure. They don't like it, and they start passing this pressure further ... And that's bad for the business."

Harry nodded. "Then what's your profile of these kidnappers?"

"They ..." The detective stopped himself, glanced over. "What are you going to do with this information, Mr. Potter?"

"Exactly what I told you, Lieutenant Seeger - I'll use it as a member in a team or I'll use it for myself, if that's all I can do." Harry returned the detective's stare calmly, waiting while the other man was apparently fighting for a decision.

"Well, Mr. Potter, I wasn't entirely honest when I said my picture of you is still incomplete. I mean - it's totally correct, only I omitted to confess that I milked all sources I could find this morning. There weren't that many, and the result was strangely incomplete." The detective's stare was humourless now. "I dropped you from my list of suspects, that's all I could manage. So I thought, why not accept your cooperation, and maybe letting you read all the case files for starters ... But going that way, it might not be helpful to present my own conclusions first - wouldn't it spoil the chance of you finding something I overlooked?"

"You think so?" Harry pondered the idea, shook his head. "I'm no criminal expert, I'm not used to see the relevance of facts and details. What I have in mind is, I think I can find signs of wizard work - at least that's my hope. Otherwise, my contribution should be the magical side, and approaches that are beyond the scope of a police machinery."

"Such as?"

"I don't know yet." Harry shrugged. "Maybe I meant, beyond the scope of Muggle police."

The detective kept silent for a moment, then inhaled deeply. "Alright, then. It's a gang of three people at the minimum, eight at the most. They select public figures with children, mostly in the show business, and this is the right place for that. Their modus operandi shows a strong sense of - well, marketing's the only term fitting. Because they present themselves as a kind of *reliable contract partner* - the children are returned unhurt, unmolested, apparently treated well, and at the other side, they respond to every attempt of catching them with extreme brutality. Until yesterday, they almost had reached something like a good press - the tenor was, be a good parent, keep the police out, pay your million or two, and nobody's getting hurt."

"And now?"

"Your friend has blown their reputation." Lieutenant Seeger looked grim. "A father saves his daughter from kidnapping and is killed for that - they failed for the first time, and suddenly they're no longer the Robin Hoods of California, just a bunch of bloody killers and child thieves."

"Then who are they?"

The detective raised his arms in a helpless gesture. "Just a gang, outside the established circles. They found a niche market. They're careful not step on bigger feet, and they're careful not to stir attention." His voice turned growling. "As if that'd be difficult here."

Here - that was the valley, probably the largest congregation of millionaires, excentric people, citizens used to mind their own business. Even so, Harry had more questions. "What about the money - where do they keep it? Bank accounts? ... And something else - do you think they live here? Because in this case, we have a limited number of suspects."

"Limited?" The lieutenant looked uncomprehending.

"Yes - the wizards with a residence somewhere between Ventura and Santa Ana."

The answer was a harsh laugh. "Just twenty-five million people, maybe thirty ... How many of them are wizards, Mr. Potter?"

"Maybe twenty-five thousand, or thirty, or fifteen - whatever, it's a limited number."

"That'd be promising - if we had a list, but we haven't." Lieutenant Seeger rose. "I have to use the men's, and afterwards I need to go back into my office. Thank you for this invitation, Mr. Potter - all I can offer in exchange is an invitation to a quiet room with a large pile of files, because they're not supposed to leave the building."

Harry nodded. "Now's a good time for that. And please wait for me there - you know, a restroom's a good place for a portkey jump, with all these handles and bars."

06 - Task Force

Laila Belezikijan, personal assistant of the *Groucho Biochemicals* CEO, clapped her boss' shoulder. "Alright then, Ramon, don't move while I'm off in that Irish minefield." Grinning, she added, "And don't tell anyone - it won't do good to your macho reputation."

He looked angry toward her. "This isn't funny - and my *machismo* is the least of my worries."

She nodded solemnly. "Yeah, unfortunately so, otherwise you would've found a way long before to make my job a bit more - er, personal."

Into his flushed muttering, Laila pressed the top-left button on her porty's keyboard, was gone, came out in the entrance hall of the Groucho headquarters in Dublin.

The joke hadn't even caught with herself, had been part of her job as much as her own way of handling touchy issues. Her job, that meant taking burdens off Ramon's shoulders, to keep his head free for strategical thinking. And doing her duty, she had made this remark which was simply ridiculous, considering yesterday's events.

Ramon, as an ex-cop, should be used to seemingly rude remarks in the view of death. But Laila had found out soon that all good cops were hopeless romantics, that this protective layer of cusswords was wearing thin quickly. While for herself, ex-sergeant of the Israeli army, this technique appeared as an integral part of her habit.

Three people shot, one of them a friend of Harry, and all this to save a baby girl from being kidnapped ... Laila had seen her share of casualties, among them quite a number of children. If it was the other side's work, they were shredded to pieces by explosives, or torn apart by the debris sent flying from such a bomb. If it was her own people's work, using bullets, the result looked a bit cleaner, otherwise as deadly and equally indiscriminating toward children and adults.

Quitting the army and joining Groucho had been the best thing in her life. Well - aside from some other things closely related to that change, among them her transit from a Muggle to a witch ... Although, in a way, Laila had kept her sergeant's role. Ramon as a commanding officer was the right man at the right place, and she would gladly take care of the cumbersome details, of the footwork.

Working together for such a long time, it was inevitable that they felt some physical attraction toward each other. Laila would have extended their scope of teamwork with pleasure, at one occasion or another, except that this wouldn't have worked out well.

Mostly because of Ramon. His sense of honour didn't cover such games. Otherwise ... Laila met his wife often enough, and for all she knew, Marie-Christine had no trouble imagining some arrangement, in particular one that might involve herself - as long as it was kept within limits.

But not with Ramon. And so Laila solved the problem and released the tension simply by complaining about his obvious lack of interest every once in a while, preferably at occasions when his mind was caught by other concerns. It worked - quite well, actually. Short of the real thing, of course.

Which didn't mean she was in short supply of the real thing, oh no. For herself being a single, with no regular lover, it wasn't the touch of a hand away like for a married woman - but then, was it always that close for them when they needed it? That had to be more fiction than fact, according to what she heard, and not heard. However, it was within reach.

Sometimes even in Ireland. With the same people that were responsible for the wonderful changes in her life, eight years ago. Not often - just on occasion, one might say, and these occasions happened less and less frequently. Had to do with their children - too old for not having their own thoughts, and too young otherwise ...

Although Laila considered it impossible to hide anything from these monsters. The nicest kind you could find, agreed, though monsters nonetheless. And according to this logic, they knew already, so what was the sense ...

Only that logic was one thing, and an unrestrained libido was something else, as she had been told.

The same person who'd said that had given her the party, and thanks to this wonderful piece of technomagic, other possibilities were also within reach. For example, on the island of Haiti. Where another single in the services of *Groucho Biochemicals* could be found - Beatrice, and it just so happened they had a similar taste, and Haiti was a good place to find two decent men in search for a weekend of romantic adventures, and Beatrice had a house, and what's more, she had a thrilling potion, quite helpful to reload your accu for the days to come.

Or to empty it, depending on from which side you looked.

And if their search was unsuccessful, if the figures they met were just too distasteful ... When it happened for the first time, they looked at each other, and the first suggestion had been to scan somewhere else, maybe in Jamaica. Only they didn't know the promising places there, and time was running ... And when their eyes met, they recognized the same idea in the opposite face.

Since then, they had raised their standards a bit, and called this game *Haitian roulette* - something like the inverse of Russian roulette, maybe comprising two cartridges, except that guns and cartridges didn't participate in that game.

Quite in contrast to the issue at hand. Walking down the corridor, Laila decided to talk with Rahewa first. This was her own kind of approach - when pushed into the centre of the action, she wouldn't feel out of place, only if there was time, she would behave like any good sergeant - carefully stepping closer, using every cover she could find, exposing herself not sooner than unavoidable.

Rahewa had nothing to do with Biochemicals, unless you would count her husband Clemens, the genius behind the most widespread potion on earth. But Rahewa was regularly in touch with Cho for professional reasons, and with Harry for private reasons. Also, Laila got along well with her - only that Rahewa wasn't bothering much with cover of any kind.

Not in her style of conversation either. "You're here because of Tony, right?"

"Yes."

"Ireen's in Carron Lough, together with her daughter, probably for a while. Harry's in Santa Monica, working with the police, or so he said, because I'm not sure the police has the same view of things - well, and Cho's so happy about that, she's all song and dance today."

"He wants to catch them by himself, huh?"

Rahewa's glance was answer enough. Then she said, "I wish I had an assistant of my own, so I could pass the job over for a few days and join him."

"To hunt kidnappers?"

"No - to sit in the sun and jump into Tony's pool, twice per hour." Rahewa's smile softened the effect from her sharp voice. "I know by myself what a poor detective I am, and probably the hardest part would be to get Harry's agreement, but the thought drives me crazy."

Laila grinned. "I wonder what Cho would say - would she be glad that someone's covering his back, or more the opposite ... At any rate, these guys are pretty quick with their guns, so maybe I'd be qualified better for that task."

"Yes, probably." Rahewa sighed. "Although - you know, I was twelve when someone shot at us, Harry and myself. So my experience isn't totally zero."

Laila knew this story - a lunatic who had tried a kind of showdown with Harry, and who had killed himself later.

When Rahewa was done with her daydreaming and changed into a young businesswoman again, Laila asked whether she knew more than what the newspapers had reported. Listening to Rahewa's description, Laila felt helpless rage, caught herself wishing she could join the hunt.

Then she said goodbye and went for Cho's office.

Reaching Cho meant passing Chrissy Vanzandt, Cho's assistant. Playing an ante-room dragon seemed a strange role for the person with the second-highest level of influence in the Groucho enterprise. However, in most cases Chrissy made no attempt to block the way - for example because Cho herself might have overruled her. It was just her method to keep in touch with her bosses' doing.

And today was special anyway. So Chrissy just looked up, said, "Hello, Laila - it's not Bio, is it?" and continued her own work, at the sight of Laila shaking her head.

Cho was talking over her desk-o-mate, a desk model of a phony with a larger display showing pictures of, and data about, the person at the other end of the non-existent line. Seeing Laila entering, Cho blew her a kiss, which looked weird because she didn't stop talking in a sharp tone.

Shortly afterwards she finished, showed a smile. "Hi, soldier girl. What's your trade today - chemicals or guns?"

"Guns, and not my own - that's what you meant, right? ... I could say I was sent by Ramon - it's not entirely true, but it's not wrong either, because he didn't like the idea of discussing it

over the phone. So we decided that I should be the one to nose around while pretending to express sympathy."

Cho nodded approvingly. This style of conversation - an exchange of grumpy remarks - was their way of expressing deeper feelings in the shortest form possible. Probably quite un-Chinese, but as Cho used to say, the one in charge of politeness was Harry ... Or Gabriel, since recently.

Then Cho asked, "You know the details?"

"Yep. I just met Rahewa."

"Testing the ground, huh?" Cho grinned wryly. "And saving my time. Although - I'd like to rant and wail myself, and at length, from my very personal perspective - about someone who right now is just where you came from ... Only that I can't help feeling you're the wrong person for that."

Laila nodded. "In more than one way. And I'm not alone with that - if Rahewa could, she'd be there too."

"Tell me something new!" Cho's eyes were flashing, calmed down again. "Tell me why wizards would use guns - Harry says he found proof of magic involved."

"Really?" The beaming in Laila's face was badly suited to improve Cho's mood, so she hurried to say, "Maybe they tried to hide their nature ... Or simpler still - for a Muggle, looking into the muzzle of a gun is much more impressive and threatening than looking at a wand."

"And maybe because it's faster."

Laila shook her head. "Only in western movies." Then she walked over, grabbed the armrest of Cho's chair, turned it around, bent down, planted a light kiss on her mouth. "Guns ain't fast, wands ain't fast - it all depends on the person behind, and in this regard, you can stop worrying."

"You're prejudiced," replied Cho, but her voice was soft.

"Yes, I am, but it's true anyway." Laila straightened. "How's Ireen?"

"Good enough so we could leave her in the castle." Cho's head made a movement toward Chrissy's room. "We told her, there's a babysitter just a call away, in case she has business in California ..."

"Beverly." It was no question.

"Right. It's not as though Winky couldn't handle the girl, but a house elf mightn't be everybody's cup of tea, and besides ..." A faint amusement was sparkling in Cho's eyes. "Anyway - if you want to say hello to her, go ahead. Right now you might find her at the beach - but first you should prepare yourself, in order not to melt away in tears."

"That bad? But you just said ..."

Cho's smile was a mix of sympathy, gloating, and something else. "Oh, she is - only that you'll find a certain flute player at her side, and his tunes are more than an ordinary human can handle, even at the best of times."

Laila found her decision in an instant. "Then I'll skip that - he does a better job in consoling her, and I guess she does a better job in mourning and weeping."

* * *

Harry dropped the file on the desk, leaned back, suppressing a pained groan. He wasn't used to paperwork, certainly not under these conditions - a wooden chair lacking all comfort, a simple desk, harsh light from the ceiling, and nothing around that would invite him for a five minutes' break.

Today was his second day in this particular task. He had read every single line in these case files. And now, after having gained an overall impression, after having found a few hints, he would read them again - to confirm or deny his suspicions.

There had been four cases before - the *Chee massacre*, as the press had dubbed it, marked the fifth. Known cases, that was - nobody knew whether some other family had paid silently without informing the police afterwards. Nothing in the kidnappers' instructions said anything about keeping silent after the child was back home safely, and Seeger felt pretty sure there were no others, only he couldn't exclude them either.

But then, would it change the vague pattern Harry seemed to recognize?

The Waylon case was the first. Amanda Waylon had hit the movie scene like a comet, shining and brilliant. After three movies, she took a baby break, without bothering to marry the father. When the baby was six months old, Amazing Amanda returned to the set. When the baby was fifteen months old, a TV repair truck arrived at her house. The kidnappers beat the nurse unconscious, or so she said afterwards, when awakening from something which most likely had been a drug trip similar to that of Tony's lawn mower boy. At any rate, the kidnappers were gone with the baby.

Amanda Waylon called the police. Then she refused to cooperate with them, which meant she delivered the money - two million dollars - without telling them in advance what was going on, reporting what she'd done only after having her baby back.

Then she sued the security company that protected the residence in which her own house represented one of eight. The lawsuit was still pending, observers had little doubt who'd be the winner - Amanda Waylon.

All these facts together provided excellent food for the media. However, they were badly suited to raise much emotion in public. Some actress who earned twenty millions for a movie role had lost two of them and was about to gain back ten more from a lawsuit - wasn't this exactly how things were going in God's own country?

This public impression changed a bit with the King case. Solomon King, a big fish in the show business pool, famous for fantastic stage events, had a young and beautiful wife who gave birth to a son pretty soon after that marriage. Rumour had it that for Solomon, close to

his sixties, this came as much as a surprise as his stage orchestrations to the audiences. In public, however, Savvy Solomon wasn't tiring to praise his luck.

This luck faltered a bit when, shortly after the boy's first birthday, his wife received a phone call that her husband would expect her, together with the baby, in the Regent's Inn hotel for a press event - his car was on the road and would pick her up in ten minutes' time.

There was indeed a car, looking exactly like her husband's, which wasn't difficult because it was one of these VIP stretch limousines, black, tinted windows. The wife came awake from her own drug sleep under some trees, lying in the grass, without remembering more than a hooded figure pressing something onto her face.

Solomon King called the police, cooperated with them. He collected the two million dollars, let the police do their preparations at them, and when the call came, he went into his car and drove off, armed with the money suitcase, a gun, and some electronic equipment.

The next call told his wife where she could find the car, her late husband, and a suitcase with the wrong content - and that they would offer her one last chance, still for two millions but this time unprepared and unregistered.

She did as ordered. When she was driving in her car and received the call over her mobile phone, she hurried to tell the other side that she suspected to be followed by a police car, against her own will. And right she was, but only for ten more miles, until the voice told her now the air was clean and which exit she should take.

The civil car was found later as a wreck, apparently from an explosion that killed the driver. The second detective had survived the blow while not the two bullets found in his chest and his head.

The police reacted by replacing the officer in charge. The couple targeted next, movie stars both of them, reacted by keeping the police out until their child was back.

Same in the fourth case. Hazel Sue, a singer born as Hazel Simmons, the brain behind a successful female band and single mother of a girl, had also the good sense to keep this special business private until her baby of sixteen months was back home.

All this had taken place within a period of four months. All cases in California. Although no state boundaries were crossed, the FBI was trying to get a foot in the door, or several of them, because kidnapping counted as a federal crime. Or maybe it was just pretense - the police had almost no clue.

All parents played some role or other in the show business. Which came as no surprise, first because this was the valley with the world's largest collection of movie enterprises, closer related to the music industry than ever before, and also because these people traded their family affairs in public. With the exception of Tony, and this difference was one of the items on Harry's list.

The children were all quite young. On the other hand - handling a baby wasn't any more difficult than handling an older kid, more the other way around, for example because a two-year-old was useless as a witness, wouldn't remember a face, or a place ...

Normally, as Seeger had explained to Harry, kidnapping crimes had two weak spots. One was the communication between the kidnapers and the parents, the other was the money. Or the way how the kidnapers were spreading money around, afterwards - even if the serial numbers hadn't been recorded.

In these cases, however, there was nowhere an unusual outburst of a sudden and unexpected wealth. Meanwhile, the rewards totaled up to a quarter of a million dollars, still, none of the street contacts could point out a promising trail.

And the communication - in the era of mobile phones, tracing back a phone call was nearly impossible. And besides, criminals used stolen mobiles for calling like they used stolen cars for driving.

However, the items in Harry's list had nothing to do with attempts to trace back the events. Instead, he was aiming toward the origin. Maybe this approach seemed like searching a needle in a haystack, but then, it was only one haystack, even though a big one ...

The door opened. Lieutenant Seeger came in, sat down opposite, looking tired. "How's your progress, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, better than expected ... I was planning to go through the files once more, but now that you're here - can we talk?"

The detective leaned back. "Sure. Go ahead."

"It takes a bit longer."

A humourless laugh. "I've got all the time of the world - I just don't know where to get a hook into this mess ... You sound as if you'd have some idea."

"Yes, indeed." Harry looked around. "I'd like to discuss it in a better atmosphere than this room here can offer ..."

Another harsh laugh. "I can offer my office, only there we'll be interrupted every second sentence ..." Seeing Harry's look, the detective shook his head. "No - no restaurant, no cafe, nothing where I don't know who's listening."

"That's understood." Harry checked his watch. Three o'clock in the afternoon, that meant eight o'clock at home ... "Well, I can offer a decent conference room in the Groucho building, but if that's fine with you, I'd prefer my own home."

"Your own ..." The lieutenant's face showed something like incredulous suspicion. "In Ireland??"

"Yes - there isn't any difference in jumping a few miles or across that distance, only that in Carron Lough it's evening."

Slowly, an expectant grin was spreading in the detective's face. "Carron Lough - that sounds so ..." He looked at the files on the table. "Do we need them?"

"Well - you said, they're not supposed to ..."

With a quick movement, Lieutenant Seeger snatched them under his arm. "Maybe I meant, I'm not supposed to lose them out of eyesight ... Allright, ready."

After such a long time in an air condition not quite up to the standards used from the Groucho buildings, Harry felt the need for a bit fresh air. He also suspected that for a Muggle like this detective, it might appear more natural to come out under an open sky. So he programmed the ashtray on the table for the short path between the bay and the castle, said, "Here we go - touch it," and followed into the soft pop of Seeger's disappearance.

Wrong he'd been. The lieutenant looked around, examined the flight of stairs leading up to the castle, said, "That's cute, really ... Couldn't you have sent us upstairs?"

"Sure. Just a sec."

At this moment, however, the plaintive sound of a flute reached them, coming from the direction of the beach. The detective craned his neck, listening. "That's really Ireland, isn't it? Some piper wherever you go."

"Well, it depends." Harry grinned. "That's my son, down at the beach. He's as Irish as you and me."

"Oh - sorry, no offense intended." The lieutenant listened more. "Although - if you'd said, there's a stranded sailor, homesick, I'd believe you every word ... It fits so perfectly to the scene here - how old is he?"

"Seven, going eight."

"You joking?" The detective eyed him suspiciously.

Harry shook his head. "I'd like to introduce you, only he's no doubt sitting with Ireen - Tony's widow. That's their way of mourning, and it's everybody's guess whether this song is Irish, or Japanese, or Gabriel's own invention."

Lieutenant Seeger's glance was slightly abashed. "Well, no - maybe later, when they're finished."

Harry hadn't expected any other answer. He programmed a piece of rock. "Here - that saves you from climbing all the stairs."

"That's kind of you - tha ..." The rest probably was finished up in the small frontyard.

Harry followed, guided the lieutenant into the entrance hall, took a second to sense around. "We're pretty much on ourselves - my wife's still in the office, I guess, and my daughter's upstairs in her room."

"That's fine with me ..." The detective looked around, as if missing something, a note for example. "Say, how do you know? Some signal system no one else can decipher?"

"It's much simpler - for us, I mean." Harry smiled apologetically. "We're a bit special - since you'll hear more about that when I'm going to present my ideas to you, I might as well tell you right away ... Well, you know, I can feel the presence of my family, or their absence."

He was rewarded with a sharp look. "Pretty cool ... And does it work the other way around too?"

"With Sandy and Gabe, yes - they know already that I'm here with a guest ... While Cho, that's my wife, she's a bit - er, more conventional." Harry had to grin inwardly - if Cho would hear him ... "By the way, I'm no mind reader ..."

The lieutenant twisted.

"... no, really, but I know that everybody's asking that himself, after such an announcement. I can sense presences, and strong emotions, to some degree - on the other side, you as an experienced detective can do the same, probably better than you think yourself."

"But not through walls." It sounded more like a protest than a complaint.

"Just a matter of training."

Harry led the way to the library where they sat down in comfortable armchairs. He registered with appreciation how this Muggle quickly adapted to things like glasses of brandy appearing out of nowhere.

Raising his own glass, he said, "Is it okay with you to drop titles? My name's Harry."

"Just what I thought - mine's Carl. Cheers, Harry, to oil the senses ..." The detective stopped, laughed. "Does it work with your sensing?"

"Like for anyone else, Carl - only the first one's improving them."

"That's reassuring, somehow."

Harry smiled. "In most regards, magicals are quite ordinary humans. There are just a few things special - we'll have to discuss them anyway, when I come to my conclusions, so - ready to listen?"

"Shoot." The detective leaned back, an expectant look in his face.

"I think the most important aspect is what I told you already yesterday - these kidnapers are wizards, or at least some of them. There are details in the reports, for example what the witnesses said in their interviews, how it felt when they were stunned, and so forth ... But equally important, I'd say, is the fact that they took pains to hide their ability. That raises two questions."

"The first's obvious - why did they hide themselves," said Carl. "But what's the second?"

"How much do they hide?" Seeing the blank look in Carl's face, Harry explained. "Look - the magic skill among wizards is as different as - er, maybe the skill with a gun. One guy hits a bird at hundred yards, another one won't hit the next Thursday. Now, in these cases, they didn't invest too much of magic, and I wonder - did they use all they can muster, or is there something they could do but avoided for some reason, maybe because it might have revealed their skill instantly."

The detective thought for a moment. "Let's see whether I can follow ... Could they have jumped directly into these houses, rather than creating artful hoaxes in order to catch the children?"

"Maybe not - you know, you can jump only to places you've seen before - real, I mean, pictures won't do. But the money transfers, for example - they could have made it much simpler, not this endless sequence of driving and phone calls and redirecting ... Except that then, everybody would have known - this could only have been an apparition."

The lieutenant looked wondering. "What's so important in their skill? Does it make any difference?"

"Maybe not for the crimes," replied Harry, "only I'd like to know better what kind of people they are ... To form a picture of them ..." He looked at the other man. "It's said some people smell a cop no matter how, and where - is it true?"

"Yes." Carl nodded. "Maybe not a rookie in his first months, but it sticks quickly ... Yes, I see what you mean. There's a gap in your profiling, right?"

"At least in this regard. Otherwise ... They kill without much hesitation, we can take that as a given. But still - I wonder if the killing of Tony wasn't an act of panicking."

"You mean - they heard the sirens outside and felt caught between two fires?"

Harry nodded. "Something like that. The disappearing of the girl in front of their eyes - they must have realized that this was an artful piece of magic, quite unsettling, even for an experienced wizard ... Maybe they were frightened to step into another magical trap any moment ..." He shrugged. "Might not be important in general, only for myself."

The detective kept silent for a moment, then said, "Let's come back to the first question - why they were hiding their magical nature. What do you think is the reason?"

"Just one reason, but a good one - if you look for Muggles, you ignore wizards. Even if not - there are thousand times more Muggles than wizards around."

"Something else?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't see any other motive."

"Me neither." The detective sipped at his brandy. "But even looking for wizards - their number isn't that small, and besides, they might hide it all the time. I remember a story about a lieutenant who did that for quite a while ..."

Harry showed a short grin, replaced by a grim expression. "I have means to recognize a wizard, Carl."

"Is it like, it needs one to know one?"

"No - an ordinary wizard has no way to figure that out, as long as the other one avoids magic. But - well, I'm not an ordinary wizard."

"No?" The detective made big eyes. "That's a real surprise, that is."

"It's not my own skill - I have ..." Harry interrupted himself. "We'll come to that later. I'd like to discuss other common factors first. For example - all these cases took place in the show business."

Carl raised his hand. "Wait, wait - we didn't sit idle, you know, waiting for the next kidnapping. Scanning for common factors, that's a built-in reflex, in a way. So we checked around - what's the same in all these cases? Same agent - same lawyer - same doctor - same school, maybe. Aside from the obvious facts, that the children are about the same age, that the crimes took place in and around Los Angeles ..."

Harry interrupted him. "What about the agents?"

"Not even two in common."

"But ..." Harry pointed at the case files, lying on a table. "These stories smell of insider knowledge. There must be something - agencies behind the agents, I don't know, something like that. These people are part of the show business - for me, that much's for sure."

"I'm not yet convinced," replied the detective. "These people are public figures - just reading newspapers, or maybe some showbiz magazines, you can learn enough to pick the proper targets."

"The others, maybe." Harry leaned back again. "But not Tony. He himself as a director and producer, sure - but not with Tanitha, or Ireen ... Show me a magazine with a picture of the girl, or just an article - there isn't any. He didn't hide them, his crew on the set could see them more than once, but that was all. No yellow press interviews."

"Hmm ..." The lieutenant looked thoughtful. "Okay, let's assume there is a common factor, only so small, or so hidden, that we missed it. Then how to find it?"

"With footwork, and with paperwork." Harry pointed at the files. "We have three cases directly in the movie business - two actors, I mean a single actor and a couple, and a director. Someone will start at Tony's business - scanning for names, figures, companies. I'd say - the last two or three years first, because that's the age of the children. Tony's movies in that time, then the movies in which these actors had a role - scanning for a name that appears in both lists. There'll be some, obviously so, and then we'll visit them and ask them questions."

"We?"

"Well - I'm ready to team up with colleagues of yours, Carl, but I'd prefer to do it with you."

"I feel flattered." The detective grinned wryly. "And you're the common factor in that, huh?"

"Yes, because of the - er, magical part."

"And this paperwork?"

"Someone who's good at this kind of research. Someone who knows the movie business. Someone who's authorized to come along and ask questions." Harry had been counting with

his fingers. "A team of three, or two if one of them fits two roles. Of course, the one with the authority must be a cop."

"Aha. And the others?"

"I know someone with a knack for this kind of work - going through lists and files and papers. Plus someone from Groucho Entertainment who's familiar with these names ..." Seeing the detective's look, Harry added, "Carl - they'll work for a salary, paid by myself, plus a premium if they strike gold ... I did it in the past, and it was successful."

"There is already a reward offered - a quarter of a million, might be raised even higher with this new case."

Harry waved dismissively. "Whatever - the money's unimportant, it's there, and I'm going to spend it."

"Fine, fine." The lieutenant raised his eyebrows. "And then? Assume this someone comes up with a name - so we pay them a visit, say hello, we'd like to ask you some questions ... They can tell us a lot, or just laugh at us - and if they're innocent, it could be even the genuine thing. How to nail them down?"

"Aah ..." Harry grinned. "Well, you know, it so happens we'll also be a team of three."

"Will we? ... And who's the third man?"

"Not a man - it's a she, her name's Nagini."

"Sounds promising, Harry, with that name. Let me guess - slender body, almond eyes, her voice warm and gentle ..."

Harry laughed. "Not bad - except for the voice, since no matter how you look at it, nobody would call it warm and gentle."

The lieutenant grinned. "So what, nobody's perfect. And when will I have the pleasure to meet that lady?"

"In a moment." Harry grinned back. "Only - it's not exactly what you might expect, because - well, you know, Nagini is a snake."

* * *

Gabriel was lost in the fourth dimension. Memory. Not his own experiences - those of Ireen, sitting next to him. Not events either, just emotions, feelings of joy intermittently changing with sorrow, the painful sense of loss, the desperate knowledge of a love whose object was beyond reach forever.

Except in memory.

He wasn't playing music in the conventional sense. He was riding the waves that came surging into his mind, accentuated by the waves breaking on the beach in front of them. Still, it was music that came out, although Gabriel wasn't the musician - he provided just the

instrument, tuned by Ireen's remembering, the bamboo flute in his hands not more than its resonating part, a line of holes opening and closing almost by themselves.

It was magnificent nonetheless. Gabriel felt his music touching Ireen's thoughts in reverse, and this feedback was driving him to heights he hadn't climbed before.

He had imagined them, yes. Occasionally when playing solo, once or twice when he and Héloïse had really been in sync, pushing each other to a daring sequence of chords.

Now he felt Ireen awakening from her trance. Rather than breaking abruptly, Gabriel held the tune, improvising still a minute or two - like a bird slowly sailing to the ground, circling with outstretched wings, losing height, and finally disappearing behind a cliff, leaving it to everybody's guess whether it would touch down a moment afterwards or start climbing again.

The last tune had faded. Ireen turned to him. "You're incredible."

Was he? "Why?"

"You're playing exactly what's going through my mind. You can carry me through the pictures of my memory - it's as if your music's sharpening them to an almost unbearable intensity."

"That's simple." Gabriel held the flute up like a proof. "It wasn't really me, playing. It was you - I just added the breath, that's all."

Ireen smiled at him. "Oh, really? ... And who opened and closed the holes at the right time? Must have been the seagulls, huh?"

Gabriel imagined one of these birds sitting on the flute, just in front of his face, trying to cover one of the openings with its claw, and the thought made him laugh. "That was funny," he said, recovering. "I wish I could do that."

"Do what?"

"Telling funny jokes, that make other people laugh. You're so - er, even now, you can do them. You know, just like that, without long thinking."

Ireen put an arm around his shoulder. "Don't worry. I couldn't either, when I was your age. I still couldn't later ... It was Tony who showed me how to look at the funny side of things." Her face came around, revealing what Gabriel had felt already an instant before - Ireen could talk about her lost husband without bursting into tears again. "And now that he's gone, maybe it's my job to teach you the same."

"Yes, please."

Ireen looked up into the sky on which dusk was falling. "You know, it's as though he's sitting somewhere, cloud number nine or so, and telling me, c'mon, honey, don't make such a fuss, our daughter's safe, life goes on, so just give it a rest."

In his mind, Gabriel saw another picture - a cloud in which the feet would sink in, with a pole, on it a shiny brass plate with the engraving *No. 9*. It was funny too, only it didn't feel right to laugh now. So he said, "But Harry won't give it a rest, and I think Tony would agree to that."

He could feel Ireen's tensing, so he quickly added, "He'd do it anyway, you know ... And if it takes a bit longer, then at least we have time so you can teach me joking."

"Because afterwards I have to leave quickly, right?"

"No!" Gabriel felt his cheeks flushing, having fallen for this trap question.

Ireen pressed him tenderly. "You see, Gabriel, making jokes most often implies someone feeling a bit embarrassed. And that's why you have trouble with jokes - you're such a gentle boy, you don't want to embarrass anyone ... So that's been today's lesson about jokes."

Still uneasy, Gabriel said, "But you know that you can stay as long as you want, don't you? ... You and Tanitha."

"Are you speaking for yourself, or for the entire family?"

"For ..." Gabriel stopped, examined her face. "You're joking again, right? You know that I can sense what the others are feeling, and that they all think the same."

"Yes, my little piper, I know. But that's not just common, this ability, as you know perfectly well - actually it's quite astonishing, and sometimes a joke's the best method of coming to terms with something you're not used to at all." Ireen smiled. "See - that's been the second lesson already, and if we're going to proceed that way ..."

Gabriel caught the thought, smiled back. "Then we can send you off pretty soon."

"That's my boy! Fluting or joking, changing with the tide."

Gabriel felt pleased, even though his senses told him that Ireen was caught again by her own tide of emotions, and that her last remark had been more forced than genuine. In search for a less sensitive topic, he suddenly saw a possibility to solve this problem with another one.

"Ireen?"

"Yes, Gabriel?"

"Do you know Japanese?"

He had her full attention. Rather than answering, Ireen examined his face, Gabriel could feel how her thoughts were racing. Then she smiled. "You know what I just tried to do, don't you? ... I tried to play Harry's game, to find the question behind the question that lies behind the question, and to answer that, ignoring all the steps in-between ... Only I couldn't - I can't do it with other people, least of all you."

A thought struck him. "Is it more difficult with me? Because, you know, Harry never plays that game toward me - he always answers just the question I asked."

"Yes, that might be the reason."

Only Gabriel could feel - she wasn't entirely serious with her answer, something not quite unusual among people talking about him and his father. "Well, then - do you know Japanese?"

"Not much, Gabriel. Yes, my family is of Japanese origin, and I like holding to certain traditions, but I'm not really fluent. I mean, I get along - I won't poison myself in a Japanese restaurant, if that's what you mean."

"Have you ever been in Japan?"

"Yes, several times."

Gabriel could feel her growing curiosity, and a slight trace of impatience, although Ireen's face didn't reveal any sign of it. However, not unlike his father, he accepted such a kind of pressure from just one person, and that was his mother, not Ireen. So he asked, "Have you heard about our planning for a xylophone?"

"Er - yes."

Lacking his knowledge where these two seemingly incoherent topics met, Ireen was at a total loss to foresee the next twist of their conversation. And again, Gabriel felt little mercy, more a kind of satisfaction, while no need to relish it any longer. "Could you imagine a visit in Japan together with me?"

"I certainly could, if you'd ever tell me what's this all about."

Hadn't he just ... No, not at all, as he realized. "It's about a xylophone ..."

He saw her inhaling, vaguely aware that the same behaviour could be seen from people talking with his father. Gabriel hurried on. "... and you know, I asked our Music teacher, and looked it up in the Internet, and the best xylophones you can find, they're built by Miyikura, that's ..."

"Come again?"

"Miyikura - they're found in Akashi, and that's where they have a large hall with an exposition, all models they offer, it's quite a lot, actually - there was a picture on their home page, it looks so great, all these xylophones, and enough room between them ..."

"And you want to visit this exposition, and find the right xylophone for yourself, I assume?"

Gabriel nodded eagerly. "Yes, because you know, in stores here around - er, I mean Paris, or Dublin, or Santa Monica, they have just one or two models, not more, because there ain't many people around playing xylophone - well, and now that Harry's so busy - er ..."

"Yes, I see." Ireen kept silent for a moment. "Where is Akashi?"

"In the south. The next bigger city is Osaka. It's pretty close, actually."

She looked approvingly. "You're an experienced traveller, huh? Know exactly what to look for ... Say, does this company make vibraphones too?"

"Oh, no! Just xylophones." Gabriel smiled. "For vibraphones, that'd be Yamaha, and for them, you wouldn't need to go to Japan. Yamaha of America is almost bigger than the original company, and they're at home in Buena Park - that's just next to Santa Monica."

Ireen looked alarmed. "That doesn't mean you should visit them alone - particularly not now, not in this area."

"Of course not." Gabriel's voice sounded patient, nonetheless hinting that he wasn't stupid, that he knew, and besides, who had brought up the issue of vibraphones? As far as he was concerned, this was a conversation about xylophones.

Ireen calmed down. "So it's Osaka, then ... Are you aware of the time difference?"

"Nine hours." It came matter-of-fact.

Ireen blushed a bit. "Sorry - I forgot that you've been travelling around much more than I'll ever do, probably. Anyway - what do you suggest, how to match reasonable times here and there?"

"This exposition, it's open from nine to seven, all week long. So we could do it in the morning, Saturday or Sunday - only that during the weekend, there's a lot of people there, their home page said something about - er, so many thousand visitors per year ..."

Strange, how large numbers slipped his mind, creating a vague spot in an otherwise accurate report.

"... so coming in the morning's probably better, and this could be any day of the week, and for us here it'd mean midnight."

Ireen looked at him, and Gabriel knew what she was thinking - a seven-year-old, well, okay, seven and a half, jumping around the world at midnight local time.

He added, "And for Tanitha - you know, there's Beverly, she was my babysitter some years ago, we could ask her, I'm sure she'll come over, I mean she'd probably stay overnight in the castle, but that's fine with her ..."

"Yeah," said Ireen, "so I heard."

Gabriel sensed some amusement, was too close to his own goal to bother with that. "So what do you think of it?"

"Your planning's perfect, my dear piper ..." Ireen raised her eyebrows. "All that's missing, for what I can see - did you ask your parents about that?"

"No, of course not." Maybe she had joked again, only Gabriel felt too preoccupied now. "First I wanted to talk with you."

"Yes, sure, what else ... Alright, Gabriel, I'm with you in that business, so maybe we should get the permission together." Ireen grinned. "Whom shall we ask first?"

"Harry." It came without hesitation.

"Certainly, that'd have been my guess too. And - is it fine with you if I'm going to ask him about that?"

Gabriel beamed. "You're joking again, ain't you?"

"No, I'm totally serious." But her eyes were sparkling. "This kind of joke is called irony - if you ask for something that's fairly obvious, it's called a rhetorical question, but most often it goes with some irony."

This was really interesting, only right now Gabriel couldn't care less about the fine art in rhetorics ...

"So I'm going to ask him, okay?"

Gabriel nodded. "Yes, that'd great ... Thank you, Ireen - and once this is settled, I'll talk with Fleur."

"Fleur?? ... Why, what's her role in that?"

Gabriel looked astonished. "But ... Because of Michel - he's supposed to come with us ... Wasn't that clear all the time?"

Ireen started to laugh. "Maybe so, except ... Anyway, I shouldn't wonder."

"No, definitely not. We play together."

"That's not what I meant." Ireen ruffled his hair. "You're as much a Chang as you're a Potter - and for them, negotiating the tricky way is a built-in reflex."

Examining her face, Gabriel knew - this had been no joke, even though it had sounded like that.

07 - Setting the Goal

When Harry returned from Santa Monica, after escorting Carl back into an early afternoon, Cho was still in her office. Taking into account the recent days, during which she had finished early, this was nothing unusual. Even so, Harry had to suppress an impulse to call her, or to make a one-minute jump visit to check whether everything was fine.

Probably an effect from studying kidnapper crimes for hours. Cho would have been furious ... Or worse, she would look at him mockingly, and every day in weeks to come, she would drop remarks stating the obvious - in the morning, that she was about to enter the wild, dangerous plains of the Groucho headquarters, and in the evening, how glad she felt being back home in their cosy nest.

Harry could do without that. And besides, he had work of his own, the first part of which had to be done here in the castle.

He found Ireen in the family room. She was zapping idly through the TV channels. Flat TV, that was - specter TV still ran as a tiny plant, prospering only among sport freaks who considered the three-dimensional perspective superior for football, basketball, and other games. While for news and talk shows, everybody seemed satisfied with the limited angle of a 2D camera zooming into some face.

He sat down. "Are you watching anything in particular?"

"No - we can talk." Ireen switched off the TV.

"Yes, you're right, I came to talk with you." Harry examined her, then realized there was a very simple way to find out more. "How do you feel?"

"Well ..." Ireen closed her eyes. "It varies from one minute to the next." She opened them again, looked at him. "At least well enough to sleep alone."

"Will you find sleep?"

Ireen inspected her nails. "You mean - if not, I can come for a lullaby?"

"Kind of ..." Harry bent forward. "It's no use yet, Ireen - to lie awake and think how it was with him. And long walks, to get tired, ain't the best alternative either, for the same reason."

The shadow of a smile ran over her face. "I've made more progress than you might expect, Harry, in such a short time. Mostly due to the day shift of the Potter intensive care unit." For a moment, Ireen showed a real smile. "It's incredible what your son can do with this small flute. He says it's not his music - he says he's just listening and turning into tunes what he gets from me."

"Yeah, that's of course totally different from our method."

About to nod, Ireen stopped, examined Harry's face. "You're making fun of me, but I guess you're right. Anyway, one thing at least's different - Gabriel gives me jobs to do. I got an interesting one, a while ago."

"Something about music?"

Now she looked more joyful. "Let's trade - you came for a specific reason, so first you tell me about what's on your mind, and then I tell you about this job."

Harry hesitated. "Mine isn't very pleasant. Are you sure this is the proper order?"

"Absolutely, because mine is."

"Well, then ..." He told Ireen what he needed - files and lists with all of Tony's contracts and contacts, and why. "I'd say we can restrict the scope to the last two years, at least for the beginning."

"That means three movies, Harry. Your own's the oldest of them. Then there was *The Sign in the Circle*, about a year ago, and something quick and dirty for the video market - I don't even remember the title, that was a few months ago."

"The Sign in the Circle?" Harry remembered only vaguely. "What was it about?"

"Some mix of magic and myths and martial arts ... Going with the fashion, Tony called it. Remember *Chinese Ghost Story*? ... This movie established a trend, and Tony followed it. With demons and ghosts, and a woman that turns into a snake and back ..." Ireen smiled a bit. "Pretty boring, from your perspective, I'd say."

"Was it a success?"

"It paid off ..." Ireen sighed. "That reminds me - when he sold the rights for TV channels and the video market, Tony always made contracts so he'd participate in the revenue. That means, sooner or later I'll have to get in touch with what's going on there."

"What I'm going to do might be helpful in that regard - well, of course only for these three movies, but I'd assume the channels are the same as for the older ones." Harry looked at her expectantly. "Is there some kind of archive?"

Ireen nodded. "Actually, yes - and probably quite up-to-date, because some time ago, Tony became aware that the collection of his own movies was a mess, and he hired someone to put it in shape, with new recording media, DVD rather than these old tapes ..."

She swallowed. "He said, maybe she gives a damn, but if Tanitha ever wants to find out what her father did, then this archive should contain everything." Now Ireen steadied herself. "But these are just the recordings, Harry, and the scriptbooks, as far as he still had them - for contract files, you'll have to look in his office."

Harry became aware how little he knew about his late friend's daily work. "Where is this archive? ... And where is the office?"

The archive, as it turned out, was a small windowless room in the house, could be reached from the library, while the office was somewhere downtown - the official residence of *CHEE Inc.*, which had been Tony's business company, his own name artfully used as the acronym for *Chee & Huang, Entertainment Enterprises*.

Harry, who had seen this title more than once during his own excourses into the movie business, realized only now that it meant something more than Tony's family name. "Who's Huang?"

"A ghost." Ireen made a wry face. "When he started doing business, Tony used to meet investors under this title, and Huang supposedly was a sleeping partnership with some Hongkong big guy. You know - it simply meant, anyone interested in his project wouldn't feel as if being the first to risk his money."

It was new for Harry, Tony never had bothered to tell him about these days. Strange how you learned surprising things about someone no longer alive. Dead people had nothing to hide.

Between movie projects, the office was run by a single secretary, a Mrs. Carmino. It was a part-time job, four hours a day, and maybe not even that woman herself knew for sure where she would place these four hours tomorrow.

"Alright then," said Harry. "I'm going to ask Paul to do the research part - Paul Sillitoe, he's the one who located Voldemort. I don't know anyone better in finding the real hints in a pile of names and numbers." Thoughtfully, he added, "Of course, the people from the other cases have to cooperate - with Tony's data alone, there's nothing we can learn."

"You think they will?"

"Why should they refuse?" But Harry knew well that the question could also be asked the other way around - why should they agree?

More to himself, he said, "With the actors alone, just using the information from the final credits of these movies, we can do a lot ... And for specific questions, we'll have a detective as the third person in the team."

Ireen kept silent.

Harry had a fair idea why. "You don't really want to know who they are, right? Giving them names and faces somehow makes it still worse than it's now, ain't that so?"

Ireen looked surprised. "Yes, you're right - only I thought I was alone with this feeling."

"Well, not quite ... You know, I'm not doing it for revenge - not any longer, I should say. Sure, yes, in the first minutes ... But with every hour passing, it's more obvious that revenge would make us suffer again ..."

Harry could see it in Ireen's face - she agreed with him, only she hadn't expected him to look at it this way.

"... No, my main concern is to stop them. To make sure this particular threat is cleared, so you can return to California without fearing all the time they might try again." Harry smiled. "I didn't say you have to go, then, but you should have the option."

"I know, Harry. Your son told me already, and he felt sure to speak for the entire family in that matter."

Harry chuckled. "Took all his gifts to realize that, no doubt ... Was this part of his negotiating?"

"What?" Ireen looked indignant. "Are you serious with that question?"

"Yes and no ..." Harry searched for his words. "You should think Gabriel's a perfect mix of Potter and Chang, shouldn't you, except that so far he presents himself in a way almost unprecedented from both sides ... Well, and sometimes it might be helpful to watch how he's acting toward other people - even at the risk of looking like a spy."

Ireen showed some amusement. "I'm not going into details, but let me tell you - I've heard enough in that negotiation to know I was talking with Cho's son ... Ain't you interested to hear what kind of job I got?"

"Definitely so."

"You think you know already, but you don't know half of it." And then Ireen told him about Gabriel's planning. She finished, "I'm supposed to ask you, to make it happen - is this enough Chang inheritance for your taste?"

Harry grinned broadly. "Japan, of all places ... Well, Ireen, that's fine with me, only that talking with me was the easy part - all that's left is to get a nod from Cho, and I think there's no one better suited than you for reaching this goal."

"Why? What's so special about Japan?"

"That's an old story, but as you know, there's nothing as precious as a well-used prejudice." Harry tried to imagine the map of Japan in his mind. "Osaka, huh? ... That's somewhere - well, far enough from that island ..." Seeing Ireen's blank look, he said, "You know that I had a seminar in Japan, as a student? ... Well, as it turned out, I came back with lessons taught by two teachers, and the other one was a woman. Is this background enough?"

"But ... then how ..." Ireen looked still more confused, and a bit flushed.

"You mean, how does that fit with us three together, and your Japanese roots?"

Ireen nodded, obviously grateful for Harry expressing this particular thought.

"I wouldn't call Cho a racist." He chuckled again. "You know how it works with these prejudices - present people always excluded." This half joke didn't help Ireen much, so Harry added, "If Cho has a saying, which means a saying in advance, everything's possible, if you know what I mean ..."

Yes, she knew, from personal experience.

"... while otherwise - this island, where the seminar took place, is covered with cedar trees, which is nothing unusual there, only it gives this place a very characteristic look, and smell ... And now, imagine what was Cho's comment when Sandy came back with her wand and it turned out to be cedarwood?"

Ireen looked incredulous. "And what if, by accident, Gabriel picks a xylophone that's made of cedarwood too?"

"What should be?" Harry shrugged. "She welcomes opportunities, as you might have registered at some time or other ..."

He kept his expression casual, was more successful in that than Ireen.

"... and this would be just good for a remark or two, only that I'd be deeply surprised if she'd give them in Gabriel's presence."

Ireen nodded. "Certainly. Mothers and sons, that's just another level of harmony, compared to mothers and daughters."

"Maybe so." Harry grinned again. "Maybe another reason is - of course Sandy wanted to know what's so special about cedarwood. I don't think she found out yet, and maybe she's not asking that question herself any longer, but imagine the issue would be raised again - and this time, both children would start pressing."

"Say, Harry ..." Ireen's face was expressionless. "Should I emphasize this distance between Osaka and that island, when I'm going to ask her?"

Harry's answer came as a reflex. "Only if she says no in first place - and only if nobody else is around."

But at least one person had to be around for that, Cho herself of course, and she did so quite late in the evening, done for the day, not in the best mood for educational matters worth more than a nod, which was why the question still was pending the next morning.

* * *

Paul Sillitoe, for the last two and a half years a regular editor of *Magiscope*, a weekly magazine with its offices in London, pressed the Off button on his desk-o-mate. Lost in his thoughts, he didn't register how his call partner's data faded from the display.

He knew them by heart anyway.

As far as they went, that was - which didn't include the slightest hint why Harry Potter just had asked for a meeting, yesterday if possible, a request upon which Paul had responded by saying, "Gimme half an hour, okay?"

Just time enough to rearrange today's agenda, as Paul had planned it before receiving this call. What, to the outside, might have looked like an act of courtesy was in fact simple journalistic greed. Harry with something urgent, that smelled of headlines. Heavily so. Probably not for the next issue, but headlines nonetheless, sooner or later.

As solid as this motive felt already, it was crowned with - or built upon - another concern, of the long-running kind. Except that recently it appeared more like running out, fading to a meaningless shadow of the past ... Paul's relationship with Ginny.

Ginny Weasley, Harry's sister by adoption, Paul's girlfriend according to public knowledge, was keeping Paul on a leash too long to see the other end, be it fog or fine weather. Well, the picture was somehow inappropriate, the leash seemed there only from his perspective - for all Paul knew, Ginny might have dropped the handle weeks ago.

But she hadn't said so.

Over the years, Paul had learned to be careful with his calls. Ginny didn't take well to the slightest trace of pushiness, had hinted occasionally that she could do without being tracked down twice a week, had stated it very clearly once.

As if he didn't know where to find her. Shortly after Paul had signed with *Magiscope*, Ginny had started her own model agency - here in London, with herself as her most important horse in the stable, at least in the beginning. A hard-working career woman and a writer and researcher devoted to his profession - they would meet as often as the moon hid the sun, if not for soul's sake, or simple need of the libidinous kind.

And these needs seemed grossly unbalanced between them, these days. Unless ...

Against knowing better, Paul hoped Harry might have more information. If there was anyone Ginny would tell less - or later - than himself, then her brother. Because - well, their own version of unbalanced feelings was even older.

Paul made another call, sent an email memo to delay his appointments until later in the day, then leaned back to prepare himself for the coming conversation. And the first step in that process was to figure out Harry's reason for coming.

Or trying so. Paul wasn't aware of anything new in the Great Plot - the story waiting to throw its headlines for the last eight years, and the most likely candidate at first guess. But then, working at his own story, something about big-style corruption in the health and welfare business, Paul had paid little attention to the tickers from the news agencies.

Ticker was still the term, while for years already, these news arrived as electronic memos similar to mail. Paul switched on his viewer, started to scan backward.

Political meetings ... peace mission failed ... alarming weather statistics ... hurricane hits the Gulf of Mexico ... sports news ... military aircraft crashed in Zimbabwe ... spectacular divorce filed in Nevada ... three casualties after shooting in - Paul stopped, his attention caught by the name *Santa Monica*, started reading, found another name that ringed a bell - *Tony Chee*, movie director known for eastern movies western style ...

Had to be that. His eyes in fast-forward, Paul scanned further backward one more day, not striking another hit. This done, he started his reader account for *Magiscope*'s knowledge base, ran a search for *Chee, Tony*, got his results, his eyes flying over movie titles when there was a knocking at the door.

"Come in."

His visitor was Harry alright, presenting a face which revealed about as much as a fortune cookie, only less to the point.

"Hello, Harry, long no see." Paul shook hands. "I felt sorry to hear about your late friend, Tony Chee."

No reaction, aside from a little smile and a "Thank you." Damn Potter had scanned him already with more than eyes, one of the reasons why Paul would never meet him across a poker table.

Well, not more than a precaution, because Harry didn't play poker.

Although he would do just fine, considering his opening right now. "How are you doing, Paul? Don't you miss the daring freedom of the freelancer?"

For himself, Paul found a taste in poker evenings, that's why he kept his face steady - Harry wasn't wasting time at all, already preparing the ground for something that had to be a job offer. From somebody else, Paul might have expected to be asked for a favour, but Harry was a strong believer in a solid financial base for deals, leaving it to the other side to accept or to protest and say, no, it's for free.

"Not really," he said. "You know, earning a regular salary is a thrilling experience - you can concentrate on your real work. I'm still not tired of reading my pay slip at the end of the month, and feeling awe."

To some degree, it was the truth. But even so - Harry's face lacked the slight amusement you'd expect after such a half joke, and Paul felt as though having just figured out that his opponent was hiding a straight flush in front of an innocent face.

At this moment, said opponent asked, "And how's Ginny?"

A minute before, the thought still had seemed embarrassing, to confess that Harry himself might know better. While now, with this exciting agenda, after he'd seen this small glitch in Harry's mimikry, Paul only cared for a visible reaction. "I wish I knew."

"Oh ..." Harry's look was sympathetic. "I wasn't aware, Paul - haven't seen her in a while either. That bad?"

"I hate to quote myself again, and maybe it won't be entirely true. Anyway - I just don't know."

"Yeah, that's ..." Harry sighed. "I'd like to say, let me talk with her, only that's as helpful as curing a cold with a sunburn."

Paul could grin about that. "Yes, it is, isn't it? ... So then, tell me something new, Harry - or let me guess and show you what a journalist can do at short notice."

"I shouldn't cut your punch line - " Harry smiled apologetically, "not right after such a sad confession, but I can give you my answer already - what do you think why I'm here? I don't know anyone who's that quick in catching the essential details out of an insignificant mass of data."

Paul nodded. "Maybe except toward my own life, but that's quite a common habit ... So it's about Tony Chee, right?"

"Yes. Are you aware of the other cases?"

"Not in detail."

"If you had them, you probably knew already. Two actors, a singer, an entertainer, and a director - Tony. I just found out that these kidnappers must be wizards. Let's take that as a given, while what comes now is guesswork ... The kidnappers are insiders, some people in the show business, and they're somehow related to the parents in these five cases. I need someone going through the data of their movies, their events, their recordings - to find common factors, so a detective and I can check them out ... That's the short version."

Yes, certainly so - and the long version would start with Paul's own first question, which at the same time would signal his agreement. For a task that didn't afford any delay, in contrast to his last serious research for Harry, in which he had located Voldemort. At that time, Paul had finished a short-term project first, since a few days more didn't mean anything after months and years of waiting. While now - he was a fix-contract employee of *Magiscope*, who had lost his taste in the business of a freelance facts digger.

Only that Paul's last project in Harry's order had brought him a small fortune and a first-class reputation. And the unwavering support of this wizard, who would give you nightmares, should you ever find yourself at the wrong side of the table. Despite the fact that they met hardly once a year.

The same wizard, actually, who was to blame in first place for the terms between Ginny and Paul himself. To blame, mind, not to hold guilty. Or maybe in second place. Or in third ...

This wizard was sitting there, neutral face, after telling him he was the best and after making clear what the job was about. Not pleading, not in words nor with his eyes. Just laying out the facts. Just waiting since then. The pressure felt almost unbearable.

I'm not a show business expert, Paul wanted to say. What he said was, "I'd need a show business expert."

"Yes."

Paul had expected to hear a name, of someone already waiting somewhere, pencil in one hand, phony in the other. Or maybe five of them. But next instant he realized - not hearing the name didn't mean this someone wasn't found yet.

"And a place where to work, and probably ..." Paul stopped, feeling sure he was checking off a list Harry knew already by heart, and recognizing that he was playing for time before nailing himself - while, somehow, at some moment in the recent seconds, he seemed to have taken his decision.

So he exhaled deeply. "Allright, Harry. I'm your man."

Rather than looking pleased or thankful, Harry said, "From our side, there's nothing that'd conflict with this being the investigations for an ordinary report, to be published as soon as it suits you, and the magazine. Based on that - when can you start?"

Paul grinned wryly. "Gimme another half an hour - and a pair of ear protectors, for the talk with my editor-in-chief."

"Thank you, Paul, I appreciate that a lot." Harry wasn't smiling when he added, "I could be back in a minute with the protectors, so you might delay that conversation till then - at any rate, I thought I'd wait till you're done here."

"You would, won't you?" Paul looked wondering. "Where would you get them so quickly?"

"Sandy's earphones ... Her taste of music and volume would pass even through the walls of our castle, that's why."

Paul chuckled. "Prepared for everything, no doubt. So please tell me, what are the next steps?"

"Your apartment, to pack a suitcase. From there to Tony's house, that's probably the best place to stay, provided it's no longer sealed - and if, I'll talk with Seeger - that's the detective lieutenant in charge. Then getting in touch with a Mrs. Carmino, Tony's secretary. Talking with her whether she feels competent enough to be your first-hand expert - and if not, asking her whom else to contact ... Somewhere along the road, I'd like to introduce you with that lieutenant."

Very much as expected - Harry had the schedule ready, down to the last detail. The only topic not yet mentioned was the - well, the financial aspect. Paul still was searching for the proper words when Harry saved him the effort. "Your salary, Paul - in euro or dollars, which is the same ... For the task itself, hundred grand - and another hundred, should your employer turn sour about this change and fire you ..."

Paul raised his hand to protest, to say this was highly unlikely, once his boss had thrown the inevitable tantrum.

"... If you're successful, if we find them based on this approach and your results, you'll get a premium of a quarter of a million - from our side, that is ..."

"That's too much, Harry."

"Lemme finish - from our side, as I said, and then there's the official reward from the police which is another quarter. At least, these were the numbers before they killed Tony - and if it's raised again, we'll raise equally." Harry looked piercing. "You know that I'm not weighing my gratefulness in money, Paul, and I know you don't do the opposite - but I'm not going to be outnumbered by some slow-moving authorities, so don't tell me about too much."

Paul grinned. "Won't happen again. And since I've learned to trust your gut feelings, I might get prepared to feel rich."

"This you can do in Tony's house - it's a good place for that." Harry stood up. "I'll be back in half an hour - I don't think it would improve things with me hanging around here."

Which was true. Even now, Paul felt the familiar greed, the temptation to ask questions no end, while he better got his things settled first.

At the door, Harry turned once more. "Besides, Paul - I think I'll do a small research project of my own - a very short one, I'd guess."

"Which one?" Although he knew already.

"Talking with Ginny. If it's hopeless, you deserve to know. Preferably from herself, but whichever way, it shouldn't be her style to let it hang like that."

Paul felt a fluttering in his stomach. "She'll be awfully happy about you mixing in this particular business of hers."

"She herself wasn't treated that way." Harry's face hinted no expression. "Which is to say - we shouldn't discuss how much *mixing in* is the proper term, should we?"

* * *

This day would bring something special. The class knew it already a few minutes into the first course, French, had registered this fact the way students in school learn about news since centuries - by noticing slight alterations in the teachers' behaviour. Nobody knew what it was, they only felt sure the day would not pass as expected.

They had to wait almost to the end of the second course, Math, before Madame Clairvaux told them they should wait after the break, because they'd be guided to a different room. When they asked what this was about, Madame Clairvaux just smiled and said, "If I'd tell you, I'd only spoil the fun. Use the break for some guesswork, if you want - afterwards, you'll wise up quickly enough."

Leaving the classroom, Sandra and Héloïse looked at each other, realized that neither of them knew more, shrugged almost simultaneously. They'd wait the few minutes, wouldn't they - and if they were dying of curiosity, they'd bite their tongues before admitting so. It was seriously uncool to say anything much different from, "Who cares - not me."

Outside, however, they were joined by two other students who gave a damn for cool. The first of them, known as Benoît, said, "Hi - do you know what's up?"

"What do you mean, what's up?" Héloïse tried to look casual rather than surprised, which was difficult because apparently these boys knew more, which could only mean they were told more, which was a shame ...

"Didn't they tell you? After the break, the two parallel courses will work together - but first somebody will hold a speech."

And the second of them - Frédéric - said, "We're pretty sure about *where* this'll be ... There was some construction work in a side floor, they made one classroom out of two. But when we tried to have a look, they chased us off."

"So what?" said Héloïse, as if their own course had purposefully refused to gain more information.

It didn't help. The two boys insisted on hearing what exactly Madame Clairvaux had told them. When Sandra, tired of this pretentious game, confessed, "Nothing - not even that our

courses will be put together," they wasted no time in savouring their superior knowledge. This was a bit surprising, except that a moment later, it became obvious why - they had a more important issue to discuss.

Benoît said, "It's something new, Fresnel said. And not only today - the two courses will keep together in that for the next time, maybe all year long. So - er, we thought, er, we should sit together - if that's okay with you."

His glance hung at Héloïse. Looking up, Sandra saw Frédéric's eyes resting on herself, and what she felt was anxiousness, hope, uncertainty, hope ...

Héloïse seemed in her element. "Hmm ... Well, I don't know ... What's so good at sitting near you?"

Benoît had no answer ready.

Frédéric had. "We don't smell. That's more than some other boys can claim, believe me."

"That's an argument?" Héloïse looked incredulous.

"Yes it is," replied Benoît, "if you ever were sitting close to them ... But that's - er, I mean, that's not the only reason ..." His voice trailed off, came back an instant later. "Whatever it'll be - having Frédéric near you isn't bad at all, he knows a lot."

And Benoît's face had gained confidence, totally ignoring the question how this could be an argument in his own favour, because for him the answer seemed obvious.

Sandra said, "It can't be anything new. We already know all our courses."

Frédéric nodded. "True. And if I'm not much mistaken ..."

Héloïse interrupted him. "Whatever - who said we want to sit with boys?"

Benoît looked flabbergasted. Frédéric's face didn't change, although Sandra could feel that he wasn't buying Héloïse's remark. So she said, "Save it, Hély - maybe Benoît doesn't know what to say, but he's not going to believe you were serious." Sandra turned to Frédéric. "I'm still not sure what to think of it, but there's just one method to find out, right? ... So let's do it and see what happens."

"Yeah!" beamed Benoît. "That's the spirit." For an instant, waiting for Héloïse's reaction, his face grew anxious again, but when the Veela girl didn't protest, his beaming returned.

Frédéric stared admiringly. "You two work together pretty well. But with Benoît and me it's similar, only we're not yet up to your level ... Anyway, I can imagine us four outperforming all the others."

"So, can you?" replied Héloïse, but she looked quite pleased.

Then the break was over, and when the students of the two parallel courses were guided right to the room Frédéric had predicted, Benoît showed some of his qualities he had omitted to

emphasize - like a bulldozer, he ploughed through the crowd, helped by his friend, the two girls in their slipstream, with the effect that they caught excellent places instantly.

Because this new room had tables for four students each, apparently structured to work in teams of that size, and Benoît had aimed for a table pretty close to a small stage in front, with good sight to what was happening there, however more to the side, out of the teacher's immediate attention.

The room filled with the boys and girls, pretty slowly because this sitting order came as a surprise to them, and naturally there were discussions and hesitating and last-moment changes. Negotiations from one table to another were still in full process when three adults entered the room.

Monsieur Thionnay was the first, shutting down the noise with his appearance only.

Madame Maxime, the Beauxbatons Headmistress, came next, big as ever, looking considerably more joyful than the teacher, wearing a shining-blue dress that would have choked the last remarks, had there still been some.

And finally, giving Sandra a jolt in her heartbeat - Ron Weasley.

The three of them sat down. The Headmistress looked over the tables, smiling. "My dear students, when talking to you, I should stand up - but then, you know, I shouldn't."

Giggling in the double class, Ron smiling, Thionnay with a face of stone.

"Anyway - today we'll start something new in our school, that's why we are here, and the young man to my right, with this hair that shouldn't come close to paper ..."

More giggling, students staring at Ron's red hair, unsure whether it was appropriate to laugh. Ron grinning at Madame Maxime, Thionnay's face not moving a muscle.

"... he'll explain it to you. I want to introduce my dear friend, Ron Weasley from the European Education Council. It was his work - the idea and the setup, so he's qualified best to tell you what's this all about." The Headmistress made a gesture toward the guest.

Ron stood up. "Thank you, Madame Maxime, Monsieur Thionnay ..." He turned to the class. "To come right to the point, my dear students - it's about the way how to train your magic skills, the way how Magique Générale courses will be run, and how you will work as of today. In the short version - you will do it here in this room. You will do it in teams and groups, typically just the teams sitting around the same table - and for that, you'll organize yourselves, as far as it's not yet done already.

At this moment, Ron was looking right at their own table. Sandra felt his greeting in her mind, while Ron's face wasn't hinting anything special.

"Basically, that's it already. But I want to show you a bit of the background, and in addition, I want to make you aware of some changes in style that go with this new organization. So why do we change it like that, and what are the consequences?"

Ron wasn't keeping at the small stage any longer. He walked between the tables while speaking. "The essential question is - what are you in first place, students or magicals?" He stopped for an instant, went on. "The answer - you are neither - not in first place, that is. You are magical students, and any attempt to emphasize one more than the other is wrong. Bound to fail."

He had reached almost the far end of the room. Walking toward the front, Ron kept silent until reaching the stage again. Sandra, who had watched him as a speaker before, took the opportunity to study the faces at her table, those of the boys enraptured, that of Héloïse showing pleased attention.

"The magical world has met the Muggle world some years ago, and since then, we are fighting to find our mutual balance. The Muggles have learned to recognize a wand ..."

Ron presented his own, this way clearing the doubts in some faces, after the Headmistress hadn't bothered to explain his state, with him coming from a Muggle institution.

"... and we, we've learned to use computers. Among other things, sometimes in a combination of magic and technology ... And looking around, we see that the Muggles have quite some experience with students showing special abilities, or gifts. There are all kinds of special schools - specializing in sports, in music ..."

Ron's eyes, all the time going from table to table, from face to face, met those of Héloïse for an instant, just long enough so Benoît and Frédéric became aware of it and Héloïse herself could start beaming.

"... in ballet, in sciences - whatever. And in all these schools, you find organizations that are suited best to their special topic. No matter how different they are, there's one thing they all have in common. In their own specialty, standard teaching is replaced by something you might call a constant training seminar."

Ron walked again a few steps, this time to the far end, turned. "What is it, learning spells? You watch how it's made, you watch once more, and then all you have to do is to try, try, try again until finally you manage. It's not any different from a dancer learning a jump. Some are quicker, some need more time - and most of the help you need can be given by your teammates. This is why the team organization is the basis of our training seminar, and that's how one teacher can supervise a large number of students at once."

Ron looked around. "All of you can learn and teach at the same time - within your team, from one team to another ... The moment someone has mastered a spell, he turns into an assistant teacher - for his own team first, but why not for others? ... After a while, something else is due, and then, for a short period, the class is back to one teacher, until the first students have mastered it, and so forth."

Checking the people at the stage, Sandra saw - Thionnay's face no longer was stony, it showed barely suppressed pain and disgust. With beaming satisfaction in her own, she turned back to Ron.

Who grinned right now. "Of course, this could end up in a mess easily - if you were going to behave like an ordinary student, taking the first opportunity to start some nonsense ..."

It earned him some laughter, more so when Madame Maxime supported Ron's words by rolling her eyes.

"... and here we come to the second essential point. In all these schools, the students understand themselves as self-responsible in their special ability. This is your obligation. A musician doesn't mess up in music, a dancer doesn't mess up in sports and exercises - and a wizard, a witch, doesn't mess up in Magique Générale ... It's that simple."

Ron walked back to the stage, turned once more. "I would think this arrangement is much nicer than the previous one, so you already get paid for this heavy burden of self-responsibility ..." He waited through the laughter. "But there's still another benefit - like in all these special schools, students can specialize pretty quickly, can intensify certain aspects. If you're quick enough in mastering the *official* program, you can pick a non-standard spell and train it while the others are catching up."

He turned to the teacher. "Monsieur Thionnay will probably be pleased to show a bit more than the average student can master, and if - some years from now - this raises new challenges, then it's just the same effect that can be watched on all these special schools."

Monsieur Thionnay seemed having serious doubts about his pleasure, and Sandra - for once - shared his opinion.

"So that's the story in the longer version ... Thank you for your attention, and enjoy the new age in magical learning." Ron made a slight bow toward the class, another one toward Madame Maxime, sat down.

The applause from the class was reluctant - maybe from the stunning news, maybe with respect to the teacher's face, or from simple lack of habit. Sandra, in contrast, was hammering her knuckles on this shiny table, followed by Héloïse and, after a moment, by the two boys.

Madame Maxime thanked Ron for his "speech from someone who knows what he's talking about," as she said. Toward the students, she announced a five minutes' break in which they might settle their seating order - as a first good example of self-responsibility, because nobody else would tell them, only at the end of the break, they'd be fixed to what they had. Then the Headmistress and the two men left the room.

The noise level swell instantly, students shouting, pleading, arguing - with the notable exception of a few tables, among them their own, so they could watch the turmoil with quiet amusement.

Realizing whose work this was, Sandra said, "Look at them ... We owe it to Benoît that we've settled that already."

Héloïse stared at her, caught by surprise, her mouth almost falling open.

Benoît himself just shrugged. "Wasn't it obvious, after we were *d'accord*?" He looked at Héloïse. "Weasley, huh? ... He's a relative of you?"

"My uncle."

"That hair's really something ..." Benoît seemed to balance names and family structures. "So he's your father's brother, right?"

Héloïse's head fell back in a gesture of exhausted patience. "Yes, indeed."

"Does your father have the same hair?"

Héloïse closed her eyes, as though this was more than what you could look at. "Yes."

"Really? ... Then how come your own's so different?"

Before Héloïse found the time to lose her faith in this particular team, Frédéric said, "Hey, Ben - do me the favour and switch on your brain, would you? ... She's a Veela, remember?"

He was rewarded with a grateful look from Héloïse, something Sandra found no time to feel bothered about because she was busy sensing the two boys after this short exchange - it might have turned out as an invitation to a fistfight.

Benoît, however, looked neither upset nor embarrassed. "You mean that's Veela hair, and it pushes through? ... Well, we don't have that many books at home, and, you know, the other day when I asked the librarian here for something about Veela, she looked at me as if I'd asked for some - er, well, you know what I mean."

They were still laughing when Thionnay came in the room. He shot a sharp glance at them, however without saying a word. Instead, he walked to his seat, looked around. "Well, after this splendid suada, it can only grow better."

And while Sandra was fighting a murderous impulse to send him a good one, or to make his legs dance on their own, while the students waited for their first opportunity to do the promised teamwork, the teacher presented his own speech - as if to prove that only a pen-pusher from the Education Council could cook up an idea as crazy as self-responsible students.

He did so eloquently, spoke about different magical courses, how they had been separated in the past, how the merging of Magicals and Muggles had destroyed this traditional order, and what a shame it was, being stripped down to *Magique Générale* in favour of some stupid world-wide education program.

With every minute passing, the speaker and his audience became more aware of diverging trends - the audience, that their teacher could do without Muggles and their technology, that he gave a damn for computers, phonies, porties, that in his opinion portable music players were devilish devices - and the teacher, that his audience was disappointed, bored, getting openly hostile.

Thionnay, noticing the scowling faces, stopped in his droning, sneered, "Do you have trouble with your self-responsibility? ... Well, might that our red-haired guest didn't outline the full truth? That magic is more than swishing a wand through the air? I'm talking about magic, nothing else."

One student raised his arm. "Yes, Monsieur le Professeur, but we thought first we'd train a bit in our teams, before coming to all these things."

Some murmur in the class made clear - the others were thinking the same, while not quite as unafraid as this student.

"Alright then, since I can assume this lesson has rounded up the scarce picture you were given from our *councillor* ..."

Thionnay said the word with such contempt, Sandra had to bite her lips and, at the same time, send a soothing wave to Héloïse, who seemed at the verge of shouting back insults of her own choice.

"... but, after this excursion in magical ethics, let me give you a little demonstration what magic can do toward this sacred self-responsibility. I'm talking about the *Imperius* curse - can someone tell us what this is?"

Sandra, who felt sure to know more about this curse than the teacher himself, used this announcement to relax, ready to watch what was coming, without any inclination to prove her knowledge. However - right next to her, an arm was up.

Thionnay nodded to Frédéric, who said, "It is one of the Unforgivable Curses. It breaks the will of the cursed person."

"Breaking isn't quite correct - it just disables the free will as long as the spell is held. But otherwise you were right, Monsieur Pouilly - this is one of the curses that are forbidden under normal circumstances. But just for demonstration, and for the benefit of the class - " the teacher smiled at Frédéric, "would you allow me to spell you?"

Don't do it, Sandra thought, and she almost sent this impulse into Frédéric's mind. But he was already up, walked forward to the stage, a bit pale, otherwise quite determined.

"Don't worry," said Thionnay, "I'm not going to harm you." He raised his wand. "*Imperio!*"

The boy stood calm, arms slack, and only Sandra could feel how an energetic mind turned into a docile stupor.

Thionnay made him walk, stop, fall, come up, roll over. While each command was carried out without hesitation, the class showed little enthusiasm - maybe because of these unimpressive actions, or because their patience had worn out.

Thionnay, registering his limited success, reacted instantly. He stopped Frédéric, said, "Tell me, Monsieur Pouilly, what is my nickname here?"

"Thionnite."

Satisfied with the sharp intaking of breath among the students, Thionnay eyed them. "You thought I didn't know, am I right?"

"Yes."

The answer had of course been given by Frédéric, raising some nervous laughter in the class.

"Well, to good last ..." Thionnay moved his wand, conjured up a single flower - a splendid rose. He passed it to Frédéric. "Take this flower and be a chevalier - give it to the lady of your heart."

Suddenly, the teacher had the full attention and approval of his audience - well, with a certain exception, because Sandra wasn't approving at all that Frédéric came walking straight into her direction.

He stood in front of her, opened his mouth ...

Without even thinking, purely from instinct, she raised her arms as if to accept the flower, touched him, and sent the counter spell directly into his mind.

Frédéric staggered, regained balance, his eyes clear again, although a bit confused. "What ... Oh - what flower is this?" He looked around at the teacher, a questioning expression in his face.

Thionnay was baffled for an instant, came hurrying, examined Frédéric. "Are you okay?"

"Er - yes." Frédéric sat down.

The teacher quickly regained his composure. Toward the class, he said, "That's quite interesting - you know, normally the spell would be broken by itself only if the order was the most terrible that person could imagine, and even then only by few people."

Thionnay turned to Sandra, showing a thin smile. "I wonder whether this has really been a compliment."

Her own smile wasn't any better. "I think it was the flower."

"Oh, do you?" When some laughter could be heard, two flushed spots appeared in Thionnay's paled face. "Let me show you how wrong you are." His wand came forward like a snake. "*Imperio!*"

For a moment, Sandra felt stunned - from surprise, that Thionnay really had cursed her, without even asking for permission, which nominally would have counted as reason enough to be sentenced to prison. Except, of course, that he would excuse himself with the confusion of the moment.

At least, the teacher's own confusion was good enough to take her stunned look for the real thing - not aware at all that Sandra, in a reflex, had shaken off the fleeting rush of dizziness. Thionnay said, "Go to the blackboard and write your full name."

She had to grin - clever move, that, giving a perfect excuse for breaking her incognito, only that another teacher, female, years ago had made sure she'd never fall to such attacks even for a second.

Still grinning, Sandra held up the rose. "Doesn't work ... I really think it's the flower."

08 - Research

Harry stood in the entrance of the Waylon villa, a building with a white facade in the neo-classic style found more often here, along the Sunset Boulevard. The doorbell button was placed in the centre of an affair that could have served as a holy water basin in a baptism, save for the hole in the middle. He pressed it.

He had announced his visit the day before. He had announced his coming a few minutes ago, and now he was aware of the camera some feet above and to the side, a faint noise telling him that the lens was shifting from wide-angle to close-up.

Harry could understand these precautions. After what had happened, Amanda Waylon took no chances. Although - how often would a lightning strike the same place twice?

Hearing the buzz, he pushed toward the handle, opened the door. Looking up, he saw a man standing about twenty feet away, his arms crossed in front of his chest. The man inspected him calmly. "Mr. Potter?"

"That's me."

"Please come in."

When the man dropped his arms, started to move, Harry saw confirmed what he already had expected - the man wore a shoulder holster, and his stance a moment before was just his way to be ready, short of aiming the gun at every guest entering the house.

Harry was guided into a large room, almost a hall with its huge ceiling. The man turned to a woman sitting on a sofa, a baby in her arm. "Mr. Potter, Madam."

So this was Amanda Waylon, the shooting star on Hollywood's sky, hell on legs in contracts and lawsuits, as Harry had been informed by Mrs. Carmino ... Blonde she was, had wide shoulders for a woman, light-coloured eyes examining him openly, a sensual mouth not bothering to smile right now.

He examined back. She wore jeans, certainly from some designer he was at a loss to identify, and a white T-shirt that showed some spots, had to be the baby's slobbering, just above two breasts for which a push-up bra seemed a waste of engineering efforts.

Well, for all Harry could see and sense, she was likely to be a hell with legs somewhere else too.

"I'm done, Mr. Potter. When you are too, have a seat." Amanda Waylon spoke these words without her expression supporting the joke.

But then, maybe she hadn't intended to sound funny. Harry could remember a time when he'd have turned dark red from such a remark - only then, he would have made his own examination less openly. Here and today, he just sat down.

The woman said, "Would you please identify yourself?"

"Yes, of course." Harry seized for his GALA - his Gringott's Account Liquidity Affirmation, for him the most reliably ID card he could think of, passed it over.

The actress inspected the thing. "Very cute. What's this, a gameboy?"

"No, Miss Waylon. An ID card from the Goblins' bank. Basically it's a credit card, but it's the only false-proof ID card on earth. You can ask it about me."

"You kidding? ... No, apparently not." Amanda Waylon looked up to the man. "Hey, Warren, look at this - ever seen something like that?" Toward Harry, she added, "By the way, this is Warren, my bodyguard."

Harry exchanged a nod with the man, who walked over to the woman's place, all the time holding some distance to Harry's own position. Watching Warren's steps, Harry felt sure - as graceful as they were, this was no *aikido* adept.

The actress held the card with Harry's moving picture up. "Funny, isn't it?" She turned to Harry. "And how do I use it?"

"For a billing, you would ask whether the bank guarantees the payment. But you can just ask it whether I am the real Harry Potter."

The woman glanced at the picture again, then, with a cunning look in Harry's direction, she said, "Hey, tell me - what's Mr. Potter's account good for?"

Her eyes widened a bit when, as Harry knew, the picture of a Goblin appeared on the card. Next moment, a Goblin voice said, "Gringotts will accept every bill in the name of Mr. Potter."

"Cool, isn't it? Nice toy, that." Amanda Waylon threw the card in Harry's direction, so quickly that only his trained reflexes allowed him to catch it. His sharp movement made the bodyguard go tense for an instant, right hand already halfway to the holster, before he relaxed again.

The woman came up with a phony. "And now let's be sure." She pressed a button.

The voice of Lieutenant Seeger said, "Yes?"

"Hello, lieutenant, Amanda Waylon calling. I've got a visitor, says he's Mr. Potter, except it could as well be Santa Claus. Would you please describe him?"

The voice said, "Well - er, about five eight, twelve stones, I'd ..."

"Lieutenant." The woman's voice was like acid, resolved in sugar. "Would you please describe him in terms I can follow?"

A second's hesitation. "Medium-sized, slim but muscular, has a scar on ... Miss Waylon, lemme talk with him, it's simpler."

She held the phony up. "For you."

Harry came forward, bent closer, took the phony - and retreated to his chair, if only for Warren's peace of mind. "Hi, Carl."

"Harry - it's you, no doubt, but just tell me - how did I return from that lunch into my office?"

Harry grinned. "You touched the towel bar in the men's of Luiz' restaurant."

"Okay, passed. Gimme back to her."

Harry handed the phony over, and while Miss Waylon was telling the detective the acid had been just by accident and only the sugar was the genuine stuff, he started his own way of communication with the girl that had been dropped on the sofa. When the short exchange was finished, the girl was beaming at him, giggling audibly.

The girl's mother showed the first smile. "Alright, Mr. Potter - may I call you Harry? ... My name's Amanda - what are you doing with my daughter?"

"Playing with her, what do you think?" Harry sent a stronger tickling, which caused a joyful gurgling from the girl. He looked at the woman. "What's her name?"

"You're so full of tricks, I wonder why she didn't tell you. That's Ginger ... Say, how do you manage from that chair?"

Harry smiled. "Wizard tricks, as you said - I was a bit reluctant to come close, er, I mean with respect to Warren, less from her salivating - that's something I'm used to all the time."

The woman watched her daughter's beaming. "Sometimes I think she really's a little short on a father ... She can't await coming near you." A smile flashed up. "Or maybe she's just an early starter."

"Fine with me - now, don't get afraid, it's just another trick ..." Harry summoned the girl, who came floating through the air into his arms, almost bursting of pleasure.

The mother had gasped, now just stared. "I'm not sure whether I'd get used to that, Harry. I prepared for this conversation by reading about your own roles as an actor, so I might say I was forewarned, only - seeing that right in front of my eyes ..."

Harry settled the girl in his lap. "With Cho, my wife, it's the same - she never got used to it, and she's a witch herself. But you know, especially in Ginger's age, they just love it, and that's always a good excuse for showing off a bit."

Amanda gave him a look that acknowledged this hint of a compliment, then grew serious, suddenly looking very businesslike. "You didn't come here as a children welfare institution, Harry - " the smile flashed up again, "and not for mother's welfare either, even though it looks that way right now, so what do you want from me?"

"Information." Harry explained what he had found out, and what he and Paul were looking for. "I'd guess we can restrict it to your movies after the baby break - two, if my counting's right. This would be *Desperate Measures* and *An Unremarkable Event*."

"Yeah, that's correct. But I was just an actor ..." Amanda saw his expression. "Yes, okay, I was the star, but so what - why are you coming to me, not to the producer, or the director?" A flicker crossed her face. "By the way, I'm sorry about your friend. I never met him."

Harry produced a slight bow. "Thank you ... Coming to you was the natural step, for several reasons. Asking the director might be the next step, or the producer - or both, I'm not sure yet."

The woman's face showed disgust. "If you think it'd be helpful me talking with the director - forget it. You'd be better off coming on your own, or with that lieutenant."

"Really?" Harry looked wondering. "But wasn't it the same in both projects?"

"Sure it was. So? ... It's money that held us together, nothing else. As far as I'm concerned, Scotty's an asshole, and what he's thinking about me - " Amanda grinned, "he might tell you himself."

Harry said, "You know, one reason coming to you first was - at the current state of things, only the victims themselves are out of the question. True, I'm looking for wizards, only they hide their nature well, that's why everybody else's on our list in first place, needs some clearing before we'd be ready to trust him."

"Scotty? Never." The woman shook her head. "I won't go as far as saying he isn't up to that kind of scheming, but didn't you say this must be a team? ... Well, in that case - his teammates would've shot him already some time ago."

After a moment's thinking, she added, "No, I'm pretty sure he's clean. Scotty's a pro, If he'd call me for a promising script, I'd agree right at the spot. He knows how to make a star shine, only that doesn't make him a pleasant guy ... How was it with your friend?"

Amanda's question hit Harry by surprise. Why did she ask? Maybe just professional curiosity, or out of interest for himself, or simply as part of a polite conversation, after her unladylike remarks about another director? He said, "On the set, Tony was merciless. Or so it felt - you know, I'm just an amateur actor. With the cameras off, he was nice - but then, he was my friend, so I'm prejudiced in my own way."

"How did you meet him?"

Harry didn't feel prepared to tell the story of his life, particularly not with Warren, the bodyguard, still lingering in the background. But he wanted help, and this woman seemed to trade information for information, if only by a built-in reflex.

"It was on a party," he answered. "I came together with my wife who's in the spectator business, at that time was trying to get started. Well, there was a scene with a kung fu actor, and just when I was about to kick him, it was Tony who warned me, said this actor was only waiting to file a lawsuit ... Then we talked about martial arts - anyway, he was the only nice person I met this day."

"And how did it go with this kung fu type?"

"I didn't touch him." Seeing Amanda's disappointed look, Harry added, "I scored nonetheless - and besides, I guess Tony was right. That reminds me - how's your own lawsuit going?"

"No comment." The woman smiled apologetically. "It's a pending issue, I shouldn't discuss it in public. By the way, this is another reason why I'm not ready to start any action in this regard. It's a tricky business, I'm not going to jeopardize my position."

Harry had been forewarned. Negotiating with Amanda Waylon was something you did on your own risk. He asked, "Are you blaming them?"

"As I said, Harry - no comment. But I can give you the facts - at that time, I had a bungalow in Pinewood Crescent, one of these places with fences around, guards at the entrance, and so forth. They let the car pass without making sure they came on order ... I sold the bungalow and moved into this house here, partly because they said they couldn't serve a lawsuit opponent. As if they did before ..."

For the first time, Harry sensed genuine rage in the woman.

"... Anyway, I changed my security system, and that's why Warren's around me all the time."

The rage was gone, and there was a sparkling in her eyes that seemed to indicate these words could be interpreted literally.

"Of course," said Harry, his expression casual. "A bodyguard stays with the body, that's what he's supposed to do."

The sparkling intensified, otherwise Amanda kept silent.

Harry held his eyes at the girl's head in front of him when he said, "There's a girl, about Ginger's age. Her name's Tanitha. Her hair's black, and there are other differences too - for example, she wasn't kidnapped. And so far, she hasn't been short on a father. Although, that might change."

Now he looked up. "Paul is a journalist. Usually he works for a weekly magazine in England, but he's been a freelancer before. Assume he'd be working on an article about you, collecting background material. Assume he'd come to this director, and the producer, in that business ... Could he speak in your name?"

Amanda's eyes watched Harry, with her daughter in his lap. "Make it a biography, otherwise it would look strange, going for the details you want to know ... Come to think of it, that might be an idea - is he good?"

So Harry got what he wanted, and Amanda was pressing the most of it for her own benefit. Wasn't this exactly what Mrs. Carmino had predicted? He said, "Depends on what you want. Paul's specialized in research, especially in stories where people have reason to keep their mouths shut - scandals of any kind ... Anyway, for some time, he'll be busy."

"You take me for a cold-hearted bitch, ain't you?"

Without a second's hesitation, Harry answered, "I take you for a mother who went through her own ordeal, and managed quite well. And whose daughter's quite charming, which doesn't strike me as if she's inherited all that from this father being so short ..."

Amanda's lips were twisting.

"... I was told I'd meet a woman that's hard to negotiate with, but once it's settled, she'd hold to the deal. The first part's true, so I have no reason to doubt the other."

"No, you don't."

"There's something else," he said. "Yours was the first kidnapping. I can hardly believe that was by accident. It makes me wonder if there was something that put you in the focus."

"The press campaign," came Amanda's immediate answer. "I'm a fucking star, in case you didn't notice, and these people did what they could in marketing for my first movie after the break. Pictures of me and Ginger all over the papers, stuff like that."

"You figured that out by yourself, didn't you?"

"I'm not stupid. Just blonde."

Harry smiled. "You're still blaming yourself - and I'd bet there hasn't been a picture of Ginger in the papers since then, only they had those from before, hadn't they? - And your lawsuit against the security company, you're punishing them in place of yourself."

Her voice was angry. "Don't you listen? I'm not commenting, I said."

"I didn't expect an answer. I only thought you should know that someone else knows, someone who - well, the device Tony used to hide Tanitha, it was me who built it. And when I haven't anything better to do, I think, he shouldn't have asked for it, I shouldn't have made it for him, then he'd still be alive, and Tanitha would be back long since ... That's what I wanted to say."

Amanda's stare softened. "It needs one to know one, huh?"

"That might be the reason." Harry stood up, came to the sofa. "Thanks to you, I'll be too busy for such useless thoughts, so - here's your little angel, it was a pleasure to hold her for a while."

"You two were looking great - and I appreciate to have her returned the usual way."

Harry grinned. "To be honest - I can do it only toward myself, not the other way around."

Amanda took over the girl. "Would you answer me a question, Harry?"

"Maybe so - ask."

"Erm - that funny thing you showed us, is it real?"

"The GALA? ... Yes, absolutely - why?"

For the first time, Harry saw something like embarrassment in Amanda's face when she said, "But then ... Your account must be beyond any measure, according to what this figure said."

"The Goblin," corrected Harry in a reflex, then flushed a bit. "No, it's not - I'm not exactly broke, but I'm sure it's way below your own. Only ..." He hesitated.

"Only what?"

"Well, for some reason I'd like to keep out, they refuse to charge my account, no matter what bills are coming. It makes you very reluctant to spend some money. I already thought of a double bookkeeping, but if the Goblins found out, they'd be deeply insulted."

"You're kidding."

Harry snorted. "I wish I were."

Amanda stared at him. "I wish I had your problems - er, financially, I mean. Because then, I hadn't, if you can follow me."

* * *

Sandra felt very pleased. Pleased *with* Mr. Thacker, their English teacher, and equally pleased *against* Héloïse. Because Mr. Thacker had offered her to leave, after seeing her bored glance - at the cost of a very small essay, just one page. And Sandra had gladly accepted.

Héloïse had looked stunned. Her ghostspeaker leaving her in this critical moment?? ... Only that, considering Hély's recent attitude, Sandra felt it justified to do what her mother called *cutting her wings just a little*.

Actually it was about the first time Sandra did that, and also the first time she understood exactly what Cho meant.

Sandra was on her way to the students' workroom. There, she would take her dictapen, would make it flying through a few lines, to work on her own things afterwards. Mr. Thacker hadn't even specified a topic, she was totally free in her choice, knew already what to write about ... Her first impressions here in Beauxbatons, polite but objective, he he, this English gentleman would no doubt appreciate it.

Entering the room, Sandra saw a figure sitting across a few tables. Then this figure raised its head, and for an instant, Sandra felt like fleeing - only that, even if not naturally so, a Potter didn't flee.

"Hello, Sandra." Frédéric showed a smile.

"Hello." She skipped the smile, took the next-best seat, sat down. Pulling out her dictapen, she felt trapped. Dictating toward the pen audibly, fully in Frédéric's view, seemed awfully embarrassing, while doing what she had planned - letting the pen run with mind waves only - was plainright forbidden.

Because dictapens weren't famous for being controlled silently, not the least bit.

Keeping her eyes on the paper, Sandra sent a low murmur, suddenly feeling an unexpected writer's block. A moment ago, she had known exactly what to write, while now ...

And, at this instant, her problem was growing worse, because she felt a presence approaching, a quite determined one. Who asked, "Mind me coming over?"

"Actually ..." Yes. "No."

"You're not banned from class, are you?"

Sandra had to grin on that. "No. It's English - I was freed for a single page."

Frédéric nodded. "Yes of course - he's really a nice guy, Thacker."

Heaven forbid curiosity, while politeness ... "And you?"

"Religion. I'm released full term."

"Religion?" Sandra's face showed surprise - for herself, religion was a fascinating matter, like a mix of history, fairytales, plus a dash of jokes, even if she was the only one who felt like laughing out loudly.

"Yes - it's a family tradition. You're a strong believer?"

"Me? ... No - er, I mean, not in this sense."

Frédéric looked relieved. "Good - so you don't feel offended." He hesitated. "Er - about family ... Say, did my family name tell you something?"

Of course! "No - why?"

"Well ..." Frédéric stared at the table, looked up. "It seemed to tell Héloïse a lot. Didn't she talk with you about the name Pouilly?"

Sandra wasn't used to lying at all, had the distinct feeling she was as bad a liar as her father. "Ooh - you mean that it's an old French family and so? ... Yes, I know."

"But it's no better nor worse than Delacour - that's similar, for all I know ... Maybe that's why ..."

Sandra shrugged, leaving his questioning tone hang in the air.

"There was ..." Frédéric swallowed. "Sandra, I have to tell you something."

She tried Héloïse's style of conversation. "A confession?" The word was hardly out when Sandra felt her own cheeks starting to glow.

It made Frédéric blushing even deeper. "No, not ... It's just - I know something, and I think you should ... Sandra, I know the first name of your mother."

"My mother??" Sandra's mouth fell open.

"Er - yes. It's Cho, right?"

"How ..."

Not looking up, Frédéric hurried on. "And I know the name of that centaur, and ... I ... I know who you really are." His face came up. "I thought you should know that I know."

Sandra stared at him.

When Frédéric kept silent, waiting for her reaction, she said, "I had the feeling you knew something ... Where do you have it from?"

"There is ..." Frédéric swallowed again. "By the way, I thought you'd guessed already, about me knowing, and that's one of the reasons why ... It's so embarrassing, now that we're together in the same team ..."

"What made you think I knew that ..."

Sandra realized how complicated a conversation could grow when talking about the knowledge of the knowledge of one's own knowledge. However, Frédéric had caught her question, said, "When you blocked Thionnite's Imperius - to me it felt as if you'd said, yes, you're right."

"Not at all - and why ..." Sandra stopped, becoming fully aware that there was little sense in denying. "You seem to know a lot - the others all thought it really was the flower, or Thionnite had messed up. Why not you?"

Frédéric looked pleased. "I know a bit about the Imperius - and besides, he'd spelled me a moment before, and then I came out again, and ..." Frédéric's eyes widened. "Yes of course - it was you who took me out, wasn't it? Because next moment, I would have said your name."

"Each time I ask you how do you know, you switch to something else." Sandra stared angrily at Frédéric. "And what's worse, it looks as if I'm the one myself who's dropping the question and changing the topic. So ..."

"I'm sorry - I didn't do it on purpose, it was just ... Okay, about the Imperius - well, there's just one person that's known to be totally immune from the Imperius, and that's - er, your father, Harry Potter."

"Oh, is it? And everybody knows it, something as common as the capital of France, huh?" When Frédéric chuckled about her remark, Sandra didn't join him, registering again how bad her interrogation technique was. "Alright, let's go back to the first question ..."

Frédéric's face alone told her - he wouldn't have objected skipping this detail.

"... how come you know so much about our family?"

Once more, Frédéric kept his eyes on the table. "There's an old story, took place here in Beauxbatons ... For the recent days, I was wondering if you know about, because - if not, if your father ... I didn't want to be the one ... But then I thought, why does she call herself ..."

But maybe you weren't told ..." He looked up, a pleading in his face. "I cannot - please, Sandra, tell me if ..."

Suddenly she understood his problem. "Er - yes, I know about that. I ... I didn't tell the truth ... Sorry."

Frédéric exhaled deeply. "Good ... You didn't even twist, hearing that name." He gave a short smile. "I shouldn't wonder, what with a ..." Then he blushed again. "What do you know?"

"As much as you, I think. Ha ... my father once killed a Pouilly, Gérard was his name, in the great hall, and he did it because this Gérard was about to kill Marie-Christine ..."

"You know her?" Frédéric seemed a bit surprised, and relieved.

"Yes of course! She's like an aunt ..." Sandra stopped before drifting off again. "Go ahead."

Now that the first barrier was mastered, Frédéric seemed more than ready. "This Gérard, he was a brother of my father, so he would have been an uncle. Because this story is mentioned every now and then in the family, my father once told me. And then ..." Frédéric blushed, hurried on, "I was - er, for a while, I was imagining myself how I'd come, one day, and take revenge - er, you know, what you'd think, like, er, once you're big and strong and ..."

Sandra wasn't too familiar with such daydreaming, on the other side, she wouldn't call it totally foreign to her. "Yes, I know what you mean."

"Yes, er, and one day, I think I said something in that direction, and my father made a remark like, I should think twice, and I asked why, and he said, because it mightn't be the best idea, and I asked more, and he said, this story had two sides, and none of them would be very inviting for revenge, and then he said that'd be all he'd tell me."

Frédéric paused a moment. This time, however, Sandra had wised up, kept silent.

Frédéric continued, "So I thought it over and, after a while, I understood what he meant. The one side, that meant this - er, your father, he had to be very dangerous to mess with - er ..."

Sandra felt no reason for being angry about that, quite the opposite. "Yes, that's true."

Frédéric glanced at her, went on, "And the other side, that is this Gérard, it could only mean he shouldn't be used as a subject for revenge ... Well, in a way it was just - you know, I'm not really the action type, so ... But I'm good with books and so, and I started to gather information about this story, and about him - er, your father, I mean, and people around him, and what ..."

"Really?" Sandra felt extremely pleased. "And that's how you know?"

"Er - yes, in a way. But then, one day, I found something at home. Er - I don't think I was supposed to read it, but I read it anyway."

"What was it?"

Frédéric hesitated again. "It's ... a protocol, from when he was interrogated by the police."

"Harry??"

"You call him that way?" Frédéric looked surprised.

"Sometimes, or daddy, or ... Just how it seems appropriate." Sandra felt no need to reveal other names she used to address her father.

"So you can talk with him, huh?"

"Yes, of course. We can talk about everything."

"Well, maybe ..." Frédéric flushed again, this time seriously. "This protocol, it's very detailed. He - your father - er, he told everything."

Sandra felt like bursting of pride. "Yeah, he never lies, to nobody."

"Which doesn't mean he tells everything."

"No, of course not." Then she realized what Frédéric had inclined. "You mean, there's more in this protocol than what he told me?"

"Er - yes, I'm pretty sure. It ..." Frédéric's dark red face was kept low. "It's not that ... only, when I met you and realized - er, and all of a sudden, it felt so dishonest, me knowing about ... Because, you know, it ... it has to do ..."

Sandra wasn't a Veela, still, she was a girl, used to talk with many different people, none of them famous for shying off much. "It has to do with sex."

Frédéric could only nod.

Girl or not, Sandra felt glad he wasn't looking at her. "Well, erm, I'm not going to tell you exactly who told me what, er, but about Marie-Christine and - er, Harry and - er, Cho ..." Sandra's voice trailed off, because she wouldn't know how to finish that sentence. Even so, it seemed to be answer enough for Frédéric.

Then she realized something else. "Does Benoît ..."

"Are you mad??" Frédéric's face came up. "Sorry - I didn't mean it - er, but no, definitely not ... You know, he's okay - he's more, actually, but - well, sometimes he's a bigmouth, that's why ..." After a moment, Frédéric added, "I'm not going to tell him about you - nor anyone else, for that matter."

"Thank you. Although ..." Sandra grinned ruefully. "You know who's the most likely candidate to blow my cover? ... Me myself."

"You?" Frédéric shook his head. "No, I don't think so - not after I saw how you took the news about my name."

"Oh, that?" Sandra waved dismissively. "That was pretty simple, because ..." Stopping just in time, she barely avoided to prove her own words toward another matter badly suited for public knowledge, hurried on, "... because I wasn't provoked."

Frédéric looked blank. "Not provoked? ... What do you mean? Isn't this name enough reason ..."

Certainly - only Sandra had sensed enough in the seconds before to be prepared. "Well, it was - Benoît just told your names, it was exactly what you'd expect in this situation - er ..." Then Sandra found the rescuing argument. "And besides, Harry - er, my father, he isn't particularly proud of what he did."

"Really?"

"Yes. He said - well, it's a bit private, but I know he always regretted not having found another solution. While for Marie-Christine and Cho, they think differently."

Frédéric kept silent, relishing this information for a moment. Then he said, "It's funny that we met because of your wand, in a way, because ..."

Sandra knew what he was about to say.

And here it came. "... Well, in that protocol, he describes exactly what he did. And he did it without a wand - just with his hands, actually the way Héloïse held her hands, just before you showed your wand."

Sandra suppressed a twist, her mind racing for some path off this topic. "Is this another family tradition?"

"Huh?"

"To have a brain that's working like that. Because you know, there's one thing in which Harry and Marie-Christine agree - this Gérard was really brilliant."

Frédéric looked embarrassed. "I'm doing fine - it's just that at this moment, I realized that all this stuff I was collecting all the time - er, all of a sudden it was reality, with you sitting there."

Sandra flushed again.

And she'd failed - Frédéric wasn't brought off track. "Er - Sandra, er - I wonder whether you could do it?"

"Do what?" As if she didn't know.

Frédéric swallowed. "Doing spells without a wand."

How reliable was he? How much could she trust him? But then, toward this Potter historian, what was the sense ... Would she reveal anything about the High Priestess when confirming something she might have inherited from her father, besides her immunity? Or learned?

But Sandra had learned also from her mother. "I'd like to offer you a deal."

"A deal?"

"Yes - I'll answer your question if you come to show me that protocol."

Frédéric grinned. "Hey, it's not *that* detailed ..." He flushed, while even in his embarrassment not losing another Pouilly quality. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. But you know, that deal's a bit unbalanced."

"Is it? Why?"

His grin returned. "Ah, c'mon, you know why, your brain isn't any worse ... Well, if you can add something, we're in business."

"Add what?"

"If it's an adding at all, because after this scene in class, I guess I know the answer already. In exchange for me showing the protocol to you, you show me something else."

Sandra stared at him, not trusting her ears.

Registering it, Frédéric hastened to explain. "I mean that centaur - the one who gave you the mane hairs. His name is Firenze, isn't it?"

* * *

Ireen looked at the time table again. Now that the journey was due within the next hour, she felt a bit tense. There seemed no reason, basically, it should be a piece of cake - only, the parents had made quite a fuss, it had been a hard fight, ending only when Ireen said, "Okay, then let's call Urion. He'll send a Goblin patrol of six, if not more, and that'll do."

The parents had looked at each other, sighing simultaneously, had finally nodded.

These parents were of course Harry and Cho, being extremely reluctant about Gabriel's idea to visit an exposition hall for musical instruments in far east Akashi. It wasn't the idea itself what made them hesitate - no, they just couldn't warm up to the details of that journey.

Harry's initial plan had been to program a portkey right to that building, and another one back home. The plan was simple and straightforward, and bound to fail. Because Gabriel didn't like it at all.

At least toward the end, the boy's own plan looked quite similar. Yes, jumping right to the building. Yes, jumping back home without any detour. Only there was no portkey in play - instead, Gabriel would summon his co-travellers on both ways.

Which meant Ireen herself, and Michel.

This plan left just one problem - Gabriel never had been there. But he had a solution ready, and that was where the discussion started.

In Gabriel's eyes, his solution was not much different from what some of his classmates had to do every day, using metro, buses, and whatnot, only that Gabriel would use linkports. After roaming the Internet for linkport timetables, he had come with what he called "the shortest route, from the time needed."

It started in Dublin Linkport. From there to London Linkport. From there to Hongkong Linkport. From there to Tokyo, then Osaka, and finally Akashi. Little more than an hour.

Gabriel was quite proud of his route, and Ireen had told his parents they could be proud too, because wasn't this a masterpiece of research, in a very mathematical area, otherwise known as the *Travelling Salesman Problem*?

Yes, maybe, except it looked more like an odyssey.

Gabriel hadn't expressed it in words, but even so, it was obvious to everybody that he wanted to manage without his father's help. Using Ireen for this purpose.

So Ireen had argued that they'd be back in an instant, should something go wrong, because wherever they'd be, Gabriel could summon both of them in a second. Which was true, only that maybe Gabriel might be more interested in watching the spectacle.

Then Ireen had hinted how much she would welcome doing something useful here, other than tending Tanitha. And that said Tanitha would be in good hands during that time, in those of Beverly actually. The first argument scored well but not enough, the second one was classified as off the matter because Tanitha would be safe here anyway, they were concerned more about the other places.

And so Ireen had made this suggestion to call Orion, finally reaching the breakthrough, mostly because Harry and Cho knew - she was right, and while nobody seemed ready to believe Ireen would call the Goblin, Gabriel's beaming face at her words had told them he would do it without hesitation, should this last resort become necessary.

Now it was a quarter past three. Ireen expected Gabriel at close to four, which would leave only a few minutes to reach Dublin Linkport. Also through the Internet, Gabriel had made reservations - the printouts from the answer mails made a thin pile of sheets in Ireen's hand, with the time table on top.

She could only hope the reservations worked okay. Because otherwise she felt sure there'd be a small boy losing all gentleness - while on the other side Ireen wasn't sure at all whether she wanted to be around when Gabriel would turn mad ... Really mad.

The doorbell chimed. This had to be Beverly, Tanitha's babysitter for today, since this was the time they had agreed upon. Ireen went to the intercom receiver. "Yes?"

"It's me - Beverly."

Pressing the opener button, Ireen thought - had this been her own castle, she would have installed a camera system. But next instant she realized that the inhabitants had their own way for examining people outside the door.

However, the voice had sounded right. And here she came, a bit breathless and flushed, probably from climbing stairs, when she said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Chee."

"Hello, Beverly - please call me Ireen, otherwise it sounds so formal ..."

The girl blushed deeper, almost twisted, then she murmured something barely audible, and just in time Ireen realized - these had been some words of condolence, Beverly simply didn't know how to behave toward a widow of just a few days.

"Thank you," replied Ireen. "You met Tony once, didn't you, at the pool? ... But that was before Tanitha was born, so you haven't seen my daughter yet. Then let's go see whether she's awake already."

Tanitha was only half awake, opened her eyes to a full stare when sensing someone new. Beverly, in turn, had lost all awkwardness at once, was eager to take the girl and to show that she could handle it, wet diapers and all.

She could, although Ireen had a moment of gasping when Beverly used her wand and a spell for cleaning and drying Tanitha's skin. But obviously her daughter had no objections, smiled with pleasure.

Beverly wasn't the talkative type, however answered readily to Ireen's questions. No, these spells weren't part of the standard schedule, only she had specialized a bit in this direction, maybe for a medical career, she wasn't sure yet, while in the meantime they came in just handy, "especially when the diaper's a bit more than wet," to which Ireen could only agree.

Beverly visited Hogwarts, was in her last term, had finished earlier today, babysitting in the Potter castle would be an excuse good enough with more teachers than the Lupins, and for more than the last half hour she'd skipped. Travelling was easy play since Beverly had her porty, only she had realized it made her a bit lazy in her efforts to master apparition.

Ireen asked, "How is it, then, for a witch daughter, with a Muggle mother?"

"Where's my mother a Muggle?" Beverly laughed. "True, she cannot do a single spell, but she's so used to them - each time there is some little problem or another, she says, can't you spell it? ... And when I say no, I cannot, she goes, see, that magic's just overrated."

Seeing her own daughter in good hands, Ireen checked the time on her wristwatch. If Gabriel wouldn't be here quickly, they'd ...

Beverly's movement saved her from jumping when the boy's voice came from behind. "I'm ready ... Hi, Beverly."

Turning, Ireen saw Gabriel standing in the doorway, a small rucksack already shouldered. He stepped aside when she hurried to fetch her handbag and her light jacket. Coming back, examining him again, she said, "You'll be cold over there - arriving in Japan, it'll be past midnight."

"No, I won't - there's a sweater in there." Gabriel's thumb pointed over his shoulder, and his face showed something Ireen wasn't used to from this boy - barely suppressed impatience.

A quick kiss on her daughter's cheek, and she was ready herself. Glancing toward Gabriel, she saw him disappear - and an instant later, after a fleeting sensation she had no words for, Ireen saw him again in front of her, this time in the hall of Dublin Linkport.

They walked toward the desk. Ireen said, "Some people think a fair warning might be helpful, too."

"Warning?" Gabriel looked astonished. "But wasn't it clear? ... I mean, what should I've said?"

"What about *Happy Christmas*?" When, after a second of utter disbelief, the grin was spreading Gabriel's face, Ireen added, "You know, just to make it different from that countdown Sandra does each time you're jumping together."

"Oh, that ..." The dismissive gesture of Gabriel's hand looked a bit like the second lesson in the young men's course for cool manners. "It's just an old habit, as if we couldn't do it otherwise ... And besides, then, each of us jumps on his own, while here I summoned you."

"That reminds me - I've been told a Muggle would feel sick when summoned, only I feel fine."

Gabriel nodded. "I paid attention to that."

"Oh." As if he'd said, I looked to both sides before crossing the street, maybe except that moving through city traffic was probably more of a challenge for this boy of seven, going eight. Ireen felt pretty sure that this particular skill was one of the differences between son and father, otherwise Harry wouldn't have used portkeys whenever sending people around.

Like the one for Tanitha ... Ireen pushed the unpleasant thought quickly away, concentrated on the things around while standing in line, was helped by the excitement of Gabriel, who kept glancing around, taking in every detail of this ordinary linkport scene.

Ireen said, "Someone looking at you must think this is your first linkport travel - which is quite funny, considering how often you jumped around the world with your father."

"But it is my first," protested Gabriel. "At least the first bigger one, and that's quite different. You can watch people, and things ... Harry told me how they used to travel with a train, when he was in school. I'd like to do that - travelling with a train, sitting there, walking around in the train ..."

So much for the last developments in technomagic, thought Ireen.

They came out in London Linkport. Twenty minutes till the connection link to Hongkong, the longest period of waiting on their route. Gabriel pointed toward the line of shops. "Can we have a look?"

"We haven't even time to buy a single item," replied Ireen, then, seeing Gabriel's face, "Okay, but only five minutes, not more."

They walked over. From Ireen's own perspective, the shops were just the kind you'd expect in such a travel station - sweets, tobacco, books, music, bags and suitcases, and Gabriel pressed his nose at the glass pane, drinking in the sight of these overpriced items.

Ireen said, "Tell you what, Gabriel - one of these days, we should make another journey, maybe just London, Paris, and back, with lots of time we can spend, then we'll stroll through all these shops here, with enough pocket money so we can ..."

Gabriel wheeled around, stared at something across the hall. Next moment, he craned his neck, his glance sweeping from side to side.

"What is it?"

Gabriel relaxed a bit. "There was a man - but he's gone."

Ireen examined the scene across, saw nothing out of the ordinary, felt her neck hair rise even so. "What did he do?"

"He ..." Gabriel turned to her, probably recognizing her alarmed look. "He was watching us - anyway, he's gone, let's go to our gate before we're too late." He took her hand, pulled her forward, as if suddenly their roles had changed.

Standing in line again, Ireen had calmed down enough to start another attempt. "What was so special about him, Gabriel? You were peeking into the shop window, and next moment you shot around as if kicked from behind."

"Because of the way he felt," came the boy's answer. "Like ..." He stopped, shot her a quick glance, looked away. "Doesn't matter - he isn't here any longer."

Gabriel wasn't telling her what really had happened, that was all Ireen felt certain about. And why not? ... Stepping forward, her mind came up with two explanations, both of them disquieting - either because he didn't want to worry her, maybe with respect to the recent events, or Gabriel thought she would cancel the journey instantly ... Or for both reasons together.

Standing in line, slowly moving toward a linkport gate, seemed an awful place for a discussion about that. And worse - there was no longer a boy at Ireen's side, excited about his first long journey. Instead, she saw a wizard with an unreadable expression in his face, watching the scene, quite casually, as it seemed, only she wasn't buying it. And small as that wizard looked, this was just a deception, tricking the eye, if not the mind.

They jumped, were in Hongkong, suddenly it was a few minutes past midnight, while the linkport hall still looked crowded like early in the evening. They checked around for their connection gate to Tokyo, found it, walked over.

Ireen had a very bad conscience. She should have done something more, should have asked Gabriel again, should have started the trip home instantly - only he wasn't going to tell her more, and following their planned route seemed as fast a way home as any other.

Somehow, that made it even worse. This - and the fact that Gabriel's excited mood didn't return. He was watchful, yes, extremely so, but in a totally different way than before.

They were already a few steps from their Tokyo port when Ireen realized what Gabriel was doing - scanning the crowd for a particular picture, or sensation in his mind. Coming out in Tokyo, she said, "You're looking all the time for that man, right?"

"Yes."

"Alright, Gabriel - we'll follow our route as planned, probably we're sufficiently far away, but once back in the castle, we'll talk with Harry, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

His astonishment had sounded genuine enough - so Gabriel had decided to talk with his father probably a second after this scene at the shop. Ireen suppressed a sigh - she wasn't playing in the same league as her travelling companion, not at all.

They reached Osaka, gaining another hour local time, for the first time finding a hall as quiet as suitable to this night time. And in the gate to Akashi, they made for half of all the travellers.

The line of cabs outside the building didn't stretch long either, however one cab was all they needed. When Ireen told the cab driver their destination, the Japanese said that would be fine with him, only there'd be everything closed, and the drive was about half an hour. Ireen told him they knew, and that it was okay.

Looking to her side, she met Gabriel's eyes. The boy smiled. "That's my first longer cab ride, too." Then he looked out again, watching how the streetlights came closing in, whooshing past the car, on streets nearly deserted.

They reached the Miyikura complex. The driver stopped the car next to the exposition building, on which only the large company sign was illuminated. He pointed, said something Ireen didn't fully understand.

"Okay. We'll leave here." She checked the taxameter, opened her bag.

A sound of utter disbelief came from the driver. Only now, Ireen realized the misunderstanding - the driver had been sure about to be paid on his way back, might not have agreed to this route otherwise.

He rattled something Ireen couldn't follow either, and maybe it was better this way - the average cab driver's language in such a situation, especially toward a woman in Japan, that was probably something she didn't need urgently.

Gabriel said, "He thought we'd come back with him, didn't he?"

"Yes, apparently. But he's wrong, and while it's true that I didn't tell him, he didn't ask either."

The wizard with the watchful glance was gone. The gentle boy at Ireen's side said, "I wouldn't mind driving back. Let me just have a look, and then - it doesn't matter where we jump from, we can do it as well from Akashi."

Was it just the night ride? Or a cab driver looking very upset? ... Or maybe the discussion lying ahead - at any rate, Ireen told the driver they'd changed their mind, would drive back with him, after this young man had a closer look at the building.

The driver still looked sour, murmured something almost inaudible - to stop in a sudden gasping that was followed by a pained groan.

Gabriel's head turned to Ireen, showing eyes gone dark. "Tell him to apologize, otherwise he'd get another one. And then pay him."

Ireen gasped herself. "That was you??"

"Yes." It came fierce.

Before she had time to ask, or to do what Gabriel wanted, the driver bowed quickly several times and explained he felt very ashamed - giving proof that he could follow English as well as minds that were changing twice in such a short time.

Ireen paid him, with a tip matching Californian standards. They climbed out, then watched how the cab took off into the night, with tires almost squeaking.

Ireen looked at Gabriel. "Why did you do that?"

"He insulted you." Seeing her expression, Gabriel added, "I don't know what he said, but it must've been something very insulting, I could sense it clearly."

Ireen almost laughed, now that the tension was fading. "You're some knight ... Alright then, let's have our look."

09 - Trails

Sitting in the passenger seat of Seeger's Pontiac, Harry felt uncomfortable. Maybe not quite as uncomfortable as Nagini, curled over his feet because a Pontiac wasn't designed for people with snakes round their chest, only this didn't make him feel better.

It had to do with the car's inappropriate air condition, with some overstressed shock absorbers, and also with Carl's style of driving, which might stand in a cause-and-effect relationship to their state. Or maybe Harry's uneasiness could be explained much simpler - the average service car of a Los Angeles police officer wasn't on a par with the German or Japanese luxury cars Harry had grown used to.

When driving was unavoidable, of course.

It didn't improve Harry's mind either that right now, his son would jump around the globe. Not alone, Ireen was with him, only - even at the best of times, Ireen never had struck Harry as the most determined person, should something go wrong.

His own task at hand, on the other side, gave him no worries. Paul had found a small company with the name *Letterals Inc.*, listed in Tony's files as well as in those of Amanda Waylon's last movie, and now Harry and Carl were on their way to the company's office.

These people had been in charge of the final credits in the movies. Just that, not even the lead-in titles because, as Harry had learned from Mrs. Carmino, these titles, their size, shape, and colour were integral parts of the complete intro and nothing for which a director in his right mind would hire such a no-name company.

Carl slowed down, turned right, said, "Cullinan Drive - that's the street. Number seventeen, that must - there it is."

He parked double, bent down, came up with a laminated sheet that showed the emblem of the LAPD, to place it in front of the steering wheel, visible from the outside. Toward Harry, the detective said, "Sometimes it saves us from a ticket, sometimes not. There was a time when we could place the red light on top, that worked better."

"And today?" asked Harry. "Would it be gone, coming down again?"

"Not from the car," replied the lieutenant. "Only that the car would be missing altogether ... As bad as it looks - stealing a police car is kid's sport nowadays, and the red light would be like an invitation ... Okay, let's see what we've got here."

Draping Nagini around himself, Harry saw Carl's hand go under his jacket, apparently a trained reflex - checking his gun before walking into a scene where he might need it.

They exchanged a look, their eyes silently commenting on each other's preparation, then walked inside.

The building had no receptionist - not in this quarter which was the local realm of small enterprises, to put it politely. They saw lots of signs, some of them even handwritten - agencies for this and that, lawyers, loan sharks, a private eye ... And *Letterals Inc.*, in an

adventurous type font on a paper sheet, in Harry's mind raising the picture of some kids playing with a computer and a laser printer.

The elevator worked and took them up to the third floor. Following another one of those sheets, this time with an arrow pointing into a narrow corridor, they reached a door at which the meanwhile familiar sheet made clear - the prosperous *Letterals Inc.* could be found inside. Seeger knocked at the door.

"It's open," came a male voice from inside.

Harry followed Carl through the door, stood in a room with office furniture, the desks covered with computer equipment. A young man and a girl, sitting back to back, were staring at the detective.

The young man said, "You ain't the delivery guy, are you?" Then his gaze fell onto Harry, next second at Nagini. Slowly, he said, "No, you're not."

The girl was staring at the snake in fascination. After a moment, she lifted her eyes to Harry's face, said admiringly, "Pretty cool - what are you, Greenpeace?"

"No," said Seeger and presented his badge, raising almost as much attention as Harry with his snake. The detective started to explain.

Still outside in the corridor, Harry had already been pretty sure they wouldn't find magicals here. A short exchange with Nagini confirmed this - the two young people were Muggles, no doubt representing the complete staff of *Letterals Inc.*

Looking up, Harry saw that Carl had lost his audience as well as his own speech - three faces were staring at himself, at Nagini, but mostly at him. He said, "That was snake language."

The young man started to grin. "Hey, I met the dog squad before, in my drug days - but a snake, that's something new." Toward Seeger, he added, "You two are really good, but don't let them catch you with that badge - they don't think it's funny, not the least bit."

"What?" Carl's face showed disbelief.

"The cops, man - 'specially not about this story. You should pick another one, before going on stage, something you can laugh about, like, er ..."

The young man was still trying to find a better example when the lieutenant handed him a business card and said, "We'll think it over - in the meantime, here's my card, in case you hear something you'd like to tell me." Then he turned, gave Harry a very short nod to follow, and walked out.

At the elevator, Carl stared at the snake, shook his head, said, "Harry, our routine needs some improvement. I felt so ridiculous in there - for a moment, I was seriously tempted to arrest the guy, just to make sure he'll never again confuse me with one of these showbiz clowns."

The cabin arrived. Stepping in, Harry said, "Sorry, Carl - next time, I'll instruct Nagini beforehand, so it's only her talking snake language - but you know, that's the minimum."

"Yeah, I think it's okay if a snake talks snake language." Next moment, Carl looked at Harry as if not trusting his ears, hearing his own words, then he started to chuckle, finally said, "Oh Jesus - picking another one, before going on stage ... Harry, this is your opportunity to win a friend for life, it's quite simple, actually ..."

"No," interrupted Harry, "but I promise you to tell it only to my family."

Down at the street, he told Carl he wouldn't come back with him because he had some family business, but he'd join him again later - it might take less time than the car ride, so maybe he'd await him already in the office.

"This is a damned time machine, your apparition stuff." Carl climbed into the car and drove off.

Harry jumped home to Carron Lough, into the dinner room, good husband that he was. His first sensing-around told him - his son was still on that journey, his daughter somewhere in Paris, and his wife, for all he knew, in her headquarters twenty miles south.

Reaching the kitchen, he found a scene worth staring at - Beverly, Tanitha in her lap but sideways and supported by one arm while the other was spoon-feeding the girl, with every mouthful announced and classified in the old custom, "... this one's for Sandy, here we go, yes, lovely, and the next one's for ..."

It had been Tanitha's reaction which made Beverly look up, registering Harry with Nagini still around his chest. She faltered in her sermon, her face darkening, then she continued, "... so this one's for Nagini, that's why it should go down extra smoothly ..."

Tanitha, not showing any objections toward this dedication, swallowed obediently.

Harry sat down. "I haven't heard this kind of incantation for quite some time - and even for Nagini, which is quite funny after what we had to listen to a few minutes ago."

A quick glance was Beverly's only comment.

Knowing only too well that this was her equivalent to something like, "Tell me, I'm dying to hear," Harry described the encounter with the two young people. "Carl didn't know how to look, he isn't used at all to be made fun of ..."

At this moment, Harry remembered his promise to tell only within the family. Telling Beverly didn't really feel like a breach of promise, only he better wouldn't mention this part because declaring her as part of the family had all ingredients to kill any further remark from Beverly's side for the next two months.

But right now she said, "Nagini's still the hero of Slytherin."

"Really?" Harry grinned at the memory of that year, when Nagini had been awarded fifty points in Hogwarts' House Cup. Dumbledore, the cunning Headmaster, had counted them for the House of Slytherin with its snake in the banner, rather than for Harry's own, Gryffindor. The effect was that Gryffindor lost the House Cup to Ravenclaw.

And Beverly was Ravenclaw, to the deep satisfaction of Cho, who had been a Ravenclaw herself.

Harry asked, "Do they still run this competition like they did when we were students?"

"Sharper than ever," replied Beverly. "That's what Mrs. Lupin says, because I wouldn't know. It's all quite friendly - very British, I think," Beverly smiled, "but they're fighting every point."

"Like we did." Harry felt pleased, seeing the pictures coming up in his memory. "Nagini scoring for Slytherin, somehow that improved terms between the houses quite a bit - although, the real breakthrough had been before, with Bob and Angelina falling in love ..."

Bob Daunty from Slytherin had been Harry's first teammate in the Flying Squad ... And his next teammate, that had been Cho, and then Viktor had arrived, to announce that the twin teams should form themselves as permanent ones, following their own preferences ... Harry still could see himself, sitting frozen, before he finally managed to walk over to Cho.

Looking up, he could read in Beverly's face that she knew about Bob, while not from him, which only left an information channel that had to be formed with Cho at the beginning and Chrissy at the end.

Seeing his look, Beverly blushed again.

Trying to find a less sensitive topic, Harry said, "Imagine they'd know that you're in touch with Nagini ..."

"But they know!" After this outburst, Beverly's face darkened more, and probably not because she had interrupted him.

"From whom?" Harry felt at a loss to imagine who'd leaked this information, felt sure it hadn't been Beverly herself.

"Mrs. Snape."

"Samantha - yes, of course, who else." Harry chuckled. "That's her - never afraid to spill a secret or two, if she thinks it's for good reason." And he could even see why - no doubt it had to do with Beverly's shy attitude, encouraging Samantha to give her a push toward public attention.

"And?" he asked. "What's the effect?"

"They come to me. Talk to me. Asking me things."

Harry said, "Must be horrible," waited a second, and when he saw the girl nod eagerly, he continued, "... all these boys ..."

The nodding stopped because Beverly froze, looking at him wide-eyed.

"... and you never know - is it you they're attracted from or just a damned snake."

Beverly's face was blood red. Had she been able to move a muscle, she would have looked away.

Harry glanced down at Nagini, made a hissing sound, looked up again. "I just apologized toward Nagini, that I called her a damned snake. She said it's okay with her. Maybe I should also apologize toward you ..."

A choked sound from Beverly, most likely a denial.

"... to be so blunt. But you know, I feel obliged toward Samantha, and when she saw reason to push you right into the middle of this merciless crowd ..."

A tentative grin appeared somewhere in the embarrassed face opposite him.

"... then it can't be that wrong to support her a bit ... In particular since I'm pretty sure about what's attracting them, and that has little resemblance with a snake."

The half-formed grin disappeared, was replaced by an alarmed look.

Harry turned toward the dish with a forgotten rest of something about which he only knew - it wasn't rice-pudding, Sandy's one-and-only food at Tanitha's age. "Alright - for compensation after this conversation, let me show you a trick that's at least as good as this spoon parade."

Putting his fingertips together, pointing them at the dish, Harry formed a tiny ball of pudding, made it rise a few inches, move toward a small mouth. Arriving there, the ball made a short jump upward, was back again, then eased forward.

Tanitha opened her mouth, and the ball went inside.

"It started in Hogwarts," explained Harry, "as a project about poison balls. Then it turned to water balls, for training purposes - well, and later it came in quite handy, when Sandra was about that age."

Beverly had found her speech again, said, "But she did it by herself, didn't she?"

"Yes, but only after she saw me doing it. She grasped the idea, and probably she copied what she felt of the spell. I mean, it's not complicated, just a bit training - it's really much simpler without a spoon."

"Yes, I think you're right ..."

The moment the conversation turned about babies, Beverly's shyness seemed to disappear, raising a thought in Harry's mind he would never speak out aloud in her presence - that babies were the end product in a sequence of cause and effect, a sequence in which the other steps were also worth considering.

"... but you know, I'm not playing in Sandra's league."

Harry shrugged. "So you'll have to train a bit longer - know how long it took me then? ... Weeks. And besides, nobody's playing in Sandy's league - maybe with the exception of

Gabriel ..." He stopped, having sensed something, started to smile, "Talking about the devil - here they come."

And seconds later, Gabriel and Ireen came in, saying hello to all sides. Gabriel sat down and seemed ready to eat something, while Ireen fussed with Tanitha, shooting admiring glances toward daughter and babysitter that the feeding had gone so well.

"So then," said Harry, "how was your trip? Did you find the exposition hall?"

Ireen looked at Gabriel, and Gabriel's answer was a short, "Yes."

Which told Harry two things. First, that he had made the common mistake of asking two questions where one would have been enough. And also that there was something else to report.

He looked from one traveller to the other. "Which of you is going to tell?"

A hesitant silence, broken first by Beverly who rose from her chair and said, "I think I should go."

Next instant, everybody was talking at the same time. Harry won the competition by coming up, putting his hands on Beverly's shoulders, saying, "Sit down - hearing some family gossip won't hurt too much." Then he sat himself again, looking expectantly.

Ireen glanced at Gabriel. "I'll tell about the taxi driver, and you about the man in the station - okay?"

The boy nodded.

After another second's silence, Harry said, "Ladies first."

Ireen described the drive from Akashi Linkport to the Miyikura hall, and what had happened there, emphasizing her own failure in making clear what type of travel this would be. She finished, "... and he looked very guilty when he drove off."

About the same was true for Gabriel, right now.

While Beverly's face seemed full of admiration, and Harry himself was almost losing control of his face still looking serious, and of his mind guard, desperately trying not to burst out laughing.

A quick glance from his son told him that he'd already lost the battle.

"Well, son," he started - not coming further because the chuckling rose in his throat, and of course everybody joined him with relief.

Calming down, Harry said, "Listen, Gabriel, it's not quite that funny - in a free society, people have the right to be impolite. To some degree, you were right - if a man insults the lady in your company, you're supposed to take measures, and, well, I hope your blow was decent."

"Er - yes, reasonably so."

Nagini kept silent, which meant Gabriel was telling the truth - however a truth measured by his own perspective, leaving still some room to imagine what this taxi driver might have felt.

"On the other side," said Harry, "did you know that, for Japanese, women often count as people second class?"

"I've heard about that," said Gabriel, "but that's wrong, isn't it?"

Trying to ignore twisting lips, his own included, Harry said, "Yes, of course it's wrong - only that's their culture, and if you're a guest in a culture, you behave as a guest, rather than as a missionary of western ethics ... When a Japanese comes to visit here or in America, he sees many things he considers wrong, without starting to teach his hosts."

Gabriel looked at Ireen, who had more experience with Japanese visitors than anyone else in this room.

Answering the unspoken question, Ireen said, "That's true - and if they're polite and civilized, they don't even draw a face."

Making do with this half-hearted support, Harry said, "So you see, Gabriel, these things always have two sides."

"Yes, Dad." Gabriel looked unhappy. "It was also because ... the way this man felt, it reminded me of the other man, the one in the station in London, and - er, I guess I was angry at him for the other."

"What was in London?" Sensing his son's emotions, Harry lost all amusement in an instant.

"There was a man ... We had a few minutes, and were looking into the shops, when I felt someone staring at us - it was more than staring, it was as if he'd been aiming at us, like with ..."

Gabriels voice faltered, his quick glance toward Ireen told Harry the words he'd swallowed - *like with a gun*.

"... and then I turned around as quickly as I could, and saw him at the other side, but it wasn't ... It was a camera. He was doing pictures of us."

"A camera??" Ireen stared at the boy.

"Yes, and it felt so - I wanted to take the camera away, but I wasn't ... I mean, it wasn't forbidden what he did, only ... But next second, he was gone, and then it was too late anyway."

Into the silence, Harry said, "Go ahead, son."

"Uhm, yes - in the other stations, I sensed around all the time, but he wasn't around ... That's all."

Harry's mind was racing. "You didn't think it was a press journalist, did you?"

"No, Dad - they feel different."

"When he disappeared, did he fade into the crowd or did he jump?"

"He jumped." Gabriel looked at his father. "I wanted to pursue him, to fetch the camera. But ..."

Seeing almost a mirror of his younger self, Harry said, "You were angry because you had hesitated a second too long, right? And this hesitation, it was because you were on this particular journey, and in public, and an eight-year-old is not supposed to pull a camera out of the hands of a grown man, isn't that so?"

"Yes, Dad, that's just why."

"Don't blame yourself, Gabriel." Harry sent a smile, but only with his eyes. "You have excellent instincts, and all I can say is, trust your instincts - next time, just do it, and face the consequences afterwards."

"I will, Dad," said a beaming Gabriel.

Harry didn't feel like beaming at all. "Say, what do you think - was he shooting pictures of you, or Ireen, or both of you?"

The boy shrugged. "He felt as if he'd called, *them two* ... As if he'd waited for us."

"Waited?" Ireen looked baffled. "How could he? Nobody knew that we were going to travel at that time."

"No," said Gabriel, "I booked our slots through the Internet, all along the way. You can hack into such connections easily - the Internet isn't safe at all, but for a linkport reservation, I mean, what's confidential about that?"

Harry would have liked to give a remark that maybe it was some yellow press journalist, despite of what Gabriel had felt - except he didn't believe it, and with Nagini still around him, he wasn't ready to say it aloud.

Instead, he said, "It's a weird story, but you find all kinds of people in linkports ... Anyway, now that Gabriel knows the place, we don't need them any longer."

Gabriel saw his chance. "That's right, Dad - what do you think, can we do it this evening?"

Seeing the glances toward him, Gabriel added, "I mean, Beverly's here, and that's the best opportunity, isn't it?"

Harry never had felt less like buying a xylophone, but then again, had he ever felt like that? And maybe this was the best method to hide his worries, following the boy's suggestion - and to settle it before Cho was around to spread panic.

He looked at Beverly, then at his son. "Allright - if you don't mind me coming with you."

Checking the faces told him - he had fooled nobody, they all knew he was worried.

* * *

Paul Sillitoe dropped the computer printout on the desk, sighed. Then he started doing something a researcher wasn't supposed to do, at least not in this state of things - he started to think about the data, rather than evaluating them.

After swearing a bit first.

He had a good excuse for his sinful work. That was, he had an excuse that would count for the journalist in himself, while not for the researcher ... His data was spent, with no result.

Paul had collected all data from Tony Chee. He had gathered all data he could get about Amanda Waylon and her last movies, feeling pretty sure that would do. Then he had cross-checked them, and had sent the lieutenant, together with Harry and his snake, to the few places that couldn't be cleared out by phone and paperwork. Nothing.

As a true researcher, now Paul would have been obliged to collect data from the other cases, from King's widow, for example, and start over again. Only this was nonsense.

His chain of conclusions was thin, extremely single-threaded, in a way, but Paul felt fine with it. First, because he wasn't a researcher. This was a myth held precious by Harry, after something which, to the outside, had looked like research turned out to be the base for the successful tracking-down of Voldemort. And Paul himself hadn't seen reason to clarify.

He was a journalist, was he. And as such, his metaphorical nose kept itching here.

Because what Harry had said sounded reasonable ... Some insiders. And the key factor, the reason why Paul felt no inclination to go for King's files now, was Tony. More exactly, Tony's slender footprint in the press. The lack of articles about Tony and his child told Paul - if there was something to find, he'd find it in Tony's files. With data from another case for cross-checking, and for that, the Waylon data did the job.

Trusting this approach, Paul was supposed to find a group of people who had done some work in Tony's movie projects, especially in the last two. He had looked for companies, small to medium scale, not striking gold. Which meant - he had to look closer, dig deeper.

Which meant, subcontractors.

Paul also trusted the idea that these people were working together, which excluded freelancers and single-head enterprises. Three at the minimum - in this business, that meant the first thing they'd have done at some time in the past was to invent a name, a company logo, and to print business cards.

Subcontractors, then. And where to look, short of everywhere?

Very simple - where you'd expect wizards. And that was the point where Paul finally had left the holy path of tedious research, in favour of daring speculations. Or well-founded ones, if you were ready to trust this itching, and he was.

The first keyword that came to mind was *stuntmen*. But funny as it seemed, Tony never had used stuntmen to a degree that would involve more than a few specialists, working alone. Yes,

some stuntwomen were listed, while otherwise the actors had done their jumps and falls themselves. This had been Tony's trademark - real fighters, for whom falling down a staircase was part of their regular business.

Then, of course, special effects.

"Special effects are made on computers nowadays," Mrs. Carmino had said. "Except for fireworks and car crashes, because in such scenes, everybody can spot a fake instantly, and that'd be the killing mistake."

Still, for Paul this felt like the most promising trail. Tony had worked with small firms. Mrs. Carmino's statement was certainly true for Tony's movies, in which car explosions didn't play much of a role, while ghosts, ghouls, and glibberworms, supposedly Chinese though not for the soup, had a short but violent cyber life - except of course that all of them were eons old, before the movie started and the hero came along.

In contrast, the Waylon movie *Desperate Measures* showed lots of the common action, with explosions, firestorms, the usual car hunt, everything you'd expect in an action movie, and the company in charge of all this demolition had been *F/X Entertainment Effects*.

Paul intended to start with them. The only question was - should he appear as a journalist and ghostwriter in the services of Amanda Waylon, or as a representative of the LAPD?

One was a lie as much as the other, but maybe appearing as a cop counted as the smaller lie, and Paul certainly liked the idea of asking questions with some borrowed authority.

He pressed the *Call* button of the desk-o-mate, specified the name of that company when the voice without picture asked for his request. This hadn't been Tony's, wasn't Paul's own either - it had come from Harry soon after they'd started this investigation.

"Effix Entertainment Effects, may I help you, sir?"

The desk-o-mate display presented the picture of a woman around thirty, dark-haired, showing a polite smile. It told Paul there was a desk-o-mate at the other end as well, a bit unusual for a reception desk, although much more reasonable than for anyone else. The display didn't tell him the name of that woman - simply because she had told her own device not to reveal it automatically.

Which was a common habit, since Paul had instructed his own the same way. "Hello," he said, "this is Paul Sillitoe, calling in the name of the Los Angeles Police Department - whom am I talking with?"

"This is Kathleen Miller, Mr. Sillitoe ..."

Paul's display updated itself by presenting this name.

"... and you'd be the first detective who'd use a desk-o-mate. So would you please tell me what it means exactly, calling in the name of the LAPD?"

So much for borrowed authority. Stupid desk-o-mates, revealing everything.

"Well, Mrs. Miller, I'm performing an investigation together with detectives from the LAPD. It has to do with the recent kidnapping cases, with the Chee case as the last of them - actually I'm sitting in Mr. Chee's office, and ..."

"Mr. Sillitoe." The voice was friendly but very determined. "It's still unclear to me whether this is an official call or something else."

Paul grinned into the microphone. "Let me put it this way, Mrs. Miller - you can answer my questions or not, and if not, you'll be asked the questions again by a Lieutenant Seeger, who'll be excited to make your acquaintance - although you're right, he won't see your picture ... Would you like to check this with him?"

"Yes, that's what I had in mind now."

"He uses a phony, so you can ask your own device for his number - I mean, I could give it to you, only it might be part of this big hoax, so ..."

There was amusement in the woman's voice when she said, "I'll call you back in a minute, Mr. Sillitoe."

It took even less time until her picture appeared on Paul's display again. He pressed the *Answer* button. "I'm still here, Mrs. Miller."

A chuckling. "It's Miss, by the way - or just Kathleen. Sorry to let you wait, Mr. Sillitoe ..."

"Or just Paul," he threw in.

"... Paul, but now you're certified. So how can I help you?"

He had used the time to think it over how much he should explain of his true interest, had decided to play openly - to some degree. "I'm looking for common factors in these cases, Kathleen. F/X Entertainment Effects has been a contractor in the movie *Desperate Measures*, in which Amanda Waylon had a role - hers was the first case. Now, what I'd like to know for starters - does F/X Entertainment Effects hire subcontractors in such projects?"

"Yes, of course."

That sounded promising. "Why of course?"

"Well, you must know, F/X Entertainment, in first place, is a global contractor for film projects. Our own resources cover the tasks that can be made with computer animation - although, sometimes, even for that we'd hire a computer studio ... While for all kinds of real effects, we'd make contracts with specialized teams, or single persons."

Paul was scribbling feverishly. "Would they be listed in the film - at the end, I mean?"

"In the final credits? ... It depends - stuntmen for sure, and of course the more famous artists of their profession - fireworks, for example."

A printout of the credits list in *Desperate Measures* was lying before Paul's eyes, and he scanned it while listening to Kathleen's explanations. "Aaah ... yes, I see. But they're mentioned alone, isn't it, even if they work with a team."

"That's right." Kathleen laughed. "Only for the mega stars, these lists show every name, down to the last asswiper ... And for the director, of course."

"Alright then." Paul inhaled deeply. "Can you tell me your subcontractors for *Desperate Measures*?"

"What? - All of them - over the phone?" There was a gasping in her voice.

"Well, hm, I didn't think there were that many ..." Paul wasn't in the mood to wait for a detailed list. He said, "I'll need the complete list eventually, but for now - I'm interested mostly in teams of more than two people, and I'd really appreciate if you could give me a few names now."

A short hesitation at the other end. "Listen, Paul, I have to look it up in the files - I guess I'll find the names of the people we always work with, but for such an official inquiry ..."

"Please!" Paul's voice became imploringly. "Just give me the names that come to your mind, and once the list is ready, I'll verify them - besides, *Desperate Measures* is my starting point, I'm not even sure - I mean, it's a likely candidate, not more."

"Just one more question - when do you expect the complete list, and how?"

Paul recognized the message between the lines instantly. "Gimme something to work at, then it's okay till day after tomorrow - an e-mail will do, in whatever format you like."

"Are you a journalist, Paul? ... You ain't no cop, that's for sure."

He almost gritted his teeth. "Yes I am, but it's still true that I work with the police in this business. Why?"

"Accepting any format - no cop would do that." Kathleen's voice became a bit teasing. "I didn't doubt your honesty, that wasn't the reason for my question."

In all his greed for information, Paul suddenly realized that there was a woman at the other end, quite good-looking, for what his display told him, and this woman seemed to try a pass on him. He said, "Might be I sound a bit narrow-minded, right now, and my only excuse is - I am a bit narrow-minded right now. But if you have a few bones for me to gnaw on, I could imagine myself inviting you to a dinner. What about that?"

"Sounds great ... Okay then, you ready?"

"Shoot."

The first name Kathleen gave him belonged to a computer studio for animations. The next was an agency for stuntmen, not telling Paul more. The third name also had to do with stunts, only this time specialized in car stunts and car races on public streets. The fourth name

accelerated his heartbeat - *Pyromaniacs Inc.*, a team for fireworks, blow-ups, and demolition, the same team which appeared under its own name in one of Tony's movies.

In his excitement, Paul almost missed to register the second hit - *Gilbert Masks & Costumes*, a make-up studio for special make-ups, from a walking zombie to a cyclop with a single eye above the nose. This studio had worked for Tony at least once, Paul remembered the name, while not the movie ...

"You still there, Paul?"

"Er - yes, I'm here ..." With some effort, Paul mustered a bit more enthusiasm in his voice. "Thanks, Kathleen, you might've given me something. So what about tomorrow evening?"

"Fine with me ... If you come with flowers, I'll come with the list - isn't that an offer?"

Paul laughed. "Yes it is, but you shouldn't have the list with you - you know, I'd be tempted all the time to look into it."

"You mean, I should leave it at home, and we can fetch it there afterwards?" Now her voice was openly flirtatious.

"A very interesting idea," he replied, "only that the distracting effect might still be the same."

"I take the challenge." Kathleen's voice left little doubt whom she expected to win. "Any suggestions which place to go?"

"Since I'm not from here, I know just one - Luiz Pereira. But if you have some other idea ..."

"You kidding? - I'm not going to spoil my one and only chance to have dinner in that restaurant - although I wouldn't wonder if they're booked out already, one day is short notice for them, as I've been told."

Paul grinned. "Let me manage, and be prepared to find a table waiting for us there ... Bye."

He felt in high spirit after this conversation. However, when calling Seeger, Paul was told that checking out these teams had to wait - Harry had given notice that he was dealing with some family business, only that Seeger couldn't imagine which, because it took place in Japan.

* * *

Gabriel came awake, opened his eyes, an instant before Fleur's hands reached his shoulders. He murmured, "Time?"

"No, not at all - I just wanted to check whether I can catch you in sleep." Fleur's grumpy reply wasn't completely faked - for a fleeting moment, it had felt like staring into the eyes of a jungle animal.

But the moment was gone, Gabriel smiled at her, only now he checked his wristwatch and said, "Why? It's only half past eleven," reproach in his voice.

Fleur made a show of checking the time by herself - by lifting Gabriel's arm, staring at his own watch. "My, really ..." Then she grinned. "C'mon, midnight lunch's due."

"I'm not hungry - I'm too much ..." Gabriel stopped since, like his father, he saw little sense in arguing with a doorframe that had emptied a second before. And shouting remarks across several rooms wasn't his habit either.

So he rose from the chaiselongue on which he'd been dozing, after Fleur had tranced him a bit two hours ago, all this in preparation for the journey to Japan. The second for him, the first for Michel.

Coming into the kitchen, smelling garbled eggs with ham, potatoes, and cheese, Gabriel changed his mind at once, sat down, seized the fork. "Hmmm ..."

Without turning, Fleur asked, "Has Michel fallen asleep again?"

"No, must be here any second."

For Fleur, practical as ever, the question was perfectly normal - her step-nephew could sense it, so why walking to check? And indeed, seconds later, a sleepy-looking Michel came into the kitchen, still yawning.

Fleur filled their dishes, sat down, took a small piece from the baguette for herself. "So 'arry's coming with you, huh?"

"Yes." Chewing with a full mouth, Gabriel was saved from commenting further on his father's change of mind, and the reasons for that.

"That's even better, then I can deal with him afterwards who's covering what." Fleur glanced at her son. "And you, my little drummer boy, what are you going to come back with?"

Michel shrugged. "Naphing, I fink." His pronunciation suffered from his own mouthful of food.

"Never." Fleur turned to Gabriel. "I checked their home page myself, and scanned a bit deeper, rather than staring at this one picture all the time." Her eyes were shining. "They offer a bit more than just xylophones."

"What elph?" Gabriel's interest in Miyikura's other program was somehow limited, while he really enjoyed this mode of conversation - talking with egg between the syllables and ham for punctuation was a welcome change from the standards in Carron Lough.

"You'll see by yourself." Fleur turned to Michel. "All I'm saying is, use the opportunity. Sometimes it's nice to be rich, and today's one of these occasions." She checked her own watch. "Or tomorrow - except that for me, tomorrow will be when it's tomorrow here."

Which would be a few minutes from now, but Gabriel agreed with Fleur that a new day should start in the morning - six o'clock would be about right. At any rate, the question of the prices was occupying his mind much stronger, because Gabriel had seen some of them in the Miyikura web pages, and they looked expensive, although he had difficulties to correlate them with something else.

So he asked, "How expensive are they, Fleur?"

His step-aunt smiled. "They don't come cheap, but don't bother with that - just go by the sound they offer, otherwise you could have bought them right in the next shop ... And don't forget - they offer flutes too."

Yes, Gabriel knew, only he had a flute already, while no xylophone yet. But maybe Fleur was right ... Suddenly he felt glad Harry would be around, because his father would help him to find the balance between missing an occasion and grabbing too much at once, and his father would do so with a few decent hints heard by nobody, because most of them would be given mentally.

The dishes were empty. Some more gulps of cafe au lait which, by people less polite, might have been called coffee-coloured milk, then they were ready. Fleur kissed her son, her step-nephew, said, "Bonne chance," stood waiting to see the boys disappear.

Gabriel grabbed Michel's hand. "Au 'voir." He concentrated, because this was the first time he would do what he had planned for a while - jumping and summoning simultaneously, for a spectator almost indiscernible from the normal sequence but still a world of difference.

And it worked! They came out in the dinner room, nobody watching the spectacle, Gabriel beaming at Michel who nodded approvingly, fully aware of this premiere while not overly excited - maybe because the journey to follow was more interesting, or maybe because this male half quarter-Veela had the deepest insight in what his friend could muster.

Storming ahead, Gabriel found four grown-ups in the family room, one of them just barely passing as such - Beverly, sitting with Ireen and his parents, even looking relaxed, which was probably thanks to Ireen right at her side.

"Hello," said Gabriel. "Ready?"

His mother examined him. "Don't stay all night long. You need your sleep." Cho wasn't even trying to give her admonishings to her husband, thereby showing an accurate response to the status quo, at least on this journey.

Harry came up, then Ireen.

Gabriel took Michel's hand, jumped and summoned like moments before. Still before fully registering the scene in front of him, he summoned first Ireen and then his father.

Harry looked around, then at him. "That's been synchronous, with Michel, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Gabriel beamed, as proud of his own doing as of his father recognizing it instantly.

"Well, well, well - that's something, son, really. I'd like to watch it again, but not now. Let's go."

It was shortly after nine in the morning here. The hall could have opened only a few minutes ago - even so, Gabriel registered with surprise the number of people already there. It looked as if one or two courses from some school had used the same day to make a journey to this

exposition. But next moment, he forgot about the other visitors, even his travelmates, all his senses focusing on the instruments offered here.

Xylophones ... At the entrance, there had been tables presenting small instruments, the tiniest of them with just one octave - no toys at all, anyway more show-pieces of craftsmanship than serious items. Then came the real ones, those built on their own racks. Single-layer pieces first, which meant three octaves, then the two-layer instruments which still had three octaves but with the full scale, meaning the second layer held the bars for the halftones.

Next came an instrument somewhat isolated from the others, as if building a bridge between two parts of the exposition. Three layers, shorter than the others - glancing up, seeing what the other part would offer, Gabriel instantly recognized this piece as some kind of experimental instrument, because there were just two octaves per layer, with the halftones integrated between the other bars.

He dismissed it at once - just looking at it didn't feel right.

And then he was in the last part. Four-layer xylophones, the first and third layers bearing three octaves each, the other two providing the halftones and therefore with gaps in-between. All shades of colours wood could offer, with the help of some furnishing, from nearly white to almost black.

The lighter ones were larger, seemed a bit too wide for his size. Gabriel passed them, stopped at an instrument with bars shining in a soft, dark red. His eyes were drinking in the sight, his mind getting in touch with the obvious musical nature of this arrangement, his imagination going through the movements. His upper torso would swing a bit, which meant his feet had to be placed firmly, giving his body a solid base when his arms would move along the bars, when he'd run a warble with the sticks shuffling across ...

Someone chirped something at his side.

Coming out of his trance, looking up, Gabriel saw a man standing there - a Japanese, dark suit, pretty small, he had to tilt his head only slightly when he said, "I'm sorry?"

"Eeh ... do you speak English, sir?"

"Yes, I do - *ou francais, quand c'est plus facile pour vous.*" Next second, Gabriel realized that this had been some kind of overkill, because the man hadn't understood, and besides - hadn't he offered English already? But nobody had called him sir before, and one politeness deserved the other. "Yes, I speak English."

"Very good. May I be of assistance, sir? My name is Tanzani."

A quick check around told Gabriel that he was standing there alone with this man. He could feel the others in some distance, admiring something together with Michel, as it seemed. About to answer, Gabriel remembered just in time the few bits he'd learned about Japanese manners, from his father more than from Ireen. So he bowed. "My name is Potter, Tanzani-san."

The bow was returned instantly. "Very pleased to meet you, Potter-san."

Gabriel felt pleased too, and very important, having an escort of his own. But he also felt wondering about this fact, as any other seven-year-old would do, and asked, "Do you help all visitors that way, Tanzani-san?"

A beaming smile. "There are visitors and visitors, Potter-san. When I saw how you looked at this instrument, I felt it mandatory to assist you. Would you like to give it a try?"

"Oh yes."

"May I?" Mr. Tanzani touched Gabriel's shoulders, his biceps, lifted his arm a bit, taking measure. "I'll be back with some sticks in a second, Potter-san."

Gabriel used the opportunity to take the folded cardboard sheet from the top of the xylophone, to have the instrument free of all distractions as well as to examine the sheet. However, the writing was Japanese, except for some digits - and these digits looked as if they'd specify a price.

Fifty and some zeroes ... *Fifty millions??*

Couldn't possibly be. Gabriel wasn't fluent in prices, but fifty millions - that was impossible. Only, he knew how prices looked, with dots and commas and a hyphen at the end, totally different from a model number, except that these digits had a funny sign ...

"Here we are, Potter-san - I've brought a small selection, with different heads, so you ..."

"Er - sorry, er, Tanzani-san - say, is this the price?" Gabriel pointed at the digits, anxiously waiting for the answer.

"Yes, indeed, but of course that's the price in yen."

"Yen?"

"Yes, our local currency." Mr. Tanzani waved dismissively. "You must know, Potter-san, you'd need a thousand yen for a single dollar."

"Oh ..." Gabriel was shamefully aware that he hadn't mastered yet the art of dividing fifty million by thousand, both of these numbers quite large, so whatever the result was, it had to be reasonably small, hadn't it?

Quite relieved, he examined the sticks. All of them pretty much the same size - balancing one, the size felt just right, giving proof that this beaming Japanese knew what he was doing. The differences were in the head that would hit the wooden bars.

"This here's simple felt, Potter-san - quite a hard one, still, they'd create the softest sound and - if you'll pardon me saying so, they are a bit more forgiving than the others ..."

Forgiving? ... Oh, yes of course, had to be the hitting angle, coming wrong with them would be heard less clearly than with the others.

"... then we have these, ivory, which makes the smallest head, also the purest sound, crystal-clear, though with the shortest resonance, so they ain't everybody's case ..."

To Gabriel, these sticks looked almost like drumsticks, the heads only slightly thicker than the handles, giving him the impression he should try them only after having gained some expertise.

"... and then there are our top models - wood core both of them, these here covered by fine leather, very sound, the ones I'd recommend, if you allow me so ..."

Yes, Gabriel did, particularly so as they looked quite inviting, only that the last pair looked almost identical. "And those - what's the difference?"

"Ah - our latest development, Potter-san. The cover - see here, that's shark skin. Please feel it - the surface is rougher than leather, as you'll notice, which makes for a feathery sound, lighter than usual."

"I'll try them first." Gabriel held the leather-covered ones still in his hands.

"Yes, absolutely, Potter-san."

Gabriel's first beats came tentatively. He was listening to the sound, to the differences when hitting the bars harder, lighter, what was happening when he muted the bar with the stick not lifting off, testing his stance. Similarities to a keyboard, yes, from the technique, still totally different ... This sound - bells made of wood, it was wonderful.

Then he started real playing. A few chords establishing a theme, repeating it, circling around, improvising, still testing the ground, hesitantly first to switch between the layers, after a moment gaining confidence. The wooden bars were talking with him, inviting him, and he met them joyfully with these magnificent sticks.

And now his first warble ... Erm, yes, that would need some more training, maybe a shorter one, for the time being - better, still not up to Gabriel's own standard, so he kept to single beats, now playing slower, using the short moments of silence between his beats, giving each bar time to fade out - and, finally, a small *furioso* in which his stick-armed hands were flying across the layers, at last stopping abruptly.

He nearly jumped when the applause rose around him. Looking up, Gabriel saw quite some people, among them a group of Japanese schoolgirls, staring at him in awe. And his father, Ireen, Michel.

Mr. Tanzani bowed twice rapidly. "Excellent, Potter-san - you are made for each other, you and this instrument."

A gentle wave in Gabriel's mind told him that this had to be a mix of honest approval and the flattery of a salesman, reminding him that Mr. Tanzani was a member of Miyikura, after all.

Gabriel looked at his father, the origin of this wave. "What do you think?"

Harry bowed toward Mr. Tanzani. "Does it make sense to let my son test other instruments?"

The Japanese bowed back. "Certainly, for the different kinds of wood - while otherwise, for the size, and the level - I'd think there is no use in trying a simpler instrument, sir."

Gabriel had the vague feeling he should introduce them to each other, only he didn't know how.

Ireen came forward. "What kind of wood is this here?"

"This is cedarwood, madam. The softest in the scale that suits Potter-san's size, giving the warmest sound. The same model is offered in oak, which is the other end of the scale, and in mahogany, which is somewhere in the middle." Mr. Tanzani was pointing at two other instruments nearby, one of them showing nearly the same colour, just slightly more brownish, while the other instrument had bars that looked lighter, almost grey.

Gabriel registered some amusement in both his father and Ireen. He didn't know why, had nothing to do with him - maybe about Mr. Tanzani who had dismissed less expensive instruments so categorically.

Harry said, "Let's try the other end - the oak model."

They walked over to the xylophone with the greyish bars. Just from looking at them, Gabriel liked it less than the one he had played. However, when his sticks hit the first bars, he changed his mind at once - the sound was finer, more brilliant, with a different pitch, the effects were more audible.

When he stopped, his father asked, "So what's your impression? Cedarwood or oak?"

Gabriel pondered the question, looked up, feeling helpless. "I don't know. They're both so ... so unique." He glanced at Michel. "What do you think?"

And his friend, totally unafraid, replied, "I think we came for two, didn't we?"

Harry grinned. "That's what I thought too - and who said they had to be the same model?" He turned to Gabriel. "Then all you have to figure out is - which of them to place where ... Is this okay with you?"

"That'd be great - super." Gabriel felt thrilled enough to send mind waves to all three of his travelmates, raising two smiles and a gasping twist, the latter from Ireen.

While Harry turned to Mr. Tanzani, Ireen said, "We've found something else, Gabriel - for Michel. C'mon, we want to show you."

After a glance to Harry who nodded, said he'd join them there, Gabriel followed Ireen and Michel toward another part of the hall, all the time feeling like floating a few inches above the floor. They left the xylophones behind, and then Gabriel saw what they meant. There were instruments he had never seen before, with two common factors - all of them were made of wood, and all of them offered alternatives to a normal drum with drumskin.

They stopped at something which took Gabriel a moment to register. Four pieces that looked like tubes, open at both ends. Different sizes, in length as well as in diameter. They were resting on padded frames.

Michel said, "Now watch."

He pressed a button, and all four tubes made a tiny jump, probably less than an inch. Michel explained, "It's a levitation charm built in, so the drum bodies hang entirely free - there's nothing that would dampen the resonance."

"Cool." Gabriel looked admiringly. "Did you try them already?"

"No, not yet ... Pity you haven't brought your flute with you - drums alone, that's ... I'd like to know how it sounds together."

"Oh." Gabriel glanced at Ireen. "I could be back in a minute."

"Yes, you could, but I have a better idea." Ireen looked quite pleased. "Come with me, you two."

They followed her around a corner. Ireen stopped, pointed. "Look here - that's something I'd like to contribute."

Flutes ... Small ones, large ones, hanging at a wall, of course all of them made of wood. Most of them were fixed vertically, while others hung there horizontally. Only when stepping closer, Gabriel realized why - the horizontal ones had the mouthpiece at the side, to be played transversely.

Ireen was pointing again. "This one looks like the wood version of your bamboo flute ... And this one," she indicated a larger piece, "that seems to be the upper end of your finger range. Unless you see one that looks more promising, I'd say we take them."

While Michel found this a great idea, and now, so they could test the drums, Gabriel felt a bit overwhelmed. "Well, I don't know. Why not fetch my flute at home?"

"Because I want to have a present for my piper," said Ireen. "And where's the problem? Michel gets four drum bodies, and you get two xylophones and two flutes - isn't that perfectly balanced?"

Not really, Gabriel was fully aware of that, but Ireen's face made clear this was meant as a joke, while about the two flutes she seemed quite serious, so he nodded, and someone came along to hook them off, Ireen took the bigger one, Gabriel took the small one which felt familiar at once, and they could follow Michel, who was storming back to his drums.

Harry had arrived, Mr. Tanzani in his trail. The Japanese had one look at their target, said, "Just a moment, please," was back quickly with drumsticks.

To Gabriel's surprise, while not to Michel's, they were made of metal - steel, actually, quite thin, no head at all, the same diameter from one end to the other.

Michel looked at his flutist. "Ready?"

Gabriel nodded, the new flute already at his lips.

Its sound was a bit darker than that of the bamboo flute, softer too, otherwise offering the same characteristics. Gabriel played a kind of opening, until he felt that his friend had warmed up sufficiently to these unfamiliar drums with their throbbing sound, then he made his life

easy by just hanging on Michel's sensations, very much the same what he'd done at the beach for Ireen, only that Michel's feelings were considerably more joyful, and the music too.

In his playing, Gabriel registered how Michel recognized what he did, how his friend took the lead in the rhythm, and that was exactly what drums were made for, while Gabriel himself provided the tune, only it was from Michel too, just filtered through his sensing.

After some moments, he sat down on the rug, just opposite Michel and his four drum tubes, without stopping in his play. He closed his eyes, and now only this pulsing, throbbing beat was left in a world that had to be filled with flute sounds flying over them, accentuating them, or connecting them to a perfect harmony.

Some time passed. Eventually, Gabriel felt Michel's tiring, slowed down, opened his eyes, faded out to let Michel finish with a last staccato on the thinnest tube.

They beamed at each other. There was applause around, yes, and that was probably something you could get used to, pretty quickly maybe, only today they had played for themselves, transforming joy and excitement from some new instruments into music.

10 - Questions and Answers

It was weekend. Saturday, to be precise, which was the better part of it because Sunday would follow and because you could do things that weren't suitable on Sundays. Shopping, for instance.

For Sandra, however, Saturday meant visiting Aram'chee, the High Priestess, her mentor, teacher, friend, and the only person toward whom she wouldn't even try to hide something. There was no use, because Aram'chee would find out anyway. There was no need either. The High Priestess would blame her, oh yes, she would, mercilessly so, however in a way you could bear to listen. And understand. And find peace with yourself and all your failures.

"The High Priestess must be a woman," Aram'chee used to say. "More than anything else, this means that the High Priestess must be a human being, with all the glitches that are built into us. Being the most human witch, that's the essence of what will be your obligation, later."

She didn't press her either. "I praise the gods who let us meet when you were so young," Aram'chee had said at occasions, "because it gives us time. You can be the child you are, you can become the young woman you'll be, before it's time to take over the full burden. Fate is merciful, sometimes."

Sandra's life would split into three phases. The first of them was the current one, living the life of an almost ordinary girl. Almost - that was good, ha ha.

Anyway, this time would be followed by the phase Aram'chee was currently in, that of the High Priestess in duty. In personal lifetime, this part would be the shortest of the three while in historical years, it would span an unknown number of centuries.

Aram'chee, for example, was spending lifetime less than a day per week. Just the hours of these visits, and still this was her highest life consumption in a long time. For the rest of the week, she kept herself in some kind of stasis, about the only topic Aram'chee didn't go into more detail during their conversations.

The third phase in Sandra's life would start after the duty of the High Priestess had been passed over to a successor. For Aram'chee, this phase was close, in some sense, and Sandra could feel the woman's expectancy better with every year. For Sandra herself, about ten more years would pass until then, while for Aram'chee, the total time awake still as the High Priestess would be less than a year, just right for getting in sync with modern times and their rapidly changing trends.

Sandra jumped to the Crusader castle near the Lake Tiberias where, somewhere deep down, the High Priestess had her residence. Sandra's first jump brought her to the outer wall, close to the gate at which an ordinary tourist would be ordered to buy a ticket. Peeking through the iron bars, she spotted a corner where she could wait for Aram'chee to appear, jumped inside.

She didn't even have to send a mental call. Her presence alone would awake Aram'chee, as it had been the first time Sandra visited this place, eight years ago.

Moments later, the air at her side filled with the High Priestess. To the outside, Aram'chee looked like a woman around her forties, a very attractive one. Black hair, kept longer than

today's fashion. A face - Aram'chee wasn't beautiful in the common sense, still her face would turn heads wherever they went. Well, little surprise, after so many years without the normal penalty of ageing signs. She had a tall body, neither slim nor sturdy, a figure that caught the eye from any angle, although the one from front was clearly the best. Sandra hoped she would grow breasts comparable to those.

Today, Aram'chee wore a simple linen dress, perfectly matching the small crowd of tourists around. Turning to Sandra, she said, "Hello, little witch. Which horizon would you like to face today?"

"Hmm ... In the mood for shopping?"

Aram'chee smiled. "Why not? What do you need - or should I ask, what do you want?"

"Not for me!" Sandra looked the High Priestess up and down. "For you - I thought we should get you a bit dressed to the fashion."

Two dark eyes, in which a sparkling glowed, were resting at Sandra. "This must be your mother's side in you, little witch. At the surface, it appears just as part of my education to modern styles and behaviours. While from another perspective, it strongly resembles the common habit of any girl your age - fetching a puppet out of the box, dressing it to the last fashion, then store it away some time later."

Sandra hadn't looked at it that way, or hadn't realized by herself which motive was driving her. Even so, she saw no reason to protest, not at such an enticing idea.

"Fine with me," said Aram'chee. "And where?"

"Well, Paris - where else?"

"I was told there'd be better places for shopping clothes than Paris - Milan, for example. But I was also told that nobody wants to be in Milan at this time of the year, or the week."

Aram'chee nodded. "So Paris, then ... Go ahead, I'll follow you."

Thanks to Fleur, Sandra knew some shops offering first-rate fashion at acceptable prices, employing staff who used to move the corners of their mouths upward, rather than downward. These shops were a far call from the tourist traps near Champs Elysées. Still, Sandra's jump didn't aim directly to these small side streets. Instead, she just used one of the two targets in Paris she knew best - the place in front of the Beauxbatons school.

Because at this place you'd find a Métro station. For reasons Sandra couldn't really follow, Aram'chee loved riding subway. From Sandra's own perspective, the Paris Métro was a punishment of dirty seats, bad smell, loud noise, and these unpleasantly sharp pushes at each bend and every station. But Aram'chee loved it, and despite all the people around, a Métro wagon was a good place to tell the latest news. While not for a serious conversation.

Going retrograde through the recent events, first Sandra told Aram'chee about some other shopping that had taken place in Japan. The High Priestess listened silently, glancing around with an attentiveness that would mark her as a tourist instantly - but then, she was a tourist, wasn't she?

And she was looked at by other people. Men, mostly, but also women. Some of them casually, others more openly, up to the level of impolite stare. Every now and then, Aram'chee played the game of the staring eyes by herself, at someone just too impertinent. Of course she never lost.

From the list of shops she knew, Sandra selected the one with the most complete stock, where they'd find everything, from underwear to costumes. Except shoes, of course, however a decent shop for shoes and handbags resided nearby. A while ago, Harry had simplified the procedures by providing the High Priestess with a Gringotts account, including a GALA - the wizard credit card. Since then, Sandra and her teacher no longer caught attention from running around with a bag of galleons.

When they came out of the shop, Aram'chee looked like a different woman. Skirt, blouse, a feather-light sweater strung over her shoulders - and the large bag with her old stuff had been left inside, with the order of sending it to Fleur's address.

They walked the few steps to the shoe shop, where Aram'chee got a pair of light sandals, pretty flat, because she wasn't really used yet to the size of heels fashion would dictate. Then they were done with shopping.

Both of them felt like having a drink first, and maybe some cake afterwards. To Sandra's relief, Aram'chee agreed to a simple jump, rather than the Métro again. They came out at the Seine promenades, one cafe bordering the next.

Full with tourists, as far as the eye could wander.

Sandra said, "Fleur thinks Paris is no place for people either, at this time of the year ... What now?"

"A boat ride." Aram'chee's glance followed the sightseeing boats that were passing up and down the river. "A bigger one, with a cafe on board - they seem not quite as crowded as the smaller ones."

A boat ride ... Sandra would never ever confess in school that she'd done something as dull and boring as that, at the weekend. But so what - she wouldn't talk about her meetings with the High Priestess anyway. And the main goal of their meetings was to talk, and sitting there, gliding across the water, a large piece of cake in front of you ...

Checking the timetable, they learned that docks could be found all along the river, with those at more remote places promising less passengers or a better seat from the start. So they went to the farthest of them, going through a short sequence of jumps by eyesight.

The next cruise would start in twenty minutes' time. They found a bench, and finally they could talk.

Sandra told the High Priestess about the kidnapping cases, in particular about the last one, how Tony had died, and what her father was doing since then. Then she asked, "How can people kidnap children? Are these still humans?"

Aram'chee had listened silently. Now she said, "It's greed that drives them - and greed is an essential human aspect. So you know the answer yourself, don't you?"

"But children, Aram'chee! Small ones, babies."

"They were treated well, you said. So tell me, what is it that makes kidnapping so particularly terrible?"

Sandra stared at her mentor in disbelief.

"What is it, little witch?"

"But ... taking the children away from their mother - the thought alone ..." Sandra didn't know how to emphasize her horror still stronger.

"Is the mother the only person that can feed them, protect them, give them warmth and love?"

"No, of course not. But ..." Again, Sandra stopped, slightly blushing. Because at this moment, she became aware that her own mother, Cho, had left these tasks to other people ... Agreed - not in the first months, and Sandra's father had more than volunteered for this role. But even so, there was no denying - when Sandra was in the age of the kidnapped children, Cho used to say goodbye in the morning and hello in the evening.

Aram'chee had a fine smile in her face, a clear sign that she knew what was racing through Sandra's mind. She said, "In poor countries, there are mothers selling their babies, for adoption. What about that?"

"Really?" Only her confusion could explain this nonsense question - Sandra knew that the High Priestess was honest. She hurried to say, "Why do they do that? For a living?"

"Sometimes this is not even their primary motive. They hope these children will have a better life than with themselves. Some of them - and often enough it's true ... Another question, little witch." Aram'chee smiled broader. "When I met you, I claimed you as the next High Priestess. Was this kidnapping?"

"No, of course not."

"Your mother didn't think so. She was ready to kill me. And even if it wasn't kidnapping, I never said I'd give you back."

Sandra felt trapped in a corner. Before she could find another argument, they had to enter the cruise boat, went inside to find two good window seats and to order drinks - coffee for the High Priestess, Orangina for Sandra herself.

Glancing up, she saw that Aram'chee kept waiting patiently for her next comment, would do so till the end of the cruise, if needed. After another moment of fruitless efforts to find a weak spot in this weird line of statements and questions, Sandra said, "Please explain it to me."

"You told me that treating the children well, to let them live, is unusual. So here we see one reason why everybody's instant feelings are dominated by horror and disgust - until they are really back home, common experience tells the parents they won't see their children again."

Sandra nodded, feeling easier.

"This is just another example how feelings and beliefs dominate us humans, while facts are neglected. And even if not, facts are insufficient to change our impressions."

Sandra had heard this before, would hear it again, more often than she felt ready to appreciate. According to Aram'chee, the human nature could be described with just a dozen such statements, and the older Sandra grew, the more grew also her bad feeling that the High Priestess was right.

The waiter brought their drinks, and both of them sipped greedily. Then Aram'chee said, "Before continuing with my explanation, let me tell you - kidnapping is nothing new, it has been done through all centuries. However, killing the victims is a new development - and I have to admit, I feel disgust myself in spite of knowing exactly why." She smiled again, this way telling Sandra that she knew how boring it was to hear times and again about facts versus feelings.

"Quite often, the motive wasn't even money. You can find many cases in history where the children of kings or dukes were abducted by a rival competing for power, to be raised by themselves - and believe me, little witch, they were treated with luxury and honour and everything ... But of course they were indoctrinated, because it was a game about power - and here we come to the main factor."

Well, thought Sandra, she should have known - power was the most human version of greed, and almost everything could be related to that. Only that she still couldn't see exactly the sequence of cause and effect.

"A normal mother," explained Aram'chee, "even if she'd know that someone else could raise her child at least as well, maybe better - she still won't be ready to give up on her child. We think that's normal, and it is - but it has nothing to do with the child's well-being. In the minimum, it is the belief that we ourselves are superior, so nobody can do it better. In addition, it is a question of power - children are always property, to some degree, taking away property is theft, and taking away children is the most condemnable theft."

Aram'chee grinned. "Besides - every now and then, you see a mother who really has someone to raise her child better than she herself could do. This is of course a sign of love and faith into that person - but a tiny rest of guilt will always remain, this is why any other person, who'd come and claim that child, with the best arguments, would be fought toe and nail."

Sandra grinned back. The High Priestess was talking about Cho and Harry, every single word true, nothing of it new, and still a perfect fit to settle this lesson about human motives.

"Let's satisfy our own greed," said Aram'chee, opening the menu card, "and order some big pieces of cake."

However, the card was no help for that, so they had to walk to the desk where the real thing could be inspected. Registering the small size of a single portion, they ordered twice the same - a piece of apple pie and a piece of a dark chocolate cake.

Back at their seats, Sandra asked, "How is it, to die? ... To die sooner than you'd have expected?"

"For whom?"

"Huh?"

The High Priestess didn't recoil from talking with a mouth full of cake. "You didn't ask how it is to be dead ..."

Giggling, Sandra waited for the continuation.

Alas, Aram'chee first swallowed the bite. "... which would have been a question I cannot answer anyway. But aside from that, you were asking six questions at once."

Still in the right mood for a joke, Sandra said, "That's good, isn't it? I mean, it's not that simple to ask so many questions at once."

"Only if you can list all six of them."

Caught, because she couldn't. Joking against the High Priestess was a game bound to be lost - still. This might change some years from now, and Aram'chee's counters felt more encouraging than embarrassing.

"How is it to die in general? How is it to die in age? How is it to die young? ... These are three questions, and you can ask them about the person that's dying and about the survivors - makes six."

Something in Aram'chee's face made Sandra say, "Only there's just one answer, right?"

"Really?"

This devilish reply from the other side was anything but nonsense, as Sandra knew only too well, and most often it meant she was wrong. While not always - and this time, her senses told her she wasn't entirely wrong, not quite correct either.

She chewed a moment thoughtfully, swallowed. "There's another answer for each person."

"Very good, little witch - and counting this as one answer is rhetorically correct." Aram'chee smiled warmly. "Why don't you ask Ireen?"

Because she was hanging around with Gabriel, shot the answer up in Sandra's mind, and because I didn't want to come and make clear he's better in that than myself. Loudly, she said, "Because I wasn't sure whether this is impolite, or painful to answer."

"Yes, it certainly is painful, but if you come asking seriously, honestly, not just out of curiosity, then I'd think this is your contribution, and as helpful as what your brother is doing." Aram'chee's face told Sandra - this hadn't been by accident, mentioning Gabriel in this context. "You were right in the beginning, while now, with a few days distance, it is a good thing to do."

Sandra nodded. "Yes, I'll ask her ... But, you know, what I am trying to figure out is what it really means, death."

The High Priestess thought for a moment, which to Sandra felt like scoring in a debate. Then she said, "My best answer - it's the opposite of life. Physiologically, that's all to be said - death"

is the end of a process in which something is alive. And otherwise - to really answer your question, first we had to know what's the reason of life, other than living, and this is a philosophical question we can discuss, only it's beyond my scope." Aram'chee looked almost apologetically. "Life is supposed to be freedom, and as old as I am, this goal is still waiting for me."

Sandra had to fight an impulse of guilt, which was nonsense - as if she were to blame that it took so long to be ready for her future duty.

"I can wait," assured the High Priestess, "and relish the expectancy ... The Greeks had a saying - it was, whom the gods love, they let him die young - only, I never met anyone who would have liked to be loved that way."

Sandra grinned, grew serious again. "And suicide?"

"If it's not a moment's desperation, then it's committed because someone realizes that everything is better than the life he has, or is facing." Aram'chee looked wondering. "Did you never discuss it with your father?"

"Not particularly so, no ... Why?"

"Committing suicide not necessarily means doing it by yourself, and as you know as good as I do, Harry did it at least for one person, although I'd agree to say he did it for two."

Sandra blushed. Not because of the first - this had been a dark wizard, seriously injured in the Battle of Hogwarts, who asked Harry to help him make an end to a miserable life. No, it was the second case, because Aram'chee was talking about Gérard Pouilly, and suddenly the topic of the Pouilly family seemed to grow in Sandra's mind.

Although it was fair to say - not the entire family, just one member, known as Frédéric.

"There is a boy," she started hesitantly. "He's - er, he'd have been a nephew of this Gérard. He's ..." and then, gaining speed while the cruise boat was chugging steadily ahead, Sandra told the High Priestess the full story about herself and Héloïse, Benoît and Frédéric.

Aram'chee looked pleased, not saying a word.

Sandra glanced at her, looked at her dish which, miraculously, had emptied during this story, peeked up again. "Why don't you say something?"

"I enjoyed what you told me. I still do."

"So you think it's right what I did?"

The High Priestess showed a fine smile. "I wasn't listening with a perspective of right or wrong in mind. How can you judge in these terms when people meet and are together? ... There's a girl, she meets a boy - there's a development, something's happening ..."

Almost angrily, Sandra interrupted her. "You talk as if this is some romance! That's nonsense, it's not like that - it's just ..."

When she didn't continue, Aram'chee prompted, "Just what?"

"I don't know, but it's not what you think. He's just a classmate - yes, he's interesting, but for once, there's his family, and I'm not even sure whether he's - er, honest, if I can trust him."

The High Priestess's voice sounded teasing. "You are telling me, you agreed to visit the centaur Firenze with someone you do not even trust? And you expect me to believe this?"

"Well, no - I mean ..." Sandra looked unhappy. "I thought you'd help me to find a way how I can be sure. Visiting Firenze - perhaps I said yes because, you know, if they meet, Firenze and Frédéric, I can watch and listen, and then I know more."

"So I'll help you, my little witch." Aram'chee's hand came over the table to take Sandra's. "You had your instincts working, and they said he's trustworthy. At the same time, you had your mind working, and it said he might be a risk. Learning when to trust your instincts, or better I should say, learning to recognize the messages from your instincts, this is the most complicated part of growing up - the most complicated, remember, not the most difficult. And I trust your instincts. Visit Firenze with him and do what you had in mind - watch and listen."

Sandra felt an enormous relief, so much so that she already missed to ask, did so after a moment. "Then what's the most difficult part?"

"Maturing, what is called puberty today. Becoming a woman." Aram'chee pressed the hand in her own. "It starts like that - girl meets boy, they are together, something develops ..."

Sandra giggled. "There's still time until then, lots of time."

"You are not mature yet, true, but love and passion have many shapes, many names. Friendship is one of them. Sympathy is another. How do you feel when your friend Héloïse, who is so gifted in that by nature, smiles at him, rather than at this Benoît?"

Caught again. Sandra blushed. "I could strangle her."

"Even if a part of this emotion is some envy, because a Veela simply can cope better with the opposite sex ..." Aram'chee paused for dramatic effect, then asked, "would it be true to call the rest jealousy?"

Saying yes felt somehow wrong. Saying no would definitely be wrong. "It sounds so ridiculous," muttered Sandra, "jealousy - that's something for later, when we're older and ..." Her voice trailed off.

"No," said the High Priestess. "Jealousy is built into us from birth, the only question is how much, how strong. It's truly amazing how you get along with your brother, so you didn't experience much of this feeling so far - although I'm sure you felt it toward your friend Héloïse already in the past."

Had to be true - the feeling had been somehow familiar. And Gabriel ... Sandra beamed. "Nobody can be mad at Gabriel - that's why."

Aram'chee released Sandra's hand, leaned back, looking sombre. "I was so glad to hear that you've met someone, and I hope this will become a friendship, if not more."

Sandra grinned. "Did you think I hadn't enough social life?"

"Yes, my little witch." Aram'chee's smile was a bit sad. "Because the time will come when it will encounter a deep caesura, which will hold very long before it starts again ... And with this in mind, I welcome every opportunity where you can use the years of your youth."

For Sandra, this prospect held no threat. She knew it for the most part of her life. Aram'chee was probably right, although - she herself couldn't press matters much, could she? For an instant, Sandra saw herself getting all over Frédéric, with the excuse that there was no time to lose because soon she'd be the High Priestess ... The picture was so funny, she started to giggle and then to laugh so hard, she was almost rolling over.

* * *

It was weekend, which meant the companies found by Paul could not be visited with any chance of meeting someone. Not before Monday - a thought Harry felt hard not to scream about. Because he had a feeling ... Because what if they picked these two days to run another attack, toward someone else?

If he hadn't decided to join Gabriel, he would have been around when Paul called Seeger.

If he hadn't decided to join Gabriel, he would have missed a few scenes to remember in years to come. And Gabriel wouldn't have known which xylophone to take. And Michel would never, never ever, have gotten his pipe drums.

It was this thought which let Harry calm down, even start grinning, imagining what Fleur would say, the next time they met. Yes, sure, Fleur had known that these Miyikura people manufactured drums and drum-like instruments, Gabriel had told Harry what Fleur had said at the table. But Fleur couldn't possibly know about this latest development, with this magic twist causing a quantum leap in drum acoustics, because there was no longer any physical support that would dampen the resonance - the levitated drums could vibrate freely, creating a reverberating sound unheard before.

At a hefty price, by all means.

This Tanzani had told Harry that Miyikura intended to establish something totally new - a patent for a combination of simple mechanics and a creative spell. Naturally so, if you could charge forty grand for something Harry himself - with Ray's help - would put together on a rainy afternoon, provided someone offered them the wooden pipes.

Harry wasn't sure whether Michel had noticed the price. But Fleur would have an idea, would start negotiating about who was to pay what - and Harry would grin and point out that he was Michel's godfather, after all, who finally had managed to find some decent company for Héloïse's priceless Goblin harp.

Then Harry grinned broader, because suddenly he knew how to argue, felt sure Fleur would have quite some fun from this little plot.

His wife was off, his daughter was off, his son glued to some pieces of wood, although still quite flexible with his arms, and Ireen was visiting Beverly. To see a bit more about spell-based baby care, as Ireen had explained, which increased Harry's suspicion that she would

like being a witch, if only for this reason. And he, facing a Saturday with nothing to do, had decided to fulfill his promise toward Paul.

To try, at least.

Harry wasn't looking forward to this conversation with his sister. Therefore, wouldn't it be nice to improve his mood in a talk with Fleur first? ... Well, it smelled a bit like fleeing, but at least it was the same city, wasn't it? And maybe Fleur could give him a tip how to argue. Provided he would raise the topic ...

Maybe so. Harry jumped.

Came out in the street, to walk the last steps. To have a few seconds for finding his decision, and to pass the Goblin guard as an act of politeness.

The two Goblins spotted him at once, recognized him, the former Ambassador who had performed his Goblin Request and once would have to find his successor in this honour and duty. Harry could recognize it in their body language - they didn't freeze, tried to behave like the best guards you could imagine, only that it meant one of them had to watch the opposite direction, and the other had to avoid staring at him.

Passing them, Harry greeted with a nod and a smile, receiving the Goblin salute with the crossbow shortly turned upward in return. He didn't tell them where he was heading to - they knew anyway, so it would have been simultaneously improper and impolite. Reaching the Weasley house, Harry could feel their pride, being the ones to meet the Excellence who refused to be addressed with this title.

Bill opened the door. He grinned. "Come in ... Now listen."

A single beat, seemingly light at first but then sending a humming sound so deep you'd think one of these incredibly large Chinese brass gongs had been hit ... And now, flying over this echo, the sounds of a Goblin harp.

Bill said, "You've got your son some competition. These pipe drums are one hell of an instrument."

"Yes," replied Harry, "they are. When I heard them together with a flute, it sounded like something totally different from what you can hear now."

Bill moved ahead. Coming into the living room, he said, "Look what I've got, Fleur - the culprit himself."

Fleur, who had been busy cleaning up magazines and newspapers, accepted Harry's greeting with cheeks to cheeks, then said, "Alright, Young Potter, sit down and get prepared."

"Uh-oh ..." Harry took a chair, grinning. "Haven't heard that for quite some time, but it doesn't sound as though the meaning has changed a bit ... What have I done so wrong?"

"What you've done?" Fleur bent over him, in a posture meant threatening, only what was filling Harry's vision seemed badly suited as a threat. "You'll tell me at once what you paid for that, otherwise I'm going to trance you."

Slightly bending to the side, Harry glanced at Bill. "Whatever's going to happen now, I'm excused - right?"

"No, not at all," replied Bill, only he was chuckling.

Fleur straightened, went to another chair, sat down. "Seriously, now - of course I was sure he'd come back with an instrument of his own, I checked their catalogue in the Internet, but this thing wasn't listed there ... And it looks awfully expensive."

Harry raised his eyebrows provocatively. "Well, as a matter of fact - it is."

"And you think you'll get away with it, huh?"

"Definitely not, because it was planned to stay here ..." Seeing Fleur's angry look, Harry raised his hands. "What do you expect? I'm his godfather, and in the course of this duty, I found him an instrument that does more than some background - besides, it was Michel himself who found it."

For a few seconds, all three of them were listening to another wave of music, coming from Héloïse's room. Then Fleur said, "Michel told us about the two xylophones, and that Gabriel is still trying to figure out which of them to place where ... At this state of things, my dear 'arry, you might tell your son to look for *two* places in some Irish castle - hear what I'm saying?"

Harry feigned utter astonishment. "Why? ... I mean, I remember what you said, some days ago, about furniture in these rooms - actually, that's why I came, to ask you which of them you'd take over."

"Oh." Fleur looked disarmed. "You mean - the instrument *and* the bill?"

"Right." Harry nodded confirmingly. "And - regardless of which one Gabriel has in mind to put here, I'd appreciate if you'd leave the oak piece to me and take the other one."

"Why?"

Seeing Fleur's suspicious glance, Harry said, "Don't worry - they're both the same price. But the other one - it's cedar wood."

Both Fleur and Bill understood at once, started to laugh. Her eyes wet with tears, Fleur said, "Very clever, 'arry - brilliant, I'm looking forward to meet Cho, and I feel tempted already to rub it in a bit."

"Please be kind," Harry pleaded, only he was laughing himself.

Bill said, "Okay, Harry, it's a deal ... How much?"

"Erm ... Fifty."

"Whoa." Bill looked a bit perplexed, then recovered. "Considering our current economy, this is probably a better investment than any kind of stocks I can imagine - but still, our kids have a fine taste, by all means."

It earned him an angry glance from Fleur.

Harry said, "You know what's most embarrassing? What I paid didn't change my balance at all, as you know - but the transfer from you will raise my account."

"Yeah," said Bill mockingly, "these damned Goblins ..."

Registering that he found himself alone, having fun with this remark, Bill added, "Save it, Harry - and by the way, for us it's not the same, but I stopped checking our balance sheets at the end of the year, when the interest is booked, and do you know why? ... Because no matter how you look at it, the interest's too much for the investment. So you're in good company."

"Really?" Harry felt very pleased, hearing this confession. Bill had earned himself a Goblin Request of the Privileged category, and apparently the Goblins had decided that its effects would not end with the initial grantings, which included this house and a more than generous Gringotts account.

Registering the change in her guest, Fleur said, "Please tell me, Harry - how much was it for the pipe drums?"

"Forty."

"Wow!" Now Fleur looked baffled.

"It's one out of twelve," explained Harry, "that's part of the reason. They said they'll build only twenty-four altogether, so it's a very exclusive drum." He grinned. "That might come true or not - who wants to know, we can tell the Goblins that Hély's harp has found a worthy companion, so they'll forgive us if the war drums will gather some dust."

"They won't," said Bill. "Michel said they're so different, now he too has more than one instrument ..." Bill lowered his voice. "But he said it only to me, not to his sister, if you know what I mean."

"My lips will be sealed," Harry whispered back.

With Fleur alone, he would have asked her how to talk with Ginny. With Bill around, however, Harry felt quite reluctant to mention the issue - which seemed totally irrational, because Bill was the oldest brother of Harry by adoption and of Ginny by birth. But then, the issue was irrational by itself, wasn't it?

So, after some more remarks, Harry said goodbye and left.

He did so the conventional way, by walking down the staircase until he reached the street, until he was seen by the Goblin guards, so they knew about him leaving. Only then, he jumped.

To the entrance of the *Agence Ginnyale*, how Ginny had dubbed her little enterprise. When Ron heard about the name, he asked whether his sister would hire the models by IQ, rather than by their looks, and if her customers had warmed up to this approach.

It hadn't exactly improved terms between him and Ginny. On the other side - Ron was her only brother who could give such a remark without being suspected of looking down at her tiny company, quite in contrast to Fred and George, who otherwise might easily have been the source of such sarcasm ... Yes, true, there was still Percy, only - did anyone in his right mind expect something like that from Percy?

Today, the agency could be rated tiny only in an inter-familiar comparison, while not toward other model agencies. And this was the reason why Harry expected the chances for meeting her higher at this place than in her penthouse.

And right he was. Ginny herself opened the door, simply because she was the only one in the office. Seeing Harry, she looked a bit astonished and not particularly pleased. "You? That's a real surprise, that is ... Come in."

Following her inside, Harry saw a desk cluttered with folders and files, while a computer monitor presented just numbers, although in fashionable colours. He asked, "Is this the leisurely Saturday of the successful entrepreneur? Bookkeeping?"

"Kind of, yes." Ginny leaned at her desk, giving Harry the impression he was about as welcome as a tax auditor, except that he could be sent off easier.

But he'd come for a reason, and now he was here. "Can I invite you to some place with less paper and more drinks, or even something to eat?"

"No thanks - I've got to finish here before I really start screaming, rather than feeling like that. And there's an appointment in a while."

What a magnificent start. "Business or private?"

"The boundaries are always floating, as you certainly know." It came with a bit of teasing in her voice, while Ginny's expression kept quite watchful. Well, they knew each other, and for once this wasn't very helpful.

Harry suppressed a sigh. "I came to find out something. It's probably not the best opportunity, but then, it's not more than a simple question ... Are you still with Paul?"

There was no surprise in Ginny's face, none inside either, only the teasing in her voice had disappeared. "Since when is this any of your business?"

"Since I asked Paul the same question - well, not quite the same, but anyway, his answer was he didn't know."

"Did Paul send *you*???" For a moment, the anger in Ginny's face was replaced by disbelief.

"Nope ... He's doing some research for me, and in exchange for this favour, I said I'll do some research for him - that's all."

"That's all, huh?" Rage was building up in her, Harry didn't need his special senses to register that. "Just dropping by, having a check at my love life - why don't you come in the evening, then you could see by yourself, wouldn't even need to ask me - that would save you the

hassle, since I'm not going to answer that anyway - and me too, so I could get my work done!" Ginny's head flicked toward the monitor, back at Harry.

"That's not my concern ..." His own breath had quickened too, from the efforts not to join her in this furious mood. "The only question is - does Paul still play a role in your life - in some future, if not at present, and it's his question, not mine, so if you'd tell me something like, I'm going to inform him till day after tomorrow, and now get the hell out of here, I'd call this visit a success."

"And if I'd start with the last part only, we could call this conversation partially successful, right?"

The bitter joke wasn't rising a smile in either face. "Maybe Ron would call it like that," Harry said after a moment, "only I'm not Ron, and he won't hear about this."

As far as he was concerned, he added in his mind, although Ginny seemed even less likely to tell her brother. A bit calmer, she asked, "What's he doing for you - Paul, I mean?"

Could this be a first peace sign? A break in the combat? Or simple curiosity - whatever, the answer would add an element totally out of place in this discussion, so Harry said, "Can we keep that out?"

"Oh, sure ..." Ginny snorted. "You've asked me, I've asked you, and now we can part without the burden of having wised up ..."

That did it. "I said to Paul, you weren't treated that way - hanging in the air without knowing what's going on, or what lies ahead. And he doesn't deserve it either - but maybe he's found the answer by himself, at any rate, the last thing I heard was that this evening he'll have dinner with someone."

"Fine, great - isn't this wonderful news?" As much as Ginny's voice gave a perfect example of joyful sarcasm - she was hurt somewhere. "Just tell him it's the same with me, and by some luck, we'll have adjacent tables in the same restaurant, that'd be the highlight of this magnificent day."

"Most unlikely - he's in Santa Monica ... Bye."

With two steps, Harry reached the door, was about to open it when a calm voice from behind said, "Just a second."

He turned. "What?"

"Santa Monica, huh? ... That means - yes, of course, that's the only explanation - he's doing some research about these kidnappings, most of all the last one in which your friend was killed ... Oh yes, I know, just didn't find the right moment to ... And you didn't want to tell me because it was off the point, or you didn't want to put pressure on me - or just the other way around, to let me find out later and feel bad ..." Ginny glared at him, her lips a thin line. "Whatever - it wasn't going to change my mind, and now that he's found some company, I'm sure he'll find what you want, my noble crusader."

"Very good." Harry glared back. "And pretty fast - especially in your guessing of other people's motives, mine, for instance. But you know, I can play that game too - it's not difficult at all to see why you treat him like that, not for me, that is ... He might not be the one to blame, but he's the only one you can make suffer, so for once he feels the same."

Two eyes almost too big in a paled face were staring at him.

"If I want someone feeling bad, Ginny, there won't be the slightest doubt about my intentions. Please remember that, when guessing again why I did something, or did not - especially toward you."

Door handle in hand, Harry added, "I'm not going to tell him. That wasn't his question anyway."

Then he was out, on the street, feeling like shit warmed over, wishing he could go back and do something other than saying he was sorry. Only he wasn't, not really, and besides, that wasn't the point anyway.

* * *

Cho swallowed the last bite of this delicious stew. She let the last morsel of that dark bread follow. Then she used the napkin, maybe the only item seemingly out of place in this room, with its walls of rough stones and the smoke-darkened crossbeams above. After dropping the napkin on her dish, she took a deep gulp of her glass - light beer, the dark stuff that went as the local speciality was a bit strong for Cho's taste.

She belched, not ladylike at all while perfectly in sync with the surroundings, looked at Clemens. "You were right - they really can cook ... How did you find it?"

"By pure luck, as the choirgirl said," replied Clemens, raising a chuckle from Ray Purcell and - from his wife Rahewa - a grin that made clear which particular kind of choirgirl he'd quoted.

The four of them were sitting in a back room of the *Crofters' Inn*, an old tavern in Kerrinan - not even the only one in this small town near Port William, at the southern end of Galloway. When looking out the tiny window, you could see the water of the Luce Bay. Craning your neck, you might recognize a dark spot in the distance, from here the only visible part of the Mull of Galloway at the other side of the bay.

Nobody would have guessed that they were holding a business meeting of *Groucho Transport & Security*. First because of this place here - who would select a pub at the Scottish coastline for such an occasion? Maybe as a waterhole after hours, yes, but for lunch plus business talk?

Only - a restaurant that would have suited Cho's expectations, after getting used to certain standards in Santa Monica, where in hell could something like that be found in godforsaken Ireland? Not in Dublin for sure. Nowhere near either. Until Rahewa came with Clemens' suggestion about this cute little tavern - had a back room, you could rent it for a song, and what about some countryside recreation afterwards, once the business talk was done?

So it hadn't been a question that Clemens, who belonged to *Groucho Biochemicals* rather than to GTS, would be with them. "Tell him he's going to join the party," Cho had said, "because, if this was planned as some special joke, at least he'll be in the same boat."

But Clemens didn't recoil, probably had hoped to be invited, which made a nicer round anyway - and someone like him, not involved in the GTS details while owning a clear mind, might even contribute with his perspective from the outside.

Rahewa said, "Would someone please roll me to my bed, for a little nap, and wake me up when you're done? I should have stopped eating some moments earlier, I'm afraid ... No, I feel great, that's not my problem, but wasn't there something like a sales campaign on the agenda?"

Cho, hearing what she herself didn't dare to admit, turned to the chief engineer. "Ray, you look as skinny as before lunch, I cannot detect the slightest trace of a bulge at your middle riff. So you're the one who can push us forward."

"No pushing, please," muttered Rahewa, "unless you'd like to watch a disaster."

Ray still had been chewing, maybe just because he was eating slower than the others. Now he swallowed, said, "That'd be the day, me doing sales. I'm an engineer, period."

"So?" Cho pointed at him. "Engineers solve problems, don't they? ... Okay, buddy, solve our problem."

The engineer glanced maliciously into the round. "The instant problem, right? Which is, you're too fed up to think straight ... Okay, get on your feet and have a walk - just follow me, half an hour, that'll do."

Groaning around the table left little doubt what the others thought of Ray's solution.

Clemens said, "I'm the one responsible for your dilemma, so I'm the one supposed to get you out ... Allright then, you won't be surprised when my first measure is a good potion ..."

Alarmed looks, most of all from Ray.

"... except this time it's not my own brew, because the local stuff fits ever so nicely the prescription." Clemens made a half-step to the wall and pulled a leather strap that hung there, to the effect that a bell was banging outside in the bar room.

When the host appeared, Clemens ordered four whiskies, "... the one that's never seen a bottle from inside, and remember, if the ladies' pints are less by a single drop, then they'll get you for sexual harassment."

The host, so huge he had to keep his head low in this room, stared at Clemens, glanced at Cho and Rahewa, disappeared.

Rahewa murmured, "He looked as if he'd got it all wrong - I mean, us harassing him ..."

Ray started to grin, opened his mouth, closed it again, seeing Cho's expression.

The host appeared again, a jug in one hand, the other hand holding four small glasses between the fingers. He clanked them on the table, giving Clemens another stare, then, very carefully, he filled them from the jug. This done, he stood there, waiting.

Clemens was the first to seize for a glass, quickly followed by Ray and, after a second's hesitation, by the women.

Cho knew whisky from tumblers, with ice cubes and soda. She watched the two men downing the amber liquid at once, did the same - and gasped, feeling a very tasty fire burning down her throat.

"Aaah ..." Ray smacked his lips. "That's the stuff you dream of, in the city."

"City!" The host's growling voice was almost spitting out the word. "What can you expect from the English? - Ha?"

"He meant Dublin," said Rahewa, and anyone listening might have thought she felt a bit intimidated from this giant and his peculiar manners.

The host's face changed to even deeper disgust. Examining his guests again, he said, "You ain't Irish, you." Then he filled the glasses a second time, as carefully as before, and left without another word.

Cho's eyes had followed him. Turning toward Clemens, she asked, "Is he upset?"

"Not at all, otherwise we hadn't got our refill - he doesn't offer that angel's piss to everyone. No, it's just the rural courtesy. Didn't you see how much he approved the sight, looking at you?"

"I thought it was because I'm not Irish for sure," replied Cho, earning the expected laughter.

Clemens said, "Alright, now that we're sufficiently awake, let's talk about some sales campaign, and I'll be the one who's going to prompt you ..."

He paused, not quite voluntarily, because Rahewa was leaning toward Cho, murmuring, although audibly for everyone, "You must know, for him, as a genuine Bavarian, such heavy food is quite common, and he became a potions wizard just because the booze they brew down there doesn't go well with him."

"... unless it's about selling that unthankful brat, because nobody's going to offer for her," finished Clemens his sentence.

"No, we won't," said Cho. "It's about the protector spheres." With some effort, she tried to concentrate - what a picture, the three top managers of GTS hanging in their chairs, hard as they were, and this solemn young man the only one ...

"Who needs them?" asked said young man.

"Yeah," nodded Ray, "that's what we're trying to figure out."

"But you're selling already, ain't you?"

"Yes, we do," said Cho. "Only problem, we want to sell more." Seeing a slight disappointment in Clemens' face, she steadied herself. "More precisely, we want to figure out

where's our market, and what it needs to adapt to this market's demands. Simple advertisement won't do."

Registering Cho's business-like voice, Rahewa and Ray had gathered themselves, now were sitting attentively.

Clemens asked, "Who's your current clientele?"

"People with high security demands," answered Ray. "Companies with laboratories and other research faculties that need protection, then the government ..."

"Government?" Clemens grinned wonderingly. "Why? To prevent these pen-pushers from being caught asleep?"

Cho said, "That might be a market. So far, it's been for prisons."

"Oh." Clemens looked a bit uneasy.

Cho smiled. "Is it pity you feel? Or is it the thought of yourself in such a place, 'n case they find out what we've done the last years? ... By the way, that reminds me, two years from now we might expect a higher demand from schools worldwide ..."

Now it was Rahewa's turn to look somewhat alarmed, hearing Cho talk about the Great Plot in such public place, while Clemens, for whom this was daily business, seemed to be at ease.

"... in the meantime, we think about military applications. Army, Navy, Air Force - they showed some interest, but the budgets are limited, despite what you hear, and what's more - we're competing against an established arms lobby, and these people do what they can to tell the generals that fifty armed guards are more reliable, and that electronic survey equipment can be deactivated too easily."

"What a crap," snarled Ray, "electronic survey equipment - but generals are appointed according to the speed by which they can switch off their own biological survey equipment ..."

"Otherwise known as brain, right." Cho's smile toward Ray seemed as much apologetic, for cutting him short, as hinting unmistakably that the GTS meeting was in full swing. "Could be a matter of price, and that's certainly true if we ever address the home market. Same with the installation procedure - it had to be simplified before going that way."

"How's it done so far?" asked Clemens.

He was answered by Ray, who explained that the protector spheres would be installed by technicians from GTE. According to the engineer, it was pretty simple in a way, very much like a connection to cable TV or something like that, only so far the spheres had been offered as high-priced high quality items - making a fuzz about proper installation represented an important part of the show as well as part of their income.

Clemens asked, "Is it always done that way?"

"Yes," said Ray.

"No," said Rahewa.

"Huh?" Ray turned to her. "What are you talking about? That's the only way - we ship them always with the installation crew."

"Right," said Rahewa, "and they arrive, install it, show them how to switch it on and off, and if they're polite enough, they get a tip. That's the standard. And they deliver a report, which is also standard - except nobody reads them."

Cho examined the face of her youngest CEO. "You did."

"Yes, I did." Rahewa's expression showed little of the diligent bookworm's pride, more a kind of wondering. "It was part of my homework for this meeting, to get a feeling what's going on at the customer front. And there was a report in which the fields for installation and test weren't checked off, while the customer's signature was there alright." She looked at the others. "You know, as a single report, you'd think they just forgot, only when browsing through all of them, you get an eye for everything out of the ordinary - well, and there wasn't any other with the same glitch."

"And?"

"It was a delivery of four spheres, customer in London, two technicians. So I spoke with them, and just by chance, I didn't call them but went down to see them myself. Well, when I asked, the one said it must be a mistake - only they exchanged a glance, and what I felt was something else ..."

Her audience had grown very attentive, most of all Cho. Rahewa's *haragei* wasn't up to Harry's level, though way above normal for sure.

"... so I said, alright boys, and now once more please for the slow of mind, but short of memory, if they'd get my drift, and they did ... As it turns out, they arrived there, were expected, only when they wanted to start the installation, someone told them it wasn't decided yet where exactly to install them, but it'd be okay, not their mistake, and in order not to make the customer look like a fool, they might just forget it ... And to help the forgetting, they were tipped quite generously."

"How much?" It was Ray who asked, looking furious.

Rahewa wrinkled her nose. "They said hundred, but it was a lie - must have been more, only I didn't press them."

"Why not? Who are they?" Ray was almost fuming.

"Save it, Ray." Rahewa smiled at him, but her voice was that of the chief executive officer to the chief engineer. "What I did instead, I asked them, alright boys, you've been there, now tell me what you make of it - and one of them said, for all he knows, the spheres had never been planned for this office. Which means - someone's bought four spheres while making sure not to appear in our records."

Cho asked, "Who's the customer?"

"A company by the name of *Three Corners Ltd.*" Rahewa looked expectantly at Cho. "Got it?"

Three corners ... "You mean, an address for some deal around three corners?"

Rahewa nodded slowly. "I tried to reach them. No answer. There's no such company in the phone book ... I had no time yet to let someone check the address, but I'm sure, the office is either empty or rented by someone else."

"But why?" asked Ray. "Why would someone worry about whether or not he's listed in some files of GTS?"

"That's simple," said Cho. "They don't want to appear anywhere. Our customer's either very illegal or very legal but secret, which for me is pretty much the same ... At least, the purpose is most likely the same as always - to protect some headquarter, or office, from intruders."

Clemens said, "There's still another possibility."

"Which?" Cho couldn't think of any.

"Didn't you say, the same as always? ... Well, a minute ago I heard you're selling to prisons - so what if someone has bought them for this same reason? Someone who's running a very private prison?"

11 - Monday

Even from the entrance to the precinct's squad room, Lieutenant Seeger could see him. The wizard ... Sitting in the lieutenant's office, looking almost like the first time they'd met, except for the bulge at his shoulder.

Had to be this snake, what's her name, Nagano? ... No, Nagini, the other was something in Japan, as if he'd think all year long about Japan, only in this context you could track it down quite easily.

Checking his own office from that distance was none of Seeger's common habits, normally he'd have looked around to register the scene at the beginning of another week in which they'd try to come any further in their old cases, while each new day would offer some new ones. But he had expected him, that early in the morning - small wonder, with eight hours time advantage.

Feeling his guest's calm stare resting on him, Seeger crossed the distance, entered the small room, little more space than a cubicle but with its own glass walls. And his guest had found the decency not to occupy the only comfortable chair - the one behind the desk.

Seeger closed the door. "Morning, Harry. How was Japan?"

"Hi, Carl ... All I saw was a large hall with music instruments, and some of them were to our taste. Did anything happen since Paul called you?"

"You mean, could I hold my temper and stay off these people while you weren't around?" Seeger sat down. "Yes, I could - that means no, nothing happened."

The eyes across his desk sent him an ironic smile. "My concern was something else - a new case, for instance."

"Jesus, no - that'd be just what we need, won't it?" Seeger did his Monday-morning equivalent of a smile. "You're awake for a while already, that's why you're politer than me, I wouldn't know any other reason ... Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks."

Harry's grin gave this washed-out joke more credit than it deserved, but then maybe he hadn't heard it before, which only confirmed what Seeger knew all too well - Harry was no cop, and a minute from now, they'd discuss a visit at some people that could easily be the kidnappers. And in this case, he, Seeger, had brought a civilian into a situation of high personal risk.

He went to the coffee machine, came back with the styrofoam in his hand, not feeling any wiser. Sitting down again, he said, "You think one of the two are the ones we're looking for, right?"

"Yes. And you think the same."

"Hmm ..." The lieutenant sipped from the hot, bitter brew, made a face. "You don't want me answering that, Harry, because if you were right, I had to call the SWAT, twelve at the minimum, and the last thing I'd dream of would be going inside with you, a civilian."

Harry examined him silently. Then he said, "What exactly's your worry, Carl - my safety, your safety, or the official rules?"

"To be as precise as I can - " Seeger snorted, "all of that, plus the thought they could escape because I messed up."

"If I was a cop - would you make the visit with me, or would you call the SWAT?"

Harry was up to some argumentation he wouldn't like, Seeger felt sure about that, only the question had been asked in a way he could answer only with the truth. "You call the SWAT if you know for sure there's someone armed and dangerous - otherwise, you'd make a fool of yourself. Two detectives, used to work together, that's more than it sounds."

"Take your gun, Carl."

"Huh?"

Harry's face was expressionless when he said, "You got me right - take your gun ..."

Seeger drew it, held it up - a short-barrelled Smith & Wesson .38, nothing to score on the range, yet quick and handy.

"... and now take out the cartridges, so you can pull the trigger."

Pretty much what Seeger had thought - Harry was going to show him how tough he was. Well, there was no lesson like a lesson ... The lieutenant emptied all six chambers, dropped the cartridges on the desk.

"Now you could pull the trigger, right? ... Okay, Carl - arrest me."

"Not from behind the desk." Seeger came up, went to the door, walked outside, for an instant concerned someone might watch them, then the imaginary scene had caught him. He turned, stood in the doorway, his right hand flying to the holster, coming out with the thirty-eight, left hand catching his right wrist, combat stance. "Freeze, buddy."

Still before Harry had time to react, Seeger's right thumb came forward, about to cock the gun ...

Except it never reached its destination, because something was pulling the Smith & Wesson out of his hand, like a painful blow, his right hand numb for a moment, while his eyes followed the weapon flying through the air, landing in Harry's hands which had come up, being already together as if waiting for the same twin-handed shooting position ... Only that Harry wasn't bothering to turn the weapon around, held it just between his palms - and suddenly a fine red beam was in the air, from Harry's hands into Seeger's face, looked like the beam from a laser gun, only it felt like tickling.

The beam faded. Harry said, "This spell could have been anything - from stunning, over disabling your willpower, to the killing curse." He held up the .38. "Here's your gun."

Not for the first time, Lieutenant Seeger became aware that the reassuring impact of such a lesson would come later, while right at the moment, at his current level of adrenaline, it simply hurt. A burning in his stomach, a sour taste in his mouth, he stepped forward. "Very instructive, only that's been the half distance, while in direct ..."

His left hand, seizing for the gun, felt the desired object suddenly closing in, hitting his fingers and pushing the entire arm upward to his shoulder, while his right hand, flat, spadelike aimed at Harry's solarplexus, if only for a sufferable demo, met something very hard, coming off its path and striking empty air, and the body in front of him, an instant before still sitting calmly on the chair, pressed against his own.

A gentle touch at his own solarplexus, a slight but nevertheless unpleasant pressure at his crotch, and the mouth before his eyes said, "... while in direct contact, protecting the privates is an essential part of any strategy."

Next moment, Harry was a step away, the gun still in his hand. Without turning, he put it onto the desk.

Seeger went around the desk, sat down, opened the lowest drawer, didn't find what his hand was searching for, finally took his eyes off his opponent to look into the drawer. "Dammit - my desk bottle's gone."

He banged the drawer shut, looked up again. "Wasn't the best idea anyway, that early in the morning, only that I'm still a bit in the high gear." He seized for his coffee. "So what ... Cheers, Harry."

"If you promise not to kick and bite, I have something better for you."

"Dope? No thanks."

A grin split Harry's face. "I wouldn't even know how it looks. Remember how I cured that lawn mower boy?"

Still feeling tense, Seeger watched as Harry dropped his snake, came around. Then he felt two hands lightly touching his throat, and then something rushed through his mind - something he'd describe later as "like a full-body injection of peppermint on ice."

The burning in his stomach was gone. His heartbeat was down to normal, his breathing came light. He stared at the wizard who had found his way back to the chair at the other side, and to his snake.

He said, "That's been the best trick you've shown me, and there were quite some, a minute ago ... Thanks, partner."

* * *

Harry sat listening, while Carl outlined their strategy and which roles each of them would play when visiting the two firms, a few minutes from now. Since the small encounter a little

while ago, the atmosphere had improved rapidly, particularly so after Harry had confessed that his experience in closed room combat was limited.

Carl would be the front man, doing all the talking, with Harry as some figure in the background, just another guy, as unimportant and unremarkable as someone could be with a snake around his chest.

"Isn't there any way to hide her?" Carl had asked, after agreeing hesitantly that Nagini was *she* rather than *it*.

"I could put her in a bag," Harry had replied, "only her head would be outside anyway - I must be able to understand her, after all, and that wouldn't look any better ... And besides, Carl - Nagini's more than a wizard detector, she can fight too."

The snake knew what was expected from her. She would sense around and inform her old master by herself, not waiting to be asked.

So Harry would be standing there, not doing anything - until Nagini would tell him there was magic. Seeger might register the hissing, or maybe not because he was distracted, at any rate, Harry would say something, maybe, "Don't forget the cross-check, Carl."

Which meant - there were some wizards, among other people. Then Carl would ask him what he meant, and Harry would, somehow, tell him which figures to ask a bit more.

From that point on, they'd play it by ear, however most likely Harry would then be the one to ask some questions, and if he'd say, "Well, that leaves some details open," Carl would know that it was time for heavier measures.

There was still another possibility - everyone there might be a wizard, or a witch, and Harry, or Nagini, or both of them saw reason to be very careful. Then Harry would say, "Carl - time's running."

It was the signal to leave - and to come back with the SWAT.

Now Carl looked at him, said, "If something goes wrong, Harry, if they come on strong, with guns and so, you'd do me the greatest favour by just pushing off, alerting the precinct."

Harry's answer were two raised eyebrows.

"If one of us manages to get out, the other's pretty safe - then they know that minutes later, the troops will come swarming."

Could even be true, at least Nagini kept silent, only that these people had given examples before how quick they were in killing, and besides, Harry found little taste in this role. He thought back of other times when he, as part of some team, had prepared for ... yes, of course! "We need an anchorman, Carl."

The lieutenant understood him instantly. "Even so, you have to find the time to make the call - if you fetch your phony in front of an aimed gun, you're dead."

Harry grinned. "So I won't fetch it then - I'm going to fetch it now. Find your anchorman, Carl - I'm back in five minutes."

He jumped to *Groucho Communications*, which wasn't far apart, said hello to the chief engineer, a Mr. Wigan, got what he wanted, said thanks and goodbye, jumped back into the precinct's large room - Carl's office was really a bit small to come out there.

Especially now - with a young woman sitting in the chair Harry had left a moment ago. Not only was she black, she owned about the darkest skin Harry had ever seen, and she owned lots of it. More exactly, she was *fat*.

Carl said, "Harry, that's Sheila ... Sheila, that's Harry Potter, my partner in this business."

Harry shook hands, registering a firm handshake and a calm mind.

Carl grinned. "Sheila found out early in her life that she has to think fast because she cannot run fast ... Well, and she has honed that a bit, and today, she's the best desk sergeant I know."

The young woman just nodded, said to Harry, "It's mandatory because, you know, I fail the physical any way you can think of, and two more, so the lieutenant has to pull some strings, once a year."

Carl glanced at the devices in Harry's hand. "What have you got there?"

Harry held them up, offered one to Sheila. "Know what this is?"

The fat desk sergeant examined the piece for a second. "A phony, so much's ... Has two more buttons." Her face came up. "What for?"

"Baby watch, and babysitter link." Harry didn't need to explain much because Sheila grasped the idea instantly - one button activated a connection between the two phonies that was muted at one end, and the other button activated a normal connection to the sibling phony, however using an LED signal and a vibrating rather than noise.

"Before entering the building," said Harry, "I'll call you, and before entering their office, I'll tell you about that and then switch mine to mute. You'll hear what the phony hears - till we're out again."

The woman's eyes were beaming. "Cool, man. And how's the signal inside a large building, with steel-armed concrete?"

"Unlimited," replied Harry. "One of the differences to a normal cellular phone."

"Well, then." Sheila turned to the lieutenant. "Put the baby to sleep, I'll guard the crib."

Carl looked at Harry. "I showed her the addresses on the map, said we'd visit the Gilbert people first. Okay?"

The mask and costumes company first - Harry didn't like the idea too much, would have preferred going right to *Pyromaniacs*, because these were the people he suspected most, and Carl thought the same, so why not ...

"They're closest from here, on the way to Pyromaniacs - " Seeger had registered Harry's hesitation, added, "and if we're right with our assumption, at least we have a rehearsal before."

The woman had followed this little conflict of opinions. Her head cranking toward Harry, she said to the lieutenant, "He's a real hotspot, huh? Just what you like having in your back."

A diabolically grinning Carl said, "Never mind, Harry - as a desk sergeant, Sheila sees them come and go."

Said sergeant looked at Harry. "What he means is, I see them go out, and sometimes I see them coming back."

Harry knew what she was trying to tell him, still didn't feel like taking the lesson unrewarded. "You forget something," he said to her, "and this is - sometimes you see me, and sometimes ..."

He jumped - just to the spot in Sheila's back, from there finishing his sentence, "... you don't."

She was quick on her heels, considering all that fat, wheeled around to focus him again. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

Harry followed a chuckling lieutenant, feeling Sheila's stare in his back.

In the car, they sobered up quickly, kept almost silent during the fifteen minutes drive to the Gilbert estate. This company's residence looked like a derelict factory building - smudgy brick walls, rusty window frames, a door large enough for a truck, presenting a rectangle of light orange on the remnants of the old paint in industry grey. However, none of the many windows showed a broken pane, and a large sign at the wall, to the left of the large door, told them they had reached *Gilbert Masks & Costumes*.

Carl stopped the car just in front of the truck entry, killed the engine and said, "This place looks more promising than anything we've seen so far - sufficiently far away from the next peeping eyes, and room enough for everything ... Allright, let's go."

Harry followed him through a man-sized door beneath the large one.

They stood in a spacious factory hall. A delivery car with the company emblem looked almost forlorn on the wide floor. A gallery across, some metal doors leading to rooms behind, all of them closed. Heavy iron bars under the huge ceiling reminded them of some industrial past. And nowhere a living soul in sight.

"I hate these buildings," muttered the lieutenant. "A maze of rooms and corridors, only the residents know where to go - you can hide an army without ever ..."

Nagini hissed something.

Harry turned to Carl. "Someone's somewhere - and this someone's a wizard."

"Then ..."

Nagini hissed again.

Harry answered Carl's unspoken question. "She can sense two wizards."

"Where?"

"Somewhere upstairs - she's no compass, you know."

"Pity." Carl drew his gun. "You follow when you see me wave, Harry - and keep your eyes open, and whatever you've got else."

Carl moved forward, his gun pointing upward. He had made three steps toward the car when an alarm bell started ringing. An instant later, the hall was flooded in the harsh light of neon tubes.

Harry watched as the lieutenant froze for moment, turned on his heels, checking around, then quickly reached the car. Apparently, Carl had stepped into the field of a movement sensor.

Could have been a natural precaution, only the scene looked just too weird for some people with make up and fancy dresses. Harry's wand was already in his hand, almost the same position as Carl's gun, while he stood motionlessly, his eyes not focussing anything in particular, his *haragei* sensing around in wide-angle mode.

And here it came ... In the deafening noise of the alarm bell, other sounds were lost - for example that of a door opening on the gallery across and above, only Harry had expected it already before the metal door swung open.

A man appeared, holding something with both hands - a short rifle, no, a pump action gun. The man's eyes scanned the floor downstairs, his attention toward the area that had to be the field of the movement sensor.

Harry pointed his wand. "*Expelliarmus!*"

The gun was flying through the air, away from a stunned-looking man. His eyes at the weapon closing in on him, Harry called, "Carl - on the gallery, left side!"

About to catch the pump action gun, Harry realized - his phony wasn't switched on! A precious moment passed until he had caught the gun, had laid it down, afraid it would fire when dropped, had decided to do first things first - just when he looked up again, his wand aiming toward the spot on the gallery, the metal door banged shut.

Carl stood in the cover of the delivery truck, checking around, and the way he did it told Harry that the lieutenant had registered him catching the gun while apparently not his warning shout.

This damned alarm bell! Its nerve-racking noise was just good to prevent everyone from clear thinking. Harry rushed over to the car, shouted, "We have to stop that bell."

"Where did the gun come from?"

"A man, up on the gallery - wait, he's gone, we're alone again, so let's get rid of this alarm first."

"You can't ..." Carl stopped himself, looked up and around, apparently trying to locate the source of this hellish sound, something Harry had attempted moments before, with no success.

"There!" Carl pointed. "See the blue sparks? That thing must date back to the Civil War ..." He rose his gun, aiming at the spot. "Don't blame me if I'm not scoring a hit with the ..."

"Wait - I've got something better."

"That gun? ... Forget it, not at this distance, and I'm not going to ..."

"No, not the gun." Harry raised his wand, aimed carefully, concentrating more on the planned spell - that would be it, after this mess, him blowing half of the building because his nitro ball was sized too big.

A tiny ball shot up, probably not bigger than one of the bullets Carl had planned. It hit the wall about a foot left from the spark-emitting torture instrument, exploded with an impressive bang, sending a small cloud of debris around.

A scratching noise, a tiny flash, looking familiar for everyone used to short circuits in electrical devices - the noise had stopped.

Wonderfully deep silence ... Unfortunately, the sudden darkness was equally deep.

Carl's whisper seemed unnaturally loud. "Just great ... What was that?"

"Nitroglycerine."

"Nitro ..." There was disbelief in the lieutenant's voice. "Harry, please, forget what I said about the Civil War, this is the twenty-first century, so do me a favour and - no, gimme that phony, I'm going to send for the cavalry myself."

The embarrassing moment had come. "Erm - I forgot to switch it on before coming in."

It wasn't really dark, had looked like that only in the first moments after the neon tubes going out. Now that his eyes had adapted to the dim light, Harry could see Carl's face, in which a laughter was fighting to erupt. "I'm sorry," he said. "I remembered just when that gun was coming through the air, and both things together - that's why I wasn't fast enough to stun that guy."

A chuckle. "Save it, Harry, was my own mistake too, why didn't I ask you? Anyway - now let's call Sheila to send a few patrols, this here's no task for a detective and a wizard, not in this rat trap of a building."

Carl was probably right, only that, in the short encounter with the man on the gallery, Harry had sensed something which gave him an idea. He said, "Carl, whatever we've found here, I don't think we've found our kidnappers. This man, the way he felt ... I'd like to try something first, before calling for support."

The lieutenant eyed him suspiciously. "But no more nitroglycerine?"

"No." Harry had to suppress a nervous giggle.

"Gimme that phony."

Harry would have preferred to make his attempt without the desk sergeant listening, only Carl was right, and better late than too late. He seized for the phony, held it up. "Here - that button."

Carl took it, pressed the button. "Sheila? ... Listen, we're inside a factory building ... Yes, but we forgot outside ... Yeah, but now shut up and listen. There was a figure upstairs, had a gun but lost it, and ... Yes, lost it, Harry took care of that, and Harry has another idea what to try first. If this works, fine, otherwise we'll need the SWAT to scan this building. Over and stand-by."

The detective looked at Harry. "What now?"

"I'm going to play a loudspeaker - a very loud loudspeaker, actually, so don't jump when you hear me calling. But first, I'll go upstairs to open that door, so they can hear us right in their ears."

"Which one?"

Harry showed Carl the door through which the man had appeared and escaped again.

"Loudspeaker, huh?" Carl grinned. "I think I know what's on your mind - but it'll be me opening the door. You watch and be ready."

Harry felt no objections. He retreated to his previous spot, from where he had a better view on the entry gallery. Then he watched as the lieutenant went upstairs, moving slowly between doors while passing them with quick movements. Reaching the door, Carl grabbed the handle, turned it, pulled the door open while simultaneously making a step into the doorframe, his gun aiming inside.

After a moment, the lieutenant rose, moved to the side, his body holding the metal door from swinging shut again. He signaled toward Harry to start.

Harry pointed his wand toward his own throat to send the *Sonorus* charm - however in a degree never used before. He inhaled deeply.

"THIS IS THE POLICE OF LOS ANGELES ..."

His head was resonating - a nasty feeling, which saved him from laughing at the sight of Carl who had twisted at the first words. Although, a good laugh might scare them even more ... Maybe after his speech.

"... THIS BUILDING IS SURROUNDED ..."

Harry had to speak slowly, otherwise, hall and echo would garble each other to an unintelligible noise.

"... YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE TO COME OUT ... AFTERWARDS, WE WILL COME IN ... WITH EXPLOSIVES FIRST, AND ARMED PEOPLE THEN."

Something else? ... Oh yes, something better than laughing. "FIVE SECONDS ... TEN SECONDS ... FIFTEEN SECONDS ..."

Harry was at forty-five when a door moved on the gallery - slowly, timidly. After a second, in which the booming in his ears was fading, he could hear a young voice calling, "Don't shoot ... We're coming out."

The door opened wider, a young man appeared, hands over his head, tightly followed by another one.

They slowly came down the stairs, frightfully looking around, in desperate search for the crowd of blue-uniformed troops they were supposed to expect, to be awaited by them.

By the time they had reached the floor, Harry knew from Nagini that these were the two wizards - boys barely above twenty, if ever, white coats with spots in various colours, scared shitless by a *Sonorus* charm.

Well, to be honest, of the extreme kind.

While Harry settled his voice back to normal, Carl made the two young men turn, lean toward the wand with arms outstretched, to check them for weapons. Of course, they hadn't any.

After checking around once more, not feeling any other presence, Harry reached the group in time to hear one of them say, "... just one besides us, Billy - he's the one that came out with the gun, he's also the one who made the deal, I think he tried to escape from the backside, maybe your people ..."

"Which deal?" interrupted Carl.

"But ..." The young man looked astonished. "The dope - isn't that the reason why you're here?"

"Oh, shit!" Carl pulled the phony out to talk with Sheila.

The other young wizard, apparently determined to contribute his own share to the confessions before everything was spilled out, said, "No, no shit - it's cocaine ... Two pound bags, finest Columbian."

* * *

Magique Générale was running toward the end of this double course like a Mississippi steamer toward its destination port - slowly, methodically, with lots of noise. However, the people aboard caused only the smaller part of that noise, and the captain felt tempted to hide in his cabin, far away from the clumsy efforts of his crew.

Only he hadn't any, this captain, commonly known as Monsieur Thionnay.

His crew, the first-year students of Beauxbatons, were training levitation charms. Mostly with limited success, and the crashing of items coming down, no longer supported by unexperienced magic, was the major source of the noise.

By the objective eye, the scene could easily have been confused with a combined attempt to destroy the new furniture as fast as possible, under the pretense to do reasonable work. However, most of the items were books and other things the hard-lacquered desk surfaces could stand.

One table, not far from the exit, seemed as if occupied by passengers rather than crew members. The four students, two girls and two boys, were sitting relaxed, exchanging remarks in low murmur, and every now and then one of them made a spheric something rise up in the air, and come down again - sometimes softly like a feather, sometimes with a bump.

And, somehow, when the sphere was in the air, it used to change its colour.

Sandra had conjured it up - a simple matter that felt like modelling clay, so the sphere had some weight, wouldn't hurt the table, would not roll away either when coming down faster than planned. She was also the one who made it change colour.

At the moment, Frédéric was trying to master the colouring spell, while Héloïse and Benoît still were working at the reliability of their levitations.

When it was Sandra's turn, she used the wand like all the other students, to the hidden pleasure of Frédéric, whose face looked as if watching a joke no one else could follow.

Maybe it was this expression, however could also have been the eye-insulting magenta with which the sphere came down - at any rate, suddenly Thionnay stood at their table. He looked from one to the other, pointed at the sphere. "What's this?"

By intuitive agreement, it was Frédéric's job to speak for their table, as long as none of them were asked specifically. Using a Pouilly as the spokesperson served as a simple precaution against unnecessary trouble. This time, however, the agreement backfired because Frédéric seemed to have trouble not bursting out laughing. "A sphe-here," he managed with some effort, then added, "It's some clay."

A teacher's most natural next question would have been, *Where did you get it from*, and Frédéric was prepared to answer, *We've found it outside*.

But Thionnay had developed his own style of management with this table. He said, "You'll have to use something clean, not this dirtball out of the gutter." His hand moved forward to grab it - confiscation would be the proper term.

Would have been ... Only, the instant Thionnay's fingers - apparently quite unafraid to seize for this particular dirt - reached the sphere, the reddish-blue clod went flat, spreading over the tabletop in an almost circular puddle, suddenly shining like a fluid.

Into the moment of stunned silence, Sandra said, "It's touch-sensitive."

"Is it, huh?"

For an instant, Thionnay seemed to ponder the idea of just leaving it like that and donate his attention to teams with more conventional problems. In fact, this might have been the best solution.

However, what the teacher actually did was touching the border of the puddle with the tip of his wand, and to murmur something.

The shining surface of the puddle seemed to tremble. Then, like sucked up from a pipette, the fluid started streaming into the wand tip.

For just a second, because at once the rest of the puddle moved up like a flying pancake, flapped itself around Thionnay's wand - and froze, the shiny surface changing to a dull roughness.

Thionnay stared at his wand, which suddenly was much heavier than before, and uglier too.

Then, without another word, he turned, walked toward his own desk, all the time holding his pancaked wand in front of him as if carrying a dead rat. Reaching the table, he put it down, not making any attempt to restore the cleanliness of this normally spotless piece of cherry wood.

Instead, the teacher walked down another row of tables, although not with his full concentration toward the teams he passed. At some point, he turned - and froze for a short instant.

Because his wand was clean again. While Thionnay's back had been toward his table, the pancake had melted once more, forming a puddle first and a sphere then - a sphere which floated back to the table where it had been moments before.

To be honest - it was more a zooming rather than floating, the sphere seemed quite in a hurry.

Benoît stared at the lump, now in an unremarkable light brown, by some accident almost the same colour as the tabletop, quite difficult to detect from a few steps away. Benoît's eyes came up, wandering from one face to the next at this table. He stopped at Sandra's face. "Okay, I'll admit, some people need a bit longer than others, but what just happened was impossible to miss even for myself ... What are you, that you can do things like that?"

According to the rule, Sandra's playing with a detestful teacher had been a small sin, because God punished only small sins instantly. Either she would answer the question to some satisfying degree, or the least that would happen was a severe break in the team's structure, delicate as it still appeared.

Sandra looked in the faces around the table, found them fully in sync with what she could feel in her teammates. Benoît's was a big wondering question mark, with wide eyes and open mouth. Frédéric's was a mix of concern and expectancy, and Héloïse - well, Héloïse was the flesh and blood version of all these self-righteous remarks we love so well.

Like, "Don't blame anyone but yourself."

Like, "Didn't I tell you? Yes I did."

Like, "Don't come to me to help you out of this mess."

Only that was exactly what Sandra did, asking, "Hély, could you invite them two to your house, right after class?"

For a second, her friend looked baffled. Then, not for the first time, she gave proof that a Veela's mind could work awfully quickly - as long as the issue was more human and less scientific. Héloïse beamed, "Yes, Mademoiselle Chang, with pleasure," turned to the two boys and murmured graciously, "That's fine with you?"

Benoît glanced at Sandra. "Not here, you mean? ... Yeah, sure, of course not."

Frédéric seemed more pleased than the other three together, and Sandra could understand why. Her father had told her how it was for him, hiding a secret from his friends, and how awful a job he'd done again and again. She smiled, feeling relief herself - and a kind of expectancy toward something this Pouilly offspring hadn't the slightest idea about.

Because Frédéric was in for an involuntary test of the careful kind. In spite of what the High Priestess had said, or maybe just from what she'd said, Sandra was looking forward to see some people's reaction toward Frédéric.

That of Fleur, for example. And most of all, that of her brother Gabriel.

They would meet, no question about that. Harry in the States, Cho in her office, Ireen somewhere on tour - the Weasley residence in the Goblin quarter was Sandra's and her brother's home for the late afternoon hours, recently.

And this done, she would find a moment with Fleur, to ask her how to handle the delicate issue of Pouilly vs. Potter parents, something Sandra would gladly bring to a satisfying end.

At this moment, the sphere rose from the table, although none of the four students around had his wand up. Having gained some height, the sphere shot toward the teacher's desk - where Thionnay stood with a pointing wand and an expressionless face.

He examined the thing without touching it, with the sphere floating in the air. Then, just when his head came up again, the motionless floating changed to a shooting forward, aiming straight into Sandra's face.

Only inches away from her nose and forehead, the sphere disappeared.

A few students had watched the teacher's doing, now looked at him admiringly.

Sandra felt no intention to clarify the misunderstanding, to tell them where Thionnay's spell had ended and her own had kicked in. After a short glance at the teacher, registering his thoughtful face and his obvious lack of interest to press the issue further, Sandra turned back to her teammates, satisfied to see that neither of them shared the other students' belief.

For the few minutes left, they used a book. One of them had to levitate it, opened somewhere in the middle, and another one should turn a page - of course also with levitation.

When the bell signaled the end of this double *Magique Générale*, Frédéric had managed to turn a chunk of about ten pages. Benoît had been able to make some pages twist, and Héloïse had felt challenged enough by holding the book in the air.

Outside, while the boys went upstairs to drop their books, Héloïse said, "So your fooling around ends this bothering situation, because I had thought about an invitation already before, only that would have raised a problem ... What are you going to tell them?"

"Only about the family. Nothing about - you know."

Héloïse nodded. "That's what I thought - 'arry's more than enough as explanation, for sure."

Once more, Sandra could register how her friend viewed her father, and his daughter too, as a kind of twin entity. As a human, Harry was Héloïse's uncle, Sandra's father, period. As a wizard with special abilities, however, he seemed to be an integral part of Héloïse's own family, or even property, to be mentioned or used with the greatest casualness. And the same approach worked toward Sandra - Héloïse would start a row toward the girl any time, should it seem necessary, while Sandra the witch was never challenged, or mocked.

Now Héloïse said, "I wonder what Frédéric will say, hearing the news."

"Not much," replied Sandra, "because for him, these are no news."

"You told him already??" Héloïse looked with disbelief.

Sandra shook her head. "He figured out by himself. And because it felt so embarrassing for him, he told me."

A grin appeared in Héloïse's face. "And now he isn't embarrassed any longer, huh?"

The arrival of the two boys saved Sandra from finding a reply, which no doubt would have presented three more hooks for the rhetorical claws of her half-quarter Veela friend. While the four of them were walking toward the exit, toward the point from which they could apparate, Benoît asked, "Say - er, how long will we ... I mean ..."

Héloïse interrupted him. "We'll get something to eat - wasn't that your question?"

"Yes, exactly." Benoît grinned apologetically.

"Maman's not going to let anyone starve in our house," explained Héloïse with determination, "and we can eat when we're hungry - which, for me, is right now."

Like for the other three, as could be read in their faces which suddenly showed a pleased greeding.

Frédéric asked, "How do we travel?"

"Just watch," replied Héloïse, then turned to her friend and travelling carrier. "Let's go."

Too late, Sandra realized that her planning had left some holes. Jumping right into the house and summoning the two boys would place them in an environment she had intended to

prepare, except she didn't know how. But any further hesitation would look awfully stupid, especially after Héloïse had hinted so clearly that she expected her to show off as much as ...

She jumped into the street, summoned Héloïse first and, not giving any time for a complaint, Benoît then and Frédéric last.

But there came no complaint. Héloïse was all pointing and explaining, once the boys had recovered from the surprise - at the house, the garden, then Héloïse made a show of walking over to the Goblin guards, saying hello to them and introducing the boys.

Walking finally toward the entrance, Benoît said, "They called you *little princess* - what does it mean?"

"That's my title among the Goblins." Héloïse's voice sounded almost dismissive - after all, true superiority was showing by itself, wasn't it?

A seemingly less impressed Frédéric asked Sandra, "And how do they call you?"

"By my name," replied Sandra, equally casual although for different reasons - first because Benoît didn't know her real name yet, still more because this name had become a title by itself for the Goblins, and this was something outside the scope of explanations Sandra had planned.

Even so, Frédéric nodded as if confirming something for himself.

What did he know about the Goblins? Sandra found no time to ponder the question any longer since Héloïse was storming ahead, up the stairs, the boys following, Sandra still on their way when she heard her friend chirping, "Maman? ... Hello-oh, we've got some gue-ests."

Reaching the kitchen, Sandra came just in time to hear Héloïse making the honneurs. "... is Benoît, and this is Frédéric, our teammates in Magique - and this is my mother, and this here's Michel, my brother, and this one's Gabriel, Sandra's brother."

For the next moments, Sandra was communicating feverishly with Gabriel, although not using words, then the boys had found a seat, she herself too, and a pleased-looking Fleur was busy with dishes and cups and more food.

This done, Fleur went out, came back with a chair for herself, causing some shuffling and moving until she could join the round. Examining the boys again, she asked what probably was the most natural question for a Veela of any grade. "So then, who belongs to whom?"

Maybe it had to do with mouths full and chewing - at any rate, for a short but lasting moment, there was no answer. Then Michel looked at Benoît and said, "You're more interested in Hély." Turning toward Frédéric, he added, "And you more in Sandy, so it fits."

A slightly blushed Benoît stared at a male half-quarter Veela. "Am I, huh? ... And what if I say I'm here because of Sandra?"

Michel shrugged. "Then nothing, but it's true this way or the other."

Benoît looked baffled. "Yeah, yes, okay, but it wasn't a lie - Sandra did something in class, and I asked her, and she said, she would tell us here, and that's why we're here."

Fleur smiled at him. "First things first, Benoît, hm? You're a very determined young man, as it seems."

Said young man twisted a bit. "I'm sorry, Madame, I didn't want to be impolite - er, yes, he's right - " a quick glance toward Michel, "but you know, Sandra can spell rings around our teacher, and for Héloïse it seems quite normal, but for me it isn't."

Gabriel asked, "What did she do?"

Benoît eyed him with something like expectant suspicion. "She made us a sphere for levitation, played with it, changing its colour - and when the teacher came to take it away, she made it melt and then ..." He stopped, registering a grin spreading in Gabriel's face. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Something like that?" Gabriel leaned back. Next instant, a piece of baguette rose from the basket. For a second, it floated over the table. Then it zoomed to the butter tray, touched down to scrap across the golden-yellow surface, came up again with its prey, and shot toward Gabriel, holding just in front of his face.

Gabriel opened his mouth, and the buttered piece went inside.

Benoît had watched, apparently had used the time for some thinking. He turned to Sandra. "It goes with the family, huh?"

"Right ... My true name's Sandra Catherine Potter. Chang - that's our mother's name, our father is Harry Potter."

"I've heard about him, but not much." Benoît turned back to Gabriel. "Did you get all that from him? Then how did your father learn these tricks?"

"You know that he fought Voldemort?" When Benoît nodded, Gabriel continued, "Each time they fought, our father won some more magic. And somehow, some of this power was given to us, Sandy and me ... Well, if you don't need a wand, you can do things even as a baby, and ..." He shrugged. "We're used doing spells as long as we live, that's a lot of time to learn tricks."

"You sound as if ten years from now, I could do the same." Benoît shook his head. "Never."

Gabriel tore a piece from the baguette, put it on his dish. "It's only levitation, just what you trained today ... Give it a try, see if you can move it to your own dish."

Benoît seized for his wand, pointed toward the dish. His charm lifted the piece up and held it in the air. Just when the audience realized that this was all he could manage, an arm snatched forward and grabbed the piece, to put in the same person's mouth - Héloïse.

Fleur laughed. "That's been a Veela's contribution in teamwork, to solve a dilemma." Toward Benoît, she added, "Even so, my dear, that's been quite a lot for the first day of levitation - no reason to be angry."

"And besides," said Gabriel, "for Sandy and me, there's an advantage - you know, with a wand you're always a bit clumsier than without, so for us it's simpler."

Benoît laughed wonderingly. "Simpler ..." He turned to Sandra. "I think I know what you did - in order not to frustrate other people who just started to learn magic, you called yourself after your mother. Only that Thionnité is such an a - er, awful guy, he always crushes your best intentions, right?"

Sandra grinned, hearing this description which wasn't quite off the point, in some sense. She felt tempted to just agree. Except that at this moment, Frédéric said, "There's still another reason, and that's why we'll keep that name to ourselves."

Benoît stared at him. "Oh, is it? ... And you know and I don't, but today's the day to wise me up, huh?"

Frédéric blushed. "No, Beny, it's not - I couldn't tell you before because, er ..."

He was interrupted - or saved - by Sandra, who turned to Benoît. "What he means is - with this name in Beauxbatons, you would remind people of an old story. Because when my father was a student, he killed another student of Beauxbatons, and it was during a gala ball, in front of all people."

"Really?" Benoît looked impressed. "And why? And what happened then?"

"There was a police investigation. But he did it because the other one was about to kill a girl, so he had a good reason."

"So he saved her." Benoît looked uncomprehending. "Then what's so bad about this story that you don't want to be called by your real name?"

The answer was given by Frédéric. "The other guy's family made a scandal of it. His name was Gérard ... Gérard Pouilly."

"Wha ..." Benoît, suddenly speechless, stared at his friend.

Frédéric held the stare for a moment, then looked at Sandra as if to figure out which of them would complete the explanation, only at this moment, Gabriel asked, "Are you a Pouilly?"

With an expression of relief in a dark-red face, Frédéric said, "Yes I am ... This Gérard was a brother of my father."

"O-la-la!" Fleur had recovered quickly from the first moment of gasping surprise. "And your family doesn't know about Sandra - " she turned to the girl, "and 'arry and Cho don't know about him ... Isn't that so?"

Two nods confirmed her assumption.

"And now you've made me a part of this plot, and I can feel flattered for so much trust and confidence - am I right?"

While Frédéric looked considerably alarmed, Sandra just nodded. "Yes. I thought this would be a good idea, to hear you first."

Fleur smiled. "The funny thing is, I really feel flattered. And somehow, it's so - you know, a long time ago, Harry came to me with his own problem, to ask me how to handle things with Cho, and today ..." She looked at Frédéric. "Your father won't be particularly happy, hearing about your - er, teammate, would he?"

"No, probably not, although ..." Frédéric hesitated a moment, then, red as before, confessed, "When I heard about this story, I was imagining myself as the one who'd - er, restore the family honour, something like that. And after some time, I must have made a remark about that, because my father said, I shouldn't, not for the one side and not for the other."

"And then?" The question came from Gabriel.

Frédéric looked up. "My father didn't tell me more. So I started to look for information elsewhere."

Toward her brother, Sandra added, "He's an expert in stories about Harry. The day after the trouble with my wand, when I showed them the wand and said the handle is centaur hair, he took the conclusion at once."

She watched how Gabriel kept his glance at Frédéric, for a long moment in which this Pouilly member just was sitting there, holding the stare, totally unaware of the extent to which he was examined. Then Gabriel turned to his own classmate. "What do you think?"

Michel said, "He's okay ... It's not his mistake that he's a Pouilly."

Into the laughter, Gabriel said, "And Harry's been a Dursley, that wasn't his mistake either."

The only one to appreciate this joke to the full extent was Fleur, almost rolling over, to the deep pleasure of Gabriel, for whom this success came somewhat unexpected.

Seeing the uncertain glances of the two guests, Fleur explained, "He means the relatives where Harry grew up. I never met them, thank God, but I've heard stories ..." And she laughed again.

Benoît said, "I always thought my own family is kind of boring. But hearing all these stories - er, I mean, sometimes boring isn't that bad." He blushed, having barely avoided a blunt impoliteness.

"You're quite right," said Fleur, "and what is your family?"

"It's Malavin." Benoît explained that the Malavins were mountain farmers, deeply rooted in a valley of the Pyrenees, and the most exciting stories told within the family were about illegal transfers across the Spanish border, from a time when this still had been a crime.

"That fits," said Fleur. "Opposites attract, don't they?" Her light smile left it to everybody's guess whether she was referring to Benoît and his friend Frédéric or to something else.

With some open questions out of the way, Sandra felt more appetite than a few minutes ago, and therefore was the last one still chewing. She listened to a conversation between Benoît at one side and Gabriel and Michel at the other, asking each other questions - Benoît about the Goblins school, the other two about the life of a mountain farmer. And she watched how Frédéric was listening too, at least he kept silent, studying the two younger boys.

He did it quite casually, or so he thought, not registering how he himself was watched by Sandra.

Then Héloïse, with growing impatience toward her slow-eating friend, muttered, "Can you come to an end? We've got more things to do." To Michel and Gabriel, she said, "Benoît thinks a guitar is the only suitable instrument for making music - and I thought we would teach him better ... Ready?"

Of course they were ready, in particular since at this moment Benoît showed some flushed cheeks, and aside from anything else, Michel and Gabriel were boys seeing another boy two years older but deeply embarrassed.

In contrast to Frédéric, who beamed. "Super - I was hoping for that, only I didn't know how to ask."

Héloïse, already up from her chair, couldn't resist. "Today you get it for free, but generally speaking, there's a magic word that does the trick."

"You wouldn't mean - please?"

Frédéric was rewarded with a gracious smile. "We have to get prepared, for such an exquisite audience, so Sandy can finish in time ... We'll call you." Then Héloïse and the other two musicians left the room.

Benoît looked at Fleur. "Madame, I'd like - er, when I saw the house, I expected totally different people, somehow, but - er, it's great here, almost like at home - " he blushed, "which doesn't mean we play music at home."

"That's a very nice compliment, Benoît." Fleur smiled. "Maybe it's because I know farm life - anyway, you're welcome any time, which is to say, if you don't get an invitation, it's not me to blame." She turned to Frédéric. "That goes for both of you."

Apparently, it was a new experience for Frédéric to be left behind by his friend regarding table manners of a guest. But then, this afternoon counted as a special occasion in more than one sense. So it took Frédéric a second, then he said, "Thank you, Madame - and I'm really glad that you trust someone with my name."

"Frankly," replied Fleur, "I might have been a bit more reluctant, but you've passed a very thorough exam - splendidly so, in case you didn't notice."

"Oh, I did - I mean, I was aware of what was going on ..." Frédéric turned to Sandra. "But only of your brother - when he asked, and Michel answered, it was a total surprise for me."

"They complete each other ..." Sandra beamed at him, "even more than Hély and I do."

The remark raised a quick grin in Frédéric's face, however he seemed not inclined to comment on that.

And a moment later, Sandra stood up. "Gabriel says we can come."

The two boys followed her at once, not even wondering that they hadn't heard a sound of this call.

12 - Messengers

It was amazing how long it took to interrogate two young wizards who couldn't blurt out their statements fast enough. Had the lieutenant arrested them, the procedure would have been over within less than an hour, because then, all these things could have come later.

After the visit to the Pyromaniacs, that was.

But Seeger found no sense in putting these young men into prison, not for such a petty crime - after all, they hadn't been actively involved in the business. And this business wasn't even a regular, just an *occasion*, as this Billy had explained to them.

And so Harry was bound to wait.

As much as his legal state seemed different from that of the two wizards - in practical terms, Harry found little benefit. He had to wait while the other two were informed about their rights, asked whether they wanted a lawyer - no they didn't - and finally squeezed for details about Billy and his deal.

Billy himself was still on the run, although Seeger felt sure they'd catch him within the next two days. The lieutenant had offered the two wizards his own deal - no prison, a role as an attorney witness, and since then they were singing every chapter and verse they remembered.

Harry couldn't have cared less. Cocaine - why didn't they legalize it? Sniffing a line was a crime - but owning that pump-action gun was legal, not even an issue in the accusation because this Billy hadn't aimed it knowingly against a police officer, where could anyone see logic in that?

Actually, the fugitive hadn't aimed the gun at all, and somehow this seemed to be quite an embarrassing fact. Seeger had passed Harry over to Sheila, so Harry could give his own statement, and this took quite a while, because Sheila saw trouble no end in what Harry had done in that building.

First, he told her what had happened. This, as it turned out, marked the funny part.

Then Sheila explained to him what kind of headache this version would cause in the official report, and suddenly the events weren't looking funny any longer.

Harry, a civilian, had disarmed a citizen in his own home, after intruding unannounced and without being allowed to do so. Then he had illegally used explosives, of unknown origin, to destroy parts of the property, in particular parts that were installed to protect against intruders. Finally, he had performed massive psychological terror against two other inhabitants of that house, causing them stress shocks, fright attacks, and a traumatic audio sensation.

"If we'd present it as it was, this Billy's lawyer would laugh in our faces," Sheila told Harry. "Gaining evidence by unlawful action, that's a cop's nightmare."

Harry stared at her in disbelief.

Then she explained to him what it meant, that they had to catch Billy *with* his two pound bags of finest Columbian, otherwise they'd have a fat frog's fart but no case. And finally, Sheila showed Harry why Seeger had such a high opinion of her abilities.

She transformed Harry's story into a recordable statement.

According to that, Harry accompanied Lieutenant Seeger by acting as a technical expert for magic and magical devices. Coming into this factory building, Harry waited at the entrance, in case the lieutenant would need him. When the alarm started and the - since then fugitive - man who was later identified as Billy Carlisle appeared on the gallery, Harry watched how this man aimed a gun toward the place where the lieutenant was waiting and unaware of the danger.

So Harry used his expert knowledge to disarm the man. To the effect that said man disappeared.

Doing nothing again, Harry watched as the lieutenant did this and that, apparently trying to find that man, or maybe someone else in this building. From his position, Harry could watch how the alarm bell developed more and more sparks and finally stopped, after showing a flash as it is typical for a short circuit - not surprisingly so for such an old device, after having done its duty for so many minutes.

Yes, and finally, after the lieutenant had shouted through the building, two other men came down - to support the lieutenant in his efforts, for all Harry could see from his distant position.

He signed what Sheila had typed, sighed. "The last time I worked with cops, it was simpler."

Sheila, busy with filing the sheets, asked, "When was this? ... And where?"

"In England. And I was still a student. And these were Goblin cops." It wasn't quite correct - these had been warriors, however the Goblins made little difference between one and the other.

"Goblins, huh?" Sheila looked up. "Maybe that's why - they don't fuss. Or maybe because you didn't damage private property ... What was it about?"

"A group of - er, criminal wizards tried to storm the wizard prison and to free some of their fellows. The prison was run by Goblins - still is, actually."

"And they let you take part in that - a student?"

"The Goblins don't tell other people what to do or not to do. We were six humans to support them - four adults and two students, my friend and I."

Sheila had stopped shuffling paper. "And what happened?"

"It was in an old mine - I never figured out where. The Goblins were hidden. They let them come along, then came up, weapons ready. About six of the assailants were too slow or too quick - anyway, they didn't freeze at once. That was their last mistake ... The others were arrested by the Goblins."

Sheila's eyes had narrowed. "You mean ..."

Harry nodded. "Yes, they were dead. Goblins don't order you twice, and they have just one definition for *out of combat* ... They had crossbows, by the way."

"Crossbows ..." For an instant, it looked as if Sheila would start laughing, then she remembered to which effect these crossbows had been used. Slowly, she shook her head. "Well, I'm not sure whether I could warm up to this style - although, they certainly save paperwork, that's for sure ... Anyway, your role was a passive one, so they just let you go, right?"

"Yeah, kind of ..."

With Nagini at him, Harry didn't want to lie on purpose. On the other side, he felt no need to reveal his true role in this encounter - that he had followed one of the assailants into the maze of tunnels, after this man could escape by using Sirius Black as a living shield, and that this man, stunned by Harry just when trying to attack, had fallen into a shaft, to die from a broken neck.

His short hesitation had caused Sheila's attention. About to ask more, she was distracted from a phone call, and Harry took the opportunity to organize his own escape.

Just to the water fountain. He wanted to be around when Carl was done with this cocaine bullshit, and Carl wanted him within reach - probably just because this would make sure that Harry wasn't trying a more private approach toward *Pyromaniacs*.

For someone used to Carron Lough water, this fluorated, refrigerated fluid tasted simply awful, and the styrofoam cup came as no improvement either.

Then Harry tried to melt into the wall. From the perspective of the other people in the room, it seemed to work fine, but then, they considered everything not screaming for a lawyer as part of the furniture. Only Harry's mind refused to calm down, his impatience even less.

He called Paul, more to kill the time than for any other reason. He told him what had happened at *Gilbert*, was informed in return that Paul had nothing new - except that he was in some hurry, about to go to lunch.

And apparently not alone, so Harry hung up.

Something to eat ... He went to Sheila, asked her about the local habits, was informed that *survival of the strongest* would be the most appropriate term, because something like a regular lunch break was unknown in the precinct. So Harry asked her for a proper method to save himself - and the other people here - from starving, if only for just one more day.

"Pizza," she said. "If you come with a pile of pizza, you'll be welcomed by everyone here ... Any size, colour, and filling, we aren't picky."

No, probably not. When Harry asked where to get it, he learned the shop was pretty close, just half a mile down the street.

Close? Maybe for someone with a car, which he hadn't.

When he asked if this shop offered any other advantage not to be missed, Sheila said no, it was just close, although pretty crowded at this time of the day. The taste, according to her judgement, had to be rated somewhere between forgettable and regrettable.

Scanning his memory for alternative places, Harry suddenly knew where he'd get something for himself and the other people. It would be pizza alright - only apart from the name, it would bear little resemblance with the local junk. For compensation, it would be tasty and nourishing.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said. Then he jumped - to the Turkish shop in the Diagon Alley, London, where he had come in touch with this kind of food years ago, still as a student.

Turkish pizza, ten, please - these people didn't blink an eye, and they were fast. Asked for details, Harry ordered five spicy, five average, otherwise all of them with everything, which stood for meat, salad, and white crumbs of sheep cheese.

Little more than ten minutes later, he had a bag full of cylindrical shapes - each pizza rolled and wrapped in aluminium foil. Just in time, Harry remembered the water and ordered ten cans of soda or coke in a reasonable mix, which made another bag.

He paid, left a generous tip for quick work and good measure, jumped back. Reaching Sheila's desk, he dropped the two bags. "Spicy or average?"

"Huh?" Sheila eyed Harry's prey, peeked into the bag he held open, seeing only aluminium cylinders. "What's that? Looks like a major delivery of cocaine, except we're looking just for two."

"That's pizza, so - spicy or average?"

Sheila hadn't gained her fat for nothing, appeared quite open-minded toward something new. "Spicy, then."

Harry took one of the colour-marked cylinders out, showed her how to uncover the upper end, and warned her about the drops which soon would spill from the lower end.

After another suspicious look, Sheila took the first bite. Chewed. Got shining eyes. "Thagh's greag, Harry, where dig you geg if from?"

"London."

"Lon ..." Sheila's shoulder sagged. She swallowed the bite. "I knew it - some people just aren't made for a decent life. Anyway - thank you." Toward the piece in her hands, however, her enthusiasm was undiminished.

Registering that, and her size, Harry dropped a second roll at Sheila's desk, this time an average one, earning an admiring glance. Then he went to the interrogation room where he knew Carl and his two wizards.

Carl looked baffled for an instant, seeing the aluminium-wrapped shapes Harry announced as pizza, however the lieutenant had learned to trust his partner's taste in food, so he took a spicy one without further hesitation, plus a coke.

He looked perplexed for another moment when Harry asked the two wizards for their choice. They sent a quick glance to the lieutenant. Then Harry had to assure he wasn't asking for money, just for their choice, and only then, he could leave the room, lighter by two average and two sodas - although feeling sure they just hadn't dared to ask for anything out of the ordinary, like a spicy one.

Coming out, Harry's plan was to sit near Sheila, in favour of something like company during lunch. Company he got, instantly - five detectives closing in on him, known as the guy with the weird stuff Sheila was eating with such great pleasure, already diminishing her second roll.

Seeing their expectant faces, Harry had to laugh. "Okay, folks - just tell me, how many more, so I'll get something for myself?"

The numbers they told him varied, probably because Harry hadn't made clear whether he was asking for detectives around or for Turkish pizza.

At least, he had an impression. Jumping back again, he was looking into apologetic faces because they could offer only four more pizza. So he took them, plus a dozen of what they called meat bags, and thanks to his tip from minutes ago, the three people were working like crazy.

Harry deepened the mutual trust with another tip, jumped back. Wiser than before, he took a pizza for himself and asked Sheila to let the word go round that a modern equivalent of the biblical meat pans was here, if not from Egypt then from Turkey. And finally, Harry started to eat.

He got even company. When Sheila realized there was a variation of the theme, somewhat smaller, she had a look that caused Harry to declare he wasn't her weight watcher, and if nobody else ...

Sheila took the bag to make her round, apparently in favour of a good conscience. She came back with a beaming face, which meant something was left, and joined Harry in his second half with one of the three surviving meat bags. They finished almost simultaneously.

* * *

Lieutenant Seeger was in a comfortable mood, better than usual on a Monday, early afternoon. It had to do with an entertaining morning, which had provided a nice mix of action and success - catching this Billy Carlisle seemed only a matter of time, and these two shit-scared whitecoats had given Seeger some information to nail a local dealer of the medium range. Sure, someone else would fill the opening gap instantly, but so was the business.

It also had to do with the lieutenant's weird partner, sitting silently in the passenger seat, together with the partner's snake-shaped own partner. This team seemed to work quite well, better than expected, and providing a lunch of the delicious kind wasn't the least of his benefits, no sir.

And right now, Lieutenant Seeger was benefitting from an interactive navigation system, saving him from the hassle to alternate his attention between the traffic and a street map. This system consisted of him at one end, reading street names aloud, Sheila at the other end, giving

him directions as well as side remarks, and that phony in-between. This would also make sure Sheila was listening when they were about to enter *Pyromaniacs*.

When she told him the road they were on would be right for a while, and he mightn't fall asleep, Seeger felt the time fine for a little rehearsal. A quick glance to the right informed him that his partner wasn't asleep either - which would have been a surprise anyway. So he said, "Okay, Harry, we're inside, and your snake tells you there's a wizard or two, only she can't locate them ... What's your reaction?"

"Erm ... Lieutenant, can we do a cross-check?"

"Yep. And now - there are five people in the room, two of them are wizards. What then?"

Harry thought a few seconds. "If possible, I'll just tell you whom to ask. If not - I mean, if there's some reason they shouldn't be forewarned, in contrast to you, then ... Do you know how pilots indicate directions?"

"I'm not sure ..."

"They use the hours on a clock. Twelve is straight ahead. So if I say, Carl, we've got something at three o'clock and then at ten o'clock, where are these guys?"

"Aah - the first's to my right, and the other's to my left, slightly more to the front." Seeger grinned appreciatively. "That's cool, Harry ... But where exactly is straight ahead?"

"Your body - mind, your shoulders, not your head. Twelve is where you'd look without your head turned." Harry grinned. "Don't turn just because I'm talking to you. We could say, twelve is the window front, only it takes too long to re-orient yourself."

"Not turning, okay." Seeger thought a second. "So I'll ask back, was it code red and stripes - know what it means?"

Harry's answer came quickly. "Their clothes, right?"

"You got it."

"So if I say, wasn't it red and yellow, it's the other guy in a group of two or so."

Seeger laughed. "It's like in a spy movie, but on the other hand, every football team uses something similar ... Okay, then, let's check the other case - there're wizards all around, and you get nothing but bad vibrations, what was that?"

"That - er, time's running." Harry's hand moved under his jacket, came up with a piece of wood. "And if you see me using that, or if you see something flash or sparkle, don't wait for further comments from my side."

At this moment, Sheila's voice, somewhat amused, came through the phony, advising Seeger he should stop playing James Bond and instead tell her the name of the next side street.

Some minutes later, they reached the estate that had to be *Pyromaniacs*, while only a closer inspection of a small plate at the entrance told them they were right. The plate showed a

cartoon bomb - a black ball with a glowing fuse on top, and the company name underneath was cut into an upper and a lower half by a small rocket zooming through.

The building looked a century younger than the other one they had visited this morning. L-shaped, in bungalow style with just one floor, large windows along the front, causing Harry to ask, "Say, is real estate less expensive than piling up storeys? Or is it because people with fire and explosives prefer a flat roof above their heads, and nothing else?"

Seeger shrugged. "This is California - can you spell earthquake?"

The company seemed prosperous, and a bit larger than the make-up studio. About a dozen cars stood in a yard that was formed by a wire fence around. Along the building ran a stripe of grass that would need a sprinkler treatment at least once a day in this climate.

Harry's glance had swept the place. Now, with a light undertone of disappointment, he said, "Bigger than expected, huh?"

Apparently he was referring to their initial guess, that the kidnapers were a group of three at the minimum, eight at the most - and seeing these many cars parking here felt wrong for him. It was another proof of Harry not being a cop - cops learned soon that reality never packaged things as expected, always found a twist to confuse those with their minds set too narrow.

And cops learned something else - how awfully wrong they could be in their expectations. But the essence of all detective work was simple patience, and Harry wasn't used to strike twelve misses before the first hit.

Seeger found a shortcut to all this wisdom. "We can be wrong this way or the other ... And maybe we're just right." Then he opened the car door, marched ahead, followed by Harry and his snake.

Reaching the entrance, Harry murmured, apparently to no one in particular, "We enter the building."

The desk lady was all smile, which froze for an instant when Seeger presented his badge and introduced himself as a detective lieutenant. Next moment, she recovered. "Then you should talk with Mr. Costello."

"That's the boss man?"

"Himself." A light ironic smile commented the detective's choice of words, while the lady bent toward a device on her desk, and a finger reached for the button she probably knew best.

Even so, the finger froze in midair. The woman had detected Harry, as her stare made clear. More exactly, his snake.

Which was hissing right at this moment.

Adjusting to the habit, Seeger kept his own friendly expression, which suddenly seemed to freeze by itself - he wouldn't have known what to explain anyway. From behind came Harry's voice. "I'm his cross-check partner, madam."

As senseless as the remark sounded, the finger lost its trance and found the button. A male voice growled something.

"Nor ... Mr. Costello, here are two gentlemen from the police department. They have some questions."

"Police? ... About wha - okay, send them in."

Mr. Costello reminded the lieutenant more of a sailor, or maybe a carpenter, than a manager. Jeans, red-striped work shirt, sun-burned skin, a questioning look toward Seeger and an open stare of disbelief toward Harry and snake. Then the man's gaze turned back to the lieutenant. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Why did his voice sound so familiar? ... An instant later, Seeger knew why - it was like the scene in a western movie, when the guy with the wrong colour tries to order a whisky at the bar - a nigger in Texas, a native American anywhere in the States, or a Mexican here in California. And he, Seeger, was the wrong man's friend, and next moment he would be accused of being colour-blind, and ...

He shook off the sensation of unreality, put some steel into his own voice. "This is Mr. Potter, my partner in this investigation. Mr. Costello, how many people work here?"

"Eleven. What kind of investigation is this, detective?"

"Please call me Lieutenant Seeger, Mr. Costello." The temperature was cooling rapidly. "We are investigating in the cases of the recent kidnappings, you may have heard about them ... I have to ask some questions to all of your employees, sir. Might not take long - is there a room where we can do that?"

"You can do it here."

Seeger showed a thin-lipped smile. "It would be grossly impolite to send you out of your own office, won't it, Mr. Costello? ... Any other place?"

"Why don't you just arrest all of them and do it at the police station?"

"Is this a serious offer, Mr. Costello?" Seeger reminded himself to behave like a good lieutenant. "There's no reason for such drastic measures, not for just a few questions. We could be gone in half an hour ..."

"We've got nothing to do with these kidnappings, so what do you want to ask them? ... And this - this snake there, what does it mean? I don't think I have to tolerate a snake in my building, police or not."

Seeger felt afraid the man was right.

"Mr. Costello," came Harry's voice, "do you know which of your people are Magicals?"

"What? ... Yes, sure - why?"

"There are four of them, right?"

"Er - yes." Bafflement had replaced the hostility. "How do you know?"

"This snake can sense magic, that's her purpose. Probably we'd have to ask only those four, except it might look less conspicuous when interviewing all of them - you know, to prevent complaints of magical harassment." Harry's voice was conciliatory.

"Oh - yeah, maybe that's ... Allright then." Mr. Costello, who seemed to know a song or two about complaints filed, came up, looking calmer than a moment before. "There's a work room, if you can keep your fingers off the things there ..."

This half-insult improved his mood even more, and he walked ahead, out of the office, Seeger and Harry following.

Passing the reception, Seeger saw a man in a light-brown overall looking up. Until a second ago, he seemed to have talked with the desk lady, apparently gossip, and no doubt - the lieutenant and Harry and his snake had been the topic, the faces looking like caught told Seeger that much.

Well - he was used to it, and it didn't mean anything, because there were two categories of people gossiping about police visits as much as they could - the criminals and the innocent.

But at this moment, the snake hissed again, taking all attention.

For just a second. Then another hissing was heard, and without turning, Seeger knew - this had been Harry. The woman was staring, and the man in the overall too - with widening eyes, he looked quite frightened, almost pale.

Snakes had this effect toward some people, here in California, not exactly rattlesnake's paradise, like New Mexico maybe, but at least you could ...

Seeger's thoughts were interrupted by Harry who passed him, grabbed the man in front, murmuring urgently, "Mr. Costello - who's that man at the desk?"

The crafty manager stopped. "Huh?" He turned. "That - someone from the messenger service. Why?"

"What service is this?"

Mr. Costello's eyes followed the man in the overall, right now leaving in some kind of hurry. "It's called *The Delivery Boys*. They're on the road all day long, from companies to sets and back, between the studios ... They do all kinds of errands, just what you need during a movie project ..."

Harry looked at Seeger. "That's been a wizard, and when he heard me talking with Nagini ... C'mon - now."

Hearing Harry's voice, Seeger felt a prickle in his neck. He turned to Mr. Costello, said, "We'll come back later - sorry," then followed Harry, who was storming toward the car.

Outside, Seeger checked around, saw a dark-brown van reaching the main road, and a bit of dust still hanging over the short distance from the fenced yard to that spot. The van was turning right, toward the city.

Harry stood already at the car, had the phony in his hand. Reaching the car, Seeger heard him talking with Sheila, telling her to look up a company called *The Delivery Boys*.

About to enter the car, Seeger glanced over to the van again, and if he could trust his eyes, he saw the driver watching the scene here in the yard, rather than the street ahead.

The lieutenant climbed inside, started the engine, moved the car out of the parking lot. "So he's a wizard - what else, why ..." Harry's raised hand stopped him.

"... and then call a Paul Sillitoe, tell him about that, and ask him to check for this company - I don't want to cut this line for calling myself ... Just ask the phony - and, Sheila, Paul knows what's going on, he's the one who found the other company names."

Harry glanced over. "When he heard me talking with Nagini, he startled so terribly, was nearly shocked - I think he knows who I am, may even have seen me on the set, but whatever, just hearing Parseltongue, that wasn't explanation enough."

Seeger, his eyes at the van in some distance, said, "A messenger service ... Didn't appear anywhere in the lists, huh?"

"Probably not."

Seeger nodded. "That fits so well - always the same story, the people nobody registers because they're so used to them. Know all places, all people ... Hear the latest gossip - just when we came out, you could see how it works."

"Wizards in a messenger service ..." Harry's voice sounded a bit furious. "Looks like overkill, but only at first thought, and besides - maybe they had additional ideas from the beginning." He examined the road scene. "Why don't you move a bit closer?"

"He's seen us coming out," replied Seeger. "Right now he's probably suspecting us to follow him, only he mightn't be sure, but if I close in, he can see us all the time in the rearview mirror."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Follow him - see where he leads us to."

"Carl - he has a phone in the car, if not something better. He's going to call his accomplices right now."

"So?"

"Send people to their place, so they won't escape - and then reach that car in front of us and let us stop him."

Seeger shot a glance to his crazy partner. "Harry, all we have is a feeling you had - wait, let me finish ... A feeling - okay, a special one, and *I trust your feelings*, but it just means I'm not going to lose that car in front of us - that's all."

At this moment, Sheila came over the phony to tell them she had found the address of the *Delivery Boys* - a place almost at the other side of the city.

Seeger's arm went sideways. "Lemme talk with her."

He took the phony, said, "Sheila? ... Listen, send a civil car to their place, for observation. Just watching - nothing else, and whatever's going to happen, the car's going to stay and watch ... Tell them they should try to hide, if possible. All I wanna know is what's going on there ... Right. And then call their office, pretend to be a secretary who's ordered to find a cheap offer for moving, office furniture, something like that - ask them questions, you know what I mean."

"Will do, lieutenant," came the reply. "I'm going to send Jake and his rookie, and tell them to report to me ... Over."

Seeger passed the phony back to Harry.

Harry said, "Carl, please, let's stop that car."

Seeger thought it over. "Alright, Harry." He seized for the microphone of the regular broadcasting receiver.

"Hey, wait a sec - whom do you want to call?"

Seeger suppressed a sigh. "Two police cruisers, to stop the car - wasn't that what you wanted?"

"Not at all!" Harry pointed into the direction of the van somewhere ahead. "I bet that guy's listening to the police channel, so he'd know what's coming - what I had in mind was something quick and clean and as surprising as possible, and we can do it alone."

"No we cannot." Seeger kept his voice calm, although with some effort. "Assume you're right, and that's what I assume, Harry, don't forget - so if you're right, then you know what will happen? ... First possibility, the guy's not going to stop at all, and contrary to what you see all the time in the movies, a limousine like this here can't stop a van - maybe short of crashing into it. But if I was the guy, I'd just stop."

He looked over, met Harry's eyes. "And you know why? Because I'd sit calmly until this stupid detective lieutenant has reached my car. Then I'd shoot him down and drive off ... Harry, stopping a car was the last action of quite a lot of police officers, but I for myself can't stop thinking there's a pension in my future."

Silence.

"Now you take me for a coward, ain't'cha, but that's ..."

"Definitely not!" After a second, with a calmer voice, Harry continued, "I'm sorry - you're totally right, Carl, so stop that crap about cowardice - and please don't guess about what I think, I'm somewhat allergic against people guessing my motives."

Seeger seized again for the microphone.

Harry's hand stopped him once more. "No - no cruisers. Just speed up and pass over, and when you're at his side, keep the pace for a moment."

"Are you going to ..." Just in time, Seeger remembered Harry's last remark. "What for, Harry? What's your goddamned motive I'm not supposed to guess?"

Harry's voice was amused, almost playful. "I wanna make sure this guy's going to stop - alive and unhurt, because we need him alive more than anything else."

"And how?"

"I'll use the magic word, Carl. And now - please - floor that engine."

The magic word, my ass, crossed it Seeger's mind while he pressed the accelerator down. He had halved the distance when he realized - the van was accelerating too.

"Look at this," muttered Seeger. "The guy knew all the time that we're behind, and he's preferring to keep it that way ... And what's worse, this bloody van is awfully fast." He glanced over to Harry. "Can I call the blue ones now?"

"Not yet. Can you go behind? All I need is a look into that car."

"Watch yourself." Seeger checked the speedometer, then the road ahead, and the distance to the van, which wasn't getting any closer. "Maybe on a highway, but not here - and he's not going to slow down for red lights - oh shit, I cannot drive a car hunt through city traffic, Harry, that's no movie here - if you don't wanna lose him, lemme call for reinforcement."

"Do you have binoculars here?" Harry's voice came a bit tighter than before.

"In the glove compartment - hopefully."

Seeger watched as Harry pulled the handle, seized inside, came up with heavy binoculars suited for observation tasks, took a second to adjust them, then examined the van ahead.

"Okay ... We're lucky it's a van, no delivery truck." Harry dropped the glasses, was moving more, did something with his snake.

"What's so different with a van?" Seeger tried to watch Harry's movements, only the high speed was taking all his attention.

"It has windows at the back, so I could have a look inside." Harry leaned back, as if relaxing, took the phony and laid it into the cigarette box between the seats. "Don't twist now, Carl - we'll meet again soon."

Seeger shot a quick glance to the side - just in time to see a passenger seat suddenly empty, a snake at the floor, and then he had to concentrate again, through this short instant while it felt as if someone was sucking the air out of his lungs - to fill the empty space, before the air pressure normalized again.

* * *

Harry came out exactly at the spot he had seen through the binoculars - between the back seats of the racing van, third row. Next instant, he almost fell on his back, as if the van had accelerated.

His left hand grabbed the back rest of a seat. The movement pushed him onto the seat behind, while his right hand already seized for his wand.

He hadn't known whether it would work, and how it would be. He wished he had time to exhale and regain his mental balance after this moment of expecting the worst, knew he hadn't any.

His appearance had sent a wave of air pressure through the car. Harry saw the head above the driver's seat jerk up to the rearview mirror. He had no chance to see the eyes because all his attention was caught by the body and its movements.

This body twisted, for an instant almost losing control of the car, which had followed the involuntary pull at the steering wheel. Then the car stabilized again, apparently from one hand's work because the man's right arm grabbed for something.

Harry's wand was pointing. "Stop it! You can't hit me anyway from that position ... And slow down."

"And what if not? - Goin' to stun me? That'd kill both of us."

Could well be - at least the car would be out of control, at this speed and with a bend rapidly coming closer, something Harry had no intention to experience. Still worse - what he felt was nothing of the desperate suicidal mood of a cornered rat. There was a determined mind in front of him, having a clear perception of ...

"Now what, big wizard?" The voice was sneering. "That's a Mexican draw, if there's ever been any. You better let me drive that car - see the bend over there?"

That was nonsense - all Harry had to do was moving to the driver's seat and be ready to take over the steering wheel when taking the man out of combat ... But all his senses were sending him alarm signs - this guy was up to something, he didn't believe his own words either, thought himself still in the better position, and this was a nasty feeling because Harry couldn't see why, as much as his mind was racing ...

The bend was there. Like a race driver, the man approached it from the outer lane, aiming toward the inner point, a firm movement of the steering wheel - which suddenly ended in a sharp pull, sending the car in a tire-shrieking slide toward the embankment, much too sharp for this speed, the car's superstructure already tilting ...

Harry's eyes flew to a spot ahead, sand and a bit of grass, as his target for an exit jump out of this dead trap. About to apparate to the planned destination, he felt something familiar but totally unexpected, taking him almost off balance.

At this instant, the car lost its own balance completely and fell to its side, ready to do a final roll-over, or two, before it would crash into the tree that stood waiting in its path.

* * *

Lieutenant Seeger swore to himself - he would teach his partner giving clear information in teamwork before this day met darkness. Maybe for Harry it had been obvious, and Seeger had a distinct idea, only ...

His eyes at the road, he bent to the side, cursing the national car industry which hadn't anything better to do than building cars in which the driver couldn't reach the glove compartment without causing an accident. Then Seeger had the binoculars in his hand.

A check at the road - straight for a few seconds. His knee fixing the steering wheel, he peeped through the binoculars, grateful that the focus was already set ...

A movement in the van, at the back seats!

Allright, then - Harry was in the car. Would be interesting to hear how he had handled the driver, without causing an acc ...

Seeing the van lose track, going broadside, Seeger started murmuring obscenities, totally unaware of his own comments while the shrieking of rubber on tarmac reached his ear.

It was like slow motion - not really, only it would feel like that, later, because Seeger knew what was coming, could only watch, his foot already at the brakes.

The van cartwheeled to the side, bowed, and made a little jump - lifting off the road, after a sliding tire had found a pothole to bite into, unwilling to be scraped any further.

Seeger watched the first roll ... The second, hearing the pained sound of metal and glass on tarmac - then the shape with its tires skyward had reached the tree. Contrary to what the movies used to do in sensurround, there was a very short *chunk*, then the car had lost all speed and most of its shape, as well as some parts which still were flying through the air.

"Oh, shit, shit, what a motherfucking shit ..." Seeger came to a stop, swung the door open, was out, running toward the wreck, his right hand going toward his holster. Unlikely as it seemed - if the wrong man was still alive, could move ...

He smelled burned rubber, scraped metal, and a second later, he smelled the pungent odor of petrol.

Of course - this piece of shit was manufactured by the local industry, and everybody knew what a damn they gave for passive security - why couldn't it be a Japanese model? This was a game of luck - maybe nothing would happen, but the petrol was vaporizing in the hot air, and if a drop reached something hot enough, there would be a soft bump, and a very large cloud of fire would stand in the air for a few seconds ... With Seeger there to have it in his face.

He stepped forward, gun aiming, in desperate search for a view inside. If there was any inside left, didn't look that way.

There ... Driver's seat, empty. Where ... Checking his memory, Seeger knew there hadn't been bodies flying through the air. He inched closer, went down on his knees, peeped in the wreck.

Tight metal in the middle, front part empty, no traces of blood either. Seeger went round the tree, to check the other side.

The sound of drops falling down ... Just one more look, only what would he look stupid if now ...

Nothing. No human body inside that car, no shattered remnants either.

Seeger retreated, his face toward the wreck. He had made a dozen steps when a sound like a flapping sail erupted from the car. His eyes registered a large ball of orange and yellow, out of nowhere, already fading to smoke when the rush of hot air reached his skin.

Moments later, the vaporized petrol was consumed in this short firework, and the wreck burned in small, slow flames where the paint had caught fire, with a single steady source toward the heck. Had to be the tank, and again contrary to what the movies suggested, Seeger knew that it would burn steadily to the end.

He stared into the flames, frozen in the old fascination of humankind toward fire and destruction. So it took him an instant to register the shout from behind.

* * *

At the last instant, Harry had sensed the driver's intention, the unmistakable aura of a wizard about to apparate, and he followed in pursuit, expecting to come out in some building, most likely the office of the *Delivery Boys*.

No building.

Open air - and he was flying through it, although pretty low, a large dune under him, and the ocean ahead. Now the dune hit him astonishingly hard before he was flying again, unfortunately without his wand which had hooked into something, released before it would break. And some feet in front of him, the driver was flying, now rolling.

That was the reason why ... Harry realized at once what was happening, and that this wizard was far from a seventh-year's level.

His own movement, as a passenger in the van driving at high speed, wasn't absorbed in the apparition jump! Not at all, and the other wizard had known in advance, selecting a place where this impulse could be lost without the risk of breaking your bones.

It answered Harry's old question - whether it was possible to apparate into an airplane in the sky. Definitely not, because a millisecond later he would have been a bloody smear at some cabin wall.

The thought crossed his mind shortly, while he responded to the immediate need of coming to a halt, preferably before the other wizard had accomplished the same task for himself.

Falling, rolling - the soft dune sand was perfectly suited to suck up the body's energy. Using his *aikido* expertise, Harry was busy to win some sideward distance to the other man, something still more urgent than reaching a stand.

A bang. Glancing sideways, Harry saw that the other wizard was already in a balanced slide down the dune, lying on his back, and aiming a gun at him. Another bang, the hand with the gun jerked up, and this time Harry felt the bullet's air movement as a gentle push in his face.

He rolled around and onto his stomach, hands together. No chance to point precisely, no time to waste either - any second now, this wizard might jump again ... Harry sent a nitro ball, the size of a child's fist, somewhere near the other man's position, while his feet were hacking into the sand underneath to stop the slide.

A deafening bang. An eruption of sand, blocking his view.

That was part of what he had intended, because it blocked the other man's view equally. Until the cloud had settled sufficiently, Harry was lying motionlessly, his hands ready to send the stunning spell.

Where was the wizard??

Couldn't possibly have jumped, Harry would have sensed it, he felt sure about that.

Coming onto his knees, he saw that the explosion had dug a crater into the dune's flank, larger than planned, and from above sand was rushing in. The wizard had to be in that crater ... Shit, had he killed him?

Even if not, in a few moments, the man would be buried under sand, this way or the other.

Harry made two steps, realized that he was way too slow, would never cross the distance in time. He apparated to the border of the crater.

Glancing down, he saw a shapeless bundle. About to curse himself for that stupid nitro ball, he saw the bundle move, and next instant, a human leg appeared from under the driftsand that had already gathered down there.

Harry sighed of relief. Then he sent the stunning spell first, and the levitation charm for injured bodies afterwards.

When the stunned wizard was lying to his feet, Harry squinted his eyes to scan the path his body had taken across the dune. Pointing the approximate direction with his hands, he shouted, "*Accio wand!*"

And here it came zooming through the air into his hand - the precious piece of holly with a blackthorn tip. He was complete again.

As many questions as he had toward this wizard - asking him had to wait until Harry had secured him in a protector sphere that prevented apparition. And fetching one of these devices

had to wait also, because he had to find Seeger quickly, before the lieutenant started some action against the building with the other wizards. Because for all Harry knew, they were similarly skilled, and attacking the building without a precaution first would leave them with an empty nest ... And probably some casualties of their own.

Could a stunned wizard be summoned? Harry made a test to the top of the dune.

Yes he could.

The next jump brought him to the spot he had selected as his exit destination from the falling car. An instant later, the unconscious wizard was lying at his feet again.

And fifty yards away, Harry saw a remarkable picture - the remnants of a van wrapped around a tree, some flames across the hulk, pretty small ones, except for one spot, the acid smell of burning paint in the air, and a figure some feet apart, watching the spectacle in fascination.

Harry inhaled deeply for his shout. "Carl! ... Carl - wake up and come over."

He watched how the lieutenant turned, started to move closer, taking his time and apparently without signs of surprise.

And when Carl had reached him, Harry listened to a short lesson about clear announcements of the planned action in teamwork, and their advantages over wisecracks of the magic macho kind.

As short as it was, the lesson left nothing to the imagination.

13 - Assault

Harry waited patiently while Carl gave his reprimand, in particular since this speech was dictated by relief as much as by a grain of truth, maybe even two. When the detective calmed down, Harry nodded and said, "Got it, lieutenant. You're right. And now that you've delivered your lesson, please note that I've delivered a delivery boy here."

Carl inspected the body lying at the ground. "Is he alive?"

"Very much so, and that's why he has to keep that way still for a while, otherwise he'd get lost in the blink of an eye." Harry explained what had happened, in the last moments of the tilting van and afterwards on the dune. He finished, "We need an apparition lock at that man - once this thing's tied to him together with some handcuffs, we can wake him up."

This reminded the lieutenant to apply the handcuffs now - he knew the man was stunned, he knew this stunning wouldn't fade by itself, only he had seen too many impossible things happen.

Coming up again, Carl asked, "How does it look, this lock?"

"I think I can get a small one - I mean, we didn't develop wearables yet on purpose, but for the transport it will do. You know, originally these devices were designed to protect a room from intruders via apparition, and at the same time to prevent the inhabitants from escaping, that's why prisons are among our best customers ..."

"Who's we?" interrupted Carl. "I thought you were an unemployed movie star, and a not so unemployed super wizard."

Harry grinned. "I married rich, that's why I can bide my time - most of the time, that is. And my wife owns a great deal of Groucho Industries, and there's a daughter company called Groucho Transports and Security - they build these things, Ray Purcell is the chief engineer, and he's the one I'm going to visit in a minute."

"Groucho, huh?" Carl's head tilted toward his car. "That's not too far from here - let's use the car, so for a little while, I could feel as if I was invited to that party."

"What you mean is the movie and spector branch." Harry's thumb was pointing over his shoulder, maybe even the right direction. "GTS - that's in Ireland ... But you've got your own share to do, don't you worry about hanging around idly, just lemme tell you before I'll jump."

Carl's voice was dry, "I appreciate that, partner."

He lost his sarcasm instantly when Harry told him what was due. The building of the *Delivery Boys*, right now probably - hopefully - the place where the kidnapers were gathering to figure out what was going on, had to be locked against apparition too. Moreover, this had to be done without them registering.

"This should make sure we can catch them all," finished Harry. "They'll resist, probably use the building like a fortress, until the last moment, assuming they can escape before it's too

late. Of course, this is based on the assumption that all of them are comparable in their skill, only what I saw from that guy here makes me think this is just the minimum."

Carl looked thoughtful. "What does it mean for us, the normal people?"

"You'll need quite some people, I guess - it's about storming a building, and you know more about that than I do. Until the lock's in place, they shouldn't be seen ... I think we'll have to wait till darkness before we can place the lock. But make sure your people are around, so we can start any time."

"Okay," said Carl, "so the SWAT finally comes into play ... They wear flak jackets by standard, but that's just for gunfire - any idea how to protect them against spells?"

Harry, about to answer no, suddenly had a picture in his mind. "If troops are used in riots or demos, they carry shields, to protect them against stones, or foul eggs. It was never done before, but I'm pretty sure these shields protect against spells too."

Thinking it over, he added, "Listen, Carl - I guess I should give them a five minutes' instruction about attacking wizards, and how to coordinate with us good wizards ..."

"Us again? ... Who is it this time?" Despite his tone, the lieutenant seemed glad to have some magical support, aside from Harry himself, at his side.

"Dunno yet, but lemme check around." Harry looked at the stunned wizard. "I wish I knew what he had in mind, together with his cronies - there's still time till darkness, and if they don't hear from him, then ..."

"That's my chance," interrupted Carl. "Aside from carrying out your orders, of course."

The sarcasm was lost at Harry. "What do you mean?"

"Erm - we'll meet again soon, weren't those the words?" The lieutenant grinned diabolically.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "And what about your lecture still ringing in my ears? ... Can I quote you now, or do I have to wait?"

Carl laughed. "Okay, okay, but I enjoyed this short moment, if you get my bearing ... What I'm going to do is, I'll behave like an ordinary cop - reaching the scene of a car accident."

"Doesn't tell me anything," replied Harry, "because I know only extraordinary cops."

The lieutenant beamed, whether about the joke, the truth behind, or his idea. "Harry - there's an accident, and we figure out to whom the car belongs, and we give them a call, saying the driver's seriously injured, unconscious, on his way to the emergency ... Well, and then it turns out a DOA, so whoever's coming to that hospital ..."

"Sorry - what's DOA?"

"Death on arrival ... Let me play this scheme, if only to give them an explanation why the guy's not responding - and before you go, please help me to put him into my car ... And in return, you could fetch your snake."

Harry almost giggled - from an imaginary picture of Carl alone with Nagini, though also from a short feeling of guilt because he had nearly forgotten about his own partner.

He entertained Carl with the first-aid charm to levitate the unconscious wizard to the car. Carl amazed him by opening the trunk, rather than a rear door. The lieutenant's remark, however, wasn't suited for entertainment. He said, "If they catch me with this load, I can send in my badge, only I'm not going to spoil our tactical advantage - there's too many eyes around, and you just don't know which hand takes what envelope at the end of the month."

They agreed that Harry would return to Carl's office. If the lieutenant was somewhere else, Sheila would know. "She's one of the few I can be sure about," said Carl. "The only envelope she gets has an eagle printed on."

Harry fetched his snake. "I wouldn't mind changing that, when we're done, if only once."

The lieutenant's smile froze. "Don't even think of that, Harry, It's a kind idea, but ..." Then he grinned. "If you find a way to send some of these meat rolls, I wouldn't know anyone having objections, and you'd win yourself a devoted fan for life."

"Good idea," replied Harry. "Just find me a wizard messenger who can apparate, and still has his job at the end of this day." Then he jumped to Ireland, to find Ray and spoil his sleep.

* * *

Rahewa Stein, adopted Lupin, born Lightfoot, switched off the phony, looked at the man who had taken sufferable pains to establish her current family name, and who had listened with some uneasiness to the phony conversation. She said, "Ray's on his way to the laboratory. I'm going to meet him there, and Harry too. I guess it'll take a while."

Clemens examined her. "A while, huh? ... A little while in the laboratory, and a longer while somewhere else - am I right?"

Rahewa moved over, planted a kiss on her husband's forehead, which was climbing upward faster than Clemens enjoyed at his young age. "Yes, my genius, but don't you worry - and if the night isn't over yet when I'm back again, I'll wake you up."

"Yeah, sure," snorted Clemens. "There's nothing like some indoor sports after some outdoor games, only I'm going to join you, and to find out whether I'll appreciate them as much as you do."

Rahewa startled. "No - please not. That's not a good idea."

"And why not?" Clemens made efforts to come up from his chair.

She pressed him down. "I'd be too scared to be of any help, knowing you around - honestly. It'd spoil all the fun, nothing but stress."

"And I? I can bite nails better than you, huh? ... My god, what a compliment."

Rahewa bent closer, hugged him as good as she could from above. "We both know it's true - and I promise, I'll compensate you."

Clemens grinned. "Fat chance - I'll be so scared then, it'd spoil all the fun, nothing but stress ... Okay, go join your hero."

Rahewa kissed him again. "Thank you, my dear ... And you know, he's just my outdoor hero, and not mine alone, there's someone I'm going to call in a minute, so I'll have protection of my own."

Clemens looked easier. "That's a relieving thought, at least one woman who's aware of what she's doing. Knowing that, I might even find some sleep."

Rahewa went to the bedroom to change clothes. All she knew about Harry's plan was that a building had to be stormed somehow, after fixing the wizards inside, and whatever it meant, she wouldn't be wrong with dark clothes and a solid pair of shoes.

From there, she called Laila. It was no surprise to hear that Harry hadn't asked her yet, probably never would, and it was a warm feeling to hear Laila's thankfulness to be invited to the party, if only for the most egoistic motives. The ex-sergeant would meet them also in the laboratory.

Thinking about other preparations, Rahewa went down into the cellar to fetch a device that had been resting there idly for quite some time, almost since she had bought it. Her broomstick ... A Firebolt Lightning, however a special model - nothing shiny and sparkling, all parts in a dull black. It was the closest thing to a Steel Wing she could get.

She had bought it as a daydream's tool - imagining that one day, she would join Harry in a real fight, him on his real Steel Wing - a combat broomstick no longer available - and herself on this piece, certainly as powerful as a Steel Wing, although without the special features of that remarkable model. Today, as it seemed, this dream should come true.

Unless it changed into a nightmare.

Rahewa jumped to the GTS laboratory - to the outside, that was, because the entire hall was protected by one of the items designed there, for reasons of security. Coming inside, she found Harry and Ray in a discussion, agitated enough so Ray didn't register her approach.

Harry did. Of course. He stiffened, glanced over, saw her, shot around toward Ray. "You old chatterbox, couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you?"

Ray wasn't impressed much. "Well, to be honest, I could, only I didn't feel like it."

Rahewa reached them. "The blame's on me, Harry - I told him, if he ever gets a call from you and doesn't tell me at once, he's going to learn about an Indian's revenge."

Ray looked imploringly at Harry. "A Canadian Indian's, mind - they're the worst."

Rahewa saw Harry's lips twist shortly, steady again. He looked at the broomstick in her hand, and when his eyes widened for an instant, she almost felt like a small girl caught in her mother's high heels, only this had nothing to do with fashion. Then Harry said, "It's bloody serious, Rage. You know that?"

"I thought as much. That's why I'm here."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I might have called you by myself, but I'm glad you saved me from the decision. C'mon, let me hug you now, because in a while there'll be no time."

Which he did, and she responded full-heartedly.

Harry looked at her broomstick again. "How come I'm not surprised at all, seeing a model I never saw before? ... Anyway, I have to tell you what happened so far because these wizards are no lightweights at all ..."

"Not yet," Rahewa interrupted him. "Otherwise you'd have to tell twice."

Of course Harry knew at once whom she meant, and he was the first to look up when moments later the door opened and Laila came in.

Seeing her clothes, Rahewa once more felt like a small girl - Laila wore a real combat dress, missing only the signs of her former rank in the Israeli army. And the leather strap could mean just one thing - there was a sub-machine gun hanging at her back.

Laila reached them, said, "Damn lazy security, that - you could get stolen without even noticing." Then she beamed at them. "As the old saying goes - it's great to be here."

Rahewa greeted her with another hugging, then watched something similar between Laila and Harry - none of them bothering to hide that they felt more than friendship toward each other. But Rahewa felt no envy, in particular since it had been her own ear into which Laila whispered, "Thank's - I'll never forget that."

Then Harry brought them up to date by giving a summary of what had happened since his short conversation with Nagini - the event that blew the wizard's cover so unexpectedly - and what the lieutenant was doing right now.

Listening, Rahewa felt a thrill climb her spine. These kidnappers - apparently more skilled and more powerful than expected, had even managed to take Harry by surprise, which was about the highest grading she could imagine. All these years, she had regretted bitterly not having participated in the Battle of Hogwarts, and today, something similar was about to take place - only with switched roles, the good ones attacking a fortress of the ...

Laila's words interrupted her thoughts. "Be careful how to count, Harry," the ex-sergeant said. "Me and my Uzi are on your side, but my witching's poor, compared to people like you or that lightfooted hotspot here."

Rahewa said, "C'mon, Laila, don't play the shy little ..."

"Shut up!"

Rahewa obeyed, looking with a mix of hurt and bafflement at Laila, who just had given her a demonstration of her expertise in commanding.

Now Laila's voice was calmer, though not warmer than before. "Listen what I'm saying, Rage. This is a fight of one group against another. It's about killing people. And in such a situation, you better know exactly what your partner's up to, and what not ... Allright, and now once more - I'm better with my gun than with my wand, that's what I wanted to make clear."

Seeing Rahewa's face, she added with a short grin, "Hey, I just put you in the same league as Harry, that's no reason to get a huff."

Harry asked, "Okay, Laila, that's understood. But you can stun someone, can't you?"

"Sure, that's not particularly complicated."

"Yes, but for what I expect, that'll be about the most important magic because it's noiseless and because it can be done from a distance - and from the perspective of a SWAT member, it puts you in *our* league, please remember that."

Laila snorted. "Well, okay, right now it starts sounding familiar - there's some people expecting things from you only because they can't do them by themselves ..." She nodded. "Yes, I remember well."

Harry asked, "What about your skill on a broomstick?"

Laila looked startled. "I manage not to fall down - why?"

"We have to place the apparition lock on the roof," explained Harry. "Jumping doesn't work, for obvious reasons, at least not on the way back, so I planned to fly over in the first darkness, and my idea was that you two would give me cover - from some distance, of course, but for sure on broomsticks in the air."

Rahewa knew - it was now or never. "There's a glitch in your planning, Harry."

"Is it?" He looked at her.

"You're planning to do it under your Invisible Cloak, right? ... Well, and there's someone smaller than you, can hide better, and that's me, so we have to switch roles."

Harry examined her, as if measuring her size for the first time. "Yeah, makes a hell of a difference, these few ..."

"My broomstick's shorter too, that's more important, and what counts most - for a real counter attack, your Steel Wing's much better armed, and besides, I'd feel much better to know you're protecting me than the other way around."

Harry's face left little doubt how much he enjoyed this change of plan, only at this moment, Laila said, "She's right - and what's more, if she's really detected, and we have to play the rescuing cavalry, I'd trust your commands more than hers." She turned to Rahewa. "Sorry to say that, but it's the simple truth."

Rahewa beamed at her. "Of course, and that's why your argument's so brilliant ... Thank you."

Harry still looked sour. However, his last reluctance was pushed off by Ray who came over from his worktable and said, "When you're finished complimenting each other, you may have a look at the devices, because I'm finished too."

They walked over to the table.

Laila asked, "Why does it look like a ghetto blaster?"

"Because I took the case from a ghetto blaster," replied Ray. "Saved time - the handle was already there, and the switch, and the openings for the effect tubes - we have no standard model yet to carry it around."

The single-person lock was much smaller, about the size of a portable MP3 player. Lifting the bigger device, Rahewa showed surprise because of its weight.

Ray said, "Now do me a favour and don't confuse the switches - it's this one here."

Rahewa suppressed the temptation to joke around because Ray had selected the sensurround switch. This was serious business, wasn't it, the faces of the others told her as much. An instant later, she was really grateful for her silence, when Ray said, "If someone finds that thing on the roof, he'll never figure out where to switch it off - hopefully, I mean."

Laila said, "I wouldn't even try - I'd just tear it to pieces."

Ray grinned. "You'd be surprised - it's armed inside, that's why it's so heavy."

Rahewa took the box, walked to her Firebolt Lightning and tested the best way of holding it with one hand while steering with the other. She flew a few yards, stopped. "Harry, let's try with your cloak."

Another test showed that the cloak could hide Rahewa herself, the box, and most of the broomstick - provided they fixed it at the tail. So Rahewa stored a roll of spellotape, by pulling it over her wrist like a bracelet.

Then Laila asked if someone could lend her a broomstick, please, preferably a tame one.

Ray disappeared in some storage room and came back with an old Firebolt Two - a bit dusty, still sparkling underneath. He rubbed it clean, held it up. "This one okay?"

"Don't ask me," replied Laila groomily. She turned to Rahewa. "You're the expert - whadd'ya say?"

Rahewa wrinkled her nose. "All that's missing are some position lights. That piece shines from here to Alabama."

"That's okay," said Laila, "since we'll be in California, and that's another direction."

Neither of the two men had twisted a lip at her wisecracking. Harry looked at Ray. Ray nodded, went to his workbench with the Firebolt Two. When he returned, the broomstick wasn't sparkling any longer.

For compensation, Rahewa's eyes lighted up. "That's cool, Ray," she said. "I get the feeling I'm totally unaware of what qualities you can offer."

Ray turned to Harry. "Let's go, before she's going to find new jobs for me. It mightn't play much of a role right now, but you know, she's my boss."

* * *

Laila Belezikijan stood in front of the instruction room. Rahewa stood at her side, Harry at the other, still - she felt as though standing alone here.

Meeting the glances of about fifty SWAT people.

Harry was introducing himself and the other three Magicals. He introduced her as ex-sergeant and as the one who might use her Uzi and her wand as she might feel due, giving her an opportunity to watch the reaction of the audience.

No bad jokes. No sexism. Actually, there were some women among the men, and all of them together seemed a bit older than Laila would have expected, in her mind still used to Israeli standards. The LAPD, however, felt little need for an eighteen-year-old in the SWAT.

Special Weapons Assault Troops, the forces within the police that came closest to military elite troops. Trained to shoot, not to shoot, to wound, or to kill, depending on the situation.

The glances Laila met were calm, appreciating. For all she could sense, these men had stared at her tits, at her sub-machine gun, and had found everything well in place. Exactly what she thought of herself, and that was a good feeling.

Harry asked his fellow Magicals to sit down, which meant on chairs here on this small stage, still a study object for the audience, although Laila was used to that from her own military past. Then Harry turned toward the audience. "We're going to storm a building with about ten people inside. There are two unusual factors in play. One is that these people, or most of them, are Magicals - wizards and witches. I'll talk about this topic in a moment. The other is their tactical plan, and our own planning to destroy theirs."

He pointed at the lieutenant, sitting on a chair close to the door. "Lieutenant Seeger told you that, for all we know, these are the kidnappers we were looking for, and that they might surrender, except he doesn't believe it. I'll tell you why."

Suddenly, Harry stood at the other side of the room.

He let the short gasping fade, said, "I just showed you what's called apparition - the ability to move from one place to another. We must assume that all people in that building can apparate. And for this reason, we assume that they're going to fight us as long as they can, only to disappear in the last moment."

Watching, Laila saw only expectant faces. They all waited to hear how to prevent that.

"Ray here," said Harry, "is the one who prepared the device to lock them in place. The two ladies and I, we'll fly to the building and place that thing on the roof - thank God for flat roofs. We'll use our standard tool for that, our broomsticks. Rahewa here will be the one to carry it over, and she'll be invisible - almost, that is. Laila and I, we'll keep distance and take action only if she's detected."

Harry waited another moment to let the news sink in. "When we're back," he continued, "the storming can start. About that, you know more than I, so let me come to my own topic, which is how to proceed against wizards."

First he asked the audience whether someone had experience with wizards. No they hadn't. Then he informed them about the wizard's standard weapon, the stunning spell, and asked Rahewa to demonstrate it toward a volunteer.

This done, Harry asked the two to try it again, this time with one of these riot shields as protection. The mood in the room improved sensibly when Rahewa's spell flashed off harmlessly.

"So far, so good," said Harry. "Problem is, these wizards know some more tricks." He let the volunteer hold the shield again, ordered him to hold it only single-handed, to avoid broken bones, and sent a spell which pulled the shield out of the man's grip.

Then he asked Rahewa to demonstrate the disarming spell, again with the same volunteer, a Corporal Shapiro. Rahewa caught the flying gun, visibly twisting under the impact, and passed it back to the corporal.

Another man stood up - black, broad, and huge. "Lady," he called, "would you please try it again? ... With me?"

Laila inspected the man's weapon, a semi-automatic assault rifle with a shoulder rest rather than a shaft, a model she knew well. In the hands of this giant, it looked like a toy. Laila stood up, to wait at Rahewa's side.

Rahewa stood waiting. "Ready?"

The black trooper brought the gun into firing position. His grip tightened. "Go ahead."

Rahewa's wand pointed. "*Expelliarmus!*"

The man's grip broke as quickly as that of the former volunteer. Laila hissed, "Mine," made a step forward to catch the flying gun, and probably to save Rahewa from badly hurting knuckles.

She walked through the room, stood face to face with the black trooper. "Don't confuse a witches' physical size with her magical power, sonny boy ... Here's your gun."

The giant stopped rubbing his hands, which had to be hurting like hell. "Got it, Sarge - and while on the subject, lemme tell you, with *your* physical size, there's no confusion whatsoever."

Laila let the laughter fade, examined the huge figure up and down. Keeping her eyes somewhat below the middle, she replied, "Good to know, trooper, but I wonder - would someone say the same about you?"

Then she walked through the howling and whistling back to the stage.

When the room had calmed down, Harry said, "Okay, folks - you may still have some questions, so let me summarize ... Spells have one disadvantage compared to bullets - a spell is visible and always reveals the position of the enemy. If you see a pointing wand, treat it like the nastiest weapon you can imagine, because that's what it is. True - a stunning spell doesn't

leave late effects, only there's the killing curse, and it's sent equally fast. Aside from that - don't forget, these people use guns as well."

They had indeed questions, about magic in general and these kidnapper wizards in particular. For some minutes, Harry answered them, mostly by confirming yes, some wizards could do that while no, they didn't know exactly whether these wizards could do it. Then Laila raised her arm.

The audience registered it quicker than Harry, giving him signs to ask her.

Laila rose. "I'm not the most experienced witch on earth, so this discussion brought some news even for myself. But all I heard confirmed the old army wisdom - to be on the safe side, take your opponent out of combat ... And that's my own question - what does it mean, out of combat? Police rules or army rules?"

For an instant, the room fell quiet.

Then Lieutenant Seeger was up, entered the small stage. "Our situation is this - we have one prisoner, we'd appreciate to have some more but we aren't ready to pay a price. This building contains only suspects, nothing else ... The first shot can't be ours, that's obvious. Afterwards, our policy is to arrest them with minimal risk for ourselves."

Laila stared at him. "Lieutenant, when I enter the next room and see a figure - do I call 'Hands up', or do I use my gun?"

Seeger hesitated. At the same moment, a figure in the first row came up. "I'm Master Sergeant Woods, the leader of this team here, sergeant. The book of rules has a lot to say about your question, but I can cut it down to this - make sure you aren't shot, and none of your teammates either." He turned to Seeger. "The lieutenant is the commanding officer and the one who'll have to answer the press, if you get my drift."

Laila sat down, looking satisfied. "Pretty well, master sergeant."

After some more remarks, the meeting was over, and they still had an hour to wait before the action could start. Killing time immediately before a combat action - Laila felt experienced in that, particularly so as, with every minute, old habits were resurfacing in her mind, and she halfways expected to be the one who would murmur short remarks to some reassuring effect.

In a way, she was right - however only toward Ray, who felt out of place in this situation, in a room without a workbench, normally his preferred place to fight nervousness.

Rahewa, in contrast, was sitting at the floor, back to the wall, side by side with Harry, her legs outstretched in contrast to his lotus stance. Both had their eyes closed, faces calm, showing an attentiveness unlike any sleeper.

They were meditating, and Laila envied them terribly.

Her own mind was racing, imagining scenes, dying a death or two, especially after Ray had found a notepad in which he was scribbling. Maybe ideas, maybe just the graffiti of an edgy engineer.

Somewhere near, Laila could hear that the observation team close to the building was complaining, asked for a replacement, while the lieutenant refused agreeing to any unnecessary car movement in that area.

She closed her eyes, started to memorize every detail she had learned - and forgotten - about broomstick flying, under the special constraint of keeping an arm reserved for her Uzi. She was right in the middle of such a mental exercise when an arm touched her shoulder.

It was Harry. "It's time, Laila."

They drove in a van, with enough room for all four of them, plus their broomsticks, plus some of these kevlar vests and the order to wear them when reaching their destination.

Laila took one. Lighter than expected, still heavy enough, and what was worse - pretty stiff and restricting her in her movements. She donned it, then examined her own body. Head, arms, legs were still unprotected - about fifty percent protected at the cost of feeling as flexible as with an iron lung.

About to drop the thing again, her eyes met those of Harry. He said, "If only for Seeger's peace of mind - please keep it."

Laila made a face, nodded, then tested seriously how much the vest was impairing her movements. She wouldn't be able to do the gun dance, the fluid movement that brought the Uzi from her back into her hands, but so what - she would hold it ready anyway.

The van stopped. The man in the passenger seat, a short-legged, pot-bellied surveillance technician, turned around, looked at Harry. "We're about half a mile south of the building. This here - " he held up an item smaller than a pack of cigarettes, "is your receiver. You fly ..."

He was interrupted by Harry pointing at Rahewa. "She's the one who'll place the lock - talk to her."

The surveillance man's eyes grew big and round for an instant, astonishingly well suited to his plump body. Then he caught himself, looked at Rahewa. "Alright, lady - store it so you don't lose it. You'll hear us through your phony. I'm *Red Post*, and if you hear me telling you that you're on track, it means you're flying straight northward. The other van is *Blue Post*, it's located eastward. If their bearing of your receiver matches the direction of the building, and you're still on track according to my bearing, the building is right under your feet ... Got it?"

Rahewa took the receiver, said, "You won't shout, would you?"

"Rather not." The technician looked at the driver. "Unless Hank here's going to tell me a joke, and I can't stop laughing."

Without turning, the driver said, "Don't worry about that, sweetheart - he always misses the punch line."

Rahewa issued a choked sound, something between a giggling and a snorting. "Sorry - I guess that's been a stupid remark."

"Not really," said the technician. "I'm in that business for some years, and I can tell you - a stupid remark sounds different, take my word for it ... Before taking off, let's have a short test. From then on, just listen - we don't expect you to say *Roger* all the time."

Laila had followed this exchange with interest, because she had missed these preparations completely, also because this ugly gnome seemed quite competent in his job. Suddenly she realized that she had no idea how to escort Rahewa, turned to Harry. "And how do we follow?"

"Carefully, and at some distance."

"Really? ... What I mean, how do we know where she is? Do you have a direction finder of your own?"

"Kind of ..." Harry showed a short smile. "I'm not going to lose her, and you keep at my side."

"Yeah, just what I had in mind."

They climbed out. Harry asked Rahewa whether approaching at a height of hundred feet sounded okay for her. When Rahewa nodded, he said they'd follow her at two hundred feet, and something like hundred yards behind.

Then he helped Rahewa to fix the Invisible Cloak at the tail fin of her Firebolt, and next moment, the girl disappeared, together with most of her broomstick.

Harry mounted his Steel Wing, said, "Let's go," and disappeared also - only that craning her neck was all Laila had to do for spotting him twenty feet up in the air.

She jumped up, muttering almost inaudibly toward herself. She wasn't used to this kind of action, she couldn't fly a broomstick as Harry and Rahewa could, following an empty spot of air gave her the creeps ... In all this mess, there was just one aspect very familiar and thus calming her nerves - all of a sudden, things developed so fast, she found no time to worry.

She climbed further up, flying a spiral she would have called sharp and courageous but only until a minute ago, before she had seen Harry gaining height. On the other side, maybe it had to do with his Steel Wing, providing a helicopter style beyond the reach of her poor old Firebolt Two.

Except she didn't think so.

Reaching him where he was floating motionlessly in the air, Laila felt a deep desire to find a target for her Uzi, or some other situation in which she might have a chance to look experienced and cool and profess ...

"Follow me."

Laila obeyed the command, wondering for a moment why Harry didn't mind talking so loudly, wondering also where he had learned Hebrew - until she realized that the command had reached her at a mental level, and that the translation into words had been the work of her own brain with its obvious tendency to use Hebrew.

They kept a slow pace, more than enough time to scan around and to gain a new respect for chopper pilots. This could only be Rahewa's decision, had nothing to do with Laila's own limited skill ... Of course - the Invisible Cloak wasn't the ideal suit up here, and Rahewa wasn't going to put more pressure on the tail fixing than unavoidable.

Laila's eyes had adapted to the darkness. She could recognize contours down there on the ground, and she felt pretty sure to have their destination identified - some spots of light, slowly gaining shape, no doubt windows in that building which had free space all around, according to Seeger's description.

She was flying at the right and some feet behind Harry, in the meantime even at a steady pace after her initial changing between too fast and too slow. So she realized him stopping even before his command reached her mind, followed his example, feeling pride to have kept her position.

Harry didn't comment on what he was watching with his *haragei*, however Laila could imagine anyway. Rahewa was probably descending, scanning the flat roof for a good place where to store the lock that looked like a ghetto blaster, and on this L-shaped building, the most natural choice would be in the middle where ...

That stupid bitch had switched to full volume!

This first thought crossed Laila's mind and was dismissed at once, all in a fleeting instant before she realized - some alarm system had gone off down there, most likely from Rahewa touching down on the roof or crossing a sensor field ...

She saw Harry losing height, his right arm holding the wand ready, and at the same moment, her instincts of a gun-armed infantry trooper kicked in. Tilting the Firebolt forward, Laila started to dive, reached Harry, hissed, "We must go down at the roof, and hold this territory - they'll come up any second now." Her last words were more of a shout because she had passed him already.

She was falling like a stone, crashing out of the sky like an eagle with scorched feathers. Oh God, she'd never put that broomstick to a halt in time, only her instincts were screaming for ground contact, which meant the stone-covered tar paper of a flat roof ... Paratroopers hung in the air helplessly for twenty seconds at the minimum, that's why this method was outdated for quite a while, so what crazy planning had brought her into this stupid situation, any second now the first head would appear, and if she started shooting, she'd forget to stop and crash with undiminished speed onto ...

A shadow passed her, giving her the perspective of floating, so fast had it crossed her level, and a shout reached her ears, "Brake!"

Yes, probably so, broken legs didn't feel any better than catching a bullet, although this was just guesswork because Laila knew how a bullet felt while she never had broken the smallest bone, and wasn't it incredible how much she could think while the airstream burned her eyes, while through the tears she registered a head, a figure appearing at the border of the roof, right arm outstretched, no doubt holding a gun.

Out of empty air, from the middle where the two wings of the roof connected, a flash shot across, hit the figure which fell like a puppet, covering the ladder platform.

Good girl, had kept her position, and that was the difference between spell and bullet - the bullet would have kicked that man over the edge, and that was Laila's own keyword too, because she was shooting across the roof, the border closing in frighteningly fast, and if she'd mess up now ...

Laila let go, hit the pebble, rolled around and around, spread her legs to stop, not shaken harder than after a jump exit from a chopper, had her Uzi ready while the Firebolt Two zoomed over the edge and disappeared in the darkness.

* * *

Harry had expected the flash from Rahewa's spell, simply because he knew her position through his *haragai*. Still, he encountered a very bad moment while watching Laila's untrained efforts to manage an emergency stop on the roof.

He saw her rolling, saw her stop hard, his own breath coming in between clenched teeth - this looked as if Laila had sacrificed some square inches of skin in favour of a quick combat position.

Seeing the Uzi come up, aiming around, Harry could concentrate on his own situation again. Keeping low, he crawled to the end of his own wing - from here, he could survey the major part of the building's opposite wing.

On top of that wing, he saw Laila doing the same.

There was a movement behind a window. Harry suppressed the urge to blast all windowpanes inside - *the first shot won't be ours*, Carl had said, and a destructive spell counted as a shot for sure. Glancing over, he saw Laila lying quietly, and for all he could sense, she knew exactly where to aim, once the deadly dance was opened.

At this moment, the noise of an engine reached Harry's ear, the low barking of a strong diesel. Then he spotted it - an armoured vehicle, funny-looking with its eight big wheels and the flat body. The vehicle stopped. A cracking sound, then the unmistakable voice of Lieutenant Seeger came through a loudspeaker somewhere at the vehicle, telling the people in the building that the place was surrounded, that they were arrested, and that they should come outside with their hands upon their heads.

Well, Carl hadn't told them anything new, as Harry realized - not after the guy sent up to the roof hadn't returned, without anyone else trying to figure out what happened to him. But now the score was set, this short moment of quietness already counted as resistance against being arrested.

If they'd only send a bullet.

In some distance, figures were stepping closer, carrying portable shields and pushing shields on wheels. The scene looked like a remake of Ben Hur as a comedy - Roman legionnaires with chariots, only they'd forgotten the horses.

A flash shot through the darkness - from the building to the armoured vehicle, changed to a steady beam. A second beam fixed on the vehicle, almost the same spot. The eight-wheeler trembled, seemed to move ...

Upward! Which meant these were levitation charms, the synchronized efforts of two wizards, and in a few seconds, they'd have lifted the vehicle sufficiently to let it drop headfirst.

This was as good as a shot, wasn't it? Harry sent his own spell toward the building front from which the first beam originated, a spell of the blasting kind, strong and furious.

A cracking, then a thousand bells chimed while the remnants of the windowpanes came raining down, partly outside, mostly inside.

One beam had vanished. The second spell couldn't hold the weight alone, the vehicle bumped down onto the ground, maybe from a height of two feet or so. The low barking started again, and the eight-wheeler moved closer toward the building. At a distance of about thirty feet, it stopped. A short, thick barrel came up, and with sounds like coughing, the barrel started to spit dark objects into the building.

They looked like soda cans. After a few seconds, Harry saw smoke clouds inside.

Brrrap - the sound and the tiny flashes from the muzzle told Harry that Laila had started shooting. Probably her counter against an attempt to attack the armoured vehicle from the other wing.

Harry caught himself at an attempt to apparate to the middle of the roof, to a spot close to Rahewa. Shaking his head about such foolishness, he crawled forward.

Suddenly Rahewa's head floated a foot over the pebble, and her mouth said, "Harry - here I am."

"You look great - a head and nothing else. I'm going to reach the other side, so I can blast in the second front too."

"Then you should hurry - Red Post told me they're shooting cans of tear gas inside, only it's a special mix, spiced up with something nasty, he said, and we should disappear from the roof before the clouds reach us here."

"Except we're one broomstick short ..." Harry thought a second. "Listen - you should move up, fifty feet or hundred, ask him which height is safe, and keep there to guard the lock device. From above, you can stun anyone who's trying to reach that thing."

"And you?"

"I'm going to break some windows, and then I'll take Laila on my back and go down, behind the lines. Tell Red Post he should inform the people in the vehicle that, in a few seconds, they'll have another front to fill."

Rahewa grinned. "Seems as if I got the most boring task in this action, huh? Only I can blame nobody but myself ... Okay, see you later."

Harry crawled the other wing along, saw Laila glance in his direction and then watching the building front again, once sending a short burst from her Uzi.

He reached her. "Hi. We have to leave - they're shooting tear gas with something else, and we shouldn't catch it."

"I know - smelled it already. Problem is, I lost my horse."

Laila's eyes were fixed on the building front, her face calm, only her voice confirmed what Harry could feel anyway - fury toward herself, mixed with embarrassment. He said, "My Steel Wing carries both of us, only you mustn't touch it, that's why I'll be your horse for travelling back."

Laila snorted. "Please avoid the cameras."

"Okay - but first lemme play my favourite sport with buildings."

"This time with me watching, because the first time I could only hear and feel, and to be honest, it was a bit frightening."

"Said the lady with the machine gun." Harry sent his second blasting spell, less impressive than the first, simply because Laila had already destroyed her own good share of windowpanes.

The eight-wheeler below could be heard while not seen - Harry and Laila kept away from the edge to avoid the gas. However, a moment later, the vehicle appeared in their view, stopped, and the short barrel sent one shot after the other into the new target area.

"Let's go," said Harry. "The Steel Wing is still at the other side."

"How forgetful of you." Laila started crawling, showing considerably more expertise in this particular movement than Harry.

They had passed a few yards when a sound like the blowing of a child's balloon reached Harry's ear - the fraction of a second before his eyes registered a cloud of pebble, tar paper, and splinters of wood and concrete blow into the air. The other wing of the roof, not too far from the center where the ghetto blaster was visible, suddenly had a large hole, about eight feet long and five feet wide.

The explosion had sent the debris upward, rather than to the sides - when it came raining down, only some pebbles reached their position.

Laila's gun aimed toward the hole. She said, "There's someone who knows how to handle explosives ... An emergency exit, but what is it good for?"

Yes, why ... "Oh shit - they're trying to escape on broomsticks." Harry had a nasty feeling of vulnerability in his stomach, here on a roof which might blow up any moment, for another hole just where he'd stopped.

A flash shot from the sky into the hole. At the same instant, they saw a figure on a broomstick float up, already falling to the side, disappearing in the hole.

Harry reacted instinctively. His wand pointing, he shouted, "Accio broomstick!"

The thing zoomed over the roof, closely missing the ghetto blaster, stopped in front of him - a Firebolt Three.

"Here's your replacement," he said. "Up with you - and keep moving, in contrast to Rahewa you aren't invisible." As if confirming his words, shooting could be heard from below the hole, probably into the direction where the flash had come from.

Harry summoned his Steel Wing as he had summoned the stunned wizard's Firebolt. Mounting the broomstick, he saw another flash hitting the hole, feeling relieved that the angle was totally different - so Rahewa was clever enough to change her position after every spell she sent.

He jumped up into the air, waited until Laila had followed, then called, "Can you guard that hole together with Rahewa? I want to fetch some of these gas cans, to throw them into the hole from above."

"No - I mean, save it ..." Laila pointed down. "Look, the first smoke's curling up from the hole. There must be some hell inside, I think these were the last attempts of organized resistance." She showed a wolfish grin. "I guess the doors inside had lots of glass windows too, and your spell made sure none of them were left intact."

"Then I'll go down to join the SWAT people, to be ready when the wizards come out and try a last trick."

Laila stopped grinning. "Be careful, Harry - that's exactly the situation where you can catch a bullet from your own people."

She certainly knew what she was talking about - this kind of accident had been the beginning of their relationship. "In this case," replied Harry, "you should come with me. Rahewa's enough guard if you're right about the conditions inside, and nobody's going to shoot at you - they remember you from the meeting."

"Yeah, sure - under this body armour, everyone looks the same."

Harry grinned. "I was talking about your hair, don't know what you mean."

The thought of firm ground under her feet apparently had strong appeal for Laila. They flew a wide circle upward, passed the ring of the surrounding SWAT men, touched down fifty yards behind, and started walking.

Still from a distance of twenty yards, Laila called at them. Some guns were indeed swinging around, only these were controlled movements. Even so, Harry got the feeling Laila's female voice had been quite helpful to avoid a nasty confusion.

The armoured vehicle had retreated from the building. The place in front was empty, under the illumination from some strong spotlights and with the smoke clouds coming from the windows, it looked as if waiting for the fire brigade.

Stepping closer, they found the lieutenant outside of the vehicle. Using its cover, he was watching the scene.

Registering them, he turned around. "What happened up there?"

"Three stunned wizards," replied Harry. "The first came looking when the alarm went off - he used the fire exit ladder. That's where he's still lying - stunned. The other two tried to escape on broomsticks, after they blew a hole in the roof."

"Broomsticks ..." Seeger shook his head. "That's something we didn't expect, did we? Using them by ourselves, and ..." He wrinkled his nose. "So this alarm was our good luck, because it nailed you at the roof."

Laila asked, "Did anyone come out already?"

"Not really - one figure reached the entrance and did something other than holding the arms up and visible ... Must be lying just inside."

Laila pointed at the wing that had been her target range. "And another one must be lying behind one of these windows. I shot him."

Seeing Seeger's face, she added, "He had something on his shoulder that looked pretty much like a bazooka, and it was directed toward this car with you inside. I thought you'd appreciate me stopping him."

The lieutenant pursed his lips, nodded slowly. "Come to think of it, sergeant, you're awfully right." Almost thoughtful, he added, "We'll make it one of our bullets in the report - it's simpler that way."

Harry asked, "Carl, what's going to happen now? Storming the building?"

"Certainly not. We'll just wait - could be the others are lying somewhere inside, unconscious, only we're not sure, and I don't give a damn if they choke to death, whether from that gas or from hurt pride."

"Would it help if I start blowing the building to pieces?"

Seeger chuckled. "Not particularly much, Harry. Even Sheila won't be able to find the proper words for ..."

He stopped because a figure had appeared in the entrance with the broken door. It stumbled forward, hands folded over its head, twisting under spasms of coughing.

A second figure appeared two steps behind, the same stance, the same coughing.

Seeger bent down, came up with a megaphone, held it to his mouth. "Get down - face to the ground - arms spread - legs spread."

The first figure went down on its knees. The second one seemed caught by a stronger fit of coughing, the arms came forward as if supporting the head ...

"They have wands ..."

Harry's voice drowned in the rattling of Laila's Uzi, instantly followed by a shout from the lieutenant. Both the kneeling and the standing figure were twisting but not falling, their arms coming forward ...

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Harry.

Two wands were pulled out of two hands, came flying through the air. The hands jerked up from this attack, and for the SWAT troopers around, this looked exactly as if both had fired some invisible guns.

The same troopers also had registered that Laila's bursts had hit the bodies without effect, which meant these two figures wore the same body armours under their shirts as the troopers themselves.

In response to that, they aimed toward the heads. Just before the two bodies slumped to the ground, Harry and Laila could watch how the two faces vanished, in the literal sense, like wiped off from the blood and flesh and bones underneath.

14 - Intermezzo

Ireen poured coffee into Harry's cup, then into her own. It was more of a gesture to temper her impatience than for real need, the cups were only halfway emptied. She put down the can. "And then?"

They were sitting at a table counting as breakfast for Harry and as a late lunch for herself, while Tanitha in her high chair didn't mind the terminology, as long as she had something to chew on. Although - the girl seemed close to the point of falling asleep, and considering the style of conversation, you could think Harry was fighting a similar problem.

Which wasn't really true. Yes, it had been a very short night for him, after returning in the early morning hours from that raid near Santa Monica. Now he was sitting here, chewing as mechanically as Tanitha, and Ireen had to press hard for the scarce description she was earning.

But sleepiness and a full mouth together couldn't be the only reasons for Harry's monosyllabic style. Maybe it had to do with his dislike against presenting himself as the cool-minded hero in the tale.

He swallowed his bite, sipped some coffee. "Then ... We waited some more minutes, but nobody else came out. When Seeger gave the signal to move in, we three went up on our broomsticks to bring the three stunned wizards down. We did ... The one who'd been sent to check the roof - he's the only one still alive."

"What? - Of these three?"

"No - of all of them. Aside from those we knew about, they found two more corpses inside. One had died from too much gas, or lack of oxygene, whatever, and the other - a young woman, maybe some office clerk, perhaps another member of that gang, anyway, she was shot."

Ireen looked horrified. "From their own people?"

"Yes." Harry dropped the remnants of his roll, seized for his cup again. "Carl thinks she was trying to surrender, or to persuade the others to give up, or something like that ..."

"And the two that were stunned by Rahewa?"

"Shot wounds in head and chest ..." Harry looked at Ireen. "Sounds familiar, huh?"

The remark was rude by conventional standards, incredibly so by Harry's own - Ireen stared at him for an instant, just long enough to realize that his anger wasn't directed toward herself. She said, "Wanna shock me? ... Every citizen in the States knows this is the standard execution method in gangs, so what the hell are you trying to say?"

"I don't know ... Sorry."

A suspicion rose in her. "Are you blaming yourself for these killings?"

Harry leaned back, exhaled. "Not really - not directly, that is." He raised his hand. "Wait, hear me out ... I'm not going to cry a single tear after them, don't worry about that. It's just that the two survivors have been some borderline figures in that group, for all we can see. An alarm goes off on the roof - whom do you send, the boss man? ... Certainly not."

He made a fist, however without crashing it on the table. "Why, why, why didn't I stun the two coming out?"

She couldn't follow instantly. "You mean they were still alive then? So what? Would be four rather than two - who cares except them?"

"Ireen!" Harry's voice expressed some impatience. "These were the heads, won't you agree about that? ... If I'd stunned them, they'd collapsed, no reason to shoot - but no, this would have been just too simple, it had to be the brilliant elegance of the disarming spell ... And it pulled them forward, and this looked like the recoiling of a firing gun, and next moment, they had no faces any longer ... So much for elegance, and now Carl's trying to find the tiniest proof that these were the kidnappers."

"Is there any doubt?"

"Not for me, not for Carl, not for anyone's been there. Doesn't count much - the two survivors are never going to talk - they'd face death sentence, while now, Carl has even trouble finding a reason for arrest."

"I see." Ireen stood up, walked behind Harry's chair, bent down. "You know what? You're suffering from an overdose of crime. I'm not entirely sure whether I'd get Cho's approval, but anyway - I think I should give you an overdose of an antidote."

"Oh my God." Harry twisted.

Ireen walked back to her chair, sat down. "Thanks a lot - comments like that really turn me on."

A rare view - Harry's face blood-red. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "for a moment, I thought you were serious."

That made her more upset than his first reaction. "You think I'm joking?" Her hand went to her belt, came up with the phony. "Wait a sec - just lemme ask Cho, and give her a chance to join this particular party ..."

She had known how fast he could move, hadn't she? Still, it was a bit perplexing to see him suddenly right in front of her, holding her hand with the phony. In some way, it was a bit arousing too.

"Please, Ireen." Harry's voice was begging.

She looked up. "You mean - just us two?"

His grip at her hand loosened, and a smile appeared in his face. "Maybe we should have a cold shower together."

"Does it work? I never tried that." She felt the moment fade, wondering whether she should be glad or disappointed.

Harry bent down, kissed her lightly. "I'm in a bad mood - I was, a moment ago, and that's not a good basis. Otherwise - asking Cho's definitely the right step."

"I might come back to that topic - although," Ireen grinned, "if you're running around in California while it's evening here, that'd be something else."

Harry sat down again. "I think I can be back in time." He seized for his forgotten roll, resumed eating.

Thinking about the new situation, Ireen said, "Now that the kidnappers are caught - or dead - I could return any time, isn't that so?"

Again Harry stopped chewing, swallowed. "Do you like being pestered by the press? Wanna see yourself in the seven o'clock news? Or the picture of your house in TV, with someone smiling into the camera and telling everyone that you refused any comment?"

"No, thanks." After a moment of silence, Ireen said, "I'm not even sure whether I want to go back at all. This place here - " she stopped, looking alarmed, corrected herself, "I mean, the area here, the people, even the rain ..."

Harry examined her. "This castle offers a lot of room," he said. "For more than four people, and for all shades of being together or keeping to yourself. If you fell in love with it ..." He let the words hang in the air.

"I'm not sure yet," she replied hesitantly. "If so, it weren't the walls alone ..."

"Yes, I know," he interrupted her, "the floors have this special charme, and the ceilings look so inviting - not to forget the windows and the ..."

"Please don't tease me, Harry, you know what I mean, the people, and all of them - you, Cho, your children, the house-elves ... The atmosphere altogether. I know I'm going to miss it."

He asked, "Do you trust me?"

"What?? ... Yes, of course ..."

"Cho too?"

Ireen stared at him uncomprehending. "Yes! And Sandra, and Gabriel ... " In an attempt to ridicule the moment, she added, "And most of all I trust Nagini - why?"

"Because it doesn't look that way. Nobody told you to go, and still you can't relax at the thought of staying."

"Oh." She smiled tentatively, grew serious again. "I see. But you know, taking it to such an extreme - I'm not used to it, it's ... it's so un-American."

A sparkling glowed in his eyes. "And un-Japanese too," he said, "terribly so ... Then it must be Irish."

"Yeah - as Irish as Beverly."

They both laughed about this picture of a girl famous for saying out aloud her exact thoughts.

Harry startled Ireen by first catching Tanitha's attention and then the child itself, all this without a single word - and without a single movement from his side, except for his arms which took the floating girl and put her on his lap. Then he said, "Do you want to join your daughter?"

"Huh?" Ireen almost flushed, feeling an instant of embarrassment - for a second, she had taken the question literally, just when it had crossed her mind that right now, an offer like the one before might find more fertile ground ...

Harry showed a quick grin. "Do you want to be a witch, Ireen?"

This time, she flushed seriously. With some effort, she said, "Maybe that's the only real drawback in this household - you just can't have a secret ... Not even a moment's thinking." The last words came as a whisper, managed only because her cheeks were burning anyway.

"It cuts both ways," Harry replied, his eyes at Tanitha. "Guess why I snatched that sweet bundle here out of the high chair?"

This remark did little to calm Ireen down, more the opposite. "Isn't she supposed to be my roadblock, and yours Nagini?" Her breath had quickened a bit.

Harry glanced at her. "You won't believe how much I'm tempted to play a little game with mind waves ..."

"Why don't you do it?" Her voice sounded strangled - the memory of his way to heat up a roaring fire was almost too much at this moment.

"Because even touchless sex is ruled by the same principle - but I promise to come home in time." He stood up. "So the answer is yes, isn't it?"

"Yes."

He came over, put Tanitha in her arms. "Here - I'll talk with Sandy about this issue, so she can ask the High Priestess ... Time for me to catch some Californian sun."

Ireen asked, "Do you think she'll agree?"

Harry stopped at the door. "It's definitely a matter of when and where, not if ... See you later."

Ireen went upstairs with the girl and tucked Tanitha in her bed. Sitting down on her own, she stared at the wall, lost in thoughts. Being a witch ... The emotion was so strong, she felt the heat return, a quivering between her legs.

How would it be? Playing tricks with a wand - and which spells were good to play games with a body? Or two? ... She wasn't going to make it till the evening, not in this state, her mind failing to stop these pictures, of a wand gliding over her belly, her thighs, its tip touching her core, parting her, smooth and cool and hard and powerful ...

For some moments, she kept lying motionlessly, imagining what the evening would offer. Then she realized - if she didn't get up in a hurry and find something to kill the time, she would spoil the anticipation for herself. Falling asleep within the next five seconds would be a solution ...

Only she wouldn't. So maybe she really should try a cold shower - despite her serious doubts that the effect would be calming.

* * *

Harry entered the precinct, reached the large room with the many desks and the few door-separated cubicles, found them unusually empty, including Seeger's own micro office. At least, Sheila was seated on her chair.

Part of her, that was, while the rest bulged to both sides.

He walked over. "Hi, Sheila. Where's everybody?"

"Most of them are in that building, or what you left of it, scanning every square inch for evidence." Sheila grinned. "And crying like never before - this gas is sticky."

"And Carl?"

The grin faded. "In the headquarters, for rapport. They're grilling him over a low fire."

"Why?"

Sheila rolled her eyes. "You are no cop, Harry, and certainly not an LA cop, otherwise you wouldn't ask that question. Eight people dead, two arrested, a building just good for the demolition crew, and not the smallest bit of evidence that these scumbags violated any law other than spitting on the sidewalk."

"Now wait a sec - at least three of them were killed by their own people. What about that?"

"Yeah, okay ..." Sheila leaned back, to which the poor chair responded with a desperate squeak. "Nobody's going to believe these were innocent citizens, but last night's raid was supposed to nail the kidnappers, and from this perspective, we haven't even got the black under the nails - zilch, Harry ... And the two survivors - the one from the roof is in the hospital, busy to file a lawsuit against the LAPD for gas poisoning and against an unknown attacker who knocked him down ..."

"Is he, huh?" Harry felt his rage growing.

"Yes, and your present from the car crash is screaming about unjustified arrest - I wonder how long we'll have the pleasure of his company."

"Then let me interrogate him - or the one in the hospital."

Sheila watched his face. "Definitely not, Harry - we've got trouble enough from yesterday's action, no need to pile up more."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Say, is this a complaint?"

She snorted. "You didn't ask me to sugarcoat it for you, Harry, did you? ... That's the system here, it protects criminals much better than us other idiots. If you want to do Carl a favour, find evidence, is all that matters."

Her voice grew a bit softer. "But calm down first - if you want to hear something that'd help in that direction, talk with Woods - you've got yourself a friend in the master sergeant, says he never before had a gig like that, none of his people hurt ..."

Yes, Sheila's words alone were already good to soothe Harry's temper.

"... only he's SWAT, and they give a damn for evidence." Sheila drew a face. "Don't think I'm unthankful, Harry, but just between you and me - if any of them had caught a bullet in the leg or so, our most pressing problems would be solved."

That's crazy, thought Harry, had the wisdom not to speak it out. Instead, he asked, "Would it make sense to join your colleagues in that building?"

"Not really - you are no detective, you just don't know how to work in such a situation." Sheila's grin came back. "And besides - you won't like it there, and what's worse, they won't like you, since there's no one else to blame for that tearful mess."

"Evidence, you said ..." Harry thought a moment. "What would be evidence?"

Sheila's answer came instantly. "The money - or part of it."

A desperate idea crossed Harry's mind. "Would it help to store a million in that building?"

For the first time since his arrival, Sheila's glance showed something like respect. "Nice try, but too late - you know, fake evidence isn't exactly a foreign term here around."

Talking about money had raised another thought in Harry. "Maybe Paul has an idea how to find it," he said, "but for sure I want to talk with the two surviving wizards. When do you expect Carl back from his barbecue?"

"After he's well done," came the reply. Then Sheila shook her head. "Harry - Carl will be the first to make sure you won't come near them, not closer than a mile - the media pack's already salivating their fangs, and the smallest irregularity ... No, I'm afraid private wizards aren't welcome in this story."

Yes, unfortunately so, and Harry could even understand the lieutenant. Which didn't change his dire need to have a conversation with them, at least with his sand dune acquaintance ... A real conversation, coming on strong wouldn't help, conventional methods of third grade would fail for sure, only Harry could imagine some tricks of the subtle kind ...

To no avail, as long as he couldn't reach that man. Even if he knew the location, he couldn't jump in because the prison was locked of course ... Having reached that point in his thoughts, Harry started to grin.

Sheila registered it. She said, "I don't think I should ask you now, Harry - can't help thinking it's pretty unlawful what's crossing your mind."

His grin broadened. "Sheila, you're a clever girl, do you know that?"

"Tell me something new." However, in her face suspicion was fighting with pride.

"Okay, and here it is - let the van driver go."

Watching her face, Harry could see that the surprise held for little more than a second. Then Sheila's eyes narrowed again. "I don't like a truth at any price, Harry."

He smiled. "You're as quick as I thought, only this time you've left yourself behind - I'm not going to torture him, for example because it won't be any help at all ... He's extremely tough, the only promising method is a superior mind."

Which was certainly true, except that Harry wouldn't tell Sheila what it meant in his family, a superior mind.

However, maybe that was exactly the reason why she didn't look convinced. "Then what are you going to do with him?"

"My only unlawful doing will be to hold him in a place which is not his own choice, otherwise with all luxury he's going to ask for ... Maybe with the exception of the latest news."

"You think he knows where the money is?"

"You mean to follow him unnoticed?" Harry thought it over. "Won't work, and besides, I'm sure he'll wait quite a while. But the longer I think about him, the more I'm sure he wasn't the lowest rank in the group - not like the guy on the roof."

Sheila kept silent for a moment, then asked, "You need to be there when he's coming out, right?"

"Yes. The moment he leaves the locking field, he'll jump - and I must be there to follow."

"And then?"

"First I'll wait whether he leads me to some place worth checking, although that's pretty unlikely - not that guy. And then - then I'll make him follow me."

"How?"

"It's called summoning. I do it all the time, but normally by mutual agreement, as a way of travelling."

Sheila nodded. "Make sure you can be reached any time, Harry. If I tell Carl about your suggestion, he's going to sniff the plan at once, and at the current state of things, that's what I'd call sub-optimal." The desk sergeant with the great devotion to her job looked at Harry expressionlessly. "Even so - expect him to be released within the next two or three days. I have a contact in that prison - " her voice turned bitter, "I can tell you, without that, we'd be the last to hear about his release."

Harry said, "Thank you, Sheila ... Should you ever get tired of being a cop, gimme a call ..."

She interrupted him. "Don't hold your breath, sweetheart."

"... No, but just in case - and in the meantime, do you need something to - er, improve the matter?" Seeing her face turning cold, Harry added hastily, "I mean, for that contact?"

Sheila's expression softened. "That's none of your business, Harry."

"Okay. But you won't turn me down coming with a Turkish pizza, would you?"

The generously padded face started to grin. "Ab-so-lu-ly not."

* * *

Paul Sillitoe dropped the morning newspaper, wondering idly whether it wasn't time to dress properly. Maybe so, only what was the hurry - with him alone in poor Tony's apartment, enjoying something that felt like vacation, Kathleen had left for work already a while ago, and even if she'd be there - would this be a reason to dress?

Quite the opposite.

Except that right now the door bell chimed.

Having a distinct feeling about who'd be standing outside, Paul suddenly felt a weird embarrassment, only it was too late. He closed the garment he was wearing - one of Tony's kimonos, these wonderfully smooth pieces seemed to fit everyone - and walked to the door.

Right he'd been ... Damn. Paul opened the door.

Harry saw him - and started to laugh.

Feeling his cheeks burn, Paul said, "Come in and tell me what's so funny - no, actually it might be better you don't."

Harry stepped in, waited until Paul had closed the door and turned to him. Then, examining the kimono, he said, "Let's make a compromise - I tell you the part you really don't know."

"And what would that be?"

"Kimonos are closed counter-clockwise. Only corpses at a funeral wear it like that."

From most other people, Paul would have suspected this to be a hoax. But not from Harry, not at the sight of his killed friend's kimono worn by somebody else. So, walking ahead, Paul

took the opportunity to correct his mistake. Glancing around, he said, "I hope you don't mind me using Tony's items, only they're just too comfortable ..."

"Yes they are, aren't they?" Without losing his knowing grin, Harry added, "Let me assure you - Tony in first place, Ireen next, and finally I for myself provide their full support in you gaining new experiences about the breathtaking touch of soft silk around a male body ... Initially, at least."

Paul muttered, "Then how come that doesn't sound relieving at all?"

"Because of your bad puritan conscience." Harry's expression grew serious. "To help you in that, Paul - I spoke with Ginny some time ago, it was a disaster, and the only relevant information - whatever will be in the future, don't worry about unbalanced accounts of unfaithfulness ... Concentrate on the lady - eh, the time being and give it the credit it deserves."

"Are you serious?" Next instant, Paul was in a haste to say, "No, sorry, I take it back, I know you are, it's just me needing a moment to adjust."

Harry smiled. "Are *you* serious, then?"

"Beats me. Currently, we're still too busy with - er, well, getting used to each other." Paul felt like skating on ice, discussing such matters with a failed brother-in-law, especially if this person was called Harry Potter - basically it was great, only you didn't know when something hard and unfriendly would hit your back ... Or your nose, for that matter.

Harry seemed to sense this kind of uncertainty. Sitting down, he said, "Paul, I wish you the best, whatever it means, on a scale ranking from a comfortable dressing-gown, over a fuck-and-breakfast vacation, to a long-term relationship. The same goes toward Ginny, and if that's bound to be two different issues, who's there to blame?"

"Maybe nobody." After a moment of silence, Paul said, "Maybe I've been using you as the screen toward which I could project my bad conscience - " he showed a quick grin, "and what you just said - somewhere I knew it already, only now it takes away my black goat, so I'm the only one left for that role." He chuckled. "Even so - thank you, Harry."

Harry sighed. "Give it a rest for a while. The only crime you could commit would be toward Kathleen. She certainly deserves an open mind ..." Another grin, "... in addition, I mean."

Paul suppressed the temptation to check whether his light dress was covering him decently. He said, "Yes, you're right. But you didn't come to discuss my love-life, did you?"

"Just taking the opportunity." Getting serious, Harry told him about yesterday's events and the current legal state. He finished, "Regardless of what the authorities will say, Paul, from my side, the situation's clear - you've done the job, and your bank's next balance sheet will tell you that there's no hurry to end this vacation here."

Paul felt uneasy. "Hey - wait a second. I told you some names, none of them were a hit, then by some accident you stumble over the real culprits, and that should be honoured with a quarter of a million?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Three-fifty - the reward was raised after Tony's case, pretty much as expected." Although his face kept steady, there was little doubt that Harry had fun at this reply.

"It feels so uncomplete," muttered Paul. He looked up. "Listen, I know how you think about it - in a way I agree with you, and it's not exactly as if I'd steal a blind beggar's earnings, still ..."

Harry watched him for a moment. "Maybe I have the solution for your problem, and for mine too."

"That'd be great. And how?"

"Well, as I told you, there's no trace of the money. If we could find that, it would be the missing proof ... And in addition, it would make sure you get the official reward."

Paul twisted. "For God's sake, Harry - do you know what you're asking of me?"

"Wait, wait - I don't expect you to do miracles, Paul, I know how little space a few millions occupy, trust my word, I've seen them. But it's worth an attempt, don't you think so? You feel better, I feel better because I didn't know what to offer for such a potentially impossible task ..."

Paul snorted, "That's a crazy argument."

"... yeah, maybe so, but you know what I mean, don't you? And look at it seriously - you're used to uncover scandels, I'm no expert but I'm sure money channels are always part of these stories, so it's not out of the question that you'd have an idea or two where to look."

With some bafflement, Paul realized that Harry was right. How often had the tracking down of some money transfers, combined with some correspondence ...

"Without any help, it'd be impossible for sure. But within the next days, the van driver will be released." Harry's eyes were glowing. "And I'll be waiting for him just outside the prison door."

Paul caught himself by feeling something like pity for this wizard. He asked, "Do you think what I think you think?"

Harry looked more joyful. "What a strange choice of words for a scandal journalist ... No, I'll treat him well, do no harm, and besides, it wouldn't help either - but short of that, I won't mind using every trick that might come to mind."

"Yours?" Paul raised his eyebrows. "Or that of your daughter?"

For a fleeting instant, Harry's face looked frightening. Then he said, "Or that of Gabriel - in some regards, he leaves even Sandy behind."

Still a bit shaky, Paul asked, "Why not just using Veritaserum?"

Harry shrugged. "Could be I'll use it, only that's not really better than Scopolamine, the Muggle equivalent - you get the answers to your questions, but nobody tells you which questions to ask."

That was true. '*Where is the money?*' would be a simple question, while even Paul could imagine a dozen methods of hiding for which the wizard's answer would be, '*I don't know.*'

Then he nodded. "Okay, Harry. It's a real challenge, in a way a nice one because nobody could complain if we fail - except ourselves, of course." Feeling silly, Paul added, "But promise me not to raise the payment, okay?"

Looking solemn, Harry put his hand at his chest. "Scout's honour."

It was so ridiculous and at the same time so real, Paul felt glad they were alone. At this thought, he remembered something else. "And what about this place? I mean, do you know when Ireen will return?"

"No. But if I were you, I wouldn't waste time in checking for another residence ... With a notable exception, of course."

So, Paul thought, after running a thrilling circle, the conversation had found its initial topic again, no less exciting in its own way. And he wondered if it was just his own single-mindedness which made him think about Ireen and her options to find some enjoyable thrill for herself.

* * *

In a group of two times two friends, it was extremely difficult to run a scheme which involved only half of them, one from each side. Still more astonishing - the slow but unmistakable transit from two times two into four friends wasn't helpful in that matter, not the least bit.

Sandra had learned this wisdom while preparing for today. Her plan showed the true geniuses' brilliance, otherwise called simplicity - they'd pass through the linkport between Beauxbatons and Hogwarts, say hello to Beverly, the nominal destination of this visit, and then wander into the Forbidden Forest to find Firenze. Only, Sandra was no genius in plotting.

To call her poor would have been a more appropriate description. Little surprise - she was her father's daughter.

The planning itself wasn't the problem, although Sandra could only hope they'd meet Firenze - there was no way of making an appointment with a Centaur, was there? And Frédéric wasn't the problem either, he seemed totally at ease with the idea of hiding their action from Benoît and Héloïse.

No, the butterflies were whirling only in Sandra's own stomach, since the common breakfast.

Some days ago, Frédéric told her that the old interrogation protocol was in his hands. Period. From what he didn't say, it was obvious to Sandra that Frédéric would give it to her only after the promised meeting with Firenze had taken place. Which was acceptable and no sign of mistrust, just a tight style of negotiation, more a reason for admiration than for complaints.

Two days ago, she used another moment alone to pass a letter to Frédéric in which she explained her idea. She would tell Héloïse about a visit in Hogwarts, with Beverly, and some minutes with the Lupins, her godmother's parents, anyway something she'd have to do alone. Frédéric, on the other side, had to find whatever excuse to get rid of Benoît. Then they'd pass the linkport, and probably have a real talk with the announced people, only a pretty short one - just to be on the safe side, should Héloïse mention that visit toward Beverly some time later.

It felt so stupid, being nervous. Having reached that point, Sandra regretted not to have played openly. After all, what was so special about her introducing Frédéric to Firenze, or the other way around? Nothing, basically, except that Héloïse perhaps and Benoît for sure would have liked to join, and that was unacceptable. Some time later, why not, but for a first visit - Firenze was special anyway, and every additional visitor would change his behaviour. Sandra wanted to see him only together with this Pouilly offspring.

During lunch, Héloïse was chatting lightly as usual, diligently prompted by Benoît, also as always, even Frédéric seemed perfectly normal with his short remarks in-between. Only Sandra felt at a loss to add any wisecrack, at the same time avoiding glances in Frédéric's direction, for fear she might look somehow imploring and reveal something - after all, Héloïse's own instincts were nothing to laugh about, definitely not.

Unfortunately, Sandra overplayed, so that Héloïse saw reason to ask Frédéric, "Hey, brillybrain, what have you done to that poor girl? She's trying so desperately to ignore your presence, and ..." Héloïse ostentatiously inspected Frédéric's appearance, "... I can't find anything at your dress that's hurting the eyes."

"Wha ..." Sandra's head jerked up, and she felt her face flush.

Even Frédéric failed the presence of mind to return some innocent joke. He only managed to shrug, combined with an unsuccessful attempt to look as though having no idea why.

Héloïse started to grin knowingly. "Maybe a lover's row, huh?"

Benoît surprised them all by answering her, "Maybe just none of your business, huh?"

When Héloïse stared at him with more astonishment than disbelief, Benoît added, "Otherwise she'd have told you, hadn't she? ... If there's anything to tell, that is."

Despite her panick-stricken mood, Sandra became aware that Benoît just had climbed a notch or two in Héloïse's respect, although time still might pass until her friend would admit, or Benoît himself would realize. However, he hadn't improved in Sandra's own scale, first because she'd stopped underestimating Benoît much quicker than Héloïse, second because his firm righteousness had made it obvious to everybody that she wasn't her usual self.

Héloïse examined Sandra again, then looked at Frédéric. "Is there anything?"

"Well," replied Frédéric, "if you absolutely need to know - I asked her whether she could imagine marrying me, and she said no way."

"Oh."

Seeing Héloïse's expression, the ironic smile in Frédéric's face made room for utter disbelief. "Hey," he said, "that was a joke - no need to look so miserable - or do I have to take it personal?"

He sent a quick glance to Sandra. What he saw there caused him to murmur, "I really don't know what grease pot I stepped into, but whatever it is, I'm sorry."

Sandra had found the time to recover. She started to giggle, said, "Never mind," giggled more, and then she was holding her stomach from an almost silent laughter that was shaking her.

After an uncertain glance in her direction, Héloïse relaxed enough to contribute her own bit of chuckling, however it was lacking the spirit of Sandra's obvious joy.

Calming down, feeling the glances resting at her, Sandra said, "Well, he said it was a joke, didn't he?" And again she started to shake, without anyone following her example.

During the classes afterwards, Héloïse was careful not to touch the issue. When Sandra told her that she was going to make a visit in Hogwarts, her friend seemed glad to miss the usual after-school chat in the Weasley house.

Sandra walked down the staircase, found a place near the linkport where she could wait for Frédéric's appearance. She was pondering methods of how to gain Firenze's attention in the Forbidden Forest when she saw Frédéric come along. He looked worried.

Sandra stood up. "Hey, what's wrong? Did you have trouble with Benoît?"

"Er - no, not at all."

"What did you tell him?"

Frédéric hesitated a second, then said, "That you're going to introduce me to someone, as some kind of test, because I'm a Pouilly."

Sandra stared at him. After some more seconds, she said, "In a way, it's no longer true, but then, somehow it is ... How did you know?"

"It wasn't that difficult. I mean, there's more to you than meets the eye, isn't it - you must be blind and deaf not to notice. Well, and thinking it over, with that Centaur - okay, he's your father's friend, which is an impossibility by itself according to the books, but then I realized that it must have been himself to offer some mane hair for your wand ... I mean, I just couldn't imagine you or your father asking, hey Firenze, would you mind losing a hair, but it's for a good purpose. And so ..."

Sandra beamed at him. "That's such a nice picture - only ..." She stopped just in time before telling too much. Feeling sure to have identified the reason for Frédéric's solemn face, she added, "No need to worry - I know you'll pass the test, if there's still any."

Frédéric steadied. "I know, because I know myself."

"Then why don't you cheer up? Listen, we'll even get something to eat there."

At least, he could smile. "Let's go through," he said.

They went through the linkport, came out at the other side, stepped up the Hogwarts staircase. Walking ahead, Sandra guided Frédéric through the hall outside. "Here - the Hogwarts countryside, and over there, that's the Forbidden Forest. We have to wait till darkness before it makes sense to look for Firenze."

Frédéric let his eyes wander. "It's beautiful," he said.

"Would you please tell me now what's bothering you?"

Earning another silence, Sandra took Frédéric's hand and pulled him to a grass spot nearby. She sat down. "Somewhere here, my father used to have serious conversations. Four-eyes talk, I mean." She looked up expectantly.

Frédéric sat down at her side, broke a blade of grass, started to tear it into pieces, finally started to speak. "Since you told me about today, I was - er, happy, couldn't wait to have so much time - you know, for us together ... The thought to meet the Centaur - I felt sure to get his appreciation, I mean I'm still sure ..."

"But?"

"Erm ..." Frédéric looked at her, quickly focused on the mutilated blade again. "What I said during lunch - it was supposed to be something silly, only it wasn't, not ... And then seeing Héloïse ..."

"And that's why you have to look the same?"

Frédéric's head jerked up. He stared at her with something like impatience. "Ah, c'mon, Sandra, don't play stupid - you know as well as I that for a Veela this topic's important, even at our age, no matter if quarter or full Veela. And the way she looked - if she'd said, poor Sandra, yes I know, it couldn't have been clearer."

When Sandra didn't answer, he said, "I know that in India girls are promised at the age of seven or so, only this isn't India, is it?"

"No, it's not." Sandra smiled at the thought. "I'm not promised to a man - to a boy, I mean." She felt the courage to try Héloïse's style and added, "You're the only one in sight."

Her voice, she realized, might need still some improvement at sentences like that.

Nonetheless, Frédéric had understood. Showing a limited relief, he asked, "Then what's the matter?"

"Please don't ask me." Sandra's voice had been begging, however, seeing Frédéric's face, she felt a plea stronger than her own motive - and strange enough, this plea seemed to originate in herself. She said, "I promised to do something ... And what I'm supposed to do makes it impossible to marry, or to have children ..."

"You going to be a nun?" Frédéric stared at her with a stunned look.

Sandra laughed joyfully. "No, not at all - there's nothing that'd prevent me from doing - er ... having - well, you know."

Yes, Frédéric knew, and his face closed like a mask.

"What did I wrong now?" For a moment, Sandra wondered whether spending time with boys was worth the hassle - if they caught one huff after the other, then maybe ...

"Nothing." Frédéric seized for another unfortunate grass blade. "It's just - er, it reminded me of my part in our deal."

"The protocol?" Sandra examined him. "Have you brought it with you?"

"Yes."

"Great. But I'm not going to read it before we met Firenze."

Frédéric grumbled, "Is this a condition with Centaurs? ... To have only thoughts of chastity?"

Sandra glared at him, in a mix of fake and the real thing. "Hey, I can be snappish too, you'd be surprised how much ... With my mouth, with my brain ..."

She sent a light mind blow, just enough to make Frédéric's eyes widen.

"... and with my fingers too." At the same moment, she grabbed his shoulder, pushed him down into the grass.

Face to face, at a distance of a few inches. The face in front of her had lost all signs of worry, looked very expectant, matching well with the total absence of struggling or resistance in the corresponding body.

Sandra rolled around, sat up quickly. After a few seconds in which nothing happened, however, some unknown force turned her head around to look at him. He was still lying in the grass, a dreamy expression in his face.

Not finding anything better, she asked, "Did I hurt you? ... With the mind blow, I mean."

"N-n ..." Frédéric smiled. "Sometimes I thought about my - my hobby, and then I thought, you're crazy, maybe not worse than someone collecting stamps, but stories and details about a famous wizard, that's so weird ..."

When he didn't continue, Sandra lost patience. "And today?"

"Today?" Frédéric came up, turned toward her, and then gave proof that he could move quickly too, using the same manoeuver she had performed moments ago. When his face was again close to hers, he said, "Today I think that's been necessary, to be prepared for you - without that, I'd be scared as hell."

* * *

Having watched his decent share of movies, having read books to that matter, having seen real-life examples, Frédéric was fully aware - by time and occasion, he was supposed to kiss that girl so close to him. It didn't look as if she'd have objections.

Except maybe for this fleeting shadow of remorse that came and went in her eyes. And for the events ahead - they alone were enough to fill the day. And, not to forget, this protocol which seemed to burn a hole - if not into Frédéric's pocket, then into his ease of mind ... If he'd only kept his mouth shut about that.

Would have made things worse. The few days until he found the opportunity to talk with Sandra had been bad enough.

Frédéric sat up. "We must come back to that place another day, when there's less on our mind."

Sandra followed his example, put her mouth close to his ear, whispered, "We will." Then she went upright, held her arm outstretched. "C'mon, let's go see some people."

Frédéric followed her inside, expecting to sit down in the hall and to endure the introductions during supper, an environment in which he felt sure to get along well. To his slight horror, the hall did not show any signs of hungry students, and Sandra pulled him toward some floor that looked no less than official.

And stopped in front of a door, knocked, opened it, walked in, not letting go of Frédéric's hand. He only could follow.

A woman, at an age that might put her in the same category as Sandra's parents, good-looking, her teint containing a bit more than just sun-tan - Frédéric had come to that point when the woman and the girl greeted each other with great enthusiasm.

Then Sandra turned around. Still clinging to the woman, she said, "You'd never guess who that is, Almyra."

Hardly noticing that Sandra had switched back to French, Frédéric felt his eyes widen, felt himself staring at the woman. Almyra ... classmate and friend of Sandra's mother, multi-animagus, one of the figures in the tales about his initial enemy who miraculously had turned to a hero ...

He tried to steady, to remember his manners. "Good afternoon, Madam Lupin ..."

Sandra squeaked, beamed. "I knew it - he knows all the stories, about you too."

Frédéric swallowed. "... My name is Frédéric Pouilly."

The woman offered her hand. "Nice to meet you, Frédéric Pouilly - I wasn't aware that I'm a celebrity, but ..." She faltered, her face showing a memory resurfacing, then turning toward Sandra at her side. "Sandy ..."

Said girl seemed to shrink in age, while not in size, down to a five-year-old. "Yes, he is," she said.

The woman seemed speechless, desperately searching for an innocent spot to look at. At this moment, another door opened and a man came in, considerably older than the woman, his face showing his age, and more. Seeing Sandra, he started to smile. "Hey, little witch - what a pleasant surprise."

Frédéric watched another greeting of the heartfelt kind, for him time enough to realize - this could only be Professor Lupin, the woman's husband, in Frédéric's own ranking an unchallenged number two ...

The man looked at him. The woman said, "Remus, this young man's name is Frédéric Pouilly - of the Pouilly family." She was using English.

Frédéric made another attempt, also in English. "Good afternoon, sir. I - I've 'eard about you, but I never had thought to meet you - er, both of you ..." He looked at the woman, back to the man, wishing his voice hadn't lost its trail.

The man sent a quick glance to his wife, another to Sandra. Looking at the suspicious family member again, also using French again, he said, "Are you sure you're not confusing us with some other people?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Professeur. You're ... you've been ... you're the teacher who taught Mr. Potter ..." Frédéric's voice faded again.

Sandra made a step to his side. Looking at the two adults, she said, "Frédéric has studied our family history - first because he had some ideas about revenge, but then, er - somehow, I mean - er, we - you know, he's a classmate."

The man's eyes started to sparkle.

Toward the woman, Sandra said, "He already met Gabe, and Michel. For them it's okay. And Fleur knows too, of course."

The man made a step forward, took Frédéric's hand. "Lupin's just fine, Frédéric, if you allow me to call you that way - I'm glad to meet you. You must be a courageous young man, by all means."

"Why? No - er, yes, Mr. Lupin, of course - er, with my name, I mean." Frédéric didn't even find the time to feel as embarrassed as he should, hearing his own stammering.

And now the woman approached him again, offered her hand again. "I'm sorry, Frédéric, please forgive me for my - er, prejudice - my only excuse is that - no, please just forget it ..."

It was out before Frédéric could stop himself. "You saw it, didn't you?"

Seeing her expression, he added hastily, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that, er ..."

For some seconds, nobody said anything. Then, somehow, someone had put him on a chair - the man, if Frédéric remembered correctly, and the woman was sitting too, and her husband was leaning at some bookshelves, looking very interested, his arm around Sandra's shoulders.

The woman looked at Frédéric. "Not really - I was sitting too far away. And whatever I'd tell you, it would be little more than hearsay. But I know who can tell you, who'll answer all your questions ..." She turned to Sandra, showing a smile for which Frédéric found just one description - malicious.

"That was mean of you," said the woman, "and that's why I'm going to return the favour - you've got one week to invite him at home - just looking in your face tells me you didn't do that yet, using poor me for testing the ground ..."

Her husband started to chuckle, while it seemed as if he had to support the girl at his side more than a moment before.

"... otherwise I'm going to tell Harry - and don't think your godmother's going to change my mind - no way, young lady ..." The woman turned to her husband, who had started laughing. "I'm serious, you know that I am."

"Absolutely." Mr. Lupin looked at Frédéric. "You must know, that's a threat only for Sandra, but not for yourself - I can assure you, Harry will answer your questions, you can ask him."

"I'm not sure whether I should do that."

Madam Lupin asked, "How's the relationship between you and - I mean, what would Gérard have been to you?"

It felt strange, hearing her addressing a man Frédéric had never seen by his first name. "He was my father's brother," he said.

"That's been my guess," said Mr. Lupin. "And your father? Does he know about - your classmate?"

"No."

"Well," said Mr. Lupin, "difficult, difficult ... I can speak only for this side of things, and for that, let me tell you - if you want to know, ask. Could even be Harry's offering to tell you by himself."

Frédéric felt the obligation to complete the picture from his side. "My father - he was the one who told me to stop thinking about, er, something like revenge. And that was - he didn't tell me more, that's why I started to collect information." Almost thinking aloud, he added, "I wouldn't speak for other branches of the family, but ..."

Mr. Lupin nodded. "The farther apart, the sharper the judgment - it's the old story." He smiled at Sandra. "I'm not going to contradict anything Almyra said, but aside from that, I feel honoured to be among the first to hear ... Does Rahewa know?"

"Not yet."

Mr. Lupin smiled. "Clever girl." Toward Frédéric, he explained, "She was close, but she doesn't know enough about the background, that might make her a bit prejudiced at first."

Frédéric said. "Yes, I know." Next instant, he wanted to bite his tongue.

Mr. Lupin saw it. "Frédéric, maybe your research was a bit more successful than it should have been at your age ..."

Frédéric felt himself flush.

"... which makes me repeat my suggestion - muster the final courage and talk with Sandra's father. In a way, he was an admirer of Gérard."

Yes, I know, went through Frédéric's mind. Aloud, he said, "Yes, sir."

Madam Lupin, who had followed this exchange, now looked at Sandra. "It's so nice having visitors, Sandra Catherine - but what's the true reason for you coming to Hogwarts?"

Frédéric watched Sandra answering almost demurely, "Firenze."

The woman looked triumphant. "Gotcha!" Then she smiled. "I don't think you'll need my help to find him."

Frédéric tried to imagine how the woman might be of any help to find a Centaur. The question was bothering him sufficiently not to remember the rest of the conversation in this room. When they walked out, after Sandra had confirmed yes, they'd sit with some students rather than with the teachers, his first measure was to whisper the question in Sandra's ear.

"Isn't that obvious?" Sandra looked astonished. "As a bird - sailing over the forest."

"Oh, yes."

Into Frédéric's anger about his own stupidity, Sandra grinned, "But it's little more than an excuse for her flying along. Harry told me, it's always the other way around - Firenze registers her, and then he knows someone's waiting somewhere."

"And then he comes? ... Centaurs aren't famous for their curiosity, you know."

"Really?" Sandra's glance would have paled Héloïse's sharpest weapon in this category. "Almyra doesn't offer that to many people, and Firenze knows."

This way cut down to mortal size, Frédéric said hello to Beverly, smiled friendly to the other girls her age who found him sweet and cute and whatnot - that was easy play for him, the urbane eleven-year-old sitting with female seventh-years at the Ravenclaw table, which was a shame according to some other female passing by, looking like a cleaning woman but walking straight to the teachers' table ... Samantha, as Sandra told Frédéric, which didn't tell him much - his documents offered no information about this person.

In contrast to another one, also sitting with the teachers. First Frédéric noticed that she was glancing more than casually to the table where they were sitting. Then he had to wait for an opportunity to cut into the chat between Sandra and the other girls, asking for that woman's name.

"That? Oh ..." Sandra wasn't shouting nor raising an arm. Even so, the woman's head spun around to look at her, to smile and to wave - with a fist, very strange that, but only until Frédéric's mind had caught the exact nature of cause and effect. Mind wave ...

"That's Hermione," said Sandra, confident to have told him everything.

She had indeed. Frédéric's own head turned around, slower, quite casually. To no avail - the woman was looking at him with open interest. When she saw his glance, she raised her glass.

It triggered a drilled reflex. Frédéric responded with the same greeting, took a sip.

He saw the woman's face split into an appreciating grin, saw her turn to a man at her side. Putting down his own glass hastily, staring at the table, Frédéric felt like in a crazy dream. The couple there - the man could only be Viktor Krum, once leader of the legendary Flying Squad, and the woman was Harry Potter's old friend and classmate, and these people were sitting some feet away, their stares hitting him right behind the ear.

Suddenly Frédéric felt sweaty and awkward.

After a while, the feeling was gone, however he didn't dare to look again, so in a way, the total improvement toward his self-esteem was negligible. The only other method crossing his mind - visiting the toilet - was dismissed instantly.

At good last, the supper was over. Had it been tasteful? Could be, might have been excellent, Frédéric didn't remember.

Sandra said, "Let's go. Maybe we should say hello to Hermione and Viktor, but then we have to do conversation with half of the teachers' table, and that's not really to my taste."

The thought alone pushed Frédéric up and forward.

Walking toward the forest, he had time to regain his balance. Dusk was falling. Under the trees, it was dim and quiet. Sandra kept at his side, or he at hers, and he asked himself whether it would be appropriate to walk hand in hand.

With other girls, it had been no question, not in a dark forest, only that other girls wouldn't walk here at this time of the day ... And he wouldn't either.

"We shouldn't go too deep inside," said Sandra. "My father told me not all creatures here are well-minded."

Good to know, that. Although, come to think of it, bad to know - for a city boy like himself, such a forest had something of a menace. And now Sandra sat down, mentioning casually that this place was just fine, Firenze would find them anyway, Frédéric did the same, and as soon as the cracking had faded, he could feel a thousand monsters crawling closer.

As if sensing his mood, Sandra said, "Don't trust your eyes while staring at something. My father says, in this light only what you can see in the corners of your view is reliable. If you stare at a point, it takes only seconds until you think there's something moving, or jumping at you."

How right she was.

Frédéric wasn't scared, definitely not. Just extremely uneasy, and jumpy too.

A hand grabbed his own. "You are not used to countryside, are you?"

"Was it that obvious?" He felt instantly better.

The hand squeezed his own. "Not to the outside. Besides - in another forest, I might feel the same, but this here's like a backyard for me."

Having calmed down, Frédéric became aware of the forest's own rhythm, of its noise profile, like a quiet breathing. A city could offer its own kind of jungle, only footsteps on plaster were louder, while animals did not step onto dry twigs.

His hand was pressed again. Sandra whispered, "He's watching us."

Frédéric held his breath, couldn't register anything. Into his exhaling, Sandra giggled as though being tickled.

Then the majestic mix of horse and man appeared out of the darkness - a lighter spot first, gaining contours, manifesting to a Centaur.

Sandra went to him, almost running, "Firenze! Hello - there you are."

She was moved up by strong arms, hugged the figure without hesitation. Still in Firenze's arms, she turned, struggled to be put down like a small child. With her feet on the ground, she came to Frédéric and pulled him up.

"Look, Firenze, that's Frédéric, a classmate. When he saw my wand, and I told him about the handle, he knew at once whose hair that is."

"And you, little witch, could not await to present your circus pony."

Laughing, Sandra clung to a front leg. "Oh, you - what a funny idea."

Feeling the Centaur's eyes rest on him, Frédéric bowed. "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening, classmate Frédéric. Are you a centaurophiliac?"

"Er - no, sir." Frédéric wasn't sure what it meant, centaurosomething, felt nonetheless certain he was none.

"So it was only me catching the honour of your attention?"

The Centaur was talking French, as Frédéric registered at this moment, and his intonation created a mocking politeness.

"Yes, sir."

"Just call me Firenze, young wizard, your attention is honour enough ..."

He had fun, this horse man, pretty much as Sandra had predicted, and still totally different, lacking all ridiculousness.

"... Are you Sandra's escort in this lovely night, or is it the other way around?"

Frédéric would have welcomed Sandra answering for him, only she kept silent, beaming and listening. Had to be more than enthrallment - in all her affection, she seemed to have an elementary respect which forbade answering for another person.

"We just came together. But it was me who asked for this visit." Not hearing another question, Frédéric felt forced to confess, "It was - it wasn't just - er, when I saw, and after ... I just had to ask."

The Centaur looked down at Sandra. "And you, my little dragon, just had to agree, at such a convincing plea."

Sandra moved her shoulders, the perfect picture of an embarrassed little girl. "Usually he talks better - and I wanted you to meet him because, there was something between his family and Harry, so I thought - if you'd see him and it's okay, then ..."

Firenze laughed softly. "As if you'd need me for that, of all people, especially with that brother of yours. How is your family?"

"Good. Gabriel plays music all the time - he has a new instrument, a xylophone. Mum's as always, and Dad's hunting kidnappers."

Frédéric listened in fascination. Suddenly, Sandra sounded like talking with an elder uncle, using terms like Mum and Dad - except that maybe these people had an uncommon way of spending their time.

"Kidnappers, hm ... I wonder if that's an improvement over dark wizards, but then perhaps the difference is smaller than expected. Please tell him the times have changed less than he might think."

"Yes, Firenze." Sandra looked wondering.

The Centaur turned to Frédéric. "You can muster courage when facing real challenges, young wizard, that's quite obvious. Why something as harmless as an old Centaur makes you freeze in awe might remain your own secret."

Frédéric had different opinions about what was *obvious* here at this place and time, thought better than to discuss them now.

"And besides," added Firenze with a smile, "I've seen something similar before, maybe this is another linking element between these two families."

And which, if you please, was the first?

"I see," said the Centaur, "you're determined to save your courage for other occasions - right you are, Frédéric, if my bearing's worth the time."

Had this been a warning? An encouragement? Certainly not another teasing, at least not from the Centaur's voice at the last words.

Firenze ruffled Sandra's hair. "Goodbye, little girl with the many names. It was a pleasure to see you - in such company."

Then he turned on his hind legs, made a sound almost like a whinnying horse, and left, providing the perfect impression of a circus pony, deeply satisfied after a completed trick.

15 - Kidnappers

Walking back, Sandra felt a deep satisfaction. She had completed her side of the deal, and something interesting was waiting to be read. More importantly, she had finished the last phase of a process in which this boy walking at her side had been thoroughly evaluated, coming out crystal-clear.

Yes, one step was still missing, and Almyra had set a deadline for that - presenting Frédéric toward her parents. However, this didn't count as a test, just a careful navigation along the idiosyncrasies of some adults.

They were walking hand in hand. Frédéric had suggested to light their path, using the wands as magical candles, but Sandra had said no, had shown him how to recognize the path from the faintest difference of grey in dark. At first, Frédéric muttered this was nonsense, she just knew the way and was showing off. "Not really, only the direction," answered Sandra, thereby dismissing his suspicion but raising a greater worry as replacement.

Shortly afterwards, however, he caught the trick, since then taking care to lead the way for both of them.

Aside from that, they were silent, savouring the memory of the encounter, each from his personal perspective. Because for all Sandra could sense, Frédéric seemed not the least bit dissatisfied with his performance, despite the remarks it had raised from the Centaur's side.

She didn't even remember the first time she met Firenze, knew about it only from her father's tales. She was two years old at that time, had helped to lure a Unicorn closer toward Harry so he could take a syringe full of Unicorn blood - the beginning of the Great Plot which, eventually, would lead to a unified world of Magicals.

Since then - she met Firenze about once a year, most often for no particular reason, just when she was around and felt like it.

Then, one day, Sandra visited him to proudly present her new wand. The Centaur pulled one of his long mane hairs out, fixed it around the wand, and told her about the effect. Coming home, her mother looked at it and said, "It's obvious to everyone that you can twist him round your little finger - but I'd never expected him to document it so clearly."

Her father grinned. "He's very special with his jokes. Must have infected himself one day, but I don't think it was me who did it, so I guess it's been someone else ..."

"Shut up," her mother told him, and it took Sandra quite a while to squeeze the story out of her father - about Cho, dizzy from a head injury and tranced from a Veela shawl, talking free-style poetry to Firenze.

As if reading her thoughts, Frédéric took this moment to say, "It's amazing - I'd never have thought he'd be that funny. The way he disappeared ..."

Sandra smiled in the darkness. Frédéric's remark clearly had been an attempt to raise a comment from her side, no doubt to gain more information, or just to revive Firenze's teasing - she didn't fall for such an easy trap.

"But what he said before," continued Frédéric, "was more serious. Does he always give you messages to your father?"

"No - at least none that specific. Greetings, yes ..." Sandra thought it over. "Although - it's not impossible this has been just another joke."

"A joke?" Frédéric's voice showed his disbelief.

"Yes, because - you know, when my father was a student here and was fighting against Voldemort, the other Centaurs always thought him doomed, after having read the stars. And Firenze was the only one to contradict them - but later, when the fight was over, he confessed to my father that he hadn't read anything different. So maybe it's just a joke about the Centaurs and their stargazing."

Frédéric's voice came firm. "It didn't sound like a joke."

Yeah, well, maybe not - Sandra's mind was focused on other things.

While Frédéric seemed to catch fire on this topic. "Think it over," he said, "what he told your father - this might have been a joke, and if so, it was an excellent one, wasn't it?"

"So what," replied Sandra impatiently. "He can be funny, as you noticed by yourself, and sometimes he's joking. Big surprise. Wow. And now that this's settled, let's come to another surprise, maybe a smaller one."

Frédéric stared at her. "If it wasn't your voice, I could have sworn that's been Héloïse talking."

When Sandra's step came to a halt, he added quickly, "Okay okay - you're right, that was no surprise yet ..."

She couldn't help chuckling.

"... so let's come to the real thing - er, well, wasn't there still the question about your doing without a wand?"

It made Sandra really stop. "Wasn't there something from your side in that deal?"

"Sure, why?" Frédéric pulled her forward, had to use a bit more force. "You'll get it in a minute, but it's dark here, isn't it, so how can you read, and you said yourself we're not supposed to make light, but what's wrong with talking in the meantime?"

Hard to beat, that argument, only ... "Yes, I can do spells without a wand, you know it already, so where's the surprise? If you wanna talk, let's talk about family visits."

Sandra could sense his *but*, only it didn't come, which was wise of him. Instead, Frédéric asked, "Visits? ... You mean more than one?"

"What about your family?"

"Hmm ..."

Was she really looking forward to meet his parents? Sandra didn't think so, it had been more of a counterstrike in their conversation than serious interest. On the other hand, it might become a question, too important for stupid remarks like, wasn't she good enough for an invitation?

Lights were shimmering through the last trees. They had reached the border of the Forbidden Forest, would arrive at the Hogwarts buildings in a few moments.

Frédéric stopped. "About my family - er, please don't take offense, but at home I'd like to tell them first thing that I met him ... Your father, I mean, but of course I won't call him that way."

"Hey, that's clever." Sandra smiled at Frédéric admiringly.

He didn't register, still his voice sounded relieved. "I'm glad you understand. Now ..." He seized in his pockets. "If you wanna jump directly, I think you should do it right from here, before we enter the locking field ... Here - that's the protocol, a copy I made - you can keep it."

Sandra felt more than she saw it - a few sheets, doubly folded. "Well, thanks - but I thought we'd read it together."

"Oh no!" The idea seemed to have a frightening effect toward Frédéric. "I mean, I know it, and ... No no, you better read it alone." He pushed the sheets into her hand. "Take it - see you tomorrow ... Er, that's been a terrific day." He turned, walked quickly away.

"Good night," called Sandra after him, earning just a wave of his hand.

Well, she thought, maybe he was right, maybe this paper really was something to be read alone. In this case, there was no sense in wasting any second here around.

She jumped into the castle.

Into the dinner room - and just had the presence of mind to store the paper in her own pockets before entering the family room, to find her mother and Ireen. Hello she said, and greetings from Almyra - just good Nagini wasn't around, this artful mix of as good as true and almost accurate might have caused a hissing.

Yes, she had eaten, of course, sitting with Beverly, which wasn't a lie either. No, it hadn't been a monologue, why, Beverly with her friends could talk like anyone else. Asking about her father, Sandra was told he'd be still in California, no sense in waiting for him, which she took as the opportunity to say good night and to reach her own rooms.

Sandra's suite - her mother had invented the term, instantly taken over by the rest of the family. It wasn't really true, just a bedroom and a workroom, the latter simultaneously serving as her library and her office and the place where she could watch TV with friends - quite large, actually. Yes, and a bathroom of the spacious kind, plus a clothes cabinet you could walk through, with a door at the end leading to a tiny storage room with the treasures of her childhood. In this large castle, nobody could call it a claim beyond measure, wasn't that so?

A mental call reached her from Gabriel. She responded by sending the pictures of Firenze, and Frédéric, and something equivalent to a thumbs-up sign.

Her brother seemed interested in exchanging some more details, only Sandra wasn't, put him off for tomorrow. It was okay for Gabriel, and finally she was alone.

Contrary to what her father had told Thionnay, Sandra was no eidetic. Looking at a page for a second was *not* enough for her to remember every word. Even so, her eyes were racing across the sheets, slowed down only by the clumsy font of a police typewriter giving equally much space to all letters.

Having finished the last page, she felt a bit disappointed. In a dry style, the paper told a story about a few students, some from Hogwarts, some from Beauxbatons, meeting at a ball, meeting again, meeting for the third time in a lethal encounter. Always at a ball, as it seemed. At the second time, a row had developed - the row and of course the final fight were described in greater detail. And somewhere in-between, a *sexual intercourse* had taken place, between Harry and Marie-Christine.

Incredibly exciting, this terminology.

Then Sandra read the protocol again, slower, taking her time to accompany the words with her own knowledge, with guesses, even conclusions. Suddenly the tale became more interesting, a bit juicier too, and at the end, it offered a thrilling mystery.

Filling in the gaps ... This intercourse, for example, it took place after the second ball, in Hogwarts - hear, hear - and somehow Fleur had helped by providing a guest room. But Harry had joined the ball with Cho, so please, what had happened to her??

Sandra wasn't ready to believe that Harry had dropped Cho in some corner, to reach the guest room together with Marie-Christine. Sandra's lack of expertise in sex - or what it did with people before, during, and after - was more than compensated by her knowledge of the people involved ... Of course, with one notable exception.

Thinking it over, adding what she had seen, sensed, and overheard at one occasion or another, she felt pretty sure to know where Cho had been at this time.

Well, well, well - it was a bit breathtaking. Apparently, Marie-Christine had been the driving force, leaving it to everybody's guess how much *force* had been necessary to drive along ... Because this Gérard couldn't come to terms with her body, preferred the sportive type.

But there were some steps missing. One, in particular. Her father had stated that he owed Marie-Christine too much to accept the risk of Gérard killing her the next day, or the next week. And Cho too. What was it?

Marie-Christine had specialized in dark magic, before starting a career as an actress. Obviously, she had provided some help. Which could only have been some information.

All of a sudden, a tale resurfaced in Sandra's memory - how Marie-Christine had been the first to predict Aram'chee's motive in searching for the spirit she had felt in the Crusader castle ... Which had been Sandra herself, at the age of two.

And both of her parents had felt obliged toward Marie-Christine, very much so. What was the common factor among parents? Their children, of course, despite the fact that this had taken place years before Sandra's own birth. Which meant, this Voldemort had planned to do

something with the child of his worst enemies ... And Marie-Christine had found out, and then Harry had taken measures to destroy the plan, by destroying its inventor.

What had Voldemort intended? ... With herself - a creepy thought, making Sandra shudder for a moment. It had to be something horrible, her parents had never told her a single word about that, except that some remarks, only halfway remembered, suddenly seemed to put more light onto this mystery.

Lying in bed, Sandra felt excited. She would discuss the mystery with Frédéric - if nothing else, it would explain and simultaneously avoid the other topic.

And she would look for the next opportunity to talk with Marie-Christine. Alone.

* * *

Ramon Garcia hadn't listened to the morning news, first because he preferred newspaper over radio and also because the excited chat of the local newsspeaker was rasping his nerves. He didn't wonder either that his assistant was late - there was nothing special scheduled, and Laila strongly believed in the *need to know* principle, keeping details of her dentist's appointments, shopping tours, and late night adventures to herself.

So it took until the lunch break before Ramon became aware that something had happened the evening before. Hearing other people's remarks in the canteen, he kept listening for a moment, carried his lunch into his office, and ate while watching the news channel in spector TV.

The flow of comments told him that nobody knew nothing, only the pictures of that building were proof that *something* had taken place, miraculously managed without leaking the slightest hint toward the media. To the effect that today, the news people were screaming in outrage.

Some details of what Ramon saw and heard were pretty unusual. He had left the LAPD years before, still didn't think the methods had changed that much. Which could only mean - they had used unusual methods.

Not to be confused with unknown ones, not unknown to Ramon.

And suddenly he had a fair guess about Laila's reasons to be late. Gripped by curiosity, he moved his hand to call her through the intercom when another thought made him hesitate. Why hadn't she told him first thing this morning?

Because something had gone wrong? Something bad, maybe? ... Most unlikely, Laila never fell to the common mistake of so many assistants which reported bad news at the last possible instant. "A sergeant's greatest joy," she used to say, "is telling a lieutenant bad news." So why else?

From what Ramon heard in the spector, the success in legal terms was limited, if any. Only this shouldn't have been Laila's problem, or if so, she would have interviewed him - after all, he knew a song or two about the difference between catching people and convicting them.

Well, sooner or later, she would come through this door for some question or another, and Ramon would wait until then. Using the time to find an innocent opening ... Somehow this was nonsense, why didn't he just walk over and ask?

Because he was a boss proud of his tactfulness. Because he had learned the hard way how stubborn his assistant could be.

Only that Ramon's work was suffering from his lack of concentration. Instead, half-forgotten memories of his own time came up - scenes with SWAT people, the scene when he, a wizard in camouflage, had used magic to save ...

"Hi, boss - time for me?"

Ramon's standard answer would have been, '*Always.*' What he said was, "More than you might appreciate."

"Is this a promise or a ..." Seeing his face, Laila dropped her attempt to play their habitual game of meanings between the lines. For an instant, it looked as if she was steadying her shoulders, then she came over, sat down. "Well, then ... Business first or later?"

"Is it important?"

"Not really."

Had this been Laila's move to start this conversation? Could be. "Then tell me why you're torturing me. Why didn't you come to me the moment you were in the office?"

"Well, boss, you know ..."

"My name's Ramon, remember?"

This way forced to a *private* chat, Laila leaned back, drew a face. "Maybe I couldn't find the right words. Yesterday I killed a guy, and somehow that's been my only reasonable contribution, and ... You know how it is, don't you?"

Ramon went to a cabinet, came back with a bottle and two tumblers, filled hers with twice his own portion. "Here, to oil the chords."

Laila took it. "Cheers, Ramon. To the bad old habits."

Having emptied her glass, she waved him off when he offered a refill, then started to talk, telling him the story from her own perspective. It was a kind of battle report with a personal touch - she made no efforts to make her own role look better than it had been, especially at the moment when her broomstick went over the roof.

When she had finished, Ramon asked, "Still some bruises?"

"Only in my pride. Harry took care of the lost skin."

"And how's he?"

"Maybe he's stopped spitting fume by now." Laila showed a wry grin. "He thinks he should have found a better way to handle the two guys coming out, because now the police is a bit short on living suspects ... I for my part, I think they provoked it, didn't really expect to come through, and - well, they were right."

It crossed Ramon's mind that Laila, in her own active time, probably had seen many suicide attacks. He said, "I think you three did an excellent job, Laila, and if Seeger didn't express his thanks to you, let me do it for him."

"Oh, he did. Still - thank you, Ramon." This time, she accepted another filling of her glass.

Ramon said, "In a way, it's the old conflict. What exactly's a cop's job? Catching criminals, collecting evidence, and delivering both to the attorney? ... If it works that way, fine. But if not - the main goal was to stop the kidnapping, and to do it without losses on our side. You can't say that in public, because it's politically incorrect. What a pity."

"Cheers to that." What Laila's voice lacked in determination, she balanced out by emptying the glass and rising from the chair. "As long as it doesn't develop into a habit ... The same goes for the booze, but this one came just right."

Alone again, Ramon thought about his assistant's drinking. Calling it a habit of hers was wrong - it was a lost habit, dropped shortly after joining *Groucho Biochemicals*, only that you never were going to lose this particular habit.

As Ramon himself knew all too well, and getting in touch with death and violence was reinforcing it quicker than you could shout *Stop*.

Well, they both had, just in time.

Keeping that bottle in his own office was Ramon's ongoing test toward himself, and the few sips he'd drunken to join Laila were already starting to make him pay dearly ...

Not because of their bad taste, oh no, sir.

Knowing yesterday's story wasn't suited well to improve his concentration toward his work. He felt distracted, pictures of his own past in the service mixed with pictures of himself in some bar, shabbier every week. At least they were good to ban the thought of the bottle in the cabinet.

Finally, Ramon gave up - doing his job seemed impossible today, and doing a secretary's work instead was no surrogate either. He jumped home.

When he returned home earlier in the past, Marie-Christine used to ask him whether he was trying to catch her with her lover, adding he'd left minutes before. Ramon hadn't heard that joke any more since the time Esmeralda joined the family. The knowing grin, though, still could appear in his wife's face.

There was no grin today. Simply because there was no wife. No children either. Ramon was alone in their home.

Had Marie-Christine gone shopping with the kids? Maybe so, only she hadn't mentioned it, and such tours at a moment's thinking weren't common to her.

Or some appointment with Carlos or Esmeralda Ramon had forgotten about? ... Or some sudden illness, a visit at some doctor?

He only had to call her in order to find out. Except that Marie-Christine's response to such checks was awfully bad. "Why don't you fix a finder on me," she had said once, "one of these things used by undercover agents? ... Or better still, I should implant one - you know, like with a pet dog, right behind the ear."

Ramon went down to the garage. His wife's car wasn't there.

Either an emergency shopping, or an emergency visit at some doctor, he decided. The latter alternative was worrying him a bit, not too much, considering the excellent health of the two children, actually less than the situation altogether.

Because - if it was really serious, she would have called him.

For some minutes, Ramon tried to find something that might kill the time, growing more restless by the minute. Ten more minutes, he thought, then I'm going to call her, and if the reply she'll give is burning my ears, so be it.

Three minutes were left to this deadline when his phony rang.

Finally ... He grabbed it hastily, pressed the button. "Yes, hello?"

A woman's voice indeed, while not Marie-Christine's. Ramon's instant disappointment was quickly replaced by something much, much worse. "Mr. Garcia," said the voice, "if you're looking for your family - they're here."

"Here? Where's here? Can I talk with Marie-Christine, please?"

"Unfortunately not." There was no trace of regret in that voice. "But they are well, and now listen carefully to keep it that way, Mr. Garcia."

Cold ice was climbing his spine - these words, or similar ones to that extent - he'd heard them before, recorded, reported - but never spoken to himself, and about his own ...

"I'm sure you want to have them back - unhurt, I mean. This can be arranged - at some price, as you won't be surprised to hear. And under some conditions I don't think I have to tell you, a former police lieutenant."

"What ..."

"Keep this business confidential, Mr. Garcia, otherwise we would have to cancel the negotiations, and I'm sure you want to avoid that under all circumstances. Do I express myself clearly enough?"

"Yes." Ramon swallowed. "How much?"

"Ah, we come to terms, very good. Five millions, Mr. Garcia - dollars, in bills not greater than hundred ..."

"Five?? ... But - I don't have so much money, that's totally unrealistic ..."

"I'm sure you'll find a way, Mr. Garcia. I could imagine your employer will help you out, if you ask, and we didn't expect you to keep him off anyway. Get the money, then we can talk more."

"Wait - wait a sec ..." Ramon tried desperately to remember the rules he had recommended often enough to other people. "How do I know it's true what you said? And before we get any further, I want some proof that they're still alive ..."

"They are, take my word for it." The voice was very cold now. "We both know you believe already what I said, and if not, just wait a few hours."

"Even so ..." Ramon stopped - the line was dead.

He felt like choking. With trembling fingers, he pressed the button for Marie-Christine's phony. No answer.

That couldn't be. Not to him, not to his family. Not right after these kidnappers had been ... Had they?

Some minutes from now, he would go bonkers. That mustn't happen. Whom to call first? ... Not the police, certainly not - never, they'd mess up, he wasn't going to risk ... What time was it in Ireland? Deep in the night - could he call them now?

Yes. No. Ramon didn't know. He was losing track, he couldn't think clearly. Rule number one - *have someone with you to keep common sense, you as the one involved cannot trust your judgement ...*

He pressed another button.

"Yes, Ramon?" Laila's voice, a bit astonished.

"Laila - my ... I'm at home - can you come? ... Now?"

"Comin'."

Seconds later, the doorbell rang. Ramon twisted up, then he remembered - Laila had a portkey to this building, but only to the outside, had been her own instruction, at that time raising some jokes from his side and not so funny remarks from Marie-Christine ... He went to the door, opened.

Laila saw his face, came in without a word, closed the door herself. "What happened?"

"They ... my family's kidnapped - Marie-Christine, the children, all three of them."

"What? But ..." Laila stopped herself, pulled him into the next room, which was the kitchen, pressed him onto a chair, filled a glass of water. "Drink that."

"Water? ... Gimme a drink, a real one."

Somewhere a blow, and only his burning cheek told Ramon that Laila's flat hand had hit his face. She said, "I swear, Ramon - if I see the bottle in your hand, I'll kick you in your privates ... Drink that."

He grabbed the glass, his fingers shaky. Took a gulp, another, downed the rest. "Yes ... Yes, okay, you're right."

She filled it again, put it into his hands.

While he sipped slowly, Laila went out. Ramon heard her murmuring in the next room. Whom was she ... For God's sake, she wasn't calling the ... He was up, reached her. "Whom did you call? Did you call the cops?" He wished he had the strength to shake her.

"Of course not." She took him, pressed him close to herself. "Whom may I have called? The best help I can think of, and you too - if you can think, that is."

No Ramon couldn't, didn't need that to know whom to expect. In a while, the thought might give him some relief, while right now a strong body, soft at the same time, somehow totally different from Marie-Christine, was taking off the tension that had kept him at the edge of breaking.

Some minutes later, Ramon saw that his guess had been only halfway correct. Yes, Harry was here as expected. And with him, not quite as expected, Cho.

* * *

Somehow, Cho thought, the old saying had failed here. God, as it went, punished small sins instantly. Only a threesome was no small sin, because it wasn't a sin at all, and even if so - the punishment had to be in proportion, wasn't that so, rather than this horrible nightmare here.

But then, maybe the punishment was to be caught out of bed, still in the afterglow of their lovemaking, except that it had been Cho's own decision to come with Harry, if you could call it a decision, because she couldn't imagine any other reaction, hearing about Marie-Christine being kidnapped together with her children.

Had to be a merciless God, if there was any, using close friends as the tools of fate.

Which was nonsense, this wasn't an action directed toward herself, Cho shouldn't have such egocentric thoughts, not with Ramon sitting there, deceptively calm ...

Small wonder - Harry had tranced him a bit, was interviewing him to get the exact wording of this phony conversation, while Laila kept writing it down.

In a corner of her mind, Cho wondered if Laila had registered where she'd called Harry and herself from. There hadn't been time to shower, to get rid of the smell. Anyway, it didn't matter, Cho didn't give a damn, pushed off the crazy thought of small punishments, concentrated on what Ramon was telling.

Watching the scene, her mind was distracted again - not entirely this time, it had more to do with the methods and tools used here. Laila had to write because there was no tape recorder, no dictaphen either - sure, a short jump into the office would have brought such items over, only none of them felt in the mood, and for the few remarks, there was no real need.

Something else would have been more useful, something she would remember, and discuss with her engineers. Why wasn't there a recorder function in these phonies? Just the last ten calls or so, with that, they could have listened to the exact intonation, to the voice of that woman.

A woman ... Strange, wasn't it? In the first moments after arriving here, Cho couldn't help thinking that yesterday's heroes - if this was the proper term - had messed up thoroughly, the kidnappers were still around, Laila's call the most obvious proof. She didn't think so any longer.

This woman - was she a mother of her own? Had anybody beside Cho herself registered this detail which seemed to be significant? That right now, for Marie-Christine the situation was considerably better than for her husband? ... Because she was with her children, didn't have to endure the mind-tearing experience of being kept off, knowing them in the hands of other people.

If she was still alive.

The *former* kidnappers had established some kind of standard in this regard, only they didn't count any longer, this case was different in so many aspects ...

For a fleeting instant, Cho pondered the most horrible alternative - the children dead and Marie-Christine alive, fully aware of ... She dismissed it at once, somehow it was too unrealistic and, more importantly, an unbearable thought.

Another detail of the phony design kept her mind busy for a short while. If the caller - or the called person, for that matter - didn't want to be identified, the phony obeyed. A phony was a magical device, and the magical power was the same in each of them - as a consequence, there was no way to overrule one phony's decision by another one.

This design had been crucial for the success of *Groucho Communications*, actually the one and only key factor. In an era of nation-wide authorities with questionable morale, running wild with billion dollar budgets, spying out the most private details. The promise of untraceable communication had been the major force in the decline of conventional cellular phones. The competition had tried everything to break the argument, without success.

Against knowing better, Cho wished they had built different levels of power - if only for a few, well selected people. And Ramon would have been one of them, and now they would order his phony to reveal the origin of that call, the name of that woman ...

They'd never do it, the business risk was uncalculable. And Cho was never going to discuss the idea with Harry, knowing all too well how he would react. Still, right at this moment ...

The others were done with interviewing Ramon under his trance. Harry woke him up, and the glassy look in Ramon's eyes changed to a dark glow, now turning into her direction. He started, "Cho - the money, the five millions ..."

"Save it," she interrupted him. "I'm going to call the bank in a while - I'd do it now, if not for some other things we have to talk about first."

His gaze didn't falter. "You know that I can't pay back?"

She dismissed the sharp reply that had crossed her mind first. Before she could find a better answer, Harry said, "They've involved Groucho right from the beginning. They did it on purpose, look what this woman said ... It means something, except I have no idea what. Does anybody have a suggestion?"

Laila said, "Pretty simple - money. They want to get rich at once, probably planned it as a one-timer."

"Hmm ... Could be." Harry looked dissatisfied. "Somehow it doesn't sound right, only I can't see anything better. But while on the subject ..." Checking the other faces, he asked, "Who thinks these are the same people as in the previous cases?"

Holding his stare, Ramon said, "Don't ask me, because I wish to God they were."

Harry nodded. "Yes, of course. But wasn't this answer enough?"

Ramon exchanged a glance with Laila, turned back to Harry. "You two, you've been there. Tell me honestly - why isn't there the slightest doubt that you caught the right people?"

Harry looked at Laila. "You first."

Laila sniffed. "What can I ... Okay, Ramon, listen - you've been a cop, tell me what it means - they have an intruder alarm on the roof, they hear the loudspeaker, and what then? ... No sign of surrender, not a single word of discussion, they try to kill the people in that vehicle, kill their own people, and when they realize jumping doesn't work, they blow a hole in the roof and try to escape. If these weren't the kidnappers, who were they? Some crazy sect?"

Without answering, Ramon's eyes turned to Harry.

"My own argument is the exchange with that guy in the van," Harry said. "Not even the words - just what I felt in his mind. There hasn't been the slightest trace of a question, about why I'm there, what I want from him - he knew, he knew I knew ... As simple as that."

Wondering in his voice, Ramon said, "So these are copycats, then?"

Cho said, "I don't believe it. Maybe they were inspirited somehow, but to me it looks so different. What's really common? Just the crime, kidnapping - is a murderer a copycat just because people kill people all the time?"

Into Harry's and Laila's glances toward her, after she had presented this unwelcome picture, Ramon said, "You're right ... These are fake similarities, I shouldn't have fallen to that mistake, only that I'm too ..."

Cho said quickly, "That woman, Ramon - could you try to classify her a bit? Or is it too early to ask?"

"No. Yes, but later it's too late ..." Ramon looked desperate.

Harry stepped behind his chair. "Lean back - I'm not trancing you, just a bit soothing ..."

Ramon obeyed, closed his eyes, exhaled. After some seconds of silence, he said, "Well educated - her choice of words, totally different from the common pattern, that's no second edition of Bonnie and Clyde ... But she's a mean old bitch, no denying that - past her forties for sure, if not older ..."

Suddenly he opened his eyes, looked perplexed. "Jesus!"

"What??" Almost unison from three people.

"The accent." Ramon seemed close to embarrassment. "I'm so used to it, it nearly slipped my attention ..." He stared at Harry, then at Cho. "She must be British."

Cho wasn't the only one for whom this information put an entirely new light onto the events. What she had thought some minutes ago, that someone was using Ramon and his family just as a tool for some other purpose, went through her mind again, stronger than before.

Who was the real target, or what? Groucho? Harry? Then why Ramon? Ramon meant Biochemicals - was this an indicator for something else, which could only refer to the Great Plot?

Or maybe Ramon was only the borderline figure, and Marie-Christine played the more important role. Cho tried to dismiss this thought immediately, because thinking in that direction made the money irrelevant, only that she couldn't wave off events of the past. Marie-Christine had once been the target of a killing attempt - well, a single figure, dead for a long time, but some people might not have forgotten ... Marie-Christine had been the one who revealed Voldemort's devilish plot, and as incoherent as it seemed, children and kidnapping and higher purposes were the common factors Cho couldn't deny.

She would talk with Harry about her thoughts, but only with him alone. It wouldn't help Ramon to see himself - or his family - as some chess figures, moved or knocked down as some players felt suitable. And maybe this was all nonsense. Only she didn't think so.

A British woman ... It seemed as if some memory from the past was trying to gain her attention, to offer an explanation. Only Cho had no idea how to catch it - no matter which figures she remembered, there was just no woman among them that might qualify as a suspect. At least not in the foreground.

* * *

Laila listened to Harry's and Cho's attempts in drawing a profile of the kidnapers, something useful to work with. As if this would help - yes, maybe later, to catch them, only this was their least worry at the moment. All that mattered was getting Ramon's family back home, alive and unhurt.

Well, in this regard, they did their best. Laila had registered how Cho just barely suppressed a hissing remark when Ramon tried to talk about the money. Five millions - manageable by Groucho, sure, however quite a sum. Because it had to be cash, what else, and Groucho's

resources were stressed to the limit with the expanding GTS business at one side and the ever-hungry Great Plot at the other. Only it didn't matter - not if Marie-Christine was involved.

Marie-Christine, who couldn't do wrong. Aside, that was, from having the clumsiness to fall into the hands of kidnapers.

Was it jealousy? ... And if so, to which side? Cho? Harry? Or maybe Ramon?

Yes it was, although none of the conventional kind, had nothing to do with ... Marie-Christine had been able to predict Voldemort's strategy, and this was the reason why both Harry and Cho would never stop doing everything for her.

And for her children too - remembering them, Laila felt a sting of shame about her thinking. Only she was no mother, didn't want to, she only wanted to do something as important as Marie-Christine had done for these two people talking with Ramon.

From this perspective, other issues were trivial. For instance, that Marie-Christine had been their lover. Besides, thought Laila, maybe she had to be thankful for that because without this first experience, her own relationship with them - especially with Cho - might have turned out differently.

Probably so - only a sense of obligation was the worst thing to fight a sense of jealousy, so much for sure. And while on the subject - there was little doubt her call had found them two at the worst time, so-to-speak.

No, not quite. But right afterwards.

At this moment, Cho stood up, said she was going next door to talk with her bank. Turning to Laila, she added, "Please come with me, I guess you'll be the one to take it from the bank."

Was she? Coming awake with another sting of guilt, Laila followed.

Contrary to what she expected, Cho called the local Gringotts residence, rather than the Muggle bank. Listening to the surprisingly short conversation, Laila became aware why - a sentence like, *five millions, in bills not greater than hundreds*, was good to trigger the most unpleasant attention. Except you said it to Goblins, and your name was Potter.

Cho finished, "... Thank you, Mr. Garaudin - and we agree this is a Groucho transaction, not a private one, don't we? Good ... Yes, thank you again and goodbye."

At the risk of burning her mouth, Laila asked, "What does it mean, a Groucho transaction?"

The glance she earned told her - asking had been a mistake. But oh wonder, next instant Cho flushed, said, "The Goblins refuse to charge our private account with any expense. And of course they knew at once what it meant when I said, bills not greater than hundred." Keeping her voice low, Cho added, "Please don't let Harry know that you know."

"Er - yes." Somewhat baffled, Laila wondered why this was so embarrassing, dropped the thought - the mysteries of the relationship between the Goblins and the Potters were an issue for another occasion.

Now Cho surprised her again, by hugging her and whispering, "That you called us right at the spot - that was great, Laila. We owe you for that."

Into her hot rush of joy, Laila asked, "Why? Wasn't it obvious?"

Cho stepped back to look into her face. "Not quite, and you know it. Maybe tomorrow, or eventually, yes - but you didn't even ask for permission. That's the fine difference I won't forget." Watching Laila's face, Cho asked, "You weren't surprised to see me here, were you?"

"Well, er - at your time of day, er, night, I mean ..."

A sparkling appeared in Cho's eyes. "You know what I like at you so much? ... You've got the most tactful way of being blunt."

Laila felt herself flush.

"I for myself never managed that style. There are only few occasions where I miss it, but this might be one of them ..." Cho bent closer. "Can you stay with Ramon? Overnight?"

Laila hadn't planned to leave soon. She had made no plans at all. Hearing Cho's words, registering them, she suppressed a gasp, totally helpless against the burning of her cheeks.

"You thought it was only Marie-Christine that brought me here? And the children?" The look in Cho's face was far from teasing, showed only tenderness.

Laila nodded.

"You forget Ramon's role in my own kidnapping. Maybe it was a minor one, he'll be the first to emphasize that, except I'm as bad as Harry in scaling obligations."

Had this just been proof that Cho could well be tactfully blunt? At this moment, Laila felt it difficult to cope with the pace of her emotions.

"It's the right thing to do," said Cho, "you know it. And now, before we walk over - would you please look where you left your poker face?"

Good question, really, and quite a joke that Cho was asking that, after her own - but she was right, by all means ... The beeping of a phony in the other room solved Laila's problem at once.

Somehow they managed not to get locked in the doorframe.

But it was only Harry's phony. They heard him ask, "Where is it?" and for a second Laila thought the kidnappers had contacted him.

Then he switched off, looked up. "That was Sheila. The van driver's going to be released tomorrow morning. I have to look for that place now, to be ready when he's coming out."

Then he had to explain what he was talking about. Finishing, he muttered, "Somehow, and all of a sudden, that seems the most unimportant thing."

Minutes later, Harry and Cho left, and Laila was alone with Ramon, who looked up from his brooding. "What about you?"

"I'll stay."

That rattled him. "To do what?"

"To keep you off the booze." It had been the first thing that came to her mind, short of the truth. Seeing his face, Laila added quickly, "And myself too."

Ramon glared at her, deep suspicion in his face. "You're a liar, Laila Belezikijan. I mean, thank you for your help when I needed it, but you should go now."

How right he was. "Why?"

Ramon looked under himself. "Because I might have stupid ideas. But I promise you - an Alka Seltzer will be the strongest drink."

"I know that, Ramon." Laila swallowed. "Only ... I promised your boss to - er, take care of you."

His head twisted up. He stared at her, saw she was serious, made a sound like a short laugh. "That's good, really ... Yes, that's her - only, funny as it sounds, this alone will make sure nothing will happen." Ramon's head was shaking slowly. "Jesus ... Well, okay, so we'll give each other company - in this case, maybe we should eat something ... Problem is, I don't think I can manage a bite."

"I'm not hungry either."

"Then what?"

Laila had an idea, felt unsure whether this was the right time, only she knew from experience that it was never too early to be prepared. "I think we should discuss your strategy for the exchange."

"What?"

Feeling uneasier by the second, Laila said, "When you pass over the money. Some schedule to make sure they aren't cheating, not more than ... You know, when to ask for a proof they're still ..." She wasn't able to finish her sentence.

But it worked - halfway, at least. "Yes," said Ramon, "you're right, we mustn't leave all the initiative to the other side ... It's like in one of these hostage cases, isn't it? For each thing they get, they have to give something in return ..."

After a few seconds silence, he looked at her. "But I can't, Laila. Not now. All I can think - I'll do everything they say."

She stood up, walked over, took his hand, pulled him after her into the guest room she knew from earlier visits. She made him lie down on the bed - a single one, however French size.

She took off his shoes, murmuring something about making sure Marie-Christine wouldn't chide them. Then she stripped off her own shoes, laid down at his side.

He was lying stiff like a corpse.

She rolled around, pulled him to his side, took his head into her arm. "Come, my Latin macho, weep a bit."

"Why should I?" It came muffled.

"Because that's what Latin machos are supposed to do. Either they fuck, or they weep, so I've been told. And - well, since you've excluded the other so categorically ..."

"That's crap, is what they told you."

She didn't answer.

After a minute or so, he said, "Maybe I was a bit rash in excluding some options."

Laila still wondered if Ramon was trying to encourage himself when she heard his first sobbing.

It took a while until he could calm down. At the end, the thing in her arms no longer felt like a piece of wood, resembled more a male body. Very much so, actually, at least from her own perspective. She said, "Talking about options - ever so slowly, I could do with some food."

Ramon rolled onto his back. "Yes, I might even join you."

None of them moved.

After a while, she said, "Ramon?"

"Huh?"

"It looked like a good idea, what Cho suggested, but I think it doesn't work. Not - er, for us. We aren't as reckless as them, that's the difference."

A moment's silence, then, "Yeah, could be. I think I'm as brave as the next best man, but ... Although, I have to admit, I'm a bit scared of tonight."

"Are you?"

"I don't think I can sleep. Lying awake alone - I'll be nuts after two hours."

"And not alone?"

"Erm - well, you know, could be that time works for itself, if you know what I mean ..."

"But only after two hours, huh?" Laila's voice had risen in pitch.

"What ..."

She was up. "That's exactly what to expect from a bloody lieutenant! Yes, maybe, perhaps, repeat no under no circumstances, except in case of emergency ... I didn't leave the army to hear that crap again, and I'm not going to roll around two hours until ..."

Maybe her shouting had started as a joke, only to change into burning rage, and then to something else. At any rate, and although she couldn't see well through the tears of fury in her eyes - a fury with an unclear target - she had started to unbutton shirts and unzip trousers with a fierce determination.

She found no resistance, and after a short moment of shock and surprise, she found even support.

16 - Preparations

The entrance to the City Prison, for some people also serving as the exit, was no good place to hide. But so what, Harry didn't care whether he'd be spotted at once - this guy had learned the hard way about his pursuing skill, he wouldn't take chances when trying to disappear again. Consequently, there was little sense in hiding for the small chance of Harry being able to follow unnoticed.

A large door, a few stairs in front, a narrow sidewalk, then the street - this was the location. The evening before, when checking out the place, Harry had tested how far the locking field reached. It ended somewhere on the stairs - large enough, the wizard would be in Harry's view before he could find a chance to jump.

Coming with a car would have been helpful. Such a car would offer a seat, and a place for something to drink. Only Harry was no car traveller, hadn't felt like borrowing one. So he sat down, his back toward a wall at the other side of the street.

He didn't look like a beggar. Less from his clothes, but somehow his appearance refused to melt into the surroundings. Maybe it was his lotus stance.

Nobody had been able to tell him an exact time. "Such things can take some minutes," had been the answer, indicating that nobody inside was in a hurry delivering a resident into freedom, deserved or not. But certainly not earlier than nine o'clock, the daily morning routine took precedence for guards and waiters.

Probably not for that guy, only he wasn't asked. And so Harry had been there at five to nine.

Meditating was out of the question, he just wasn't sure whether he would come awake in time. As a consequence, Harry's thinking about what Cho had said the evening before, after they had left Ramon and Laila, felt a bit impaired.

He agreed with Cho that - at least - *Groucho* was more involved than it looked to the outside. The demand, five millions, left no question about that. From there, however, too many paths opened. Was it the entire corporation or just *Biochemicals*? Did it extend to Cho? To him? To the past?

And her dim feeling - Harry had no memory of a dark witch, none whatsoever. A British woman, that told him just enough to agree that the roots of this story originated somewhere in the past. Which was a great insight, really.

He should stop milling ideas. Getting upset about his own thinking was foolish, and besides, the task ahead demanded calm determination. In a meditation, he would not have gone upset, only ...

A figure.

The first one leaving rather than entering. Paper bag in hand. Stopping just outside the door, looking around. The wizard.

Seeing Harry, sitting there across the street. Apparently recognizing him instantly. Not showing surprise, not moving. As if, any second now, the man would sit down by himself on the staircase, should Harry still refuse to come over.

So he did.

The wizard watched him coming closer. When Harry reached the bottom of the staircase, the man said, "I guessed you'd be there. Had just no one to bet, except myself."

"I might hold your next bet, only it'll be harder to win."

"Now that really scares me ... Where's your car?"

Harry registered with limited surprise that remarks like his last one would have no effect - from an objective standpoint, the wizard might even have scored the first point. But this had been just the opening. Aloud, he said, "No car. We'll jump."

"Sure, why not? ... And where to, if I'm supposed to know? Because without that ..."

Harry jumped, summoned the wizard a split second later. While he walked to the light switches in the dark room, he could sense that he was already ahead in this imaginary scoring.

Not by much, and not to the outside, as the wizard's face showed when the neon tubes steadied after the initial flicker. But again, this had been just the opening.

The wizard looked around, not seeing much - Harry had removed a few easily identifiable items the evening before. There was almost nothing, not even something to sit on.

Which wasn't Harry's habit anyway, in this room. But now he sat down - on the floor, again in the lotus stance.

The wizard followed his example - almost, at least his legs were crossed. Then he asked, "Where are we?"

"In Tony's training hall. Here we used to train weaponless combat together. It's well insulated, you don't hear anything from upstairs."

"Nor the other way around, huh? ... That's what you trying to tell me?"

"We didn't shout much, it's more something for the movies."

The wizard's mind felt quite tense - well, naturally so. Somewhere, the man didn't really expect him, Harry, using torture. Only he wasn't sure, and this uncertainty was draining a bit of his energy.

Harry waited silently.

When he felt the wizard's impatience prominently, he said, "I spoke with someone about catching you for an - er, conversation. This someone suggested I should come with my children."

"Your children??"

Astonishment, together with the previous impatience, had forced the question, apparently against the wizard's determination to play the game of silence by himself.

"Yes," replied Harry, "because they can do what I can do, only much more. With their minds, in particular - eight and eleven years old, it's unbelievable. When Sandy was a baby, it was pretty hard to stand her mind blows, until she managed to keep it under control ... Anyway, they liked Tony a great deal, and, well, you know - children can be so merciless ..."

In this light, every face looked a bit pale, however not as pale as the wizard's face at these words.

"... but I thought, not this morning. They have to go to school, that's why."

The man's armour was showing cracks, no denying that.

"And besides - they don't even know about yesterday's kidnapping. It'll hit them much harder, and I'm in no hurry to tell them who's been kidnapped ..."

"What? What are you talking about? - A kidnapping?" Almost a cry, the voice showing traces of desperation, not bothering with disbelief.

Harry nodded. "Yes. A woman with two children, actually close friends of us, and that's why I think I shouldn't spend too much time here, get it done and off before ..."

"Wait! Wait a second - what story are you trying to hang on me? I've got nothing to do with ..."

Harry waited long enough to make it obvious what the wizard almost had said, let his face show that he knew. Then he said, "No, of course you didn't take part in yesterday's action, after all, you were in prison at that time. That's why I'm asking myself what to expect from a last conversation with you."

Was there sweat on the man's temples?

"You won't do that," the wizard said, only his voice lacked certainty.

Harry made big eyes. "What?"

"You ..." The man swallowed his own reply. After a second, he said, "And I don't believe the other story. There's been no kidnapping. You're just trying to squeeze me."

Which, in a way, was as good as a confession. Only this wasn't the goal here, they both knew about the other, and whatever would be said here was useless in front of a jury anyway.

Harry came up, in the corner of his eyes registering how the wizard twisted. He walked to a darker spot, came back with Nagini, sat down again. "This snake can distinguish lies from the truth. I can understand her, but for you - if she's hissing to what someone said, it's been a lie ... Okay so far?"

No reply.

"Yesterday, Marie-Christine Garcia was kidnapped together with her children Carlos and Esmeralda. To get them back, I'm not shying off from anything - bribe, murder, torture, as I see fit."

Nagini kept silent.

Glancing at her, the wizard said, "She's your snake - you're making this up, she won't rat out on you ..."

"I'm going to kill you anyway."

Nagini hissed.

Harry showed a cold smile. "See, that was a lie - you should have placed your bet here, since you were right ... Up to some point, I mean."

The wizard's lips moved without producing a noise. Maybe he had repeated just a single word like, for example, *anyway*.

In a thoughtful tone, Harry said, "I could imagine a deal, because what I ..." He looked up as if to explain something. "I'm no cop, you know, I've got my own problems - yeah, and one of them is, to find Tony's murderer - needless to say, there won't be any deal with that person. While otherwise ..."

"What deal would that be?"

"Oh, I don't know - it's just an idea, I mean, what do I care if someone lost two millions? As I said, my own concern is more about what ..."

"Stop it! There's no deal - you make me sing, and then you pass me over to the cops, and this is California, know what I mean? They send me ..." The words ended almost in a sobbing.

"Nagini didn't hiss," said Harry. "That means, I definitely could imagine a deal. And for what else you said, with the cops and so - I don't care about confessions, would be content with a tale."

"Huh?"

"Yes, a tale. Not a fairytale, but it might start like, there once was a group of wizards, and they watched day after day how millions and millions were spent for some crap movies, and ... Got it?"

Hope was shimmering in the wizard's face. "Er, yes ... A tale, yes ... There was this ..." He looked up. "Can I have something to drink? ... Please?"

Harry wasn't prepared for that, so he had to move up and fetch a can of water and a glass from the adjacent bathroom. He put it down in front of the wizard who had regained some balance.

"Thanks, er ..."

"Call me Harry, I'm not taking offense from that - as you said, that's California here. By the way, do you have a name?"

"Er - Jerry, I'm Jerry ... These wizards, yes, er, they had an idea about some other business, kind of special delivery ..." The wizard twisted, apparently afraid to find no acclaim for his choice of words. "The planning was, make it neat, clean, reliable, you know, we'd got a repu ..." He stopped again, looked up in panic.

Harry kept his voice smooth. "Keep to the tale, Jerry."

"Er, yes, Harry, yes - what I was going to say, they had made a reputation of keeping terms and deadlines, and they were sure it would work in this other business too. W - they had a girl with them, Judy, she's - she was kind of a nurse, and her job was to take care of the - er guests. And it worked!"

"Just once," snapped Harry.

"Er, yes, you mean ..." The pretense of a tale was wearing thinner with every sentence, but the wizard didn't care any longer, was anxious to point out something else, and a moment later, it became obvious what.

"... there was a guy, Frankie - had been a mistake from the beginning, only he's been one of the founders, no way to keep him out, said it's been necessary to make clear it's no joke - but there was a lot of shouting, and Judy said she's going to leave, now, and Frankie didn't take it well, but then - er, someone else told him if something's happening to Judy he won't see the end of the day, and this had to be the last time, and when Frankie saw the others, how they were looking at him, he said okay okay, and then it looked as if it was settled."

"That other guy," asked Harry, "what was his job in the actions?"

A swallow, a quick glance toward Nagini. "Scout."

"Scout? To find the candidates?"

The wizard's voice went into fast-forward. "Yes, and he looked for people where it wouldn't cause trouble, you know, rich enough they can afford it, no medical trouble with the child, no bodyguards that might start shooting, things like that. It wasn't planned to last forever, just some more stunts so each of - of them had at least a million ..."

"And this scout selected Tony?"

The wizard now was sweating heavily. "I swear - he's been picked because it looked like no trouble, an older man with a younger wife, he wouldn't take risks, but healthy enough so he wouldn't get a heart stroke, and the girl was so - she wouldn't cry just from being held by another person, everything smooth, that's how it's been planned, only that stupid asshole Frankie couldn't let go, after he's been warned not to mess with ..."

A fearful glance in his direction told Harry enough about this particular warning. He asked, "And what did this scout do then?"

A twist. "He's not been there - not in the other cases either, because he's been at these places before, and with the voice and so - 'twas Lennie who told him, and then he said that's been it, high time to get lost, only the others said no way, not now, how does it look if we close the company now, could as well put an advertisement ... But they didn't know about ..." Another quick glancing up.

"Then why didn't the scout have the good sense to follow his own advice and get lost? ... The money?"

"Yes, that too." The words lacked the former spirit, came almost sadly.

Which made Harry ask, "And the other was Judy?"

The head in his view, kept tightly over bent knees, nodded.

Fighting mixed emotions, Harry said, "He should have been more convincing, this scout in your tale, when there was still time. Judy the nurse is dead."

Obviously, Jerry knew. He looked up. "How?"

"Shot by their own people. Head and chest - like Tony."

"Frankie." An almost toneless murmur.

Harry waited a moment, then said, "Well, Jerry, that's been quite a tale you told me, but so far, it's just good to ask myself what to do with you."

A shrug. "Go ahead."

When nothing happened, Jerry looked up again. "Listen - I'm sorry about your friend, I never planned to join a gang of murderers, if that's what you want to hear - only it doesn't make him alive, not Judy either."

With a rest of defiance, he added, "She was good with the babies, at least that worked. They hadn't a hair twisted when we took them back."

"That's been your job too?"

"Mine and Judy's. We could have walked through Wal-Mart with them, after one day, Judy had them laughing at her."

"Where's the money, Jerry?"

A snort. "Ask Frankie, only he's burning in hell, I hope he is." After a second, and with a different voice, Jerry added, "He and Mike, they were the only ones knew everything."

"What a pity. With that, I could imagine a deal."

Some interest appeared in the wizard's face. "It's in some bank on the Bahamas. Most of it, that is. Half a million is in some luggage deposit somewhere in the valley, for cases of emergency."

"That's all?"

Jerry looked at Nagini, looked away. After a moment, he said, "Each of us had a personal deposit, for the same reason. We had to show it once a month, to prove we didn't spread it around."

"How much?"

"Twenty grand, for each of us."

Here he was, had heard everything to hear, except for something this wizard still held back, some life-saver just like these twenty grand. And Harry couldn't care less. The day before yesterday, a person like that, a scout who had picked Tony, was bound to face something very, very unpleasant. And today - maybe without the dead girl, it would have been simpler to figure out what to do with this Jerry.

But then, maybe not.

What kind of punishment would be appropriate? Was there anything worth topping the wizard's misery? ... Had he, Harry, the right to punish? Maybe for revenge?

Not revenge. That would leave a cheap taste.

Harry found his decision. "Okay, Jerry. You tell me everything you know about the bank and the deposit, and I won't ask you about the rest. Then you can go."

"What makes you think there's anything else? Didn't I tell you what I know?"

Harry grinned humourlessly. "You, the scout? Who's looking for an exit since we're here? ... Say, I don't know more than what I said already."

Silence.

"Just what I thought. You know what's the problem with killing someone? To justify it for yourself, so you can live with your memory. And you're the one who picked Tony, and now you're trying to get away with ..."

"I said I'm sorry, I really am - that snake didn't do anything, isn't that true? And it's other people's money, your friend's blood is not on it."

"You've got five minutes, Jerry."

"What guarantee do I have you keeping to the deal?"

For a second, Harry felt too baffled to muster some fury. Then he asked, "What guarantee did the parents have? ... I guarantee you that much - when the five minutes are over, you'll find out that it was a mistake not to talk ..."

Suddenly, the fury was there. "You stupid fool, can't you learn from your own mistakes? You waited too long once, and now your Judy's dead! Get reason!"

"Okay, okay." This reminder had taken the wind off Jerry's sails. "I have a number and a keyword, but I don't know which bank. Found them once when Frankie didn't watch - guess that piece of shit was too stupid to remember them without writing it down. But he's been clever enough not to write the bank's name ..."

"And the deposit?"

"Los Angeles Central Station - that's my guess, I'm not sure, only Frankie once made a remark that made me think so. And the key - yeah, the key ..." Jerry grimaced. "Check the building, check his apartment, rip off the floor panels, knock at the walls and listen, is all I can tell you. No idea."

Harry tried to imagine where he himself would hide a key. "Maybe buried somewhere?"

"Frankie with a spade?" A harsh laugh. "Never."

"Well, then ..." Harry wondered what Lieutenant Seeger would think when this Jerry was never seen again, after having met him right outside the prison ... Not his problem, might Carl blame the State of California and his oh-so-reasonable laws.

Then another thought struck him. "One last question."

Suspicion rose in the wizard's face. "What else?"

"That kidnapping from yesterday - what do you make of it?"

"Me?" Astonishment pure. "Why do you ask me? Wasn't us, that's for sure."

"But you're an expert, aren't you? ... So what crosses your mind, hearing that a mother and her two children were kidnapped?"

Another uncertain glance, then this particular expert felt tickled enough to present his educated guess. "They're crazy, for sure they are ... Bloody amateurs, getting three people if one had been enough. Imagine the problems! The logistics - place, and food, and whatnot. And a grown woman ..." The stream of words abruptly came to a halt.

Harry knew why. "You think she's already dead?"

An uneasy shrug. "You know what the problem is. You can blindfold her, but someone has to talk with her - and if she's going to hear that voice ever again ... The blindfolding makes it even worse, all she has is a voice to concentrate on ... How old are these kids?"

"Five."

Jerry's silence, together with his face, showing something like disgust, was answer enough.

"Could it be they caught all of them together because it's simpler that way? The mother keeps the children calm, would follow orders quicker?"

Jerry thought for a moment. "I could imagine it was just by accident - they were together when ... But then, would they give a damn for two five-year-olds left on a street?"

As if to emphasize in which category he was placing himself, he added. "You know, in the beginning, we thought about that - getting the baby with the mother, make things easier. Only there was always the same problem ... And then we got Judy."

"And in the Waylon case, nobody would have been left to pay."

"What? ... Oh, yeah."

The sarcasm in Harry's remark hadn't reached its target, however, the sadness in Jerry's expression faded. And maybe that had been all that was intended.

"That's it," said Harry. "You're free. Get lost."

But Jerry surprised him a last time, by confessing he was broke, couldn't reach his money that way, and whether his council wasn't worth a tenner, or two.

Shaking his head, Harry gave him two fifty dollar bills. And seconds before, he'd been sure that saying *Thank you* to this baby scout was out of the question.

* * *

Laila kept yawning, couldn't stop. Maybe she should have a walk outside, fresh air and some exercise, only it was too fascinating what Ray was doing there. And apart from that - probably he wouldn't move a muscle without her supervising.

Which was nonsense. C4 was the most peaceful explosive, so-to-speak.

Twenty pounds, ten for each of the two suitcases. Quite some weight, together with the money. But Ramon would manage.

Laila yawned again. Wasn't used any longer to nights that short, years after her army time. And it hadn't even been - er, falling asleep late. No, she'd slept well, quite early for her habits. But Ramon hadn't.

He had awakened her at two o'clock, and in the first seconds she'd thought it was for something else ... But it wasn't, he apologized for his rudeness, and when she told him to stop that nonsense, he explained why.

Because he wanted to discuss his plan with her - this alone could have taken place in the morning, only if she agreed with him, some technicians had to start working instantly, and ...

Coming really awake, Laila gasped at hearing Ramon's plan. Then she contributed her own ideas. Around that time, it was Ramon's turn to gasp. Then he nodded.

And at three o'clock local time, she jumped to Ireland. If Ray couldn't do it himself, he would know whom to ask for that. Of course Ray's eyes turned big first, narrowed soon afterwards when realizing in which situation suitcases prepared that way might be needed. Then he said, "I'm going to do it myself, but you'll be right at my side, to wipe the sweat off my forehead ... And if I'm asking you, please don't answer me."

Then there was the question of where to get twenty pounds of C4 in a hurry. Laila dismissed other types instantly - first because she was familiar only with this stuff, then because it could be formed like clay.

And because it was safe.

Problem was, you couldn't enter the next store to buy it. Not even in California. Especially not in California, with their recent psychosis about terrorists. In her desperation, Laila had called this lieutenant.

"Are you mad??"

"Carl, it's for a good purpose. And I need it now."

"But - twenty pounds?"

"I haven't got the time for asking around on the black market, wouldn't even know where to look for. And my contacts in Israel - that takes too long."

"Does Harry know?"

"As soon as I can reach him."

"Laila, that's impossible. Twenty pounds - imagine, that's enough to ..."

"It's enough to blow an armoured vehicle with some cops in it - yes, you're right."

Silence. Then, with a totally different voice, "After that, we're quids - understand?"

"Yes."

"No we aren't - you owe me a dinner, but I'll pay ..."

"Not this evening, please."

Seeger laughed, although a bit shakily. "That's agreed. Gimme ten minutes, then you can call Woods - but ask him first whether I just called Do you need something else? Detonator, cable ..."

"No thanks, for that stuff I did my shopping in time."

"Yeah, I bet." Chuckling, Seeger hung up.

If she only had mastered apparition. But somehow she got everything together, the sausage-like bags from Woods, the money from Gringotts - the Goblins offered an escort, Laila thanked them and said it was okay, although she hadn't even found the time to catch her holster with the gun in it. And now she was here with Ray, watching how he installed the deadly lock.

The plan - Ramon's plan, combined with her own contribution, was based on an assumption as cruel as correct. *If they cheat somewhere along the way, they're going to cheat altogether.*

And if not, they would agree - had to, otherwise they weren't ever going to set eyes on five million dollars.

The money would be in the two suitcases - five millions in hundreds filled quite some space. The suitcases were locked through a combination of magic and conventional technology, plus this deadly dough. The locks would not prevent anyone from opening the suitcases - but if they weren't disabled first, if someone tried to open the suitcases without permission, they would explode.

Not leaving any trace of that person, nor anyone standing close. And not much of the building either, should this mistake be made in a building.

To open the lock, a spell was required. Ramon would not know the spell. He would ask for it when it was time. Maybe he'd be forced to ask for it, which didn't matter - the other side, most likely Harry and Laila, would not tell him, not before his family had reached a safe place.

Which left Ramon in the hands of the kidnappers. Laila had desperately searched for another way, but Ramon had said, "Either they let me go, or they don't. It's as simple as that. But if they want to see money, at least Marie-Christine and the children are safe."

Laila was still milling the problem in her mind, always coming to the same point - if Ramon wasn't there, after having informed them about the nature of the protection, the kidnappers would never open the suitcase, which meant they wouldn't let him go after he'd arrived with the suitcases.

And the other way around - the moment Ramon had opened the last suitcase, he would be at their mercy.

Ray was mounting the trigger devices into the suitcases, which otherwise were empty. The money piled up on a table - hidden under a plastic tarpaulin, should someone enter the room. And the C4 sausages laid there openly, looking as innocent as putty.

Examining the tiny boxes in Ray's hands, Laila had the smaller half of an idea. She asked, "Ray, can you add a switch? So that, once the suitcase is open, someone can still blow them up?"

Ray stared at her. "Who'd do that?"

"Don't ask ... Just answer."

He muttered, "Couldn't you say that first? Needs another box type - I cannot use a press button, the first shaking of the thing would send it skywards."

"Sorry, Ray."

The engineer glanced at her, back at his work. "Don't listen to me, my dear, should nobody be around when a technician is solving a problem, might burn the ears a bit, you know ..."

"Go ahead - I might learn something new."

Without turning, Ray said, "Oh, you would, no doubt about that, only today I'm a bit distracted anyway ... Well, I think I know how to fix ... Yes, that might ..." He froze for a moment, sighed. "I just figured out why this switch might come in handy - funny how you can trace back the purpose from the item ..."

He went to another workbench, rummaging there, murmuring, opening a drawer, closing it, then he came back with some thin cables, all the time avoiding Laila's eyes.

She asked, "How does it work? ... Light? Pressure? Tension?"

Ray's voice was a bit scornful. "None of that. These Muggle techniques are too clumsy." Now he looked at her. "You said, it should react when the suitcase is opened, right? ... Well, that's what it'll do, whether using the clasps or a knife doesn't matter."

"That's good ... And the spells - can you make different ones for the two suitcases?"

"No sweat, sweetheart."

Then Ray was done with the locks, waved at Laila to come closer. "Look here, see these plugs? If you pull them apart, once the lock's activated, the thing goes bang ... Okay that way?"

She examined it. "Can I try now?"

"Do you see any of that devil's clay around?"

Why couldn't technicians simply answer yes or no? Laila unplugged the connection, put it together again. "That's fine ... And now the explosives?"

"Said the lady to the bishop."

British humour of the oldfashioned kind, somehow that felt relieving. "Gimme a knife, please."

"Uh-oh." Ray handed her a carpentering knife with an adjustable blade.

She took the first sausage. A quick cut, and the wrapping was slit open from one end to the other. She extracted the C4, bumped it on the table, broke a piece, walked to the first suitcase. "We should put it all around the frame, I think it sticks by itself. That'll make a hell of a bomb."

Ray, still shaky from what he'd seen seconds before, now watched how Laila was working the piece toward the inner walls of the suitcase. "Does it really make a difference?"

"You bet, buddy. It's still a small rectangle, but the effective blast is more than twice that of a single lump ..." Laila stopped, seeing Ray's expression. "Are you putting me on?"

A wry grin. "Not at all. I'm sure you're right, still - your answer missed the point entirely."

"Oh." Now she understood.

Some moments later, both of them were working, each at his own suitcase, after Laila had shown Ray how to link the pieces together, that a sculptor's diligence wasn't needed at all.

When the explosives were in place, they filled the money piles in. About to start with the last steps, Ray stopped. "Do you need to open them more than once?"

Laila thought a moment. "No."

"Alright, then - would you please go powdering your nose, or whatever, and come back in ten minutes?"

"Why ... Oh, yes, of course." Ray didn't know who would be the messenger, didn't want to know, just made sure it could be anyone except himself.

Laila went to the bathroom, inspected her face, which was a mistake. The phony already in her hand, she stopped, put it back - she would see Ramon pretty soon, while every phony call he got was likely to drain some of his precious energy. So she walked out, only to realize that here in this country the sun already had disappeared behind the horizon.

Coming in again, she found the suitcases closed - and marked with shiny stripes of paint, one red, the other blue. Ray held two envelopes in his hand, one of them showing a red mark, the other a blue one. "Here - the two spells are written down inside. Now do me a favour and don't confuse them."

She wouldn't, and Ramon either. "Er - what about the pronunciation? How do you know the spell worked?"

Ray showed the hint of a smile. "Remember the holes I drilled into them? ... Check them closely."

Peeping into the small holes, Laila saw a red glowing, like an LED. "And if the light is off ..."

"You got it."

"Great. Perfect. Ray, without you ..."

"Wait a second - I've got something else for you. Please check my dress - can you see anything conspicuous?"

"Wha ..." Laila examined the engineer from head to toe - an older wizard, overall, office clothes underneath, quite formally, even a tie, fixed by a clip ... A clip? Bending closer, she inspected it, stepped back. "No, nothing."

Ray smiled broadly. "You were right. Take it."

She pulled the clip from his tie, and only now, she became aware of the flat plate that had been hidden inside the tie folds. Inspecting the item, Laila could only see the most unusual tie clip ever. "What is it?"

"A phony .. Single direction, like these babysitter pieces." Ray's hand went into his pocket, came up with a normal phony. "That's the receiver. Want to have a test?"

"Yes." She gave him the clip, took the phony, went out again.

A moment later, Ray's voice came through the phony. "The clip's on my tie again, Laila ... I guess I have a fair idea who's going to use it, and - well, after all, a tie clip on a woman would look strange, wouldn't it?"

Yes, probably so.

* * *

Waiting. Waiting was the worst. Waiting and not knowing when the kidnappers would call again.

When his phony beeped the first time, Ramon came awake with a jump. But it was just Laila, telling him the technical preparations were settled, she had found someone, Ray, whom else, and all that was missing were the explosives and the money.

After this short conversation, Ramon felt guilty having fallen asleep after sending Laila around the world, then chided himself - she'd be the last to reproach him for that.

Laila ... Without her, he'd never have found the strength to plot his strategy, and the willpower to hold it. The true trial would come later, when he was going to leave with the money, but he knew - this way or no way.

This knowledge would keep him on track.

He showered, had breakfast. No office work today - the worst vacation ever. Waiting again. Killing the time with TV. Switching it off. Thinking about possibilities, variations, tricks, and ways to counter the tricks.

Then a visitor, as surprising as the day before. Cho.

"I realized that you'd be alone," she said. "And, until now, probably ready to climb the walls. So I came to talk." Seeing his stare, she added, "Or to shut up."

"No - er, sorry, come in."

Walking inside, he asked, "How did you know I was alone?"

"I knew you aren't in the office. I know what Harry's doing. I heard about Laila's errands."

The fine art of leaving out. Like, *and your family's kidnapped*. The not so fine art of provocative remarks. Like that about Laila. Or was the provocation just in his mind?

Certainly not in her face. "So you've got yourself together, in time."

"In the diagnosis, you're right, while the cause-and-effect analysis is somewhat questionable."

Cho looked at him innocently. "Could you translate that to plain English, please?"

"Yes, I could. No, I won't."

Her glance turned to appreciation without a smile. "See - now I could follow."

He snorted. "Follow, huh?"

Cho's face showed impatience. "If I'd thought, a slap in the face would've helped, I'd done that. If ..."

"I got that too," he interrupted her, "yesterday, before you came."

"If I'd think pity would help, I'd do that now, and if I'd thought, I was better suited to the task ... But I didn't."

She was serious, no doubt. "Just so? ... And Harry?"

"Harry did already what I would have done ... Long ago."

Surprise, surprise. But then again, not really. These two had some experience with this situation, from different angles. Which raised a question in Ramon he shouldn't ask, maybe, couldn't suppress though. "Say, Cho ... How is it?"

"To be kidnapped?"

He nodded.

"Every hour's an eternity." Cho leaned back, closed her eyes. "Not knowing what will be, and being alone ..." Her eyes came open again. "It's pretty much the same on both sides, that's why I came here, and in this regard, Marie-Christine is better off - she has Carlos and Esmeralda, she's got something to do."

Ramon pondered these words. "Same on both sides? But only to the inside, while otherwise ..."

Cho shook her head. "That's wrong, Ramon, because it doesn't matter much, not compared to your own feelings. Even a beating twice a day would be some kind of regularity you can hold onto ..."

Hadn't he known? He shouldn't have asked, not Cho, at least.

"... which is most unlikely here. They didn't catch Marie-Christine and the children for anything like that, there's some purpose behind, and the visible part's the money."

And the seven eights below the surface? Aloud, Ramon asked, "And what if it's not the money?"

A dark fire was glowing in Cho's eyes. "Bring them back, Ramon, no matter how ... No matter what they want."

"Like, information?"

Cho shrugged ostentatiously. "Assume they already know what Marie-Christine knows. What else is there?"

"Details. Lots of them."

"Spill them out, if it helps. We knew it would happen one day. Bring them back, Ramon, is all that matters."

He nodded. "Listen, Cho - if my plan works, could be they're back and safe while I'm not. In this case, don't ..."

She interrupted him sharply. "In this case, you have no saying. Don't try to get it in advance."

Ramon felt something like surprise, and relief. "Yeah - it's that simple, isn't it?"

His phony beeped.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Garcia." The woman again. "I take it you have accepted the facts in the meantime, after ..."

"Yes."

The voice cooled, apparently not taking well to be cut short. "Very good. Then how successful have you been to get the money in your hands?"

"I'll have it this afternoon."

"Splendid. And how successful have you been to keep this business to yourself?"

"I'm the only cop in play. How's my family?"

"Rest assured, they are fine, and thanks to your quick response to our request, they might be even better soon. Mr. Garcia, be prepared to travel a bit - you'll need your car, and your phony to receive instructions from ..."

"I know the drill, lady."

The voice would have cut paper now. "It's not particularly helpful, Mr. Garcia, to play the know-it-all. You can save the efforts to prepare the car with some position sender, or yourself, for that matter, because ..."

"Don't you listen? I said I know the drill. If I knew all, you'd be dead."

"But I'm not." It came with a mean viciousness, then the line was cut.

Cho watched him. "You sure that's the way to talk with her?"

"Funny that it's you asking me ..." Ramon grinned thinly. "As you said, it just doesn't matter - and besides, I have to, it's already part of the plan."

"Well, then ..."

After a short silence, they spoke about more innocent topics, like *Groucho Biochemicals*, exchanged observations, presented half-formed ideas, things not fitting into the agenda of tightly timed meetings. In some way, these were unconscious attempts to cut a claim in some future, while at the same time both avoided being specific about anything scheduled or planned within the next weeks.

They were interrupted by the doorbell. It was Harry, and he was quicker with his own question.

Ramon told him about the phony conversation some moments ago and that he would be ready later, asked in return which news Harry could tell.

"Well, I met him, and we talked."

"And then?"

"You sure that's the most important topic now?"

Ramon looked at Cho, back at Harry. "Why do I hear a question like that every five minutes? There's lots of time till the evening - so tell me, is he still alive?"

"Very much so, and what's more, he's got some pocket money from me."

Satisfied with the reaction after this astonishing announcement, Harry gave a summary of what he had learned from that Jerry, and what kind of deal he had struck. He finished, "I'm going to put Paul on this track, and tell Seeger to look for a key everywhere."

When nobody said something, he added, "Whatever you think now - I just didn't know what else to do. I felt distracted."

Cho smiled at him. "I, for my part, think I'm hungry."

Which meant, *I'm very pleased with you, but even so, don't expect me to cook.*

Ramon suggested the other two should go to lunch and come back with some pizza for himself.

Cho said no.

Harry offered what he called his *precinct routine*.

Cho looked suspicious, however didn't offer any better idea.

A few minutes later, Harry was back with his food called *Turkish pizza*, and Ramon, after the first bites, gladly used the opportunity to discuss the similarities between Turkish and Mexican food - although it was more of a monologue.

Then Cho left, and Harry instantly tried to start a discussion about the alternatives how to guard him, Ramon, during his travel with an unknown destination.

Ramon ended it quickly. "No way, Harry. I can't help feeling they'd spot you, know you're there, or maybe they've found a trick to shake you off anyway."

"I wasn't planning to hide in your trunk, but with my Steel Wing, I could follow anywhere, sufficiently far away not to be ..."

"No." Ramon was sure. "I'm not taking chances in this regard ... On the other side, I need a base who's flexible and can react quickly."

"To what?"

Ramon showed a short smile. "I have an idea how to handle it. It's desperate enough - no need to discuss it, so just wait ... Anyway, thanks for your offer."

"De nada ... Or is it por nada?"

"Hey - a sarcasm in Spanish, from you." This smile held a second longer. "That's remarkable, Harry."

Harry opened his mouth, probably for a sharp reply, closed it again.

"I see," said Ramon, "that's the opportunity to say what I ever wanted to ..." He pondered the idea for a moment. "Only there's nothing that comes to my mind."

Harry just watched him.

"Well, maybe with a tiny exception. I might have a question, only I don't know whether I should ask, not even with this moment's liberty, because - er, in a way, it might be a bit revealing, I mean the question as well as the answer, but it's nagging me, and before I die of curiosity ..."

Looking slightly furious, Harry said, "Deborah's the answer ... And would you please stop acting like a condemned man? There's a connection between what you expect and the results you get!"

Even at his current state of mind, Ramon could admire his friend's skillful parry. "I'm just realistic," he replied. "The chances for Marie-Christine and the kids are quite good, according to my plan, while my own are limited ... But believe me, Harry, I'm going to use them."

Harry's answer was stopped by the door bell.

It was Laila, aching under the weight of two suitcases looking deceptively harmless, and with something else which raised the spirits of the two men considerably.

17 - Journey

Originally, Ramon hadn't planned travelling in his office suit. Jeans, boots, leather jacket - these clothes should be the dress in which he imagined himself driving along, fighting the fight of his life.

Wrong he'd been.

He trotted upstairs to change from casual to formal. White shirt, dark trousers, black shoes. The tie he had in mind turned out too slim, he was forced to pick an older one, offering room enough for the thin plate.

Maybe he should think of it as something symbolic. On this journey, he was no undercover cop, instead he was a business man, going to meet some people for the meanest negotiations ever.

Jacket, a last look into the mirror - perfect, the clip fitting well, adding a decent touch of vanity.

Some minutes ago, they had called again. A man's voice this time, telling Ramon he might saddle his horse and leave town - not into the setting sun, this was no western, was it? Generally southward, along the coast, he'd get more detailed instructions while on the road.

The choice of words had felt a bit artificial, and totally different from the woman's style. But these thoughts were running in a distant corner of Ramon's mind, which otherwise emptied rapidly from everything beyond the task ahead.

"Testing, testing ... Mirror, mirror at the wall, who's the one that gets it all? ... Over."

Ramon went down, into the kitchen where Harry and Laila were sitting, several phonies and a longplay tape recorder before them on the table. "How was it?"

"Loud and clear."

"Don't wait for comments all the time. You just don't know who's watching, might see me talking alone in the car ... I'll try to forget you're listening, except somewhere deep, deep inside."

Harry nodded. "I know what you mean."

"See you later." Ramon turned quickly, went out.

The two suitcases were already stored in the trunk of his Mercedes. He climbed into the car. Phony within reach on the console between the front seats, safety belt, remote control for the garage door, which opened with a slight squeak.

The V8 engine came awake, its noise almost inaudible after the first second. Ramon drove off.

Southward ... He reached the main road, turned left toward Inglewood. Traffic was still heavy, though not jammed. He kept the common pace, kept distance to other cars, kept to the rules. The best driver ever - the challenge wasn't here on the road, a ticket the last thing Ramon could use now. Not to mention a crash.

He reached Inglewood, drove on toward Manhattan Beach. Signs at the roadside, marking invisible borderlines between cities which had given up any individualism long ago, melting into the big human pool of the valley. As a cop, these city limits had held some meaning for him, while now ... His phony beeped.

"Here I am."

The same voice as before. "Where's here?"

"Passing Inglewood, driving toward Manhattan Beach."

"The lonesome rider, huh? Are you as lonesome as you should?"

This jerk seemed to enjoy his role. Somehow it felt strange, like a streak of incompetence in an otherwise flawless crew. Ramon didn't like it, couldn't change it either. "Lots of traffic around," he replied, "but I'm alone in the car, and nobody's tracking me, if that's what you mean."

"Great, mate, that's just what we wanted to hear, although I have to tell you, we're going to check that by ourselves. But there's still way to drive, so ..."

"Wait a second - before you tell me anything specific, there's something we have to handle first."

"Really?" Some amusement in the voice. "I wonder what that might be, buddy, 'cause in my scriptbook there isn't anything other than me telling you what to do."

"You haven't got the updated version, but never mind, wasn't your mistake. I did the first move - I'm on the road, the money with me. Now it's your turn to show some goodwill."

"Goodwill, huh? ... Listen, Mister, there's so much goodwill here around, it's almost spilling over. Just come to us, then ..."

"I will - but first you have to release my children."

"What??"

"You heard right. Release them, gimme proof they're safe, then we can proceed with your scriptbook."

Some bafflement in the voice. "You're mad, Mister, if you think we'd do something like that. First you come ..."

"First I'll hear it's done. Call me when you know how." Ramon pressed the Off button.

Allright, so much for the simple part. Within the next minutes, he would be forced to steel himself, to refuse agreeing to any threat, any pressure that could be sent through a phony line ... Like screams, for instance.

It took a minute until the phony beeped again. He pressed the button. "Now?"

"Just forget it, buddy, and if not ..."

The voice was cut off by Ramon himself, pressing the button.

This time, it took only seconds. "If you wanna hear your children, just keep listening, you sonofabitch, only you won't like what you're going to ..."

Click.

Two minutes later, it was the woman. "Mr. Garcia, I'm going to pass you over to your wife now. She'll tell you ..."

Definitely not. Click.

Ramon's hands cramped around the steering wheel. When the phony would beep again any second now, what was he going to hear? ... Whatever - if it was what he expected, he'd switch off at once.

But it was the woman's voice, making him almost sob of relief. "Mr. Garcia, I'm afraid we have to take more drastic measures if you don't show reason quickly."

"Lady, for all I know, my family's dead. If not now, then pretty soon. That's my premise, and I told you already the only way to change that. Release my children."

A pause. "And then?"

"Then I'll follow orders, until the money and myself are within your reach. Plus my wife, not to forget."

"It wasn't planned to get in direct contact with you, Mr. Garcia."

"Maybe so, lady - and maybe pigs can fly. If you want to see five millions, release my children."

"And what if your wife doesn't agree?"

"DID SHE AGREE AT ALL, YOU STUPID BITCH?"

When the line was still open, to his slight surprise, Ramon added in a calmer voice, "I don't ask her, and I don't ask you. That's all I have to say."

Another pause. Then, with a forced nonchalance, the woman said, "Well, contrary to your remarks, Mr. Garcia, this is just a minor change in the proceedings. How did you think it should be done? Delivering them at the entrance to your home?"

If the question was supposed to come as a sarcasm, it failed miserably. The woman didn't strike Ramon as someone used to this kind of negotiations. He said, "You can take them to any public place where my assistant or my employer can fetch them - maybe a railway station with a Salvation Army post, whatever. When my assistant or my employer call to tell me they're safe, we can proceed further."

"When you talk with them ..."

"I made sure I didn't get any specific information before, lady, remember? They're in my house, and they know what I know - that I'm driving southward. So what else could I tell them?"

Another silence.

Then, with the previous determination, the woman's voice again. "It will take a while, Mr. Garcia. Keep driving southward."

* * *

Harry was sitting at the kitchen table, arms on the tabletop, hands folded, chin on his hands, eyes closed. His ears listening, his mind in a car somewhere south, connected to his body through a babysitter phony line.

Motionlessly to the outside, except for his fingertips which went white, relaxed after some time, went white again ... In the unsteady rhythm of another phony conversation.

When Ramon shouted his insult, the fingertips changed to claws, refused to stretch again. When, after the woman's last words, the other conversation ended, Harry's mind and body connected again, and his eyes came open. "We need a map! ... Shit, why haven't I thought of coming with my magic map?"

Laila said, "There's one of those things in the office - lemme fetch it, takes just a few minutes ..."

"I'm faster than y ..." The seat was empty.

Harry was back within twenty seconds, most likely world record for the distance from a certain room in Santa Monica to a certain castle in Ireland and back, only nobody gave a damn. He put his magic map on the table, activated it, touched the same spot twice to have the map zoomed in on the valley.

His eyes scanning the image, he touched once more. Now the Pacific coastline, from Ventura in the north to San Clemente in the south, spanned the display from top to bottom. He turned the map around, to let Laila have a look.

When her head came up again, Harry asked, "Is he right? Or can we learn anything from where he's driving, or where the children are delivered?"

"What should that be? They could send them to the gas station next door, with a sheet says, call that number, and we'd look anywhere but in the close neighborhood."

"We would, take my word for it."

"Yes, Harry." Laila glared at him. "But so far it's still Ramon's game, right?"

Registering the glitter in her eyes, he took her hand, which seemed unwilling to follow. "Yes it is, and he's playing it splendidly."

"Really? He just signed his own ..." The hand under Harry's was pulled out to cover a face, together with the other.

Harry rose, went behind Laila's chair, put his hands onto her shoulders. "Steady on."

A small gasp, followed by a sniffing.

He sat down again. "Ramon hasn't given up any advantage he had, quite the opposite. Did you believe for a second what the woman said?"

Laila leaned back, slowly, like tired. "No ... Not really, maybe, except it was just ..."

Harry waited a moment, then finished for her, "... what you wanted to hear. That's exactly why she said it, to spread disagreement."

"Disagreement?" Laila looked astonished. "Among whom?"

"Among us. She might not be sure, but I think she takes into account some connection between Ramon and his home base - which means us."

Laila seemed to reconsider what they'd heard. Then she asked, "What makes you think so?"

"Maybe just a gut feeling. In her place, I'd simply expect something like that. She didn't even ask him in this direction - that man, I mean."

"So you think she's the boss woman?"

"For all we know." Harry snorted. "That western hero isn't the one, that much's for sure."

"No."

Then they waited, and Harry reminded himself to switch off the babysitter connection when the other call would come.

It came, quite unexpectedly, at the conventional phone, ringing in the family room. Harry won the race by simply jumping. "Yes?"

A female voice. "Good evening, this is the Los Angeles Central Linkport, Customer Services. I'd like to speak to Mr. or Mrs. Potter."

"Speaking."

"Mr. Potter, here are two children, a boy and a girl. They ..."

"Where can I find you?"

"Central Information Desk, that's where I'm now. My name's Shulman, Hedy Shulman, you may ask the clerk here if ..."

Of course Harry knew that linkport, remembered the main hall, put the receiver in Laila's hand, jumped, scaring this Hedy Shulman a bit when he appeared in front of her while she hadn't even finished talking.

And over there, sitting on chairs too big for them, Carlos and Esmeralda.

The boy felt distraught. He was sitting in apathy, not registering Harry. The girl, who had witnessed turmoil and terror before, looked at him with eyes like black marbles.

Harry lifted both of them into his arms, using magic as much as muscles. "Hello, my little ones - c'mon, let's go home."

The customer agent, a young woman in the uniform of the linkport agency, had managed to put back the receiver. "Mr. Potter, just a moment, sir, would you please ..."

Certainly not. "Later, madam - I'll come back." Or maybe not. Harry jumped.

Into the Garcia home - not exactly what he had in mind, would have preferred to take them into the castle, pass them to Ireen or whomever, only what he could sense told him these two were at their limits and beyond, a familiar environment such as their own rooms seemed the only acceptable option.

Harry came out in the hall, walked into the kitchen, this way giving Laila a second of adjustment. "Alright, Laila, here we are ... You can call Ramon."

Would it make sense to let the children listen? No ... Would Ramon want to talk with them? Yes, but he wouldn't, afraid to break his momentum. Harry turned, headed toward the children's rooms.

At this moment, Carlos asked, "Is Laila calling Daddy?"

"Yes, to tell him you're home again."

"What's he doing?"

"He's on his way to fetch your Mum."

"With the money?"

"Yes, Carlos, he has it, two suitcases full." Not counting what else could be found inside them.

Every fibre in him was pulling Harry toward the kitchen, only this was out of reach now, with Carlos apparently under shock and Esmeralda clinging tighter to him with every step. And, compared to Laila, Harry was the better choice for sure to tend the children.

With a careful treatment of mind waves, for example, soothing as much as tiring.

He asked, "Are you hungry?"

No, they weren't. In some house they'd been, didn't know where, sleeping all together in a double bed. They'd been shopping with Mum, fallen asleep in the car, somehow, and when they came awake, they'd been in that house, always the same room.

Most of this information came from Esmeralda, with Carlos changing from his shock state into an absent-minded sleepiness.

"Have you seen other people?" Harry held his breath. If they'd seen faces ...

"Just a house-elf."

A house-elf?

Harry's mind was whirling, only this had to wait until later. He undressed the boy, forcing himself to spend the time and do it properly, putting Carlos into his pyjamas - the girl was watching Harry's every movement, would register anything out of the ordinary.

Skipping the cleaning ritual might be less conspicuous. Hopefully.

Esmeralda refused to go to bed.

Sensing, Harry knew why. She felt close to a panic at the thought of being alone. When he asked whether she would sleep in the same bed together with Carlos, he earned a shaking of her head.

"Alright, then ..." He took her up, returned back into the kitchen.

Laila's eyes widened, seeing Harry with the girl.

He said, "She isn't sleepy," blinked one eye - since the moment he had accepted Esmeralda's refusal, deep relief from the girl and mind waves from his own side were driving her rapidly toward sleep.

Harry sat down, arranged Esmeralda in his arms. "What happened?"

"I called him. He said, good, and hung off. They called him - hardly more than a minute after my call ..."

With some consternation, Harry realized - there had been someone in the linkport, to check how the children would be passed over, and when.

But then, what? The figure could have been painted red, without giving him any chance to do anything differently. This was Ramon's game, not his own, there were the children, and Marie-Christine a prisoner as before.

"... passed Redondo Beach, was already close to Torrace, and now he's driving through Long Beach." Laila sent a glance toward the girl, hesitated, continued when Harry gave a nod.

"They told him to keep the connection all the time, speaking or not ... They have him fully under control, they can hear the engine's noise all the time - even another phony wouldn't help him."

In their own connection, they heard sounds similar to static noise. Probably the hissing of the tires on the tarmac, or the traffic outside - the engine of Ramon's Mercedes was nearly below audible level when driving at city speed.

Ramon's voice. "There are crossings ahead. Which way now?"

"Santa Ana."

"Santa Ana?" Ramon sounded almost cheerful. "Are you sending me down to Mexico? Hopefully not, the luggage I've got with me mightn't make it past the border."

A grumpy voice said, "Shut up."

Harry told the muscles in his arms to do the same - the girl in his lap had fallen asleep, yes, only just barely so, felt still quite tense. The arm around his neck wasn't likely to let go, would he take her into her bed now.

"Stupid asshole," came Ramon's voice as a sharp hissing. Harry and Laila exchanged a glance, then relaxed at realizing that Ramon had addressed some other driver.

The man at the other side had obviously taken the same conclusion, at any rate, there was no comment from him.

Some time later, Ramon said in a normal voice, "I'm in Santa Ana. What now?"

"Drive through."

"Which direction?"

"Still south ... Laguna Beach."

A minute later, Ramon said, "You listening?"

"Guess what?"

"Thought you would. Sooner or later, I'll have to refill. My gas is pretty low."

An angry sound. "You better stay in the car, buddy."

"Well, do you know a station with clerks? All I can see is self-service, and I don't think it's any help to roll out on the curb."

"Why didn't you fill up beforehand?"

"Was still more than half. I didn't expect to join a three-state rallye."

A short silence, in which Harry could imagine some discussion at the other end. Then, "How much is it still?"

"Display says, ninety miles. Make it eighty, that thing's always too optimistic."

"That's enough." After a moment, the voice added with some haste, "That should leave you with ten miles or so left - enough to reach a station."

"And if not, I can walk, huh?"

"Exactamente, gringo."

They could hear Ramon snorting, had the same thought, as one could read in the other's face - this remark about the way back had sounded awfully thin.

Ramon's voice came again, in the tone of a light conversation. "By the way, ladies and gents, you have to be careful when opening the suitcases - actually, it's a lot better you let me do it."

"Oh, is it? ... And why?"

"It's a bit complicated. I'll tell you when I'm there." A grim joy resonated in Ramon's voice. "I mentioned that just in case you had some funny ideas."

"And what is it that makes it so complicated?"

"The lock," replied Ramon laconically. "It's a bit jumpy ... And I'm in Laguna Beach now. Let me guess - drive through and keeping southward?"

"Not quite. Keep telling me what you're passing, so I know when to say left or right."

Ramon started to list signs, describe buildings, read street names. Harry, still handicapped from the girl in his arms, motioned toward Laila to zoom in more on the map and to follow Ramon's course.

Just when Laila nodded to tell him she was on track, the man's voice instructed Ramon to leave the main road at the next exit.

Ramon continued to comment his own driving, and Laila's finger kept floating over the map, pointing the position where she expected him to be.

"Mark it," whispered Harry.

"How?"

"The red button on top, and touching the spot."

Next instant, Laila had zoomed out, and the map showed most of California.

"Fuck," she muttered, giving Harry a bad moment because he couldn't do it by himself, not with Esmeralda in his lap, while Laila fumbled in a frenzy to find the street map of Laguna Beach again, had it, but in the meantime Ramon had turned right and right again.

For some seconds, they could only wait - Harry clenching his teeth to suppress the remark that wouldn't help for sure, and Laila avoiding his eyes, feverishly scanning the map and the street names in the suspected area.

Then Ramon gave another street name as a confirmation to his guide, and Laila's finger hit down, setting a red mark - this time, the button she pressed was the right one.

From what they could see, watching his course at the map, Ramon was most likely directed toward the waterline. Would there be a boat waiting somewhere? Could be - certainly a good method to shake off any follower.

Ramon's voice said, "I can see the water."

"Okay. Follow the street until you see a pub."

A minute later, Ramon said, "There's the pub."

"Good. Now slow down, in about half a mile, there's a road going to the right, little more than a track, anyway it's the first after the pub."

Another minute, then Ramon reported he'd found a track, no sign and nothing.

"That's right."

They could hear the tires rolling over pebble and dirt, until Ramon said, "Looks as if the track ends here. There's a hut - might be a boat house, and something behind that could be a small pier."

"You've found it. Stop at the boat house and stay in the car. Keep the lights on. A boat's comin', should be there any moment now. Check the water - can you see position lights?"

"With my headlights on, I can't see anything else."

"Okay, switch them off for a moment ... Can you see now?"

"Just a moment ..."

A clicking - the sound of a car door opening. Almost at the same instant, a new voice said, "Imperio!"

Silence - except for the gasp from Laila, while Harry's mind was racing, desperately trying to imagine something he could do. Ramon under the Imperius curse ...

"Is there someone following you?"

"No." Tonelessly.

"Is there a bug in the car?"

"No."

"Where's the money?"

"In the trunk."

"How much is it?"

"Five millions."

"Now isn't that great?" The new voice changed to a sneering sympathy. "You did everything right, huh, kept to the rules? ... Pity we can't return the favour, but at least you're going to see your wife, isn't that kind?"

No answer.

Obviously after a step back, the man shouted, "Hey, Matty, everything's cool here. Have a look in the trunk, there's something nice for us."

This team - it had waited at the boat house, they had no idea, didn't even suspect ...

"Where's ..." The voice had risen again, and from the sounds and the next words, Harry realized that the man had fetched Ramon's phony.

"Hank? ... Simon here. We got him. He's alone, no tracking, all lights green ..."

Harry snatched his own phony, pressed the button for Ramon.

"... tell the lady we'll be there within the next thirty minutes, so she can start preparing for her talk show, if it's not too late and her beauty sleep isn't more imp ... Oh, look there, someone's trying to reach us, I wonder - hold on, Hank, I'll be back after the commercials."

Harry's phony was active, the voice the same. "Yes?"

"Don't open the suitcases. There's a bomb inside."

"What? ... Who are you?"

"Later. Stop your partner - now."

"Hey ..." A precious second's silence, then, "Matty? ... Hey, Matty, are there suit ... Wait - noo, for God's sake ..."

A scratching, then the phony in Harry's hand was as dead as the babysitter phony on the table.

After some silence, a trembling hand reached out to stop the longplay recorder. There was no need to have the sounds documented which could be heard in the Garcia kitchen.

* * *

Lieutenant Seeger watched as the pathologist pulled the handle of a box in this wall which, internally, was called the *corpses cabinet*. The large drawer moved out noiselessly, came to a stop with a clank.

The pathologist removed the covering fabric from head and shoulders, stepped back.

Harry moved closer, had a short look at the corpse. "Yes. That's her."

Lieutenant McIlroy's voice sounded a bit more formal, otherwise as expressionless as Harry's. "Mr. Potter, is this the woman you knew under the name Marie-Christine Garcia?"

Two dark eyes fixed on him. "This is the corpse of Marie-Christine Garcia, born Thérroux. She died from a Killing Curse."

"You are no pathologist, Mr. Potter ..."

"And you're no wizard, Lieutenant McIlroy." The black eyes were flaring for an instant, then the mask over Harry's face closed again.

Seeger's own face had kept his own mask for a while already, would keep it still longer. He wasn't looking forward to the interrogation lying ahead, although he had volunteered himself to take part. For Harry's sake as much as for that of his colleague, who hadn't found the right touch toward Harry in the beginning and wasn't likely to find it in the near future.

Understandably so, maybe. Calling Harry cooperative was the overstatement of the year.

They drove in silence to McIlroy's office, the two lieutenants in front, Harry on the back seats. His agreement to this interrogation - this *conversation*, according to McIlroy's words - was already the result of Seeger's mediation, only McIlroy didn't know, and it better stayed that way.

Because Seeger had told Harry that they had found something in the woman's car, together with her dead body, and Harry's only chance to have a look at it was to play along with the lieutenant in charge.

McIlroy guided them to a room with a table, chairs, and nothing else - except of course the large mirror which, from the other side, offered a slightly tinted view of the room. Maybe McIlroy's office offered as little space as his own, Seeger thought, only he could hardly believe this was the true reason.

"Mr. Potter," started McIlroy after sitting down, "do you mind if this conversation is recorded?"

"No."

Apparently to no one in particular, which meant toward the hidden recorder, McIlroy specified the date, the purpose, and the participants in this meeting, then said, "Well, Mr. Potter, would you please tell us the story from your perspective?"

In a flat, monotonous voice, Harry explained how he came into Mr. Garcia's house, after being called by his assistant, how he talked with Mr. Garcia, then with the bank, then with Mr. Garcia again, and how he'd been sitting in the kitchen to listen, interrupted only to fetch the children, until the abrupt ending.

To Seeger, the story felt as complete as a waiter's tip of twenty cents. Too much for calling it a refusal, however lacking any goodwill.

McIlroy seemed to think the same. "I said story, Mr. Potter, I didn't say short story. Could you provide a bit more detail?"

"To what?"

"The preparations, for example, the exact nature of these suitcases."

"They contained the money, the explosives, and a magical lock that would blow them up unless deactivated with a charm. Mr. Garcia didn't know the charms, I had them. This should protect him against being forced to open them. As I said - the plan was to open them only after they had released his wife, with him and the money in their hands ... Didn't work."

"No, definitely not - the crater from the explosion's even impossible to measure because it has filled with water, and nobody can remember how the scene looked when there was still a boat house and a jetty."

Silence.

"Another detail, Mr. Potter - have you been the only one to help Mr. Garcia - if that's the right term?"

Seeger saw Harry's nose tremble, otherwise there was no reaction.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Potter."

"I'm not here to repeat my words, Lieutenant McIlroy. If you can't remember, check your recording or find someone to translate it for you."

Look there - McIlroy could do the same with his nose.

"Where did you get the explosives, Mr. Potter?"

"From somewhere outside your territory, Lieutenant McIlroy."

Only Seeger himself registered the distinct joke in this answer. For McIlroy, Harry's words pointed toward Ireland where - as everybody knew, most of all people with names like McIlroy - this stuff could be bought around the next corner, although not in a shop.

"Mr. Potter, obstructing an investigation counts as a break of the law ..."

"Oh, really? ... Seems a petty crime, for all I can see."

McIlroy's nose went white. After a few seconds, however, he had himself under control again. "I'm no Magical, Mr. Potter, as you stated yourself. But even so, lemme try to muster the only bit of magic I know, the magical word ..."

"Lieutenant," Harry interrupted him, "you can save your breath and your pride. If I'd think this crime could be solved here in the States, you'd get my full support - the fact that both of us

can do pretty well without each other doesn't matter, Carl and I had the same trouble in the beginning ..."

Which was a flatright lie, only Seeger felt it wise not to comment on it.

"... But I can assure you, all traces point toward England, toward wizardry, and toward some story from the past ... Yes, there were some local helpers, awfully competent, but they're as dead as Ramon."

"So the money wasn't the goal?"

The money - the cruiser crews, arriving at the scene after Harry alarmed them, had even found some bills still intact. Something around thirty grand altogether, and Seeger had his own thoughts how much they'd found really - another item better not mentioned.

"No. It was a trick, and also the payment for the local people, or part of it. The goal was to get Ramon, or Ramon and Marie-Christine together."

"Is this wishful thinking, Mr. Potter ..."

Harry's face went white.

Feeling probably the same as Seeger, for whom the air suddenly felt crackling, McIlroy continued quickly, "... or is there any hard evidence?"

Harry waited a few seconds, then said with an almost normal voice, "There's a recording of the transmission from Ramon's car. You'll get a copy, lieutenant. The interesting part's what the wizard at the water said, when Ramon was under the Imperius curse." Harry swallowed, then added, "It's evidence enough."

"Then what was the purpose of getting Mr. and Mrs. Garcia? Or Mr. Garcia alone?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't sit here."

Somewhere in this statement had been a lie, Seeger felt sure about that. He just didn't know in which part.

Again, his colleague was on track with him, as McIlroy's words hinted. "I wonder if I should feel regret or gratefulness about that, Mr. Potter. Maybe we can put more light onto the case if you tell me what you make of this here ... We found it on Mrs. Garcia's corpse." McIlroy extracted something from his jacket.

To Seeger, the thing looked like a requisite from the movie *The Ten Commandments* - a roll, yellow-white. A parchment, he learned next moment, the traditional type of documents in the magical world:

This woman has paid for her crime against the spirit of wizardry and witchcraft. Her husband already went ahead - and others will follow.
The True Wizards

Harry said, "That confirms what I said. Marie-Christine played a role in the fight against the so-called Dark Wizards, and even Ramon was involved at the end, at that time still a police lieutenant."

For Seeger's trained ear, this explanation came just a tiny bit too quickly, too fluently. Not that he felt inclined to object, only his colleague had given proof already earlier in this conversation ...

"So it's just an old feud between Magicals, Mr. Potter?"

"That's my guess."

"Nothing that would concern the present?"

"What could that be?"

McIlroy sighed. "Yes, what indeed? ... And it's outside my own jurisdiction anyway, isn't it?" The lieutenant stared at Harry. "Mr. Potter, if it's of any help, I apologize in advance for my words, only what you're telling me is a lot of bullshit."

Silence.

"And should I find you doing police work in *my own territory* ..."

For a second, Seeger felt McIlroy's eyes fixing at himself.

"... then you'll need a bit more than a buddy cop to come out roses - a good lawyer, for instance."

"That won't happen."

McIlroy pursed his lips. "I'll save us the embarrassment of asking which of the two won't happen, you doing police work or me catching you at that ... Something else, Mr. Potter - what about the children?"

"They're well - considering the circumstances."

"That's not what I meant - they have to be brought into court's custody, and aside from that ..." Seeing Harry's face, McIlroy's voice faltered for a moment. Then the lieutenant mustered new courage. "... they're witnesses of a crime."

Silence.

"Mr. Potter, I'm waiting for your answer."

After some seconds, Harry said, "The children are under medical treatment. A first diagnosis indicated that, for medical reasons, they won't be available for a long period of time."

"The court will appoint a psychologist to confirm that diagnosis, or deny it."

"Lieutenant McIlroy." Harry's voice made Seeger's neck hair rise. "I'm done here. You might be interested in a private comment - when the recorder is switched off."

McIlroy thought it over, then said, "Thank you for your comin', Mr. Potter. I'll guide you downstairs."

Which, for Seeger, meant as much as - McIlroys didn't trust his own people behind the mirror. Careful guy, that.

On the staircase, Harry said, "Lieutenant, I should be thankful that you've alerted me - I wasn't fully aware of the cruelty this country's law can apply toward children. I am, although it might not show in what I have to tell you."

"That I won't see them soon?"

A thin smile crossed Harry's lips. "Worse - that recording I mentioned, I wonder if we did it properly, right now I have the bad feeling we messed up with that thing."

Lieutenant McIlroy's eyes narrowed. "Blackmailing, huh? And who's *we*? ... Alright, what do you want?"

"I'll hire a lawyer to calm down the legal waves." Harry's finger pointed at McIlroy. "And I want your support in that lawyer's job."

"Only if you tell me what they saw and heard."

"A house-elf, Lieutenant - just a house-elf, nothing else." About to turn, Harry stopped. "And that *we* - you aren't half as stupid as you present yourself, sometimes. I'm sure you'll figure out even before you get the recording - our voices are on it."

"Does that mean I get it first? ... I haven't agreed yet, Mr. Potter."

Harry's smile was short, however real. "You, an Irish cop, would not help settling the children in Ireland?" He walked off, leaving Lieutenant McIlroy with the view of Harry's shaking head.

Outside, Seeger asked, "How's Laila?"

"A mess. She's blaming herself for the idea with the explosives."

He had asked, he'd gotten an answer. Seeger didn't know what to say.

Harry stopped again. "Before I forget, Carl - in the other case, look for a key to a luggage deposit box, most likely Los Angeles Central Station. And I'd look under every floorboard in the apartment of a certain Frankie ... With that key, you should find about half a million, enough to mark the case as solved ... Thank you for your escort."

Seeger stared at the empty spot. This damn Harry had caught him at the wrong foot - at any other time, he'd moved heaven and hell to squeeze him more while now, with the recent events, he just couldn't find the mood.

* * *

Sandra heard her father coming home. She heard her mother asking him how it was, and him answering so la la, they'd talk later. Then her father asked how it was here in the castle, and her mother said, so la la, lots of people but no company.

Then her mother said, "It was her, wasn't it?"

Sandra couldn't hear her father's answer, probably a nod, while she could hear her mother's weeping, and this totally unfamiliar sound frightened her almost as much as the terrible thought that kept torturing her since she'd been told that Ramon and Marie-Christine were dead.

Now her father asked, "How's Laila?"

Sandra could have answered that. Laila was asleep, after being found drunk beyond all limits by Harry, after being summoned into the castle and into the custody of various people, among them Sandra herself.

Suddenly, into her mother's sobbing, she felt another presence and then heard her brother's voice, a bit anxious, but otherwise quite determined - Cho should come with him, he would play the flute for her, as he'd done for Ireen.

Her father said, "Yes, absolutely."

Mother and son disappeared. For a short moment, Sandra wondered if it was the beach or his own room Gabriel had selected. For another moment, she tried to find an opening how to ask her father about the thought that was pressing her heart, then he stood already there. "Hello, my angel. Is it just mourning what I can feel?"

A shaking head was Sandra's only answer.

Harry sat down, pulled her at his side, and his own opening was as simple as efficient - taking her in his arms, just holding her. His mouth close to her ear, he murmured, "I've neglected you during the last days, and your brother too. I'm sorry, my little one."

Her head was shaking again. "No, Daddy, that's not ... only ..." She felt herself close to tears.

"Shall I help a bit?" Which meant, was he allowed to send a mind wave, something he was quite careful about since Sandra had made clear that she preferred to be master of her own senses, or mistress, whatever, she had used other words anyway.

Probably more shame than pride made her talk. "I've got - I met Firenze, and he ... He asked me to tell you something, and - but I almost forgot, and when ... When I heard ..." Sandra didn't come any further, because there was another unfamiliar sound ... Her own sobbing.

Harry rocked her. "Tell me what he said."

"He said - he said, please tell him the times have changed less than he might think."

The rocking stopped. "What were you talking about?"

"He asked how we're doing. I told him about Gabe, and Mum, and that you - that you were hunting kidnappers." Before losing speech again, Sandra added, "Then he said, er, I wonder if that's an improvement over dark wizards, but then - er, then perhaps the difference is smaller than expected ... And then ... And then ..."

Her father rocked her for some more seconds, suddenly stopped. "And now you think I should have known in advance, and with that knowledge, it would have turned out differently with Ramon and Marie-Christine?"

The sobbing changed to a serious outburst.

"Oh my God ..." He hugged her harder. In her misery, Sandra could feel his head shaking. "No, Sandy, no! ... That's not true!"

"Why ... why not?"

"Because - it wouldn't have changed the outcome."

"What ..." She sniffed, almost choked, but she had to ask. "What would have been if you'd heard it before?" Despite her tear-smearred face, she glanced up. Her father wouldn't lie to her, but for this answer, she had to look in his eyes.

"Let's assume I'd made the connection between Firenze's remark and this kidnapping. I'm not sure, but it's more likely than not ... Then - I couldn't have stopped Ramon, wouldn't have - probably the only difference would have been that I'd known from start that he'd die ... And nothing, Sandy - nothing would have changed for Marie-Christine."

"But you could have helped Ramon."

Her father thought again. "Not by taking over his task - he wouldn't have allowed me. Not in the car either - they'd have detected me for sure ..."

He pulled her toward his chest. "Probably I'd have followed on my Steel Wing in the air. Then, at that boat house, I'd have stopped that fool from opening the suitcase. In this case, they'd have killed Marie-Christine just the same, and if Ramon really had survived, he'd never forgiven me for intercepting."

"So there is a difference."

"Yes, my little priestess, there is a difference, except it's none to the better, or to the worse. There's always a difference from what we do or not do. Now stop blaming yourself - bad enough that Laila does it, I can't tolerate to see you drunk too."

The joke was so bad, Sandra had to smile.

Next moment, a thought struck her, and although she wasn't aware, her reaction exactly matched the pattern of her mother's technique. "Daddy?"

"Yes, Sandy?"

"What did you and Mum owe to Marie-Christine?"

She could feel her father's shock, although to the outside, it was hardly more than a short tensing in his body.

After some seconds, he said, "She found out that Voldemort wanted our first child. He thought he could control it enough to take over the body with his own mind."

For a fleeting instant, it seemed funny, imagining Voldemort as a girl. Then Sandra fully registered what her father had said, felt a mix of nameless fear and burning rage. "Could he?"

"We didn't leave him a chance to try. But for all I know, you'd have knocked him down still quicker than I did, as a baby."

A blessed feeling went through Sandra's mind, soul, and body. So she was totally unprepared when her father, perfectly copying her own tactic, said, "And now, Sandra Catherine, I want to hear the full story."

Shit - he'd used his damned *yaho*, the art of hiding his intentions, about the only mental skill in which he stayed beyond calling distance to her own mastering.

Sandra blushed, inhaled - and then, gaining speed, like freed from a heavy burden, she told her father about two boys in the Beauxbatons school, one in particular, and a wand and a hair and a scene in class and a conversation and a deal and the Lupins and ... erm, a protocol, although about this particular detail, her voice sounded more in a haste than genuinely fluent.

Having finished, she shot a tentative glance at her father, who kept silent, understandably so after these news. Still, somehow, she had expected at least a slight trace of amusement. There was none.

"What ... What do you think, Daddy?"

"I just thought about these times, and - I guess it's only now that I realize - Marie-Christine's dead."

If not for her own concern and worry, Sandra could have registered his mood already before - sorrow, pain, a feeling of loss without hope of compensation. It was hard to bear. With a miserable voice, she said, "And I can't even play flute for you."

"No, of course not - how would that look, a little dragon playing flute?"

At any other time, the joke would have raised a wave of joy inside her. Right now, it only told her how desperately her father was trying to regain his balance. And this, in spite of all her sympathy, was the right moment to ask. "Did - did you love her?"

Sandra could feel it - Harry had sensed her merciless thought, and this was all he needed to succeed in his efforts. "You're a nosy little witch, and for my taste, you read one protocol too much ..."

Somehow he was right, at any other time, this conversation would have been impossible, for both of them.

"... but we can't stop the river of fate, least of all with you." He moved her up to look in her face. "We loved her both, Cho and I. Not the way we love each other, not the way we're bound to Almyra, for example ... And this was in addition to what she did for you."

Sandra nodded. This was undeniably true, pretty much what she'd known, or expected, and it was good to hear it confirmed.

Her father tried a smile. "In a few years, we can discuss this a bit longer, if you're still interested then ..."

Oh yes, she would remember this promise.

"... while in the meantime, let's talk about a French boy, rather than a girl, or a woman."

The offer looked inviting - on the other hand, Sandra shied off from herself being the one who'd create a first picture of Frédéric in her father's mind. She said, "This idea of inviting him, maybe it doesn't fit right now, huh?"

"Not too well," replied her father, "but then, maybe it's the best thing we can do, coming to terms with ourselves ... And with him, of course." He shook her gently. "Gimme a day or two, this is too important to meet him with a mind that's totally preoccupied with something else."

"But - but you think he's okay?"

"Hey - you're not going to tell me details, which I can understand perfectly well, and then you're trying to nail me in advance?" Seeing her glance, Harry added, "Don't you worry, my sweetheart, I'm sure it will work ... At least, he didn't make Gérard's mistake."

"Er, what do you mean?"

Harry's teasing grin was almost genuine. "It seems the Pouillys always fall for the sportive type, huh? ... Well, and this Frédéric, I'd say, did it right from the beginning."

18 - Brainstorming

Such a castle, thought Ron, would be hard to beat for an occasion like that. The large hall, otherwise hardly used once a year, was full. Agreed - only with people sitting at tables, the hall decorated as a spacious conference room, simply because this was a conference, after all.

Even so, Ron counted twenty-eight heads, had to since he had been nominated as the protocoller - mostly by himself. And this number included just the adults.

The children were everywhere - save this hall, that was. And hopefull not literally everywhere, they better clustered, otherwise the four students Ron might have called *au pair* would never manage to supervise them.

Beverly, plus three other members of her Baby Care group in Hogwarts. One of them even a boy, as Ron had the opportunity to notice when delivering his own breed. Rumour had it the babies weren't this boy's main reason to join the group, and this job in particular, at least not in first place.

This rumour was spread by Sandra, who heard it during a recent visit in Hogwarts. And Janine heard it from Sandra, and Ron heard it from Janine. Well, okay, really interesting, wasn't it? ... Somehow he had missed the point, but what the hell, today's topic filled Ron's mind more prominently.

This topic was somehow related to the Great Plot, and thus to children, so much he knew. And with the recent events, it wasn't by accident that the hosts had emphasized - no, demanded without exception that all invited people would come with their children.

Ron hadn't counted them, his protocol duty didn't stress that far. But simply by looking around, he could total them up easily, coming out at seventeen, his' and Janine's contribution forming the largest sub-group. With Sophia, Hermione's and Viktor's daughter, the youngest at her age of ten months, and Héloïse as the oldest.

His niece, as well as her brother and the hosts' two offsprings, counted as children only halfway, the other half was supposed to help guarding. From her mother, Héloïse had received the special order to tend her sister Ismène, only there was little doubt for Ron that this task quickly had been passed over to Michel.

Hermione had driven Gabriel into a severe moral conflict. Not fully aware of the current situation in Carron Lough, she arrived with the expectation Gabriel would volunteer for the job of tending Sophia. Basically correct - only there was Tanitha, by sheer presence claiming the same. Beverly solved the dilemma by pointing out that Gabriel was most certainly more efficient in his role as the Pied Piper, except she didn't use this term, and she promised Hermione to take care of Sophia, just as so often in Hogwarts.

The people here in the hall could be divided into three groups. There was the Potter-Weasley gang, counting twelve heads - although, counting Paul together with Ginny was a bit daring, to put it mildly, heehee. Anyway - the Hogwarts group made six people, the Lupins, the Krums, and, long no see, the Snapes. And the rest came from everywhere, with *Groucho Something* as the common denominator for most of them.

Except for Sirius and Deborah, of course, while for Urion the Undispensible and Wynor the Whistler, this connection was present though not widely known.

And this thought brought Ron back to the Great Plot, because there were several people in this room who never had heard about that. He was looking forward to seeing whether his private guess of the agenda - or part of it - was right.

At this moment, Harry stood up. When the murmurs had faded, Harry said, "My dear friends ..."

He stopped - some people had twisted around because they heard Harry's voice from behind while staring at him.

Harry showed a short smile. "Yes, I'm using a microphone, and the loudspeakers are in the walls. This hall is too large for my untrained voice ..."

Ron, the politician, felt Harry's quick glance toward him.

"... and I realized that the good old Sonorus charm isn't really up to the task - those near me would be deaf till the end of our meeting, and those in the opposite corner still had trouble ... This is a break of tradition, I know, and for some reason of which you're probably not yet aware, this is already my introduction, rather than a lengthy side remark."

Ron, who never felt shy of copying someone else's style, made a mental note about this trick opening, while the only word in his protocol so far was *tradition*.

"We invited you for several reasons." continued Harry. "They're all on today's agenda, but please allow me to keep them still to myself, at least for a few minutes. The recent events have been the trigger - I mean the killing of Ramon and Marie-Christine Garcia. They were murdered, even if the term may be technically incorrect, in the case of Ramon."

Everybody in this room had heard the news before, so Ron saw only attention in the faces, no surprise.

"To the outside, it looks like a failed kidnapping, and as far as we're concerned, it may stay that way in the press. To the inside, it looks a bit different. However, before I can come to that, I have to make this round unique in some sense - or is it unanimous? ... Whatever ..."

Here it comes, Ron thought, feeling satisfaction about his proper guess.

"... and before some of you start asking, what the hell he's talking about, let me just tell you - at least in the short version."

Harry inhaled. "About eight years ago, we started doping every new-born child on earth. I'm exaggerating a bit, but this was the goal - every child. And the purpose was - well, to make all of them magical. A wizard, or a witch."

Ron had been looking forward to see some faces - that of Snape, for instance, or that of Samantha. But somehow the effect was a bit disappointing - maybe it took a moment longer for them to register the full extent of what Harry had said in these scarce words.

"When I say *we*, I mean the entire Goblin community and Groucho, or the people behind and inside. In particular, Groucho Biochemicals is the dope factory, and the financing is done from both sides - if you ever wondered why Groucho isn't printing its own currency, now you know why. By those who knew all the time, this scheme is called *The Great Plot*."

The few people for whom this was stunning news were turning their heads, and even without looking, Ron knew toward which figures. A dope, Harry had said, leaving it open which dope and invented by whom, and the three candidates - Hermione, Beatrice, and Clemens - were the targets of these stares.

"And Ramon," said Harry at this moment, "was chief executive officer of Groucho Biochemicals."

He had their attention again.

"And Marie-Christine, aside from being his wife, was a major factor in the destroying of the dark wizards."

Murmur rose. What had the dark wizards to do with the recent events? Voldemort was dead, wasn't he? And what was Harry trying to imply, stating that Ramon had been the CEO of ...

"What puts these things together?"

Formulating the common question, Harry killed the murmur at once. "That's something we have to find out quickly, and I have to tell you - we'll ask this question toward all of you, in a way that has worked already in the past ... But that'll come later."

Ron's glance went to Hermione, meeting her eyes. They both knew what Harry meant, and almost in unison, they both looked at Francesco Lopez, who had taken part the last time when such a difficult question was examined.

"Something else needs to be discussed first. To explain what it is, and to give you already a key argument in the discussion later, let me tell you something that didn't go to the press."

All eyes watched as Harry took a sheet from the table.

"When Marie-Christine was found dead in her car, there was also a parchment. A parchment, mind - not a sheet. This here isn't a copy, I wrote it down from memory."

Harry read, "This woman has paid for her crime against the spirit of wizardry and witchcraft. Her husband already went ahead - and others will follow ... Signed, the True Wizards."

He looked up. "We have to assume that they're serious. And this means - there is an acute danger for everybody in this room ... And for the children outside too."

* * *

When the shocking implications from Harry's words came to full effect in her mind, Fleur wasn't the only mother who rose almost instinctively, with just one impulse - *How are my children?* But like the others, she stopped in mid motion, seeing Harry's imploring gesture.

"Please," he said, "calm down - no reason to worry at the moment." He smiled, for the first time in this room genuinely. "What do you think why we made sure you'd come with all of your children? It wasn't just to save you the hassle of finding a babysitter."

Yes, sure, only his joke didn't prevent him from some furious glances, among them Fleur's own.

"And we're not alone." Harry turned to the table where the two Goblins were sitting side by side. "Urion - how many of your men are currently patrolling around this castle?"

"A full platoon," came the growling answer. "That makes about thirty - I wasn't in the mood to take chances, won't find it some time soon either."

And we have two, thought Fleur, only they guard an entire street, and what if ... At this instant, she felt Harry's eyes resting on her. He said, "Before you think that's some Potter privilege, and what about your own home ..."

Just before Harry took his eyes off, Fleur saw the shortest hint of a grin.

"... let me assure you - you're offered any protection and any support that's within reach of the Goblins." Harry looked at the Goblin colonel. "Urion?"

Even seated at the table, Urion's resonant voice reached the opposite end - but then, he had the advantage of total silence. "When arriving at home," he said, "you'll already find some guards in position. You might not see all of them, however, if you think there should be more, tell us ... And when travelling, shopping, having a walk - you and your children, you'll have an escort. You can reject it, if you want - we won't argue, we just offer protection."

After all these years, Fleur knew Wynor the Whistler well enough to see the flicker of irritation in his face. Next instant, Héloïse's godfather was up. "The Goblin community takes this seriously," said Wynor, "and in addition, we take it very personal. The Goblins have devoted themselves to the great goal that has been designated by ..." He faltered for an instant, continued, "by us together, and any attempt to put this goal at risk is an attack toward the Goblins."

Urion the Undiplomatic brought it to the point. "That's a war declaration."

Wynor nodded with an expression resembling meekness very much, at least for Fleur's trained eye. He said, "This is why our support comes fullheartedly and doesn't mean any obligation for you, in no sense whatsoever. We only ask you to accept our help, even if it might cause some inconvenience at one occasion or another."

Seeing some questioning looks, Fleur wondered what might be left unclear after Wynor's statement. Only she was already too much used to this kind of service, as she could register at Harry's next words.

"For all of you not as familiar with Goblins as some others," he said with a grin, "let me translate Wynor's words a bit. Of course it means free of charge, and please don't try to tip the guards, that'd be very insulting ..."

Urion the Unabashed stared at him in perplexion - the idea of a tip alone seemed to make him speechless.

"... while otherwise it's just a question of your personal style and ethics. It's definitely not forbidden to be grateful, and regarding the way of dealing with the guards - these are warriors, and I think your common sense is as good as mine, so ..."

This remark should have been good for some laughter, only it didn't come, maybe because of the speed at which some people had to cope with unexpected news.

Samantha was quicker than others. She called, "Can we offer them a drink?"

Before anyone else could answer, Fred shouted back, "Is the Pope a catholic?"

Maybe Urion had planned an answer, maybe Harry - they found no opportunity because everybody started to talk at once. Fleur turned to her husband. "What do you think - should we offer them a room or two?"

"Hmm ..." Bill looked embarrassed. "I'm used to bankers only, not to warriors. I'd ask Harry, except it feels so stupid asking."

Fleur felt more practical. "Common sense, he said - I'll offer them, and they can say yes or no thanks."

For herself, having Goblin guards around was part of her daily life. For others, such a state felt different, so Fleur was the last to think about the common question, eventually formulated by Bonnie, George's wife. "How long will it take?"

"Until we've found them," gave Sirius the obvious answer.

Which wasn't really satisfying, so the chatting died, and the eyes turned to Harry again.

"That's of course correct," he said, "and as long as it takes, I beg you not to be careless. Please. Our chances to find them depend on several factors, and one of them is the outcome of the next topic on our agenda ... It's a brainstorming, as some of you already guessed. I'm going to inform you about all the facts we have, and all the non-facts too, and then we'll ask ourselves the essential questions ... One, in particular."

"Which one?" called Viktor.

"Wait and see." Harry smiled. "It's a good tradition to let Hermione do the moderation, and she'll be the first to tell you that you're supposed to find out by yourself."

"Yeah," replied Viktor, "but you know more than I do."

"That'll change soon." Harry looked around. "We need a bit preparation, and I've got the feeling we better let the general discussion take place first. So - let's have a break."

Into the shuffling of chairs, he called, "Don't eat too much - a full stomach's a lazy thinker."

* * *

There hadn't been a seating order. Before the break, Paul had been sitting next to Deborah, in a way quite a natural choice, except that the seat at his other side remained empty for a while.

A very unsettling while, to be honest - until Ginny arrived, found a seat at another table, not exactly opposite, and after that, the few latecomers saw no more reason to avoid the seat at Paul's side.

It had been Ireen who filled it, after helping outside until the last minute, and her choice seemed as natural as Paul's own a while before. Except that - well, he couldn't shake off a feeling of ridiculousness, despite the more than serious topics discussed.

And now there was a break, and people were walking around everywhere.

Like, say, the buffet outside. Like, say, Paul himself, by some accident reaching the same corner as Ginny moments ago, by some other accident a choice nobody else seemed to prefer.

"Hello, Ginny."

"Salu, Paul."

They ate a few bites. Not exactly together, *simultaneously* came closer to it.

For example because Ginny anyway kept picking like a bird. So she became the first to have a mouth free for talking. So she said, "I heard you were successful."

"That's a myth Harry's spreading. I didn't find them, I only sent him to the right spot at the right time, purely by accident. And besides ..." Paul stopped, realizing that Ginny might have meant something totally different.

A careful glance revealed nothing. A fashion model could hold a poker face when other people would already shout insults.

He finished lamely, "Didn't help. I got rich nonetheless." Registering the questionable nature of his statement, in this environment, he added, "For a journalist, I mean. It's all relative."

"And now you're working at the other half."

"Yes."

Pretty well informed she was, by all means, wouldn't it be nice to know whether someone had told her voluntarily or ... Paul twisted inwardly - had she really meant the public reward? Or had she switched to the topic he had suspected already in her first question, only then it was no switching at all, was it?

Ginny saved him from the disquieting doubt. "I also heard you found something more, in addition to - sorry, I mean, *aside from* kidnappers." The correction in mid-sentence was accompanied by a faint smile, leaving it to Paul where to place her remark, on a scale ranking from a mocking play of words to a nasty sting, coated with politeness.

He jumped over the trap, opened his own. "You're well informed."

"Not really, just a hint or two. But I just got confirmation."

So much for avoiding traps. Ginny could play such games considerably better than Paul himself ... Maybe because he didn't like them. He looked her in the eyes. "If you want to know more - I'm ready to trade."

A short but appreciating grin went over Ginny's face. "Well, why not? ... His name's Giancarlo."

"Kathleen."

"He's Italian, makes in fashion, what else? ... A journalist." Her eyes were sparkling at these words.

"She's an office clerk in a company for special effects. I met her while searching for the candidates."

"He's just the opposite of you - joyful, charming, a womanizer and a bastard. But for a change, it's quite entertaining."

So he wasn't charming? Paul didn't think he'd agree at once, and he found no help in hearing the rest either - he knew by himself he was no bastard. But Ginny held the steering wheel in this exchange, stood waiting with an expectant face, so he swallowed and said, "She's ... It's not the opposite, maybe except - well, she's - reliable." At the last instant, he had avoided saying *fair*.

Even so, he saw Ginny's eyes narrow for an instant. Then she said, "At the next best opportunity, I'll tell him to get lost. Hopefully before he's going to tell me."

Trapped again ... Neatly, without haste and pressure, Ginny had cornered Paul to hear the answer to a question he wasn't even ready to ask himself.

"That's ... I just don't know," he said, "we didn't raise ... It's more a kind of playing by ear. I'm left in debt of that answer, I'm afraid."

Ginny curled her lips. "I hadn't planned to offer a loan."

"I hadn't planned accepting it," replied Paul. "But concerning the interest - I didn't stop loving you, Ginny."

She smiled. "Sometimes I forget that you can play with words as well as anyone, Paul ... Maybe it's because you save most of it for your articles."

"Maybe we both suffer from our profession. I spend too much eloquence and sharpness in scandal reports, and ..." He hesitated.

"And I have to be nice and sweet and quiet on the catwalk, have to jump when I'm called out, so there's nothing left in the evening, huh?"

"I didn't say that ..."

"But it's what you thought, Paul." Ginny's voice sounded more imploring than angry. "That's exactly the point - okay, not the only one, and maybe not the most important one, but it's the point I can blame you for."

This hidden confession wasn't helpful either, since it didn't tell him anything new. Paul stared at her. "You mean, if I were upset enough, shout at you, treat you badly, that would help?"

She grinned naughtily. "There's nothing wrong with a little spanking, Paul."

He laughed, more dutifully than with joy, stopped when her expression made him wonder if this really had been a joke. Agreed, in a way it hadn't - still, the seriousness was only metaphorical, wasn't it?

At this moment, Ireen came along. "Break's over," she said.

They both nodded, expecting Ireen to move on. Only she didn't, instead looked at Ginny and asked, "Wanna switch seats?"

"Is this an offer or a test?" Next instant, Ginny flushed. "I'm sorry, Ireen - I totally forgot to tell you - to express my sympathy, er, with you and Tanitha ... Please forgive me for being so late."

"Thank you, and it isn't late - it only looks that way, for all of us." Ireen's voice was apologetic. "You know what's strange? ... Please don't get me wrong, but - you know, we see each other seldom, and so it's perfectly alright, and still it feels so - so ..."

"Out of place?" tried Paul to help.

"Yeah, something like that. As if I'm getting something I don't deserve ..." Seeing two blank faces, one of them mixed with embarrassment, Ireen added, "I mean - I'm here and can say thank you, but where's someone to whom we can express our sympathy for Ramon and Marie-Christine?"

Paul said, "We just can do our best in what's coming now."

Ginny, Weasley that she was, asked what Paul himself never would have dared. "Ireen ... You're here, you said - er, in contrast to Marie-Christine. If there'd been something like a choice ..."

Ireen helped her. "You mean, am I better off? ... Yes, absolutely, trust my word. Sure, in the first hours, but ..." She smiled. "There isn't a choice, which is just good, because I might have taken the wrong one." She turned. "Let's go, we're late."

Somehow, her initial offer was forgotten, at least none of them was coming back to it, and so they all walked toward their previous seats, feeling a bit awkward since they were the last to arrive, and everybody else was watching them.

* * *

This meeting was no congregation of *Groucho Industries*, regardless of all the Groucho people sitting around, and of those missing because they were dead. But it was her home, and Cho wouldn't have declined when being asked to moderate a bit by herself.

But no, it had to be Hermione, who else, the know-it-not-quite-all as Cho had dubbed her since two other potions geniuses were around ... Not in public, of course - you didn't say something like that toward your own employee.

And besides - shouldn't she be thankful? The last time they did such a brainstorming, it had been in search of herself, caught by Voldemort. Glancing toward Francesco Lopez, a Pinkerton agent then and the chief security officer of *Groucho* soon afterwards, Cho met his eyes. So he had the same memory right now, only he had no objections against the selected moderator.

Who, at this moment, cleared her throat through all loudspeakers. "Erm - sorry, not yet used to that microphone ... Alright, folks, this is a brainstorming. Who doesn't know what it means?"

No one spoke, no arm was up.

Hermione smiled. "Guess I should have asked the other way around, 'specially being a teacher myself. But, to make it short - what's the worst mistake you can do in a brainstorming?" She looked around, evidently grateful to find at least one arm in the air. "Ron?"

"Not to say out aloud what you think, only because it might be bullshit ..."

Hermione nodded.

"... I mean, you're most probably right, but say it anyway."

Hermione said pointedly, "Thank you, Ron." With a normal voice, she asked, "So then, what's the purpose of this brainstorming? What's our goal?"

All eyes turned to Harry, who said, "Figuring out who's behind the killing of Ramon and Marie-Christine. Figuring out whether this has to do with the Great Plot. Figuring out if there are some dark wizards left - or new ones grown."

"Are these three goals, or just one?"

"No idea." Seeing the glances, Harry added, "Well, okay, it's not quite true, only it's a conclusion, so I don't want to offer it now."

Hermione wrote something, looked up. "Okay. What do we have in facts about the kidnapping and the killing?"

The eyes on him again, Harry said, "Before I start with that - Beatrice has prepared something to help us in this task." He turned to the other potions witch. "Beatrice?"

The black face darkened a bit. "Er, yes, it's the brain booster of course ... I prepared a mild version - after talking with Harry, I realized that a stronger concentration would probably

establish a kind of filter in our brains that would try to suppress the - er, the crazy thoughts, and that mustn't happen."

Beatrice pointed at some bottles in front of her. "This is the stuff - a pint for each of us is about right."

The bottles were sent around, and people filled their glasses. For a short while, the room resembled more a wedding dinner, with the guests preparing for a toast.

Cho took her own portion. She hadn't been aware of this preparation, wondered if this was Harry's idea or Beatrice's. Not that it mattered, only Cho couldn't warm up too much to the thought of some conversations between her husband and this black beauty.

Not relevant. She emptied the glass.

When the noise had died, Harry said, "One fact is the parchment found at Marie-Christine, the one I read a while ago. Actually, it's the last in time order." He looked around. "You still aware of the words?"

Oh yes, they were.

"Then let's come to the first in sequence of the events. You'll hear a few sentences from the phony conversation Ramon had while driving with the money. Please push aside the situation, or the words, and concentrate on the voice at the other end, the person behind."

He stepped to the wall, pressed a button, and a woman's voice came through the loudspeakers. For Cho like for most other people, the sentences were new.

"Mr. Garcia, I'm passing you over now to your wife. She'll tell you ... Mr. Garcia, I'm afraid we have to take more drastic measures if you don't show reason quickly ... And then? ... It wasn't planned to get in direct contact with you, Mr. Garcia ... And what if your wife doesn't agree? ... Well, contrary to your remarks, Mr. Garcia, this is just a minor change in the proceedings. How did you think it should be done? Delivering them at the entrance to your home? ... When you talk with them ... It will take a while, Mr. Garcia. Keep driving southward."

Despite Harry's warning, the uneasiness in the room was palpable. Sirius recovered quicker than the others, asked, "What's cut out?"

Harry looked at him as if to say, *not what you think*. "Only Ramon's words, not a single syllable of what the woman said - that sentence in the beginning was cut off by Ramon hanging up."

Sirius' nod confirmed the unspoken exchange. "I'm sorry," he said, "I was too busy with the words themselves ... Can I hear them again?"

Harry looked around. "Maybe I should have told you in advance that in this exchange, Ramon forces her to release the children ... Okay, ready?"

Seeing the nods, he started the sequence again.

This time it was Samantha who spoke first. "She's British, no doubt. One of those upper-class bitches."

"That's what Ramon said, too." Harry smiled at Samantha. "Just good we have the opposite around."

After a moment of silence, Hermione asked, "Any other instant comment on that voice? ... No? Then let's hear what else we have."

Harry said, "When arriving at the boat house, Ramon was disabled with the Imperius Curse. We have it recorded, only the man and his voice are meaningless because he's dead. The only interesting part is one remark. Please listen."

A male voice said, "... tell the lady we'll be there within the next thirty minutes, so she can start preparing for her talk show, if it's not too late and her beauty sleep ..."

Waiting a few seconds, Harry played it again. Then he asked, "What do you make of it?"

Laila said, "My first thought is a kind of public confession - you know, what you can see in TV when agents or soldiers are caught by the other side ..."

Francesco interrupted her. "Like what the Vietcong did with our boys?"

Most others, much younger than Francesco, couldn't follow.

Laila said, "Yes, probably - I saw it with Israelis in the hands of Palestenians, after some brainwashing. But anyway - I think that's not what he meant."

Remus said, "The picture he's drawing - that this woman is a kind of moderator, with some guests ... Two about whom we know, maybe more."

Severus Snape had listened to both, now said, "It could be something in the middle. The Death Eaters had this habit - confessing something in front of a group of people, but certainly not in TV."

Into the silence that had fallen after the word *Death Eaters*, he added with an expressionless face, "It wasn't planned to be heard anywhere else, and the idea of TV ..." Snape looked at Harry. "The man who spoke - do we know more about him?"

"Don't ask for hard evidence," Harry replied, "but I'd say, a local helper who knew the location. At least part of the money was intended for him and his cronies."

Snape nodded. "Just what I thought. If the woman is part of some people in the tradition of the dark wizards, or their leader, then this man was making fun of their beliefs, with these words."

Cho, once a student who had benefitted from Snape's undercover work, beamed at him. "Excellent, Severus - you haven't lost your touch."

Hermione said, "I'm the first to agree, and Severus knows why, but please, don't let us drown in compliments toward each other. If we ..."

Somewhat irritated, she looked at her own husband, Viktor, who was chuckling in his seat, then continued, "... if there's no other direct remark, let's continue with what Harry can tell us."

Wiping the grin off his face, Harry said, "I asked the children what they saw, or heard. The only useful fact is this - they didn't see any human face where they'd been kept. All they saw was - a house-elf."

Into the surprised murmur, Ron said, "Winky."

Cho's head jerked up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ron looked unimpressed. "Nothing. When I heard house-elf, my first thought was Winky, and then Barty Crouch. But Barty's dead, and ... My God, Cho - I know Winky's somewhere here downstairs, has been there all the time - it's just the picture that crossed my mind."

Cho, somewhat abashed, glanced at her husband to see whether he was grinning - better than a shaking head. But all she saw was a thoughtful face.

Paul said, "House-elf, that means an upper-class wizard family. And it comes in handy if you don't want to present a human face that might be remembered later."

Rahewa glared at him. "Do you want to say they were planning to release them, after ... after whatever?"

"No." Paul held her stare. "I just pointed out the technical benefit in a case of kidnapping."

Almyra turned to her adopted daughter. "Even a five-year-old can remember a face, actually better than most adults. And they released the children."

"Yes," said Bill, "because that's been the only way to get Ramon."

Deborah said, "Folks, that's a touchy issue for sure, if I ever saw one, but we don't get much further in challenging each other ..."

Cho watched as Hermione nodded in approval, expecting to take over again, only Deborah wasn't finished yet.

"... I say that because what's crossing my mind could easily be misunderstood as a challenge." She looked at Harry. "It's none, it's just what I'm thinking, okay? ... Well, we had kidnappings in the past, and somehow, it turned out well, and this is the first time it doesn't, and - sorry, I just wonder why?"

Cho held her breath.

Harry's expression was masklike. "You forget Tony, Deborah."

"Oh ..." Deborah's hand was flying to her mouth. With a blood-red face, she turned to Ireen. "I'm awfully sorry, please excuse my ... It was a stupid remark."

Ireen just had time to say it's okay, then Hermione cut in. "No it wasn't. Regardless of how much it's wrong or right - we know the kidnappers in Tony's case were only after the money, and this here's something else."

Harry said, "Don't think I'm not asking that question myself, and I for my part are counting Tony too. I'm asking that still more since I learned about a remark from Firenze, the Centaur."

What was that?? Cho didn't know any such remark.

"Sandra told him I was hunting kidnappers. And he said, kidnappers, hm, I wonder if that's an improvement over dark wizards, but then perhaps the difference is smaller than expected. Please tell him the times have changed less than he might think."

Her own daughter? ... Erm, yes, sure, who else would chat with this Centaur, only this tale had slipped Cho's attention. Which for herself was equivalent to, she hadn't been told at all, and most likely on purpose. Well, the purpose wasn't hard to guess, saying *dark wizards* to her was raising the worst ...

"... has changed. Let's assume there are some right-wing wizards who realized that the number of magical children is growing beyond any expectation. They don't know why, they just look toward where they can see their strongest opponents. Aside from Japanese toy factories, Groucho is the most prominent force in combining magical and conventional technology ... They call themselves *The True Wizards*, - this is not necessarily a pseudonym for dark wizards, the true ones are dead ..."

Dead they were, yes, and she, Cho, had contributed her share, had killed the Number Two after Voldemort with her Steel Wing, the same whose ... House-elf?? ... But Malfoy was dead, and his son too, both died in the Battle of ...

"The woman!"

Harry stopped in mid-sentence at Cho's shout, and all eyes turned to her.

"I think I know who that woman is." Cho turned to Ron. "You were right, in a way, only it wasn't Winky, it was Dobby."

Harry stared at her, whispered, "Yes, of course ..."

"Lady Malfoy," called Cho, "the old hex. Lost her husband, lost her son - nobody had a second thought about her, somehow we believed she's a decent lady, overruled all the time by the rest of the family, spends her time mourning, or not ..."

Interrupting herself, Cho smiled triumphantly. "And what if she's been the driving force even then? Lucius Malfoy wasn't exactly outstanding in his efforts to help Voldemort, took his time to join him. And Draco - does anyone remember Draco doing something by himself? I bet a million ..." She stood up, walked toward the door.

George said, "Don't bother, Cho."

She stopped. "Huh?"

"Weren't you on your way to fetch the million? ... Nobody's going to hold against you."

A few gasps, there was too much excitement for enjoying a Weasley joke. Cho just marched ahead, although bystanders could hear something like, "Idiot ..."

When the door had closed, Ron called, "I set a tenner, says she's coming back with Dobby, to interview him about his old mistress."

He went as far as offering hundred to one, without success. When Cho returned, however, she was alone.

Seeing the faces, Cho became aware of the misunderstanding. "Oh no," she said, "I'm not going to compromise him that badly in front of so many people. But we're on track."

She turned to Hermione. "Her real first name's Lucinda, doesn't that just fit? Only she didn't use it in public, for fear of being teased because of her husband's first name ... Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy, that's the one we have to look for."

* * *

Gabriel finished the last tune, took the flute off his lips. After a moment, he mouthed it again, let a funny little trill follow. "That's the signal for food," he called into his audience.

Not his own idea. Beverly had asked him for that, some minutes ago. Because his audience was so transfixed, they'd starve, dry out, and pee themselves - if they hadn't done already - before moving away voluntarily from this piece of meadow, located between some flat rocks at the landside of the castle.

Ireland or not - this spot of green was totally artificial. Sure, the grass was real grass, only without some magical help every now and then, you'd find little more than sand and pebbles here. While now, it offered a perfect ground for this bunch of kids.

In a short distance, Goblin guards could be seen, and this was true whichever way to look. At the beginning, some of the kids had been quite intimidated, for example Bryan, three years old and the son of George and Bonnie. Same with Deirdre, Remus' and Almyra's daughter. But mostly thanks to Sandra and Héloïse, these shorties had lost their fright quickly.

Today Gabriel was soloist. Pity, somehow - with all these Goblins around, wouldn't it be great to hear a Goblin harp, or Goblin war drums? But no way.

Héloïse had flatly refused to bring her harp around. Here, outside?? Not a Felison, thanks a lot. Well, maybe she was right, only sweet Héloïse seemed a little pissed off today, felt herself out of place among these pee-pucks. Short of anything better, she had gathered a small ring of devoted slaves, consisting of Alain, Bernard, and Donovan.

Michel, the other candidate for a second musician, had an excuse which listened to the name Ismène - provided she would listen. Ismène clung to her brother, not letting go, letting off a siren's wail when, a while ago, someone else had tried to replace Michel in that task. True, on her brother's arm, Ismène wouldn't mind him walking through a hailstorm, but normally she was more open to foreigners. Maybe today's ballyhoo was a bit too much for her.

The one who tried so unsuccessfully was Howard, the only boy in the group of four students from Hogwarts. Officially, he had tried in favour of Michel having his hands free to beat Goblin war drums, only Gabriel could sense some more motivation, quite effortlessly so.

It had to do with Beverly, and with the bundle in Beverly's arms that was called Sophia. After his unsuccessful attempt with Ismène, Howard hadn't wasted much time before catching Tanitha, the other alternative in terms of age. To the girl's full satisfaction, so the youngest ages were in good hands.

The other two students from Hogwarts, Felicity and Linda, were busy with the rest. Minus the twins, that was - at the time Carole and Diane were almost finished driving the two Baby Care students into desperation, Sandra had taken pity and had put the two little devils under her special custody. But his sister had some fun herself, as Gabriel could register.

The crowd was moving toward the rear entrance of the main building, the one closest to *the garden*, as Cho used to call this little ground. Hearing this term for the first time, Harry had laughed and said, "Know a shrinking charm for rocks? Because then we could call it a Zen garden, if we'd find someone to smooth out their surfaces." But of course, the rocks had kept their size ... While Harry hadn't kept his laughing.

Michel, all the time closest to Gabriel, had risen too. "Gotta get to change her diapers first," he said. "No sense in letting her sit in her own pee - except for your playing, of course." He walked away with a grin.

Gabriel stretched his back, looked around - and saw two figures sitting there, apparently without any intention to move. Carlos and Esmeralda.

They were sitting side by side, hand in hand - just the view Gabriel had gotten used to, in the last two days. They were inseparable, day and night, literally - when Esmeralda went for little girls, Carlos had to guard the door ... Well, from the outside, but only since yesterday.

Gabriel asked, "Ain't you hungry?"

Carlos' mind formed a yes, except it didn't come. Esmeralda turned to her brother's ear and rattled something.

With limited enthusiasm but unwavering support, Carlos asked, "Can you play more?"

Looking into the girl's face, Gabriel saw no begging, no hope, hardly expectation. What he could sense was a kind of wall, with a tiny hole to peek through.

"Sure, just gimme a minute, okay?"

If he wasn't grossly mistaken, there had been the smallest nod ever from that head. Gabriel asked, "Has this been Spanish?"

Another nod, the fraction of an inch longer.

"What would be *yes* in Spanish?"

Five seconds lasting forever, while Carlos, if only from sheer self-interest rather than politeness, kept quiet, then Esmeralda's mouth formed a single syllable. "Si."

"That might be something, learning Spanish from you. Could you say that again what you said to him, only slower so I can follow?"

Three seconds this time, then, "Es tu podas tocar más?"

"Si, Esmeralda."

Sensing the silent groan in Carlos, Gabriel said, "Before we start again - what about something to eat, here in this place?"

The idea seemed to find appreciation, only there was the problem of logistics - Esmeralda clearly refused to go inside, which nailed Carlos at the spot on which he was sitting, and Gabriel disappearing inside didn't find the girl's approval either.

Gabriel grinned. "Lemme show you a trick." For a few seconds, he hid his face behind his hands, then looked up. "Alright - now watch the building."

It took about half a minute, then a window opened, and the figure of Sandra came into view. "Here - fetch it," she shouted, and something came sailing toward them.

Gabriel plucked it out of the air, put it into the grass - a plastic box with sandwiches.

Another shout from the window, and a bottle of lemonade found its way down to the ground. Then the window closed.

Carlos stared at Gabriel admiringly. "Hey, that's cool ... how'd you do that?"

"Me and Sandy, that's like you two, we can talk without talking - well, a bit more, since we're older and ... Anyway, I sent her a picture of hungry people, and she knew what I meant."

Carlos was already chewing, Gabriel couldn't resist the invitation either, and - look there, even the girl found something to her taste.

Between bites, Carlos said, "But we can't send pictures to each other."

"Did you ever try?"

A baffled look from Carlos. "No." Esmeralda had stopped chewing, stared at Gabriel.

"It's different from one to the other, but a little bit is always possible. What do you think - I can show you, and you teach me Spanish?"

Too fast for the girl - Gabriel could sense how the peephole was shrinking again.

"Just an idea," he said. "At any rate - learning Spanish from you, that'd be something."

Between more bites, Carlos explained that he had learned Spanish from his sister, in exchange for French, because his father didn't use Spanish by habit. And with this reference, the pleasant mood from seconds before was gone.

In desperate search for some cheering up, Gabriel found nothing. But then, maybe the subject itself ... "My own father's parents were killed when he was a baby," he started, "did you know that?"

No they didn't.

"He was sent to relatives, but they were scared of magic, so as soon as he could, he moved to Grandma Weasley. That's why the Weasleys and the Potters, somehow that's just one family."

He had their full attention.

"And Rahewa, that's Sandy's godmother, she lost her mother when she was a student, but that was from illness. And her father was no good, always drunk, so she got herself new parents, and she picked the Lupins ..."

Maybe a bit tight, the course of this conversation.

"... By the way, my own godfather, that's a Goblin. Same with Michel, actually, only mine is Urion, he's the commander of these Goblins over there ... Did you know Goblins before?"

No, they didn't, and the topic of Goblins wasn't the best choice either.

In this case, it didn't strike Gabriel as an improvement to talk about Tanitha, who had lost only a father, not so long ago, while her mother was still around.

At this moment, Esmeralda said, "I don't want new parents."

"Huh? ... Why not?"

"They'd be killed. Each time I get a new Mum and a new Dad, they get killed." Esmeralda looked at Gabriel with defiance in her eyes. "Can you play now?"

"Er, yes." Gabriel wiped his hands in the grass, seized for his flute, brought it at his lips.

For some seconds, the girl's idea was still whirling through his mind, a concept almost unfathomable and thus horrifying, then Gabriel pushed the thought off, concentrated on the picture in his view - a quiet place, guarded and protected by the best warriors he knew - and blew the first tune.

19 - Hunter's Moon

Paul Sillitoe chewed, swallowed, dropped his knife, sipped from his glass, took his knife again, and aimed for the next bite. He presented the perfect picture of a man savouring his supper. Except it wasn't true, his thoughts were somewhere else. Accordingly, he didn't register the glances from the cook, who was sitting opposite him.

"Today we got a new contract," the cook said. "Quite a project, about half of all scenes will be computerized. It's kind of a space opera ..."

"Really?"

"... Yes, and to the outside, first it looks a bit like *Alien* because there's this monster they catch, only the real conflict is within the crew - not the real crew, but there are lots of scientists on board, and they don't like each other."

"I see."

"Each faculty looks down at the others, most of all at the hero who's something new, a kind of integrated scientist, it's called *nexialism*, but of course the established sciences despise them. There was the question whether he should be a wizard too ..."

"Of course."

"... It's not decided yet - you know, a matter of identification, nobody wants another superman, but it's still pending."

"That's understandable."

"If it turns that way, we'll need some more people, in particular Magicals. I'll be the one to do the interviews. It's almost like casting - all these young men, anxious to make a good impression. It's intriguing, isn't it?"

"Yes, absolutely."

The sudden stop in Kathleen's tale made Paul come fully awake. Seeing her expression, he desperately tried to remember where his comments had gone wrong.

She was quicker. "You met her, huh?"

"Met whom?"

Wrong answer, definitely so. For a short moment, it looked as if Kathleen would start throwing things into his direction, which would be a shame, after all, there was nothing to complain about this meal, actually it was even delicious, or would be ...

Her hands were flat on the table. "Don't ask me for her name. Not me!!"

"Kathleen ..."

"Yes I'm here, with body and soul, and that's more than what I can say about you. Or do I share that name with her too?"

He couldn't look in her eyes. "No."

"Who is she?"

The one that ... Paul looked up. "Does it really matter?"

"Why do you ask me? Why don't you ask yourself? Why can't you figure out what you want, and keep to it?"

This he could answer easily. "Because I don't know."

"Then maybe I should ask something simpler. How's the food?"

"Good ... Excellent."

"Better than hers?"

Paul had to grin on that. "I can't remember any meal she cooked for me."

"Is she better in bed?"

How to judge that? "No."

Kathleen snorted. "Then it's obvious, isn't it? ... Because I'm too young and too good-looking to be outscored in these regards."

"Maybe it's obvious, but ..." After a second, Paul continued, "It's more complicated, and what's worse, right now the situation's getting totally out of control - of my control, that is."

"Has it ever been?"

Yes, indeed, at least from his perspective. Always working at the same place, not counting short travels. Always loving the same woman, not a single step aside as long as ... And then he'd accepted this job, and since then, the events were playing roller coaster with him.

Paul shook his head. "You don't understand, Kathleen, this isn't a simple question of you or the other one ..."

"Give her a name, dammit! And then tell me what else is there - yes, you're right, I don't understand, and maybe this is an accidental side-effect from you not telling me anything!"

"Okay ... okay." Paul pointed at his dish. "Gimme a minute to get done with my food, because - er, it's really good."

Kathleen still was glaring at him, only when his glance switched between his meal and her face several times in rapid succession, she couldn't hold her rage any longer, almost grinned. "Eat, you - you British blockhead."

Chewing, he had time to find his words, a task that seemed strangely complicated for him, the journalist. "Some weeks ago," he started eventually, "my life looked simple enough ..."

"Stop playing Tolstoi. Come to the facts."

How much he would like to get upset by himself, only in doing so now he would pick a bad time for sure.

But he could growl. "Her name's Ginny. Runs a model agency. Is a model herself. She loves someone else. Had me dangling in the wind. That's been the state some weeks ago. You with me?"

"Whom?"

"Not the one she's been - er, doesn't matter, but he's out of reach. No way. Never. That's when I take on that job. Come over. Meet you. New perspectives. First job done, get an enhancement. Working on it. That's been the state some days ago. You still copying?"

Leaning back, moving her hand as graciously as a queen, Kathleen replied, "Yep."

"And now he tells me to drop the Bahamas, leave it to the Goblins, they'll manage, probably quicker ..." Paul's voice gained genuine rage, "as if he couldn't ask them in the beginning, he's sooo tight with them - and instead, I have to hunt that woman, tracking her down wherever she went ..."

"Which woman?"

"Some old bitch, I mean, witch, probably both, he thinks she's the one behind the Garcia killing. And for that, I have to jump back and forth across the Atlantic, she's English but probably here, or back again - and all this just when I'd come to the point of thinking seriously about what's going on between the two of us. One day I'm close to you, next day I'm in her playground, except it doesn't matter since I have no time anyway." Paul looked up. "That's been the state when I missed the punch line in your gossip."

"You could say no to that job."

He had a harsh laugh. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Did you sell your soul?"

"You mean the money?" Paul came up and made a step, then sat down again next to her, and took her hand. "Kathleen, I could give it back, I could reject the reward - or better still, I could pass it over to you, it wouldn't change anything ..."

"Oh, it would, take my word for it - for me, that is."

Paul hesitated. "To be honest, the thought crossed my mind - I mean, to share it with you, except I didn't know how to address the issue, because in this situation, it would look so - so ..."

"Second price? Is that what you're searching for?"

"Not quite. Maybe compensation was the word I didn't want to say."

"British gentleman, huh?" Kathleen's voice made it hardly sound like a compliment.

When he didn't reply, she asked, "What's the reason you can't say no, if not the money?"

"The money has nothing to do with that, believe me. Sure, it would increase my bad conscience, but ... I could say no, technically it's no problem - Harry would nod and be gone. It's just me who couldn't live with that."

"Just you?" Kathleen came forward with a jolt. "And this Ginny's being his sister, that's totally besides the point?"

Paul's eyes narrowed. "His adopted sister," he said with a voice suddenly cool.

"So wha ..." Kathleen stopped, stared at him wide-eyed. "It's him - isn't it?"

"Yes."

Seeing Kathleen nod in this *didn't-I-know* style, Paul barked, "You don't know a wet fart! It's been me who found the place where Voldemort was hiding, after he had kidnapped Cho. Not alone, Francesco was the other, but since then I'm Harry's good-luck charm in cases like that, and the near miss with Tony's killers didn't exactly cool it down."

With calmer voice, he added, "That's why I can't say no."

There was silence.

Then Kathleen stood up, busied herself cleaning the table.

Halfway finished, she stopped. "You're going to make a mistake. But I can't stop you doing that mistake again and again, obviously not ..." She gave a bitter laugh. "Perhaps I could fight her, but how can I fight him? That family's too much for a simple woman, and I'm not even a witch."

A dry sob. "I'm not going to make the same mistake as you. Not me."

"Kathleen ..."

"Save it, Paul. I'm okay. I will, in a while. I'm not blaming you, it's just - well, I was getting used to it." Another sob. "You'd have done okay with me, I'd never let you dangling in the wind." And now the tears were running freely.

Trusting his short experience that she wasn't the fistful type, Paul took her in his arms, found his judgment right. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"I'm sorry too, Paul."

After a moment, she freed herself and resumed her work.

"If the Goblins are successful," he started, then corrected himself, "No - when the Goblins have found the bank, because they will, would you share with me?"

"First bed, then breakfast, then bounty?" Kathleen blushed. "Sorry, that wasn't fair."

"What's fair?" muttered Paul.

"Don't ask me, but at least I know what's unjustified ... No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't earn it."

"Did I?" He thought a moment. "It's just money, Kathleen, it doesn't mean anything. You know the old saying - it balances for nothing, except for debts and loans."

She smiled. "Funny catchwords you know, I never heard that one before."

"Because I just invented it." When her head was shaking again, Paul sighed. "Did it cross your mind that you paid even taxes for it?"

"You're right," she said, wondering in her voice. She glanced at him, to see if this had been meant as a joke. Seeing his expression, Kathleen hesitated still another moment, finally said, "Well, that changes the matter dramatically, I guess ... In this case, I should wait till tomorrow morning before throwing you out."

Not even her voice was convincing enough to rate her last remark as a joke, because it sounded more like a question, while her face begged him to accept this last bed and breakfast.

* * *

Sitting at the Beauxbatons breakfast table, Frédéric ate mechanically, his eyes fixed at the entrance to the hall. Students were still arriving, less by the minute - in a short while, classes would start, and the number of empty seats was already outnumbering those with students on them.

This would be the second day, and somewhere Frédéric already felt sure they would not come, only hope is dying last, someone had said, he couldn't remember who, anyway this someone had been right.

The day before, he and Benoît could barely avoid a fistfight with other students. Reserving two seats, in a hall more than full, for people who didn't come? Fortunately, the pecking order was established in Beauxbatons since a while, this table hosted only first-years, and among them, Benoît's reputation was good enough to earn not more than angry shouts. But they hadn't made friends that way.

Big loss, really. Frédéric had all the friends he needed, except they didn't come, apparently kept missing today as well.

"They're sick," Benoît said, not very convincingly. "It'll take a few days."

"No," replied Frédéric, not taking his eyes off the spot he was watching, "not both of them at the same time. It's something else."

"And what?"

Yes, what? The last time Frédéric saw Sandra, she had been standing just outside the Forbidden Forest, the copy of a protocol in her hand. Had some tree monster caught her?

No, because Héloïse had been far away then. Could the reason be something with the protocol? ... If so, how?

Frédéric had finished eating, sipped his café au lait, somewhat awkwardly because even now, his eyes would not stop scanning. As a little boy, he played the common game of closing his eyes, convinced his wish would be fulfilled when opening them again. It never worked, so he had given up on that, and staring into a cup wasn't any better.

Putting the cup down, he was forced to look at the table for an instant. When he glanced up again, the two figures had already crossed half the distance.

Frédéric started to beam, stopped again when registering that the faces didn't smile. Benoît was less scrupulous. "Finally!" he called. "Where have you been yesterday?"

"At home, where else?" Héloïse's flippancy lacked the usual spirit. "C'mon, let's go, before we're too late. I can do without Thionnité's comment on that."

In the classroom, Thionnité looked around, saw their table complete again and sneered, "Ah, the demoiselles are back, how wonderful ... Are you that close to catch the same virus at the same time, and even recover in sync?"

"No," replied Sandra. And when the last student had become aware the *Monsieur le Professeur* wouldn't follow, she added, "But at least we're close enough to catch the same bereavement at the same time."

Feeling consternation, Frédéric had little opportunity to relish Thionnité's expression. After some seconds, the teacher said, "I'm sorry to hear that. Nonetheless, the rules demand a certification."

"Yes, Monsieur le Professeur." Sandra seemed the personified politeness again. "I'll tell my father to pass by."

"Oh, a written form will be fine."

This answer, given with some haste, and Sandra's face at that moment were similarly lost toward Frédéric. His deep worry faded only when, shortly afterwards, the girls made clear that no, it wasn't a direct family member, promising more information during the lunch break.

All the harder was Frédéric's shock when hearing who had died. The name Ramon didn't tell him anything, while that of Marie-Christine, just when digging out the old story ... Frédéric couldn't help thinking there was a coincidence, only that would mean his own family was involved, a thought still more horrible because he felt ready to dismiss his father while no one else.

Which didn't fit, somehow. Only his father could have registered that the protocol had been removed for a while - and for all Frédéric knew, his father didn't even remember this paper.

Frédéric kept silent through the meal, excused himself as soon as possible to walk out, to find a place where he could hang on to his thoughts alone.

Coming into the small park, he was stopped short at the sight of some Goblins. They looked pretty much like those he'd seen near the Weasley house, only there were more of them around here, Frédéric counted six Goblins just in his view.

Some of them looked to the other side, while two of them were watching the park and what was happening there. Unmoving faces, leathery rather than stony, disquieting all the same. Frédéric felt eyes resting on him while he searched for a place to sit.

Then these eyes found another subject to watch, except that seconds later, Frédéric found himself in their focus again because the subject had reached him, sat down at his side.

A moment of silence, in which Frédéric waited that these eyes would find some other people to stare at. But they didn't. Eventually, he said, "We're watched all the time."

"Yes, of course." Sandra showed a short smile. "These are my bodyguards ... Mine and Héloïse's, the moment she's coming out."

"Why?"

Into his question, Frédéric had the bad feeling he knew the reason quite well, and what he heard from Sandra confirmed his assumption. Some old feud from the past, she said, leaving it unclear enough so his initial thought was fed again, crazy as it seemed.

Then Sandra asked, "Have you ever heard about something that's called *The True Wizards*?"

"True wizards?" Frédéric looked confused. "Often enough, and you too - in every third sentence, Thionnite's telling us what a true wizard's supposed to do, and still more, what not ... Why?"

"There was a message found with Marie-Christine. Some threats - it was signed with that name."

Had he heard that at some family meeting or another? ... Frédéric wasn't sure, couldn't exclude it either, only that bloody title was hardly discernible from the Traditionalese he had learned to ignore in the conservative circles of his family and their friends.

Sandra said, "I know what you think. But I don't believe it."

Before he could answer, she continued, "And I - I thought, because I didn't tell my father in time what Firenze had said, I'd be ... It was so terrible, and then I talked with him, and he said, it hadn't changed anything."

Frédéric didn't know what to reply.

Glancing at him, Sandra said, "And then he asked me to tell him everything, and I did."

"About ..."

"About you, and Firenze, and the protocol." While Frédéric was sharply in taking his breath, she hurried on, "And I asked him what they owed Marie-Christine, he and - and Cho. It was something that had to do with Voldemort, and what he planned to do ... with me."

"With you?" Considering his usual standard, it took Frédéric quite a moment to realize the discrepancy. "But - but you weren't even born then."

"Not with me personally. With my parent's child."

"Oh."

Frédéric felt some reluctance to ask more; however, didn't hear more, and didn't care either, because another question was predominant in his mind. "And - what did he say? About ..."

"You? ... Erm - we didn't talk much about you - I mean, he had questions, only I thought it better you'd answer them by yourself, and ... And then we said, maybe right now is a bad time for an invitation, except just that might be the best thing to do, so ..."

Frédéric cleared his throat. "Yeah, sure ... And in a way, it's - having a few days for getting used to this idea, that might ..."

"Scared?" She smiled at him.

"Not exactly - honestly, it's not fright, it's ... My knees might go jelly, and could be I'm going to tremble a bit, but ..." Frédéric thought for a moment. "There's something - I hope it doesn't take that long because, you know, I think he's the only one to whom I can talk about this thought - that my family's somehow involved in these events."

Sandra beamed. "You'll see, it'll work. You trust him without having seen him once, and for what I heard, it's the same the other way around."

"Is it? ... What did he say?"

"He ..." Sandra blushed. "He said you didn't do Gérard's mistake." Next moment, she was up, about to leave.

"Hey, wait! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Figure it out. You aren't going to tell me you didn't make your own copy of that protocol, are you?" Sandra had stopped only because these words weren't intended for a larger audience, now she turned and hurried away.

Gérard's mistake ... His would-have-been-uncle's greatest mistake had been to go insane, and so far, Frédéric fully agreed with Sandra's father - this wouldn't happen to him. However, most likely her father had meant something else. Then what?

Yes, Frédéric had his own copy, naturally so. He had to read it again, because there was nothing in his memory, which gave him a clue ..., It was maddening - he had to wait till the

evening, and at this very moment, the concept of madness was offering totally new insights to him.

* * *

Harry sat down, looked at the other three. "All right. What did you find?"

"I'm pleased too," said Deborah, "seeing you. How's Cho?"

It earned her a short smile, somewhat tired, while not apologetic at all. "Working day shift in Ireland and night shift in California. With me it's the other way around. Wanna hear my report first?"

"Hold on a minute," said Sirius soothingly, "you haven't even arrived yet, Harry."

"I have, I'm here, and time's running. So?"

Sirius stood up. "Just a second - I have something for you."

When he returned with a glass and a bottle of brandy, Harry felt tempted to send that bottle through the closed window. For a short instant - then, realizing what a bad example he would give in this critical phase, he relaxed.

Just a bit, to raise his glass. "I'm sorry. Deborah, Sirius, Paul - cheers."

Putting the glass down, Harry started without waiting for another invitation. "McIlroy - that's the lieutenant in charge of the Garcia case - he thinks he has identified one of the two figures at the water. They found a deserted car close by, and from that they evaluated the owner, tracked down a girlfriend, and played the scene from the tape. She said it wasn't him, but she thought she'd heard that voice some time before. Now McIlroy's trying some DNA tests, after they got a hair from that guy's comb."

"DNA tests?" asked Deborah. "Against what?"

"They think some of the pieces they found belonged to the rear of Ramon's car. And if they're right, then the spots at the inside stem from that guy, because that's where he was when the suitcase came open."

Unimpressed from the faces around him, Harry continued, "These tests are just for confirmation. In the meantime, McIlroy and his men are trying to trace back the last days of this guy - Matty was his name, assuming they're right."

Sirius asked, "Any results?"

"Well, he was a hired hand, so much for sure. The other names - Simon, Hank - didn't raise an echo so far. But just from the names, this Simon might have been from England." Harry looked at Sirius. "Someone with that name claimed missing?"

"Eight or so, but none of them fits the description. Would have surprised me anyway - if this Simon was kind of an assistant for dirty work, he certainly made sure nobody's calling after him."

"No, probably not." Harry was more interested in the woman anyway, and for some irrational reason, he couldn't help feeling she would leave more traces.

However, Sirius' report was badly suited to support his theory. "Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy ..." His godfather fetched a notepad out of his pocket. "Widow, witch ... Encountered a deep fall from social grace about fifteen years ago. Lived a secluded life in her villa in London. Left about two months ago, destination unknown. Vacation in the Caribbean, that's what she told her waitress."

"Alone?"

"No youthful lover, if that's what you mean."

About to give an angry reply, Harry stopped just in time, forewarned by something like triumph inside his godfather. "But?"

Sirius showed a disappointed grin. "It's just no fun trying to hide something from you - okay, okay, here's what the waitress said - she traveled with her servant, who's totally disqualified for the lover's role, because he's a house-elf."

Harry had felt little doubt before, if any, and this information nailed it, as far as he was concerned. Wouldn't mean anything in front of a jury, but then, this woman wasn't going to appear in some court.

"The name wouldn't help us much," said Harry, "because according to Carlos and Esmeralda, the house-elf in that house never said its own name ... Which is a bit unusual, I'd say."

Nobody commented on that - neither Sirius and Deborah nor Paul would claim any expertise of house-elves' speaking habits, quite in contrast to the Potters.

Harry asked, "What else?"

"Background material," replied Sirius, "and in that, Paul's been more successful with his society contacts."

It was Paul's turn to seize for his notepad. In contrast to that of Sirius, his' was an electronic one, a pocket computer - had Cho been sitting here, Harry thought, she'd have started making plans for a new *Groucho* branch ... But maybe not today.

"It's quite interesting," began Paul, "what you can learn once you've found the right contacts - in this case, the Goblins, until recently quieter than a Swiss bank."

He sent a grin toward Harry, the one responsible for this particular source of information. Seeing the echo, Paul quickly hurried on. "Immediately after the Battle of Hogwarts, Lady Malfoy was forced to pay a hefty fee. She had to sell the family residence, an estate somewhere in Berkshire, could keep only that villa in London. However, normally it would have been impossible for her to hold it, and to keep her life style ... The only conclusion - some sponsors helped her to get along."

Again Paul looked at Harry, this time businesslike. "The Goblins' openness doesn't extend farther than to this woman, that's why I have no names. But even so, we can deduct a bit ... As

much as Lady Malfoy was cut socially, she always had a few faithful friends, and we can expect them in the same circles that were notorious for their beliefs in Voldemort's time. Nothing public, the lady didn't run dinner parties for them, and nobody could remember having seen her on some invitation. But she wasn't isolated, so much for sure."

That reminded Harry. "What about pictures of her?"

Sirius said, "The newest picture we found dates back about thirty years. That woman's either pretty vain or a natural as an undercover agent."

Deborah said, "Ain't there graphic programs on computers to let someone in a picture age?"

"Sure, honey." Sirius grinned at her. "Only how to do that with a magic picture? We didn't even manage to get a hardcopy."

Paul nodded. "Yes, she's an ultra-traditionalist. No phone, no TV, no car - nothing that smells of Muggle technology."

Harry asked, "So where do we stand?"

"Hear Deborah first," replied Paul.

Deborah didn't use a notepad. "I checked the media," she said, "which in this case just means newspapers or magazines. There's a weekly newspaper, pretty obscure, called *The Magic Guardian* - they didn't tell me their circulation, actually they didn't tell me anything, but from what I could judge, I'd say it's less than thousand copies ... Then there is a monthly magazine, *Social Observer*, which tries to balance between the right-wings in the wizarding world and those in the Muggle world. Something like, we're different, we respect each other, as long as everybody keeps to his place, and to hell with the indiscriminating rest."

She sighed. "It's a pity - with the Muggle neo-nazis, you can track them down quite easily, all you have to do is to roam the Internet. With them - I'm sure there are similar publications in other countries, only they're hard to find."

"Do they matter?" asked Harry.

"They might." Deborah grimaced. "I got a few issues of the *Magic Guardian* - bad stuff, by all means - and every now and then, you read something about friends in the territorial Europe, or friends overseas, but never names." She looked wondering. "Say, can an owl cross the Atlantic?"

"No idea." Harry felt baffled. "Ask Almyra."

"Yeah - anyway, I found articles about what they call *bastard wizards*, or witches, and that they're the worst of all, and that something must happen to stop them."

Feeling grim in his heart, Harry said, "Too late - and Voldemort's been the one to break the dams ... How do they manage this fact?"

"Using the same techniques as the neonazis when denying the genocide of the Jews and the concentration camps. I can show you, but be warned - that's sick stuff."

"Does she appear in articles?"

"As a kind of icon, you mean? Or spiritual leader?" Deborah shook her head. "Not directly, at least - on the other side, I couldn't lay hands on more than a few issues." Professional disgust was in her voice, "Imagine - a newspaper without a public archive! They have one, I'm sure, but they didn't let me use it."

"With a bit more evidence," said Sirius, "I could confiscate it. But as it stands, they'd get it back within an hour even with the most stupid lawyer in the Kingdom."

Paul made a dismissive gesture. "Would we really learn anything new? ... I'd say, we know there's an international conspiracy, small groups, only they're rather militant ..."

"And we are the target," interrupted Harry, today apparently not immune from this deadly sin, "and some days ago, they struck for the first time. It failed for them as much as for us, which makes me think they're in the same frenzy to strike again as we are to strike back."

"Amen," said Sirius.

Deborah stared at him. "I never noticed you being religious."

"Normally I pray in the office," replied Sirius.

Deborah sent a quick glance toward Harry, whether he'd help her figuring out if Sirius was putting her on, but no such luck. So she asked, "And what caused you making an exception today?"

Sirius made big eyes. "Isn't that obvious? ... Got home work to do."

Even Harry's lips were twisting a bit. "A propos homework - Cho did some more checks on security leaks, however she couldn't find anything significant. On the other side - when shipping the potion, there's always a quota of loss, for whatever reasons, and of course these containers are not particularly protected. So far, we always ran the principle of hiding in public ... The only remarkable event was this shipment of four apparition locks to a customer that doesn't exist, and in this regard, she couldn't find anything new. That track's cooled out."

"So we know they're there," said Sirius, "and we can safely assume this woman's in a leading role. Only we haven't got the foggiest where they are, and which are the others."

Deborah asked, "What's a cop supposed to do in this situation?"

"Infiltration," was the answer. "Undercover agents, only this takes something we don't have - time. And what's worse, Severus is retired, so-to-speak, too old anyway."

"Is he?" Deborah examined her de-facto husband. "He's as old as you are. And he didn't ..." The sentence hung in the air, unfinished.

Even so, the others knew what she had suppressed in the last instant, the mentioning of Sirius' twelve years in Azkaban. And the chief of the Law Enforcement Squad confirmed by replying, "But he did undercover years, they count the same, and he's with Samantha, she counts twice ..."

Harry saw Deborah intaking her breath, said quickly, "And aside from that, we're totally off the topic, I'd say. There's no time for undercover agents ... But infiltration - that's something to think about."

* * *

Entering the classroom, Sandra was stopped by the students in front of her, who blocked the doorframe. They were pushed forward with slaps at their shoulders, accompanied by remarks to give way, they weren't transparent, except for their brains.

Two steps farther, she didn't score much better herself - the stuff on the teacher's table was surprising enough to stop her short, and to earn her own share of blows and shouts. Sandra obeyed - from their table so close, she could examine them equally well.

Cauldrons, undeniably, only not enough for all tables. And books, apparently quite old, at least some of them. And some rubbish Sandra couldn't identify, however it looked like the raw material for the ingredients of some potions. And some knives too.

That was strange. First because potions, even the simplest of them, were a topic not planned before the end of the year. Or so she'd heard.

And then because *Magique Générale* wasn't supposed to include potions. Sandra could remember the announcement of the Biology teacher, Madame Galladier, that the basic techniques and a limited set of recipes would be regular stuff while more advanced potions were restricted to the enhanced level of Biology, one of the alternatives that would come in a few years.

But Monsieur Thionnay behind his table seemed quite confident to be the right teacher with the right topic. A moment later, it became obvious why.

"Messieurs, mesdemoiselles, please don't wait for a confrontation between Madame Galladier and myself, because I'm not challenging her. What you can see here are magical tools of different centuries, and my intention is to give you an introduction into the art of potions brewing through the ages ... In particular, I want to show you how recipes for the same purpose have been refined from one generation to the next ..."

Sandra and her three team members looked at each other. What was that supposed to be, out of the blue?

"... especially the improvements in terms of efficiency, safety, and care of the patient's health are quite impressive, and - I want to emphasize that - without any influence from modernistic, non-magical trends and techniques ..."

Yeah, of course, his old suada, but still - what devil was riding him to come with that crap?

Thionnay recited from old books. Still worse - these book gave off a rancid smell that reached their table. Thionnay was cutting, cooking, stirring in cauldrons, creating other smells not suited to calm down their stomachs either. Maybe his presentation had to be called brilliant, only there wasn't a single student in the room who could muster the slightest interest. And this torturing patience test in the last two classes of the day.

It felt like a long, boring joke whose punch line didn't come. Or had it come already, except nobody registered? Heads were lolling, eyes closing, coming open again with a twist, in faces looking guilty for a moment, before dozing off again.

It didn't matter, Thionnay had caught fire in his own story, completely ignoring such scenes although it seemed nearly impossible not to register them. Which only added to the sense of weirdness Sandra felt.

She wasn't dozing off. Rather, she felt grossly irritated and annoyed. Thionnay had lost his initial nervousness quickly, since then moved and operated with elegance and firmness, only it was totally out of place, inappropriate, felt somehow wrong from start to end.

The end - if it only would come.

Coming awake, the students glanced at their watches more and more frequently, no longer hiding this movement.

Perfectly in time, seconds before the bell would ring, Thionnay finished his presentation. "That's all for today." Looking at their table, he said, "Mademoiselle Weasley, Mademoiselle Chang, would you please help me to take these things back into my office?"

At this moment, the bell started to ring. It had barely finished when the room was empty, after a stampede of desperate students. Except for the teacher, and one less fortunate table.

Because the boys had stayed too, and right now Frédéric said, "We'll do it for them."

"True cavaliers, huh?" Thionnay showed a smile which struck Sandra worse than all the droning before. "Then you can take these books back to the library, they're much heavier than the rest ... And please make sure Madame Balmier checks them off, she was quite worried when I lent them."

Frédéric and Benoît looked at each other, suppressed a sigh for the last time, and started to pile the large tomes into their arms.

Watching them, Sandra became aware the books were almost too much for carrying them at once, only the boys' clenched teeth left no doubt - they wouldn't walk more often than once, and they wouldn't say "Enough" to Thionnay, who put the last books on top of the piles in their arms.

The cauldrons, in comparison, seemed light, just a bit unwieldy. Taking the knives and a bag with the unused ingredients, Thionnay walked ahead.

He unlocked his office, held the door open for Héloïse and Sandra. "Please deposit them on the floor," he said, "over there in the corner, please."

Waiting for Héloïse to get rid of her load, Sandra heard the door closing. This noise, so ordinary by itself, sounded terribly wrong.

She turned around.

Thionnay leaned toward the door, his wand ready, his face tense. His voice hissed, "Imperio!"

He's gone insane. This was Sandra's first thought, together with a sense of astonishment - hadn't he recognized the last time ...

She bent down to deposit the cauldrons, and to get her arms free. Coming up again, the second surprise was waiting for her.

Thionnay's wand again, and his almost joyful smile, and his few quick words. "Was a joke. Stupefy!"

This asshole had stunned her, and her stupid hands hadn't released the damned pots just where ... The blackness surrounded her before Sandra could finish the thought.

* * *

Frédéric's arms felt weaker with every step. He wasn't carrying more weight than Benoît, maybe even less, only his friend was stronger - country life provided more muscles than sitting in salons with old furniture.

So Benoît was walking and aching ahead of him, while not much, which seemed a mistake because of that pungent odor rising from the books, only poor Benoît had them just under his nose, and Frédéric felt determined to suffer his share.

They reached the library, Benoît crashing the door open, raising an angry remark from Madame Balmier, and there was a table Frédéric was there dropped the books ... a second before his numb hands would have given up, letting the precious tomes crash down right before the librarian's eyes.

Madame Balmier came over. "Couldn't walk twice, huh? And a little levitation charm's still beyond reach, you poor boys ..."

Benoît suddenly looked astonished, said, "I'm ...", pressed both hands against his mouth and raced toward the exit.

The librarian witch watched him leave, shook her head. "Tsk, tsk - bit sensitive, isn't he?"

No, Frédéric wanted to say, saved his breath because right now he had to fight his own wave of nausea, inhaling deeply, concentrating, not believing how his stomach was betraying him.

"It's okay, they're all back," said Madame Balmier. "Now hurry to get a sip of water, before you have an unpleasant accident here." Her emphasis on the last word made clear - such an accident outside the room was none of her concern.

Frédéric didn't run, instead moved cautiously, not shaking his stomach more than necessary. He'd seen, or heard, his share of drunken guests throwing up, the thought of his friend having less luck - or experience - would not send him over the edge.

Another deep intake of breath, already outside the library, then he'd managed, had stabilized, could walk faster.

Crazy that - not particularly funny, nothing to tell the girls, except what else could he say to explain Benoît not coming along with him?

Frédéric waited a moment. No Benoît.

Maybe he should look after him, only now it seemed more important to check whether the girls had completed their own task without trouble, and to say goodbye to them. So he walked to the floor where Thionnay's office could be found as the first around the corner.

No girls.

Getting close to the door, Frédéric stressed his ears, not hearing any sound. He walked the floor they had to take, coming from the classroom - it hadn't looked that way, but maybe they had to go twice, not suffering from the stupid ambition that had driven himself and Benoît.

No Sandra in sight, no Héloïse either.

The classroom was empty, which so far seemed perfectly normal, with one tiny exception - Frédéric could check it because the door opened, hadn't been locked again by the teacher.

Irregularities come in clusters, he thought, and this is one of these days, only these particular clusters didn't mind mixing serious things with meaningless events. One thing, however, didn't fit the pattern - Sandra leaving without a word. Frédéric flatly refused to believe that.

He started walking toward the exit, wanted to look whether the girls were waiting at the point just outside the locking field, the spot from which they used to jump. He hadn't reached the staircase yet when he was already running.

No, they didn't wait there. However, from this position, Frédéric could see some other people waiting - provided *people* was the right term for Goblin guards. Which meant, the girls hadn't left. Which in turn meant, they were still somewhere inside. And this meant - what?

They'd gone sick too, were in the girls' toilets, busy to - er, to do what Benoît was about to do when he left in such a hurry.

Unlikely as it seemed, Frédéric couldn't imagine anything else. He went upstairs again, reached the toilets that seemed the most likely place, after walking with some cauldrons from the classroom to Thionnay's office.

He listened outside, meanwhile not even caring if someone might watch him. Not hearing a sound, he checked around, slipped inside, feeling more worried than weirdo.

Nobody here, no cabin locked.

He went out, reached Thionnay's office, and knocked at the door. Getting no answer, he knocked again. Still hearing no response, he tried the door handle - locked, what else.

Well, at least he could dismiss the crazy thought that girls and teacher together had gone unconscious from some spilled potion. At this thought, Frédéric remembered Benoît - had his friend gone unconscious?

No. Was in their dormitory, lying on his bed, fully dressed, even with his shoes, however with an empty stomach, as Frédéric learned. "I feel so sick," Benoît whispered. "Retching already, and still it doesn't stop. Please excuse me to the girls, I don't wanna be seen that way."

"I wish I could, but I can't find them."

"They're gone, I'd say."

"Never. The Goblins are still downstairs." Examining his friend again, Frédéric said, "There's something fishy here. We helped Thionnite, and all of a sudden, you're sick and the girls are nowhere to find."

"Don't talk about fish," groaned Benoît. "And besides, if you're right, how come you're okay?"

"I had a fit myself, only it wasn't that bad."

Benoît gave no answer. He seemed too sick to agree, too weak for disagreement, at this moment no help altogether. Frédéric asked, "Can I do something for you? Do you need anything?"

"No - just leave me here."

Frédéric tiptoed outside. Having closed the door, he walked faster, once more scanned the same paths he'd checked minutes ago. Still no result, except that there were more students around than before, suppertime was near, and his imagination was playing tricks with him - any two heads together with halfway the right hair colour made Frédéric's heart beat faster for a second.

Outside the building, he sat down at a bench. He had to think, and fast.

Thionnay had tricked them. Had separated them - the entire class today had been a setup for that. And he had tricked those Goblins too, which meant ... Frédéric suddenly felt very cold.

And helpless, while not powerless. Scared but not shitless, and definitely not out of his mind. He seized for his phony. "Mr. Potter, please."

"This connection is not available for public purposes, sir."

"But I must talk with him."

"I'm sorry, sir, this is not acceptable."

Not acceptable was right, except the other way around. "I ... tell him, I'm calling in the name of Sandra - that's his daughter."

A moment silence, then, "You know, sir, that any false claim of this kind will cause your life-long lockout from this service, and in addition ..."

"Yes I know but it's true - call him, dammit!"

Silence. One second, two, three, four, five, dear God ...

"Harry Potter."

"Oh - yes, er, my name is Frédéric Pouilly ..."

"I know, Frédéric, your name tells me something. What is with Sandra?"

Hearing that voice, soothing him at one side and urging him at the other, Frédéric felt instantly better. "She's - I can't find her, and Héloïse either. But the Goblins are still there, so I don't think they left without saying goodbye, because ..."

"Where did you see them last?"

"We were helping Thionnay to take back some stuff, and the girls into his office, and Benoît and I into the library, and ..."

"Frédéric. Listen. Where are you?"

"Outside, in the park, just the place where they usually jump from ..."

Frédéric stopped because his line was dead. He still stared at the display when a shadow fell over him. Looking up, he saw a face he'd seen only in pictures, older ones, however the double scar was unmistakable, and ...

A feeling words couldn't describe. Very short, except time wasn't a concept here, then Frédéric stood in a room - large table, perfectly round, chairs ...

And the face again, just before him. "Frédéric, this here's our home. Thank you for calling me, that was great. Now please sit down and tell me exactly what happened."

A hand was pushing him gently onto a chair, and with the touch of this hand, Frédéric felt like in a dream, only it was real, his mind seemed clearer than ever, Sandra's father had asked him in French, and he started to talk without wasting any more second.

20 - Prey and Predator

Somewhere, somebody was calling her. Not with words, although the voice seemed extremely familiar. Too familiar for being a voice, and too intimate for the scope of words - such calls could only be heard at mind level.

Sandra changed from totally out to a dim awareness, just enough to realize whose call this had been - Gabriel's, and her brother's call expressed some urgency, however strangely muffled.

How could a mind call be muffled?

Very simple - because her own mind felt muffled too, pretty much so, and this was a bloody shame, really not appropriate for the coming High Priestess, who'd been taught to use that lazy mind of hers to its full power.

She came awake with a jolt.

Her eyes were open, yes, a rapid blinking confirmed this - still, Sandra couldn't see anything. For a short instant, the thought crossed her mind whether she was suffering from a blinding spell, then a simpler explanation grew to certainty ... It was totally dark here.

And cold and damp and awfully hard, most of all under her back. So she sat up.

Touching around, she felt something like a thin blanket, spread on a floor that seemed pure rock. Was this a cavern?

Maybe that, maybe a dungeon, it didn't matter right now because she could sense a presence, apparently only feet away, the same presence which had caused her to break the stunning spell - her brother Gabriel.

Getting on her knees, crawling a few feet, Sandra reached him, could feel his body lying on its own blanket, could sense his unconscious self.

A gentle mind push, and she had contact. Another one, harder this time, and Gabriel's stunning was broken.

"Sandy?" His fingers touched around, found her. "Am I glad you're here."

"Yeah, same for me ... Pretty spooky place that, isn't it?"

"Then let's go."

Easier said than done. Their attempts to Apparate home failed. It came as no surprise, not really, just a frightening fact. More frightening than their missing wands.

Gabriel sat up, his hand not letting go of hers, which was exactly what Sandra preferred herself. With audible control in his voice, he asked, "What is this? Where are we?"

"No idea. First I thought it's a cavern, only what I can sense is too regular." Sandra pressed the hand in her own. "I wish I'd copied a bit more of Dad's *getsumai no michi*, mine is hardly enough for some outlines. What about yours?"

Getsumai no michi - the moonlit path - was a Japanese technique to see in the dark, only that it wasn't really seeing, at least not with the eyes. Harry's skill in this technique ranked quite high, but Sandra had always treated it as some exotic art not really important.

"Mine's even less," replied Gabriel, "but I know something simpler. You keep here at this spot, so I have a bearing, and I crawl around. If it's a room, then I just have to follow the walls to draw a circle around you."

He was right, except that letting him go seemed a task harder than expected. However, after a deep intaking of breath, Sandra said, "Alright, I'm here - be careful, watch for holes and pits."

"I'm not going to walk."

Gabriel crawled forward. Sandra could hear the patting of his hands, obviously testing every foot on his path. Then his voice said, "Here's a wall ... I guess I'll try walking though, that crawling hurts the knees quite a bit."

And now he was counting steps, each of them set carefully, after a foot shuffled forward for testing the ground, while his hands could be heard at the walls, probably holding his balance.

At twenty-nine, Gabriel called, "Here's a corner. So it's a room, after all. Okay, next side."

This wall spanned seventeen steps from corner to corner. The next one was good for thirty-three, and the one afterwards counted eighteen, which probably was the same as the opposite wall, only that Gabriel's steps weren't equally measured.

"That's enough," called Sandra, corrected herself at once, "No, wait - did you notice a door?"

"Er - no." There was astonishment in Gabriel's voice, then he added quickly, "but I've been so busy counting and checking, maybe I didn't realize ... Wait, lemme walk again, this time I know there's no trapdoor."

Sandra listened to his footsteps, until Gabriel had passed four walls. "Okay," she called, "come back."

Gabriel returned to her spot, guided by her voice, and when he touched her to sit down at his sister's side, it seemed a bit tighter than necessary for his orientation. "I could feel just stone," he said, "nothing else. No wood for sure, or metal. If there's a door, it fits tightly - you know, the stones are pretty rough, you wouldn't feel the difference."

"Maybe it's above us," said Sandra.

"Yeah, maybe ... It's like a prison, isn't it?"

That reminded Sandra of another question. "Say, how did they catch you?"

"Mosley, the new English teacher." The former anxiousness in Gabriel's voice made room for wondering and irritation. "Called us into his office, me and Michel, to discuss how to handle my participation in his course, and then suddenly he ..." Gabriel stopped himself. "Michel! What happened to him?"

"I'd say, he's been caught too." Sandra told her brother how she and Héloïse had been tricked. "I guess they put them somewhere else."

"Why not together? They put us together, then why not all four of us?"

"I don't know."

Searching for a more encouraging answer, Sandra had a sudden enlightenment. "Know what? It wasn't planned that we're awake already. They probably know that we can do a bit more than the other two, and maybe Héloïse and Michel are in a better place, while with us, they didn't want to take any risk." With triumph, she added, "But then I felt you, and that was the first step, and what Aram'chee taught me was enough to come awake."

She pressed the hand in her own again. "Gabe, they don't know we're awake! That's something we have to use."

"Yes."

It sounded almost absent-minded, and Sandra was about to say more when Gabriel hissed, "Ssssht ..."

Had he heard something? She strained her ears, not registering any noise other than their own breathing.

After a moment, he said, "I'd say, they're here. I'm not entirely sure, but I think I could sense Michel."

Sandra knew - trying that by herself was hopeless, in this regard, Gabriel scored better. But she had another idea. "Listen, I'm going to increase your strength, and you try again. Okay?"

At first, Gabriel was at a loss to coordinate his sister's mental support with his own scanning. "Shit," he murmured, "that feels like filling a teapot in a waterfall ... Sandy, can you build it up a bit slower?"

Yes, she could, registered herself how the two minds connected to a united force, gaining size and power, until a moment later, Gabriel said, "Okay ... Yes, they're somewhere close."

Sandra sighed, "I wish we could summon them."

"Yes, definitely - except, if we could do that, we could jump out." Gabriel's voice showed rage. "That bloody apparition lock - imagine, we're held by something that's been built in our own factories."

"Not necessarily," replied Sandra. "The locks in Beauxbatons or Hogwarts are no Groucho products either."

"Sure, but this one is. Can't you feel it?" Gabriel sounded a bit surprised.

Just enough to make Sandra feel challenged. Concentrating, she let her mental fingers fumble around, and a moment later, she had a better image. "Yes, you're right."

More than once, she had wondered if these locks were really as unbreakable as Ray claimed. Simpler than the united efforts of several experienced wizards in the two schools, but good enough anyway. At that time, it had been idle musing, a nice intellectual challenge, while now it seemed the only chance to escape from this dungeon. Sandra asked, "Did you ever think about breaking such a lock?"

"Not really." Gabriel sounded a bit embarrassed. "You know, it feels like a mix of magic and math, so I thought, me and math, what's the sense in trying?"

"I always thought it's possible," said Sandra. "I never tried seriously, because it's awfully stressing. But I guess now's the right time for giving it a real try."

"Then ..." Gabriel was moving, and a moment later, she felt him kneeling behind her, his hands at her shoulders. "I'm going to do what you did with me," he said, "and that's how Dad's doing it when he supports someone with his power ... Ready?"

Sandra didn't really think the actual position had any meaning, or influence, in particular not between herself and her brother, only if that was the psychological inspiration to make it work, maybe he was right. "Yes."

Here it came, his support, a gentle stream first, growing in size and determination, pushing her forward ... She dropped the thought of this incredible power, concentrated on the barrier, probing, testing its structure, scanning for a weak spot - and here was something, whatever, felt like the right point to press, press, press harder, with all her force and Gabriel's too ...

Snap.

Before she even had time to yell in triumph, Sandra could feel how the barrier closed again.

"Whew." She was trembling from the effort. "Almost ... But I knew it's possible."

"C'mon - once again."

Sandra found no time to protest, to ask for a small break, because Gabriel was already sending his power, and she couldn't do anything other than use it.

Snap ... And shut again.

The good news - this time it had seemed much simpler. For compensation, there was nothing that felt like a means to unlock the barrier permanently.

"And now?" Sandra refused to lose her spirit, while it seemed only fair to recover for a short time, preferably a time in which Gabriel would come up with a good idea.

"Try it alone," he said.

"What??" If this was his version of a good idea, she felt little inclination to hear his bad ones.

Her brother chuckled. "It's great to feel you going upset - no, I'm serious, and I know what I'm doing ... C'mon, Sandy."

Yes, he was serious, no denying. She concentrated again, and oh wonder, it worked, except that she could swear he'd been cheating, by helping her.

"No, I didn't," Gabriel said. "I just kept in touch, to sense the exact moment when it snaps open. You know I can jump and summon simultaneously - and this short moment, that's all I need."

"And if it doesn't work, I'm alone here."

After a moment of silence, Gabriel said, "I won't fail at summoning you, Sandy, that's not the problem, but ... Michel and Héloïse are still here, and we can't return after the lock has closed again."

A conflict of conscience to which Sandra felt not yet confronted, first because she was a bit reluctant in trusting her brother's skill - and second because she saw a way to test it. "Summon them."

To her astonishment, Gabriel seemed to grin, after thinking about her suggestion. "I know what you mean, but okay - although, then we'll have another problem, because ..."

"Whatever, but I'll have a problem less, and we'll be together."

"That's what ... Okay, okay - which one first?"

"What does it matter? Eeny, meeny ..."

"No - listen. What's more scaring, to come out here in the dark or to be alone all of a sudden? Because I cannot summon both of them simultaneously."

"Oh." Now Sandra knew what Gabriel meant with another problem, still felt sure they were better off together. "Hély first."

"Yeah, that's what I thought ... Okay, ready."

Inhaling deeply. Concentrating. Seizing with her mind, holding, pressing - *snap* and Sandra just thought there had been something slightly different this time when she heard a sobbing gasp and then Gabriel's voice, "It's us, Hély, we've summoned you - hold on a second, will you, we've got to fetch Michel too."

"Don't let go of me."

"Here, hold to my back, I need my hands on Sandy's shoulders, okay? ... Let's go, Sandy."

And once more, almost routine now, then a bump, an "Ouch", and seconds later, the four of them were hugging each other, assuring how glad they were, even if the service here around rated still worse than what Héloïse and Michel had left so involuntarily.

The enthusiasm of the two Weasleys encountered a severe blow when learning that home sweet home was bit farther away than just a jump. Then Héloïse said, "Gabriel, can't we do it the same way you fetched us a moment ago?"

"Well, um, I cannot do more than one summon at once."

"But ..." Then Héloïse saw the dilemma - Gabriel's first jump would also be his last one, simply because there was no chance to synchronize with Sandra again. She asked, "Can't you send us, rather than summon?"

Michel answered her. "Nobody can do that. Doesn't work that way."

"Oh, does it?" Héloïse's mood seemed hardly improved from her brother's stating the apparently obvious. "Well, Sandy, old dragon, please do me a favour and break that stupid lock."

"Yeah, sure, just gimme a second - I mean, I hope it's not that urgent ..."

Michel said quickly, "Hold on ... Sandy, what exactly's the problem?"

"It's ..." The rage in Sandra's voice was gone when she started again. "It feels slimy as an eel, you just can't hold it open."

Héloïse said, "Nobody asked you to hold it open. Break it!!"

Sandra barely managed to keep quiet. Yes, it had been her own idea to fetch them, only the improvement seemed very limited, short of calling it a downright mistake.

At this moment, Gabriel said, "San, she's right. And now we're four people, that's more power."

Was it?

"Okay then," said Sandra, "Gabriel behind me, for sheer power. Michel in front of me, for accuracy. And you, Hély, pull my hair to make me furious."

Her friend moved nearer and whispered, "There's something better. If you manage, Sandra, I'll play for you - once my fingers have stopped trembling."

Deeply touched, Sandra replied, "It's a deal - and now keep to my side."

Héloïse counted, "Ready ... set ... go!"

Mounting power, swelling, sharply focused. Sandra drove her mental nails into this nasty barrier, pulled, pulled, had it open, refused to let go, pulled more, could hold no longer only she wouldn't let go, and just when the united forces were about to implode a shout in her mind cried, "Do it!"

And she did. Felt how the barrier cracked, splintered, broke apart.

Breathing heavily, feeling sick of adrenaline, Sandra knew for certain - this lock would never work again.

* * *

Frédéric finished his report of what had happened in *Magique Générale*, and especially at the end of this course. All the time, Sandra's father was sitting there, chin on folded hands, looking ahead, his face seemingly calm.

Now the face looked directly at Frédéric. "Where's your friend now?"

"In the dormitory ... Mr. Potter - is it what I think it is? Have the girls been ..."

"Kidnapped?" completed Sandra's father for him. "Yes, most likely, and it's surprising which risks they took. They must be desperate."

"Desperate?" Frédéric gave a damn for the feelings of the other side, what with his own desperation growing by the second, and how could this man be so calm when his own daughter was one of the ...

A hand grabbed his shoulder. "Relax, Frédéric. Right now we can't do much for them, while there's something else we have to do, for your friend."

"Benoît will be okay in a while, but Sandra! And Héloïse ..."

Frédéric stopped because Mr. Potter wasn't listening to him, had fetched his phony, was pushing a number. After waiting for a moment without success, the man looked up. "And Gabriel, and probably Michel."

"What about them?"

"My son doesn't answer his phony, and there's no denial of reception either. So we can assume they caught them as well."

"Mon dieu ..."

Two burning eyes were piercing into Frédéric's own. "It's better this way than Sandra alone - with a little luck, Frédéric, they've taken a bite that'll stick in their throat ... And now let's go."

Before Frédéric could say more, he found himself at the spot in the Beauxbatons park from where they had reached the Potter castle. Mr. Potter asked him to lead the way to Benoît, which wasn't that simple because the man kept walking awfully fast.

Panting, Frédéric asked, "Why do we have to look after Benoît?"

"Him and yourself, Frédéric - you two have witnessed the disappearance, in a way, and I have a feeling the others would like to deal with you as soon as they find the time. And maybe his poisoning is more serious than it seemed."

Passing the hall, in which students were gathering for supper, Frédéric checked their table, seeing no Benoît, very much as expected. Reaching the dormitory, he didn't see his friend either, to his deep consternation after what Mr. Potter had said downstairs.

"Please check the toilets," the man said. "That's more likely than anything else."

Right he was. Benoît stood there, leaning over a washbasin, just wiping his mouth when Frédéric reached him. "Here you are," exhaled Frédéric. "For I moment I thought ..."

"I'd washed down myself? ... No, although this might be a good idea."

Too shaky for a laugh, Frédéric said, "Sandra's father's here. He says we should come with him, and he'll help you."

"Sandra's father?" Despite his misery, Benoît looked bewildered. "What's he got to do with my sickness?"

"He thinks ..." Frédéric realized that Benoît wasn't aware yet of the girls being kidnapped, and he didn't feel like explaining it here. Actually, he didn't feel like telling it at all by himself, and besides, Mr. Potter had said they should hurry. "I'll explain later, now c'mon, we have no time."

"Just a second." Benoît opened the tap for another cleaning.

Frédéric went out, saw Mr. Potter, walked over. "He's coming. Er - he doesn't know yet."

Mr. Potter nodded. "You were right, in the castle there's time enough to tell him what's going on."

Coming out, Benoît looked slightly better, apparently felt better too, because his first question after greeting Mr. Potter was, "What about the girls?"

"We didn't find them yet," answered Sandra's father, "and that's why I'm here. I'll take you home with me before you get lost too."

"Why should ..." Benoît stopped, looked at Frédéric, saw his suspicion confirmed in his friend's face, turned to Mr. Potter. "Sir - that's been Thionnite - er, I mean Thionnay, he probably knows where they are ..."

"Certainly not," replied Mr. Potter, "or if so, he's no longer around - we can discuss this later."

"But ..."

Pulled from two sides, Benoît saved his protest, only muttered, "Yes, okay, I can walk alone, but when I see him again, he'll find out that's been a mistake he did, he will."

"Not *when*, Benoît," said Mr. Potter. "It's *if* in this case, and don't hold your breath while waiting for him."

The two friends exchanged a glance of anticipation and glee - just a moment, until they realized that this hidden promise wasn't solving a more urgent question.

They went out into the park. Mr. Potter said, "Please wait a second," then walked over to the Goblin guards, talked with two of them.

Coming back, he said, "Off we go," and an instant later, all three of them had reached that room with the large table again. Mr. Potter turned to Benoît. "Do you want to lie down?"

"No thanks, sir, but if you could show me the way to - er, just in case, you know."

"It's the second door at the left."

While Benoît left the room to become familiar with his emergency exit, Mr. Potter got his phony again, and next moment, Frédéric watched and listened how the man spoke with someone he called Hermione, and this could only be the woman Frédéric had seen in Hogwarts - right, because Mr. Potter asked her to do a home visit for a mildly poisoned boy, except it might be not as mild as it looked.

"No, I can't send him over," Mr. Potter said, "and if you want to know why, you must come here ... Yes, right into the dinner room."

Registering Frédéric's attention, Mr. Potter asked, "Did you meet her in Hogwarts?"

"Er - yes, I saw her, but we didn't talk."

Mr. Potter showed something close to a grin. "Then you must have escaped before she had a chance, huh?"

Frédéric wasn't sure how to answer that, especially after he had listened to the phony conversation so openly, but then, what else could he have done, being in the same room?

And a second later, the question was forgotten, his embarrassment too, because several things happened as if orchestrated for a stage.

First, Benoît returned from his control walk.

Then, the air popped, popped again, and again, and a fourth time, and some steps apart from a gaping Frédéric, the figures of Gabriel, Sandra, Michel, and Héloïse appeared.

Before any of them had a chance to move, the air popped a last time, and a woman with a white apron and a black case in hand stood there.

She looked around and said, "Hi everybody. Is this an audience or a welcome committee?"

* * *

Laila knew - she wasn't up to her job as the temporary CEO of *Groucho Biochemicals*. Not today, not yet tomorrow, maybe never, and so it was only good to have Cho hanging around. Except Cho was a pain in the ass, as a direct mentor, tutor, counsel, and boss.

But it wasn't Cho's mistake, truth to be told. Maybe not even Laila's own. The blame was on the situation. No - on the killer kidnappers.

Only - Cho didn't accept such excuses. She was giving her hell. While Laila herself - well, she might be ready to see purpose again, in a while, after she had recovered a bit.

Cho said she should recover in her work. Laila had a slightly different opinion - no, not the bottle, not sleep either, or sex. Something more purgatory, like emptying a full magazine into a body, moving from left to right and back, the clip empty before the first holes were turning red.

Not that Cho would disagree much, only she kept her too busy to find a likely candidate.

At this moment, Laila's phony buzzed - the private one, not that on her desk. Checking the display, she saw Harry's name, and this meant a shimmer of hope in such a miserable day. She pressed the button as fast as she could. "Yes, Harry?"

"Hi. You alone?"

"Yes."

"Can you steal home without Cho noticing?"

Laila's heartbeat was accelerating, from Harry's words and still more from his voice. "Yes."

"Do it. Fetch your Uzi, and enough ammunition. Come into the castle. Now."

Dreams come true, thought Laila, which was only fair, wasn't it, because nightmares did the same. Four minutes later - she had decided to change from a business suit into her combat dress, and she had collected two more items, in addition to her gun - she stood in the dinner room of Carron Lough. Had a look around, and wondered whether she should turn red because of her appearance.

Apparently not, since Sandra shrieked with delight, seeing her, the other kids stared admiringly, and there was Harry, his face grim but appreciating. "Just right," he said. "Laila, we've got a track to follow. More, we have a place - a little while ago, they kidnapped these young people here, except for the boys I'll introduce in a moment, and that's the mistake we've been waiting for."

Harry went out to prepare himself. By the time he came back, Laila had heard the breathtaking news, mostly from Sandra, had said hello to these two boys who could be assigned so easily to the two girls. And she had said hello also to Hermione, who apparently had finished her task already before, however without showing any signs of leaving.

Whatever Harry had done, he didn't look much different. He said, "Listen, everybody. We're going to jump into this dungeon. More exactly, Gabriel's jumping and summoning myself, and Sandy's jumping and summoning Laila - all this at the same time."

He looked at his daughter and his son. "The moment Laila and I have reached that room, you two jump back. Is this understood?"

Sandra and Gabriel didn't even look at each other. It was like two bodies, two faces doing the same. "Please, Daddy."

"No please. You jump back, and all six of you keep together, here. Can I rely on that?"

His daughter didn't give in yet. "Why can't we come with you? Our spells are as good as yours, you know they are."

"Yes I know." After a second's hesitation, Harry said, "But we're going to kill some people, and for that you're too young. That's my belief, and that of your mother too, so end of discussion. Okay?"

A sigh, and unison as before the answer from two mouths. "Okay."

Harry turned to Laila. "Ready?"

How long had it been since the last time? In a fluid motion, she swung the sub-machine gun from her back into her hands, felt some glances in the corner of her view while she unlocked the security, cocked the gun, both hands in position. "Ready."

Harry, wand in hand, looked at his daughter. "Count us down, Sandy."

"Three ... two ... one ... go."

Laila felt the fleeting moment of travelling through the void, felt hard ground under her feet in a total blackness, then Harry hissed something, a brilliant light illuminated a large room with stone walls, and Laila wheeled around, checking with eyes and gun in sync, a half glimpse at two children disappearing before she had finished her turn.

The room was empty, save Harry and herself.

A short inspection showed stone all around, two blankets at the floor, and nothing else. A huge ceiling, vaulted, raised the impression this cavern-like room had been cut into solid ground.

A closer inspection revealed two more details. Laila saw a pipe in a corner, probably for fresh air, although it wasn't beyond imagination that, quite to the contrary, this pipe could be used to flood the room with water and drown the prisoners in it.

The other discovery was the door.

Stone, as it looked, probably wood coated with stone, fitting seamlessly into the surrounding wall. A peeping hole, about a foot in height and width, was secured with two strong iron bars.

Laila said, "Shouldn't be a problem to open that door - provided we can keep out, that is, when the blast goes off."

Harry glanced at her. "And then?"

"Then it's open, and we can storm the building."

"Maybe we should prepare with a loudspeaker first, in case they failed to notice the explosion." Harry's face was almost hidden, because he kept his illuminating wand over his head, but his voice left no doubt how much he appreciated this idea.

"Well," said Laila, "that's always the problem with explosives, they're so awfully noisy ... A quieter approach would be to sit and wait until somebody comes to open the door."

"This somebody will check through that hole first. And either we have to make Sandy and Gabe lie down, which is out of the question, or they notice at once that something's wrong."

"Yeah, well, inhouse combat is a nasty business." Laila could be flippant by herself. "What about a suggestion from your side? I'm leading by two."

"We open that door noiselessly, or almost silently."

She stared at Harry. "That's a goal, not a suggestion."

The reply sounded almost like a giggling.

Laila stepped closer to the wall to examine the door again. "Could you light here a bit more?"

"What about your own wand for that? I'm leading by ten minutes."

Uhm, yes, he was right, she always slipped back to her Muggle self when carrying an Uzi. Laila's own light seemed dim, compared to Harry's, however, for an examination it was good enough.

She came up. "Can you turn that light to a welding torch?"

"Not really. I can heat it up, probably enough to make that iron glow, only it'll take forever - and with our luck, somebody will come just at the worst moment."

There was nothing wrong with their own luck, Laila thought, only Ramon had scored badly in that matter. Yes, and Marie-Christine. But maybe that was off the point, and maybe for Harry all this counted as one.

"If it was a lock, I'd score better," said Harry at this moment.

But it wasn't, his tricks wouldn't help. The image of a lock, which in such an environment could only be a padlock, reminded Laila of a more conventional technique to open them, and this gave her the idea. "Say, do you know a freezing spell?"

"Freezing? ... No, why?"

She explained how a padlock was broken that way. After spraying it with a highly volatile fluid, the metal turned so cold and thus so brittle that a single blow with something hard was enough to break it.

"A highly volatile fluid ..." Harry glanced at her. "Such as?"

"Lighter gas, for instance. Gimme ten zip lighters and something to engorge their valve, then we'd be in business."

"What is lighter gas?"

"Dunno ... Butane?" Seeing Harry's blank face, Laila added, "It's one of the simplest carbon compounds - ethane, methane, propane, butane ... The fourth."

"This wasn't a spell, was it?"

After making sure they still agreed in that this was a combat, rather than a scientific discourse, Laila told Harry what she dimly remembered from her Chemistry classes - ethane was one carbon atom, having four values, with four hydrogen atoms of one each. Methane was something with two carbon atoms, and so forth.

"Okay," said Harry eventually, "now gimme a minute - no, I can think it over while going to fetch a hammer."

"And a chisel and a rope. And if the chisel could be rubber-capped, that would be great."

Five lonely minutes later, Harry was back. The rubber cap looked pretty much like hexed in a hurry, seemed sufficient nonetheless to dampen the sound of hammer on chisel.

Harry killed the light on his wand, and suddenly it was much darker in the room. Then he started shooting drops of some fluid toward the iron bars - or liquid bullets, at any rate, they came out of his wand.

"What you're doing there?"

"My party trick," explained Harry. "Usually it's nitroglycerine, while now I'm trying to conjure up butane."

Laila would have liked to see the original trick, but not necessarily here, with the two of them that close. "Try ethane," she said. "For sucking the heat out of the metal, it should do the job, and it's simpler."

"Ethane, then." After a moment of concentration, Harry shot again, and this time they could watch how the liquid at the metal vaporized with an almost inaudible hissing.

"Here we go." Laila tied the rope around one of the bars.

Harry kept shooting droplets until the process of vaporizing had slowed down to something of five seconds. With Laila holding rope and lighting wand, he grabbed hammer and chisel, aimed at the point where the bar disappeared in the stone, and let the hammer swing.

The bar broke with a sharp *ping* - in two pieces, one of them caught by the rope, while the other fell outward, raising a more muffled sound.

They waited three minutes in total darkness for any sign of an alarm.

No sound, no movement.

For the second bar, they didn't bother with the rope, and finally, the peeping hole was free - wide enough for an arm, while not for a head, not with the sharp ends of the broken iron.

Harry looked at her. "Do you have a mirror with you?"

"Sorry, forgot my party bag."

He grinned. "That's strange, since I'd have sworn this's your party dress."

Before Laila could answer to that, Harry was gone, and back a minute later with a hand mirror.

One hand could hold the mirror, and another one a lighting wand. Unfortunately, the two arms didn't fit through the hole at the same time.

"A signal rocket," said Laila, and Harry sent a spark-emitting something through the hole. It bounced off the opposite wall, dropped down, hissing and fuming while Harry examined the outside of the door through the mirror.

"A heavy bolt," he said finally. "No lock."

Then he took his wand, held it outside, dangling from his fingers like a pendulum, and into his fourth murmur, Laila heard a clank.

With their backs to the door, they pushed, felt the weight give way, a metallic squeak, and the door was open.

Outside stretched a narrow floor to both sides, much lower than the room, at one side ending in a staircase of stone.

Harry looked at her. "Ready?"

"Just a second." Laila seized in her leg pocket, came up with something that looked like an exhaust pipe from a motorbike, only thinner, and mounted it at the muzzle of her Uzi. When she was done, the gun looked mean and nasty.

"A silencer?" asked Harry.

"Exactly." She showed a grim smile. "This party's supposed to be quiet, isn't it? Well, who am I to stand out?"

"But it's not totally silent, huh?"

"Your spells aren't totally silent either," she replied, "but here's the truly noiseless weapon." Laila's hand came up to show him a combat knife, glittering in the light from Harry's wand.

* * *

Harry set his wand to a dim light emitting from the tip, just enough for recognizing contours within a range of several feet. Using his *haragei*, he had scanned their immediate environment, reporting that he couldn't sense anyone somewhere close. He and Laila felt sure there was nobody below ground floor level, except that even Harry's sixth sense wouldn't offer any guarantee.

They climbed a first staircase, reaching something that looked like a normal cellar, extending to both sides into unknown darkness.

Sensing again, Harry felt his first guess confirmed - nobody else down here. To find out a bit more of the local topology, he tried to use his skill in *getsumai no michi*, the sense of the moonlit path. The result was a disappointing null.

Well, he hadn't used it for quite a while. And the small sphere of light around him and Laila was distracting anyway. He whispered, "I need a moment of darkness, so don't jump if ..."

Laila stopped him. "What for?"

"I want to have a better look, that's why."

"Yes, of course."

Concentrating again, Harry felt a bit of his mental ability return - enough to realize that this had to be a large building, and if he wasn't much mistaken, the next staircase would be found to their right. Switching his wand on again, he informed Laila.

"Pretty cool," she said, keeping her voice low. "While something else isn't cool at all. Harry, in a raid like this one, don't bother telling me your innermost thoughts - just tell me what you're going to do, so I know. Okay?"

Hadn't he ... No, he hadn't, and next instant, Harry remembered similar remarks from his companion in daylight, Lieutenant Seeger. "Sorry," he whispered, "you're right - won't happen again."

Laila's hand was on his shoulder. "Wait a second," she said. "Upstairs is the ground floor, and that's where we'll meet the first people. And there's a door - Harry, do you know how a team of two's storming a door?"

He had to admit, the answer was no.

"One of them is first - that's the one who's busy with the handle, or with a kick to push the door open. That's also the one who must be down at the floor as fast as possible - first to avoid some answer from inside, then to catch the attention, and most of all to be out of the second person's firing range ... And you, Harry, you're so much better in jumping and rolling and coming up, you're the right candidate for that role. While I, I can hold my gun ready and come in and say hello ... That okay for you?"

It made perfect sense for Harry. He whispered, "Yes, sergeant ... Let's go upstairs - this way, sergeant."

Lacking any amusement in her voice, Laila said, "And don't forget - if we just walk along and someone appears from ahead, find a way to give me free aim."

He said, "And if it's someone from behind, it's the other way around, right?"

"Got it, private. Alright - get moving."

They found the staircase where Harry had seen it - or predicted, whatever. Stone as the other one, only the steps more spacious, and a handrail. At the second landing, a door marked the beginning of what they expected to be the ground floor.

Harry took position at the handle, whispered, "Ready?"

"Ready." Laila's voice lacked any expression.

As long as nobody knew about them, keeping quiet was the best strategy, so there was little sense in crasing the door open. On the other side, moving it inch after inch was no option either - if someone had the door in his view, this method would give him all the time of the world to wonder, watch, and weigh his answer.

All this was probably obvious to Laila while somewhat new to Harry. The surprising conclusion - opening the door like the one to his own kitchen seemed the best approach. And so he did.

The door turned out unlocked. It came open like any other, almost no noise, until Harry had a first glance into something like an entrance hall. Then the hinges squeaked in a single protest.

Harry finished his movement, registering how the squeak ended as soon as the door had come another foot apart. At the same time, he ducked down, his wand ready. Somewhere ahead a noise, a movement, the figure of a man appearing, only the upper half of his torso leaning out to see what was going on there.

Harry saw the man's eyes widen. Then he heard a soft *Pop* from above and behind. Then Laila jumped over him, storming along the wall to the place where the man had crashed against the other edge of the door frame, not yet slumped down, speechless surprise in his face.

On the tiled floor, Laila's rubber soles made almost no sound. Harry followed her, somewhat slower, sensing to all sides.

When he reached her, Laila stood in the entrance, watching the scene behind him. Glancing into the room, Harry saw no one else, only the tools and devices of something like a house keeper.

Next moment, Laila came in - backward, pulling the body inside. She let it drop - softly, if just for the noise, looked at Harry. "Do we need him later?"

"No - why?" His voice was as low as hers, only more questioning.

"Because the hit wasn't fatal yet." The knife Harry had seen downstairs appeared in Laila's hand again. Harry saw the blade for a very short moment, then it disappeared in the man's chest, pushed upward into the heart at a flat angle. The blade came out again, covered by a surprisingly small amount of reddish smear.

"He was too close to phones and stuff," explained Laila, before wiping both sides of the blade at the dead man's shirt, and storing the knife away. She came up. "Okay - carry on."

Harry pushed the scene off his mind, concentrated on his *haragei*. He could sense presences some rooms apart, only they felt strange somehow, not at all like ... Checking around, registering the environment for the first time, suddenly he knew. This was the ground floor of a large building, maybe some castle, they'd find only servants here, and what he could sense were house-elves.

"No humans here at this level - only house-elves." He pointed. "Somewhere over there - no sense in disturbing them ... Let's go upstairs."

"You're the expert," murmured Laila, her face making clear she didn't trust his judgement entirely, suspected him of some foolish softness, only she wasn't an expert at all, had no good argument to protest.

Harry wasn't entirely sure by himself, all he knew - this raid's target was human, if only by size and shape. He reached the staircase, this time rug-covered, climbed it as quickly as possible without getting out of breath, followed by Laila.

The hall upstairs showed more luxury, and they had passed quite some pictures in the staircase, giving the impression of wealth and tradition. Only this was something to examine later, the task at hand filling Harry's mind, in particular since he could feel some presences easily.

After some more steps, even Laila could locate them without trouble - voices, laughter coming through a closed door.

They reached the door, stopped - Harry at one side, Laila at the other. Checking again, Harry held three fingers up, signaling Laila what he had sensed. She nodded.

Dropping one finger, leaving two, Harry made a cutting gesture. Raising this finger again, he pointed toward himself, then at his wand.

Laila responded by raising two fingers, then touching her gun with them, a questioning look in her face. When Harry nodded in confirmation, she pointed at him, then toward the door.

Which meant - he should open, drop to the ground so she could shoot two of them, leaving the third to Harry's wand ... This lucky one would have to answer some questions, and maybe his luck would hold.

Harry pressed the handle, pushed the door hard, flung himself forward in a jump, to roll around, come up on his knees in one fluid motion, to register the scene with his wand ready, his mind recalling the popping sounds he'd heard from behind ...

Had been four. Laila took no chances.

And there was no doubt who'd been left for him. The man sitting with his back to the door, who had turned by now, his face frozen in horror, his hand still holding the cards of some card game. More cards on the table, glasses, bottles, a cigarette still smouldering in an ashtray. The other two figures, in the middle and to the right, no longer moved.

Harry stepped toward the frozen face, his wand pointing all the time. Reached the man, asked, "You want to live?"

A blank face, first signs of naked fear. "Er - comment?"

French - of course. Harry changed to French, repeated his question, earned a nod. With the tip of his wand, almost gently, he touched the man's forehead. "Where's the woman?"

"Er ... Upstairs, in her boudoir."

"How many people else - except you three and the one downstairs?"

"None ... Not today - er, except for the house-elves." The last words were accompanied by a face close to panic, after having almost forgotten to mention them.

"Did you help catching my daughter?"

"I ..." A swallow, another, sweat where the tip of Harry's wand was marking a possible target. "I've been waiting here when ... For her and ..." The man's eyes went cross in an attempt to stare at the wand, from which he expected a green flash any moment.

"And my son," finished Harry for him. "If you told me the truth, you'll survive this day, or if not, then I'm not the one to blame ... Provided you told me everything. So - wanna add something?"

"Er - yes, er, the English lady, she's expected back in an hour or so, she's on a walk with her dog."

The English lady? This could only mean Lady Malfoy, then who was the ... Had to be the owner of this castle, had to be found and put under control as quickly as possible - other questions might be answered by her - for example where the wands of Sandra and Gabriel had been stored.

Harry nodded. "Good ... Stupefy!"

The man's head fell forward on the table, while the cards from his powerless hand dropped to the carpet underneath.

Harry reached Laila, who had been guarding the door during his short interrogation. He asked, "Did you hear everything?"

"Yes. The lady of the house is upstairs, her dwarfs down in the kitchen, and we mightn't be surprised if it's not Sleeping Beauty." Laila showed a grim smile. "Okay, my prince, you've got a very nice sniffing skill there - go ahead."

They climbed the last staircase. Harry identified the room without trouble. He turned and gestured to make sure Laila wouldn't shoot, was rewarded with a look that said, *Just how stupid do you take me for?* He sent her a short, apologetic smile, then opened the door and stepped in.

A room, more a salon than a boudoir. A woman in an armchair, reading ... Past her fifties, maybe sixty, still in good shape. A book in her hand, which now dropped to her lap.

She stared at him, sent a quick glance toward Laila at the door, focused on him again. Surprise made room for something like hateful resignation. "Harry Pottère, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's me ... And with whom do I have the honour?"

When the woman didn't answer immediately, looked almost astonished at this apparently natural question, Harry sent a quick glance around. And there, at the wall, something caught his eyes. He stared, recognizing the face, then looked at the woman again.

She had followed his glance, nodded. "Yes, Monsieur Pottère, it's him. My name is Marie-Thérèse Poilly ... Gérard was my son, and you killed him."

21 - Castle Ladies

After all these years, the contours of Gérard's face had faded a bit from Harry's memory. Yes, he could remember the last seconds, the scene in the Beauxbatons Hall - this moment was burned in his memory with small risk of getting lost. Or chance, for that matter ... But Gérard with a pleasant smile in a calm face, this was something Harry remembered only as an event, or an emotion, not as a picture painted in all details.

However, staring into the face of Madame Pouilly, he recognized features that looked familiar, somehow. And he only had to glance toward the picture at the wall to refresh the memory of Gérard.

The woman watched him with an expression as if to say, *Yes, have a close look, it's him!* Then, aloud, she said, "Alors, Monsieur Pottère, go ahead! What are you waiting for?"

"Ahead with what?"

Madame Pouilly snorted, quite decently and very French-style. "What a question! Of course I knew who's been held prisoner down there in this dungeon! Or did you expect me denying that? ... No, I won't."

Somehow, the woman seemed ahead of him, although by now Harry had a fair guess what she was talking about.

"I had my objections," explained Madame Pouilly when Harry didn't reply, "because from what I heard, or guessed, it seemed quite unlikely that we could put them under something you might call control ..."

"So, had you?" managed Harry, about his first contribution to this weird conversation.

"Yes indeed, and your presence here tells me I was right, wasn't I? They escaped, called you, and you found your way up here, together with this amazon girl." At these words, the woman glanced toward Laila, who guarded the outside with her back to the room - a back which seemed to straighten at this remark.

"Yes," said Harry, "that's exactly what happened."

"It's not really a surprise for me," assured Madame Pouilly, "only this whining about past times and gone children had really lost its charm, so I agreed to the plan when - er ..." The woman stopped, looking slightly startled.

Harry said, "Lady Malfoy is the name ... Or is it Lucinda for you?"

For a slight moment, there was something almost like appreciation in Madame Pouilly's face, then she continued, "Yes, we became friends, we had enough in common, Monsieur Pottère, as you should know well by yourself ... Anyway, my objections were mainly for technical reasons, don't think I'm looking for an apology, because I don't ... So finish your task."

"In doing what? ... Lady Malfoy isn't here yet."

"But ..." Madame Pouilly was interrupted by Laila, who had taken Harry's words as a reminder, who announced that she was going to guard the entrance, to be ready when the English lady and her dog would return from their walk.

Which reminded Harry of another precaution. He stepped forward, stopped in front of Madame Pouilly. "May I have your wand, please?"

"But why so complicated, young man?" The woman's eyebrows arched up. "Why don't you just say to me what you told Gérard?"

Without answering, Harry held his hand outstretched.

After a moment, Madame Pouilly sighed, as if accepting some inevitable nuisance, seized for her wand, and put it in Harry's hand. "Voilà - in contrast to you, I'm really helpless without. But again, don't be afraid because of that."

Harry stored the wand in his own pocket, marched to another chair, sat down, looked at the woman. "No, I'm not, it's just simpler if I don't have to watch your every movement. Because - at least for the time being, I have no intention to kill you."

"Oh, really?" Genuine curiosity appeared in Madame Pouilly's face. "And why not, if I may be so bold?"

"Because you're Gérard's mother."

"And? Is there a rule that says you're allowed to kill only one from a family? Certainly not - or do you make exceptions, like this privateer captain?"

Now she really had lost him. "Madame," said Harry, "would you please explain to me what you're talking about?"

"You mean the story with the privateer captain?" There was something like amusement in the woman's face. "Why not? - I'm not exactly Scheherezade, but if it helps to keep me alive ..."

This name rang a dim bell in Harry's memory, some woman who'd told fairytales day after day in order to avoid being - what? Killed? Raped? ... At any rate, with every moment passing, the memory of Gérard's sparkling spirit grew stronger in his mind.

"It was during the Napoleonic Wars," began Madame Pouilly. "Confronted with the superior British Navy, the French could only send privateers - fast ships with courageous captains ..." She smiled. "Any resemblance to the situation at hand is just by coincidence, Monsieur Pottère."

Yeah, only she had used this metaphor by herself, and Harry had heard enough from various Pouilly members to know it hadn't slipped her mind by accident.

"This captain in the story had bad luck," continued Madame Pouilly. "His ship was seized by a British frigate - maybe through better navigation skill, whatever, and bonmots about parallels to our own situation wear out quickly, don't they?"

Not expecting an answer, not receiving any, the woman continued, "At that time, officers treated their prisoner with some style, and the British frigate captain invited his French opponent to the dinner table as something totally natural ... Well, after dinner, the table host raised his glass and said, 'I drink to French navy officers - they're all rogues and thieves - without any exception!'"

Seeing the punch line bubble up in Harry's face, Madame Pouilly finished quickly, "And then the French captain took his glass and said, 'To the British navy and its officers - they're all gentlemen ... Well, except that I do make exceptions.'"

"I see," said Harry, for whom the joke indeed felt a bit spoiled from too many parallels. "And what did you mean when saying 'Certainlot not' about my own style of exceptions?"

"Oh, isn't that obvious?" Madame Pouilly showed mock astonishment. "With the Malfoy men, you kept to no such rule. Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy ..."

"Now wait a second ..." Harry became aware that his manners lacked politeness, wasn't overly embarrassed from that. "Who told you it was me who killed them?"

"Lucin ... Madame Malfoy of course."

"Ah, yes, that's why." His eyes staring in those of the host lady, Harry said, "Lucius Malfoy was killed by my wife, Cho Chang. It's true I would have done it by myself, only at that moment, I was busy with Voldemort ... And Draco - at the time he was killed in broomstick combat by Robert, another Slytherin, I was some miles away, fighting Dementors. I missed the air attack toward Hogwarts."

Madame Pouilly's face showed something close to consternation. For a moment, she examined Harry's face, obviously in search for truth or lie. Then she said, "I didn't know ... Monsieur Pottère, might be I had to take back a remark or two - on the other side, you're still the one who killed Gérard. So please forget what I said about two out of the same family, and tell me why the former state of being Gérard's mother seems to keep me alive."

Harry took a moment to prepare his words. "I didn't know better then," he said eventually, "and I just don't know whether I could find a better solution today ... Maybe the question isn't futile, only I stopped asking myself quickly after - after this evening because death is so final." He looked up. "At any rate, I never felt pride or satisfaction."

Madame Pouilly nodded the fraction of an inch.

"And while there was never a question for me that my doing was justified, and that I felt myself free of guilt toward Gérard, the same freedom didn't extend any further ..." Staring into Madame Pouilly's face, Harry added, "It was my intention to finish off all kidnapers of my children, and still is - only, in your case, it just doesn't work that way."

No longer as calmly as before, Madame Pouilly said, "You could find someone else for that, maybe this young ..." She stopped, her face blushing. "I'm sorry, Monsieur Pottère, that was way below my own self-esteem."

"It didn't finish," replied Harry. "But there's a bit more, Madame Pouilly, and I'd like to know how much you're aware of it ... Did you know that your friend Lady Malfoy's the one who killed Marie-Christine? ... Gérard's old love?"

The woman's pale face, staring at Harry in stunned silence, was answer enough.

"Don't ask me whether she knew - at any rate, Marie-Christine Garcia was born Thérroux. Ramon and Marie-Christine leave two children, one of them adopted."

"I heard ..." Madame Pouilly shook her head. "Maybe I should claim this old proverb - *Il faut écraser des oeufs pour faire une omelette* - and to some degree that's what I told myself, only ... No, Monsieur Pottère, I didn't know."

"They're gone," said Harry, "and may all of them rest in peace ... But there are two other people, very much alive, and that's where your own involvement is almost as strong as mine, Madame Pouilly."

Despite her quick mind, the host lady had no clue what he was talking about.

"The difference," said Harry, "is exactly in the amount of just one generation. Now - does the nickel drop?"

"Pardon, Monsieur Pottère, but you find me in some emotional shock right now, that's why I seem to be ..." Madame Pouilly stopped, her eyes widening, stared at him in growing astonishment. "You mean ... are you talking about ..."

It was neither pleasure nor triumph, definitely no amusement - still, Harry felt an emotion close to a smile. "Madame, if you could do me the favour and keep right in that chair - it just doesn't feel appropriate to find you stunned when returning with these two, and with ..."

"But yes, of course ..." Suddenly, Madame Pouilly looked as worried and trembling as might have been natural some minutes ago, seeing a wand with a deadly power pointing at her.

* * *

Jumping back into the dinner room of Carron Lough, Sandra found the same people as before, of course except her father and Laila, and still in the same positions. Naturally so - the jumping, summoning, and jumping back had taken not more than two seconds.

Seeing the expectant faces around, she said, "That dungeons's just how we left it - nobody around."

Well, this seemed pretty much what everybody had thought, while the more interesting questions could not be answered - what would be found outside this dungeon, which people, and where had they been?

A tiny temptation crept into Sandra's mind. Why not have a look? A quick jump, still quicker back ... Glancing over to Gabriel, she saw her brother in a conversation with Michel, only at this moment, Gabriel looked up, his eyes meeting hers, and an impulse in her mind that said, *We promised.*

Yes, unfortunately so, and this promise belonged to the kind you'd never forgive yourself when broken, even if the other side ...

A gentle air wave, and just this other side stood there. Harry said, "We found a door, and now we're going to open it. There's nobody around down there." Before anyone could react, he disappeared with a soft pop.

This five-seconds' appearance raised a discussion how Harry and Laila would do it, ending shortly afterwards with the common agreement that Harry had his way with locks, and that the events outside this dungeon would be more interesting.

Then Frédéric said, "I wonder if Thionnite is there."

"Even if not," replied Benoît, "we'll need a new teacher for Magique, so much's for sure." Into the fierce nods around, he turned to Sandra. "Say, does that woman wear that gun all the time?"

Sandra stared at him with some disbelief, hearing this question which could, at best, be explained with a childish fascination at the sight of a real sub-machine gun, maybe also with this impressive sound when Laila cocked it.

Before she could answer, Hermione, who had been sitting silently until now, said with some chuckling, "No, Benoît, she doesn't. Laila is an ex-sergeant from the Israeli army, and whenever she's with Harry, she falls back to her old habits of an ..."

Sandra was about the only one not wondering why the sentence never finished. Next moment, Hermione would have said something about an *ex-Muggle*, invariably raising the question how a Muggle woman could become a witch - if not from Benoît, then from Frédéric for sure. And to prevent this, Sandra had told Hermione to shut up - although not in words.

Even so, apparently Hermione felt little doubt where this cold blow had come from. She looked at Sandra with a slight trace of guilt, while otherwise quite challenged. Maybe this was the reason why she said, "By the way, Sandra, don't you think it's time to call your mother?"

Sandra didn't think so, not at all, actually. Aloud, she said, "Not yet - better to wait until Harry's back, otherwise, she's going to have a fit when she hears about him and Laila down there."

A quick glance to Gabriel told her that her brother thought the same, and from Sandra's perspective, this meant that all people with a saying in this matter had the same opinion. Well, except that Hermione still seemed chewing a bit at this sting moments ago ...

At this moment, Gabriel turned to Héloïse and said, "We should call our godfathers, you Wynton and me Urion - they have to know about what Mosley did, so they can do something."

Héloïse nodded. "You're right, that's much better than talking with someone from the school. And I'm going to tell Wynton about Thionnite too." She stood up, followed by Gabriel, to find a quieter spot for these phony calls, which seemed a bit difficult in this room without corners.

Hearing about godfathers, Sandra had a splendid idea. Fully aware that the competition of host versus guest and child versus adult wasn't cleared yet between herself and Hermione, she grabbed her phony and pressed a button. Hearing the questioning "Yes," she said with her eyes toward Hermione, "Hi, Rahewa. I'm in the castle - say, can you come over?"

"What for?"

Eye in eye with Hermione and her look of grudging approval, Sandra said, "It's about kidnapping. We might need your help."

"Comin'."

A minute later, Rahewa stood in the room. Then she sat down. Then she looked murderous, hearing about the childrens' kidnapping. And finally, she looked furious at hearing about Harry and Laila somewhere fighting, not having bothered calling her to arms also.

Still in this leisurely mood, Rahewa turned to Hermione and asked, "What about you? Are you waiting for some patient to cure?"

"No," replied Hermione, "I had my patient already," nodding toward Benoît. "And then, well - I didn't quite feel like returning to Hogwarts ... While now, I wouldn't mind something to eat." At these words, she shot a glance toward the hosts' oldest representative in this room.

Sandra blushed a bit - not much, just enough to make Hermione feel satisfied with her return, then she used her phony to send the signal toward Dobby and Winky, the house elves.

Apparently, Hermione had spoken for a vast majority. Suddenly, everybody was sitting there quite expectantly - even Benoît seemed ready to give it a try. But then, thought Sandra, maybe he just didn't dare showing Hermione that her treatment had cured only the immediate symptoms.

Gabriel stood up, as if to leave the room. This was actually what he did, except without moving. When he returned a minute later, he really walked, entering the room through the door - in his trail Carlos, Esmeralda, and Ireen.

The newcomers had found seats, and Gabriel was in full swing to break the news toward them, his choice of words obviously with the focus on the two five-year-olds, when the air trembled again ...

Cho stood there, looked around. "Hey! How come I wasn't invited?"

Hermione saw her chance. "I did my best, only ..." She stopped, starting a serious fit of coughing, at the same time trying to send a glare toward Sandra.

Who felt totally innocent, gloating nonetheless, in particular since she knew the real culprit, actually a very close relative of hers, despite the fact of his attention hanging at his mother.

Who said, "Doctor, cure yourself, huh?" Looked around again and asked, "Where's Harry? And where's that mad Muggle called Laila?"

Sandra twisted inwardly. After all her efforts to hide this secret from two guests, her own mother ... Well, maybe Frédéric hadn't noticed, except that all his senses were running overtime watching an upset-looking witch with remarkable features, somewhat Chinese.

Gabriel said, "Sit down, Mum, then we'll explain to you."

Cho looked at her son, inhaling, probably about to tell him that her own choice of sequence might be somewhat different. At this moment, she registered something which made her stop, and following her mother's glance, Sandra saw it too - Carlos and Esmeralda, staring at Cho wide-eyed.

Much calmer, Cho said, "Hello, my little ones. Did I scare you?"

Two heads went from left to right in unison. Then Carlos said, "No - er, only, we thought you were dead."

"Why should I ..." Cho stopped, looked at her son, at her daughter, worry growing in her face.

Gabriel reached her, took her hand. "We've been kidnapped, San and Hély and Michel and I. But we could free ourselves, and Dad and Laila are where we've been ..." He spoke fast, although quite measured. "I guess that's why they thought - they saw us back, and Dad gone, and you nowhere around ..." Gabriel turned to the two Garcia children. "But he didn't go to deliver money, so that's something totally different."

A pale Cho, guided by her son, found a seat of her own, let her eyes wander from one face to the other, to rest a moment longer at Frédéric and Benoît. Then she asked, "Since when?"

Various people hurried to tell her what they considered the best answer, ranking from just a few minutes to quite a while already.

Cho turned to Héloïse. "Does your mother know you're here?"

"No, not yet."

"Then why don't you call her, to tell her you're back save??"

Quite impressed from Cho's shrill voice, Héloïse replied, "Because - er, she doesn't even know about the kidnapping."

Cho gasped. Then she shook her head, maybe toward herself, managed the smaller half of a smile. "Sorry, Hély. I'm ... Anyway, call her and tell her to come over."

Héloïse seized her phony. Watched by everybody, she said, "Maman? ... Yes, we're here in the castle, and Cho says you should come over ... Because - er, um, can't you just come over and we tell you here?"

Fleur could. Appeared in the dinner room, said hello, saw a sick-looking Cho, hurried over. "What's with you, my dear?"

"Our children have been kidnapped."

Fleur's head snapped up. After another look around, seeing two Weasleys alive and unharmed, in a round looking very much complete while not quite, she asked, "And now 'arry is 'unting them, am I right?" Not waiting for an answer, she sat down at Cho's side, an arm around the smaller woman, turned toward Sandra. "Who's with 'im?"

"Laila."

Fleur remembered something she'd seen in the round, glanced in that direction. "And why not you, Ra'ewa?"

"Because they didn't let me!" came the glaring reply.

* * *

Frédéric's senses were indeed working overtime. He felt almost at a loss to decide where to look, where to listen, and what to await more anxiously. The only constant factor - he kept eating, slowly so, which for him, a veteran of upper-class French dinners, took no effort at all.

There was Sandra's mother. Just counting this woman, Frédéric would have had enough to watch. Also to await - some minute soon, the uproar here would be settled sufficiently to address another interesting point - Frédéric's family name.

Then there was Sandra's godmother. Toward her as well, Frédéric wished the moment of his proper introduction was already past, and in some sense, he wished this was another day. He had no intention whatsoever to miss a second of what was happening here - only then, he might find an opportunity to ask this woman - the same who once had held a knife toward his late uncle's throat.

And then of course Sandra's father and this woman with the gun. They couldn't be watched, they could only be awaited, and with every minute passing, the tension grew in the dinner room.

At this moment, the united forces of Potter and Weasley children finished their report toward two mothers who had listened together although with quite different expressions in their faces. Héloïse's mother stood up, marched straight to Frédéric's place, and said, "You were magnificent, Frédéric - you lost no time striking alarm." And then she bent down and planted a kiss at his right cheek, another at his left.

Which wasn't unusual in general, while from a Quarter-Veela, under the eyes of Sandra and her mother ... Frédéric blushed. "That was nothing - all that counts is that they could free themselves."

Madame Weasley smiled. "Now this answer's totally out of bounds for someone with your origin. C'mon, let me introduce you." She grabbed his hand and steered him to Madame Potter's place. There, she said, "Cho, this young man with the amazingly quick mind comes from a family not totally unknown to yourself. Please meet - Frédéric Pouilly."

Frédéric watched the rapid sequence of emotions passing through this beautiful face in front of him. Somehow it felt impolite, just staring, speechless, except it was true. Then these green eyes pierced into his own, and Madame Potter said, "Good evening, Frédéric. You didn't come for revenge, did you?"

"Er - no, Madame."

A sparkling grew in her eyes. "Then tell me, who picked whom?"

"Well ..." A truthful answer would have been, Frédéric picked the Potters in general, Benoît picked a seat at a table, Sandra picked a late arrival, and then one thing gave the other - only, somehow this answer struck Frédéric as quite lame and entirely inappropriate.

Madame Potter smiled. "So it must be fate, huh?" Not waiting for an answer, she added, "And Harry knows of course, doesn't he?"

Frédéric was still trying to figure out if this had been a question to be answered, fully aware that somehow this would be like ratting out on Sandra, when he felt a wave in the air and saw Madame Potter looking up, heard her saying, "Talking of the devil ..."

He just found the time for turning his head, then Sandra's father was already coming over to his wife, and again Frédéric felt like an impolite spectator, because Monsieur Potter kissed his wife, Madame Potter glared at her husband, said, "Wait till we're alone," and Monsieur Potter smiled, nodded, straightened to address the full round.

"Laila is well," were his first words. "She's guarding a door, waiting for a lady with a dog. There's little time - I came here to fetch two people ..."

Frédéric felt the man's eyes turning to himself.

"... you, Frédéric ..." Monsieur Potter turned a bit, "and you, Sandy."

"What for??"

A moment before, Frédéric would have confirmed any time that Madame Potter's look could be rated as glaring. However, what he could watch now degraded the former attempt to a pleasant remark.

Monsieur Potter held his wife's stare. "For a little conversation with a French lady, in order to avoid some unnecessary fighting."

French lady? Frédéric had a dim feeling, which lost its dimness by the second. Only now Sandra was at his side, grabbed his hand ...

"WAIT!"

Contrary to Frédéric's expectation, this shout hadn't come from Sandra's mother. A figure hurried around the table, reached their group, said, "A dog? Then you need a dog too, fighting fire with fire."

However, all Frédéric could see was Sandra's godmother. Yes, and a beaming in Sandra's face.

Saving breath as well as time, Monsieur Potter said, "I'm going to summon all of you into a hall - no need to climb all these stairs." He disappeared, then Sandra's godmother disappeared ...

... and next moment, Frédéric stood in a hall he recognized at once, still more so as it matched perfectly with his expectation since a few seconds.

Sandra appeared at his side. Her father turned to him and said, "Frédéric - Rahewa and I will be downstairs. I guess you know the way." Then he and Sandra's godmother lost no time to disappear down the staircase.

Frédéric looked at Sandra, took her hand. "My grandma ... C'mon." Walking forward, he felt his own hand pressed gently.

Reaching the door, he knocked, heard an "Entrez" from inside, opened, stepped into the room, stopped. "Salu, Grand-Maman ... I want to introduce my friend to you. Grand-Maman, this is Sandra Potter ..." With growing reproach, he added, "... and this is the second time she's in this castle."

Madame Pouilly twisted like under a blow. Then, with some trembling in her voice, she said, "I know, Frédéric, although only for a few minutes, about you and ..." She tried to steady, with limited success, then said pleadingly, "Could you forgive me enough to deliver a proper welcome?"

Frédéric stepped forward, grabbed her shoulders, planted a kiss on both cheeks. Straightening again, he asked, "How could you?"

Looking considerably better than a second before, his grandmother grimaced. "Well, maybe that's what I'm asking myself right now. On the other side, you didn't tell me a word, did you?"

Before Frédéric could overcome his bafflement, the woman stood up and came to Sandra. "I don't know how to apologize," she said. "At any rate, ma chère - très enchanté, and I can only hope your friendship with my grandson will help you to forgive me."

Sandra asked, "So you're Gérard's mother?"

"Yes, Sandra ... The picture over there, that's him."

Sandra looked at the picture for a moment, then at Frédéric, maybe to compare features, back at Madame Pouilly. "Would you forgive my father?"

"We had a conversation. As short as it was - I already think we should have met years ago." Frédéric's grandmother nodded, "Yes, ma jeune, probably it will take some more conversations to break old patterns, while at the other side, I'm already looking forward to them ... And I'm sure, getting visits from you two will speed up the process considerably."

Watching Sandra, Frédéric couldn't help thinking his own forgiving might score second in sequence after hers. And now Sandra said, "Well, then there's just one thing left ..."

Frédéric couldn't think of anything, felt his grandmother's questioning look, raised his eyebrows to tell her he didn't know more.

"... where are our wands? Mine, Gabriel's, Héloïse's, and Michel's. Having them ready would improve matters, Madame, because I could imagine I should fetch them now, so it's one wash-up."

Frédéric started to grin. Seeing his grandmother's blank look, he said, "Sandra can apparate and summon. Say, how did you ever think this ..."

He stopped, grinned broader. "Forget it, Grand-Maman." Turning to Sandra, he said, "And Benoît too."

* * *

Coming downstairs, Rahewa in his trail, Harry saw how Laila readjusted the gun in her hands. No doubt - until a second before, when she recognized him, the gun had been pointing in his direction.

When they reached her, Laila grinned at Rahewa. "Am I glad to find you here."

"Why? Did something happen while ..."

"No, no," interrupted Laila quickly, "everything's been quiet ... It's just - imagine, each time we three would meet, these endless complaints about keeping you out of the fun ..."

Rahewa couldn't really laugh about this joke, looked a bit self-conscious, however saw no reason for denying the accuracy of Laila's remark. Then she asked for some more details about how funny it had really been, and Laila did her the favour by summarizing the fatal facts. Only then, Laila asked how things stood some levels higher in this castle.

"Pretty calm," replied Harry, "maybe except for some emotions. I summoned Frédéric, because he's her grandson, and Sandra, because she's Frédéric's - er, classmate, and left them to sort things out."

Laila stared at him. "Preparing for family relations, Harry?"

"Listen, I killed her son fourteen years ago. And today she gave some support in kidnapping my own children. Well - I'm ready to say we're quids ... She doesn't belong to the same category as the lady we're waiting for. Any sign from her?"

"No." After a moment, Laila said, "In your own and unspectacular way, Harry, you're somewhat breathtaking - which doesn't mean I won't agree ... Anyway, how do you want it played here?"

The first answer came from Rahewa. "It's played with me outside - as a dog."

Seeing the questioning faces, not offering much agreement so far, she explained, "That woman has a dog with her, and for all I know, this dog's a weapon by itself, and can be kept at bay with another dog best. And in addition, I'll sense them earlier than you inside here ..."

Harry interrupted her. "If Lady Malfoy sees a dog she never saw before at this castle, she'll be extremely suspicious."

Rahewa looked at him as if this had been a deadly insult, normally requiring something drastic, and only their good relationship, taking into account Sandra and whatnot, had saved Harry from an unpleasant experience.

After a moment, they agreed - Rahewa would be outside, would give them a warning signal in time, and would appear on the scene when Lady Malfoy came into full view from inside, to keep the dog busy. "I hope it's a male one," said Rahewa, "then it's simpler."

A grinning Laila agreed to that, while she showed no intention to let Rahewa out at this door - despite her obvious interest in seeing Rahewa shrink to a dog. So Rahewa marched down the hall to find another exit, smaller and out of view from some distance.

Two minutes later, Harry and Laila could hear a sniffing outside, some scraping, and a short whining like from a welp. Then it was quiet again - the dog Rahewa hadn't appeared once in their view.

"That's some girl," said Laila when it was sure they would not see Rahewa before she found reason to strike alarm.

"Well," replied Harry, "she thinks of herself as a woman - but of course, I have to admit, from your perspective, with that significant difference in age ..." He let the sentence hang in the air, not gaining an answer.

Only some minutes later, Laila said, "It's a matter of spirit. I never felt as young and free as Rahewa. Maybe I was too young when joining the army."

Thinking about a corpse not lying far away, Harry said, "Maybe it has to do with some memories, and that's why I didn't call her in first place."

"Yeah ..." Laila showed a smile while glancing through the small window next to the door. "You have to pay for everything, and sometimes you get a re - There she is ... I mean Rahewa," she added quickly, seeing Harry's expression.

Harry stood at the door. "Keep watching. If Lady Malfoy comes into view, come over - for this door, our roles are switched."

"Yep." Apparently, Laila had already come to the same conclusion. Moments later, her voice flat and monotonous like that of an observation post, she said, "Woman with dog ... fifty yards away ..." Laila came to the door, grabbed the handle. "I'd say at zero it's the right time - twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three ..."

Harry stood with his wand ready.

Laila had come down to nine when a single, sharp barking could be heard from outside. Before Harry could issue a word, Laila had caught the message herself, pulled the door open ...

A black dog, standing in front of a black-yellow dog - German shepherd, by the look of it. The figure of a woman staring at the two dogs ... Before Harry could say anything, the woman, not even turning toward the door, disappeared.

Only Harry had been prepared. Remembering another game in this style, he *followed* ...

... came out at a spot that seemed not far away, maybe hundred yards, under some trees, probably with the castle entrance in view, a good place to watch - provided they turned ...

... which the woman did, right now. Feeling anticipation in her, small wonder at such closeness, feeling also a kind of resignation, Harry let her come around and have a look at him.

"Lady Malfoy," he said, "we have to talk, but not here ... Stupefy."

* * *

Aram'chee, High Priestess of the Wizarding World, looked around. The room resembled a court room very much, with herself sitting on a large chair, higher than the others, almost a throne, with two other chairs below, for the plaintiff and the defendant, and with some wooden benches for the spectators. Probably, this room had been used for exactly this purpose at some time - when Carron Lough had hosted some lord, rather than the Potter family.

The man sitting in the chair to Aram'chee's right was Harry Potter. Calling him the head of the family might count as a faux-pas, and calling him the oldest was wrong for sure, however he was the oldest male and also the one who had awakened her a while ago, claiming her help.

In the left chair sat a woman - Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy her name, as Aram'chee had been told. The woman showed her age more than necessary, in a way. Somewhere around sixty, with a face reminding of past beauty, less than it could be with this expression showing a mix of contempt and sullenness.

The benches were filled with about two dozen people. Not all of them adults - Aram'chee counted eight children, half of them unknown to her, while the other four included Sandra, her planned successor, and Sandra's brother Gabriel.

Shaking off thoughts of personal relationships with a routine she hadn't used in quite a while, the High Priestess said, "The High Court of the Wizarding World is ready to listen. Plaintiff, express your complaint."

Harry Potter stood up. Before he could issue a word, the woman in the other chair called, "What charade is this? High Court? ... That's ridiculous."

"Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy," said the High Priestess, "I will excuse this remark with your ignorance. Note, though, that any further violation of this court's honour will be punished instantly."

"So, will it? ..." The woman looked at her with a kind of uncertain defiance. "Who are you, to claim such an authority?"

"I am the High Priestess of the Wizarding World. This title is equivalent to the High Court."

"Ah, yes, of course." The woman looked sneering. "And I'm the Queen of Saba, so ..."

From a strictly objective perspective, this hadn't really been an insult toward the court, while Aram'chee couldn't help noticing that for sure it had been an insult toward the real queen, from that woman, and besides, it would shorten the procedure considerably ...

The woman's eyes widened. For a short moment, her face showed agony, then she issued a gasp, leaned back in her chair, next moment presenting sweat in an otherwise chalk-white face.

The High Priestess asked, "Do you accept this small punishment as my credentials, Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy?"

The face staring at her still looked scared to death, then recovered a bit. "If you are the judge, then where's my lawyer?"

"You confuse the High Court with the pest-ridden institutions of the outside world," said the High Priestess, "be it Magical or Muggle. There is no need for such a person, as I am your advocate as much as your judge ... Note, though, that this claim would count as another insult toward the court - however, with respect to your lack of knowledge, and to show you how I take care of your rights, you shall be excused."

Another short wave of fright flickered through the woman's face. The High Priestess turned to Harry Potter, still standing, nodded. "Speak, plaintiff."

Harry Potter turned toward the other chair. "I accuse this woman of murder in one case and kidnapping in seven cases. I blame her for another death in the course of these kidnappings. In addition, I charge her with motives behind her doing that are dictated by racism, a belief of superiority over other humans, and a treatment of contemptuous inferiority toward them. Finally, I ask the High Court to confirm or deny that these motives stand in total conflict to the goals accepted, supported, and pursued by yourself, High Priestess." He sat down.

The High Priestess turned to the woman. "What is your reply, defendant?"

"Maybe it would be interesting to see some evidence, Your Honour, or hear about. As long as this man is just telling stories, I don't see any reason to comment on them." From one word to the next, the woman's voice had gained security. Now she looked as if to say, *If you want to waste our time, fine with me.*

The High Priestess said, "Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy, you still do not understand the purpose of this court. If you agree to the facts, we don't need to bother with details of when and where. Let me remind you again, this is no playground for over-subtlety and no audience for meaningless formalism ... On the other side, if you contradict the claimed motives, then we might reach the point that is more essential here."

The woman shot a furtive glance. "And what if I had my own list of complaints against him? What if I'm plaintiff myself?"

"You are entitled to that. You are free in your reply. Speak, Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy."

The woman inhaled deeply. With a hateful look toward the other chair, she said, "Well, then ... I charge this man with murder in - er, three significant cases at the minimum. He's the one to blame for the corruption of the wizarding world, its opening to Muggles and their

despicable tools. He's guilty of ..." The woman stopped, gasped, looked with refreshed horror toward the High Priestess.

Who said, "Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy, I am the only judge and the only one with the authority to call anyone guilty. You might watch your words - while otherwise, you might continue."

"Er - yes, Your Honour ... High Priestess. This man, and other people with him, have poisoned millions of Muggle children, or drugged them, to let them sneak into the wizarding world, under the pretense to have magical power. Even if they have, this can only be a borrowed quality, not worth to deserve the true reputation of wizards and witches who inherited their magic by blood ... And these kidnappings - yes, they were done as a desperate attempt to stop this man and his cronies, because they are ..."

This time, the woman stopped by herself, after a quick glance toward the High Priestess. Calmer, she added, "Seen in this light, my doing is fully just ..." Stopping again, barely in time, she corrected herself, said, "I did what I did to preserve the magical world from these bad influences, in favour of a value that counts higher than common law."

The High Priestess turned to the other side. "Harry Potter, plaintiff and defendant at the same time, what is your reply?"

"Before answering in full, High Priestess, I want to hear of which three significant murders I'm accused by Lady Malfoy."

Not waiting for allowance to speak, the woman shrieked, "Which three? ... As if you didn't know! My husband Lucius, my son Draco, and Gérard Pouilly, the son of my dear friend, Madame Pouilly!"

Another elderly woman in the background stood up and called, "High Court, I protest against this charge! I am Madame Pouilly, and I claim my own right to represent my son's case - if and when I feel the need."

The woman in the defendant's chair had turned, staring at the other woman, then turned to the man in the plaintiff's chair, borderless hate in her face. Apparently, only the memory of the punishment minutes ago kept her from spitting insults.

Harry Potter said, "Lucius Malfoy was killed by Cho Chang, today my wife. I would have done it myself, only I was busy fighting Voldemort at that moment. Draco Malfoy was killed by a student in the Flying Squad - I know his name, although this isn't relevant here. Both members of the Malfoy family came to attack the school of Hogwarts and their people, and both died in this battle ..."

He paused because the woman had turned again, looking around, then staring at the raised arm and the teeth-baring smile of Cho Chang-Potter.

"... As for the opening between the wizarding and the Muggle world, the one to blame is Voldemort. It's his work, and it is irreversible. In order to avoid the war between these two worlds, a war that would have come invariably, we started efforts to unite both worlds by making as many children as possible magical. We - this includes wizards, witches, this includes in particular the entire Goblin community, and we did it with the permission and the support of you, High Priestess ..."

Following his look, the woman stared toward the raised chair.

"... As for the arguments regarding pure blood and which magical power is true or not, I'm not the one to be asked. For all my knowledge, magic is magic is magic, and any such person is under a higher law of which you, High Priestess, are the representative."

The woman stared in disbelief. "You supported this - this conspiracy?? ... And you claim to be a representative of some higher law? Then you're worse than all the others!"

The High Priestess had found her decision already before - in some sense, this exchange had only been a final confirmation for herself. She said, "Lucinda Narcissa Malfoy, as you cannot accept my judgement, I will release you from what puts you under this particular law."

She raised her hand. "From now on, you are no longer bound by the rules of the magical world."

"What ... what does it mean?" The woman looked at her, a new worry in her face.

"You have lost your magic. You are a Muggle woman now."

"Me?? ... Ha! Never! If I had my wand, I could show you ..." The woman stopped, staring at a wand that floated through the air into her hands. She took it, said, "Look here," whooshed it through the air.

Nothing happened.

The woman tried again, murmured, tried once more, in growing desperation. She looked up, her face distorted in a grimace. "You took my magic?? You really did?"

"I did," said the High Priestess.

With an unarticulate outcry, the woman shot forward, reached the High Priestess, her wand gesticulating, pointing. "You ... you dare ... you bloody bitch ..."

The High Priestess snatched the wand from her, turned it, pointed. "I warned you. You didn't listen as a witch, still less as a Muggle. So I'll send you to a higher authority than I am."

"Oh, really, is there any?" snarled the woman. "So you're not the highest judge?"

"No," replied the High Priestess, "I'm not ... Avada kedavra."

* * *

Christophe Thionnay, *Magique Générale* teacher at the Beauxbatons school and member of a less public circle, stood in the classroom behind his table - about to perform his official job, though all the time thinking about his secret one.

Because at this moment, the students were entering the classroom, and for all Thionnay knew - and dearly hoped - one table would remain empty.

For half of this table's occupants, he felt sure. He had delivered them personally, and the method for catching them, as cleverly as it had been plotted, still was topped by the trick used to take them out of the school buildings. Not a spectacular one, because nobody had been given a chance to watch, or to recognize afterwards, however complicated and a masterpiece of magical skill.

And simple, in a way, like all excellent tricks. The apparition lock in Beauxbatons was the work of several experienced wizards and witches - with him as one of them. With this knowledge, he had found a way to disable his own part for a few minutes, and to repair the damage quickly afterwards.

Of course - in these few minutes, anyone trying by accident would have detected the malfunction. Only who would do that? And for all Thionnay knew, nobody had made this mistake, so-to-speak.

Other things had worked less well. Returning to Beauxbatons, he had found no trace of the two boys, so far not quite as agreed beforehand, however less disquieting than the other way around. And a visit at Madame Balmier, the librarian, had confirmed that the little poisoning spell had put them out of combat. Only - nobody had contacted him since then, and this was the disquieting part.

Thionnay knew - contacting them at the wrong time could have disastrous effects, so he didn't try. He paid with the nerve-racking uncertainty and loneliness of the undercover agent who had been forced to compromise himself, and now was waiting to be taken out of the cold.

In the metaphorical sense, that was, because here in this classroom, it seemed quite hot, at least Thionnay felt that way. An instant later, however, the heat on his sweaty temples contrasted with a very unpleasant coldness creeping up his spine, so much so that a moment later, the fine drops on his forehead felt like ice ...

Because right when Thionnay thought the last student would close the door behind himself, this door was held by someone outside, and this someone entered the classroom, followed by three more students ...

Benoît Malavin. Frédéric Pouilly. Héloïse Weasley. Sandra - er, Chang.

These four looked at him before reaching their table, and Thionnay desperately wished he could ask a neutral observer whether this particular expression in their eyes had been only in his own imagination.

What did this mean??

He glanced over again, back to the rest of the class, let his glance go round with some effort - they were sitting quietly, looking at him expectantly ... Well, so did the rest of the class.

"Alors ..."

It could only mean - the negotiations had been settled much quicker than expected, because otherwise these four wouldn't sit that quietly, just doing nothing ... Or would they?

No, it made no sense otherwise. The Potter daughter alone - if there hadn't been some agreement, some clause that protected him as well as others, that girl would give him hell right now ... Thionnay could muster a lot of professional pride, ranked himself quite high with his magical skill, but he wasn't going to believe that he could stand a competition by sheer force with her. Experience, yes, and cleverness ...

He exhaled. "Messieurs'dames, please let us repeat the last exercise, so we can ..."

No - couldn't be, somehow. No matter how quickly the agreement would ... The planning had been different, without at least one of them as hostage ... And how they were looking at him - expectantly, yes, only Thionnay couldn't help thinking the event they were waiting for would be started by someone else, rather than himself.

And now, while the noise level grew from other students taking out books and papers and wands, these four kept sitting in the chairs, arms folded, staring at him motionlessly ...

They were waiting for someone!!

"... erm, please excuse me for a moment - I forgot the thing we'll need today, just try the spell we've been working at again until I'm back from my office ..." Thionnay made a first step, seizing in his pocket as if reaching for his office key, in the corner of his vision this table ...

No, they didn't try to stop him, were still sitting calmly, although maybe more expectant than a second before.

He reached the door, wand in his hand.

Where to go? He didn't know yet, all he knew - this place here was dangerous ground, to be left as quickly as possible. Thionnay opened the door, stepped out.

The door closed behind him without his own doing. A hand with astonishingly long fingers, and incredibly strong ones, pressed his own painfully - the one that was holding his wand, except no longer because another of these hands pulled the wand out.

A Goblin - large for a Goblin, almost a rectangular shape, so broad-shouldered was this figure in what Thionnay now recognized as a battle dress. And a second Goblin at his side, in a more elegant suit ...

... and a young woman, who made a step, staring into Thionnay's face, a hard stare for such a face, now splitting into a thin smile. "I'm Sandra's godmother," said the woman, "and for some reason you might be glad of, Monsieur Thionnay, I lost the race ..."

Race?? Which race?

"... that's why my only role here is to replace you in class." The woman's smile went broader, although not friendlier. "But only for today's class, Monsieur Thionnay - which you might not confuse with the idea the next one would be yours again ... Don't see you later."

The woman opened the door, went inside, and Thionnay could hear her first "Salu" before his concentration returned to the two Goblins in front of him.

The one in the battle dress pushed him forward while not leaving from his side, not letting go of his hand feeling numb, so Thionnay couldn't even decide whether the Goblin's grip was as hard as before. The other Goblin took step at his other side.

"What ..."

The Goblins stopped, and Thionnay followed the example, without contributing much of his own will. The slender Goblin in the elegant suit turned to him and said, "And I am Héloïse's godfather, Monsieur Thionnay ... I didn't win the race either, I scored only second."

"Which race??"

The broad-shouldered Goblin said, "The race who'll be first, Monsieur Thionnay, what else? ... By the way, I am Gabriel Potter's godfather, and let me tell you, your colleague Monsieur Mosley at the Goblins school and I - we together won the race."

Thionnay had recovered enough to say, "Well, congratulations, and if you could ..."

"No, I couldn't," interrupted the slender Goblin, "because we need you, Monsieur Thionnay - you and I, we'll watch."

"Watch what?"

"And listen - yes, we'll listen also, you will listen, Monsieur Thionnay ... To what? Well, when Gabriel's godfather will have his conversation with Monsieur Mosley."

Thionnay felt numbness climb his mind - a merciful reaction, because the cold horror at the thought of being in the hands of these two ...

"While watching," interrupted the broad-shouldered Goblin his thoughts, "you will wish you were dead, because the same is waiting for you, once we're finished with Monsieur Mosley ... Then it will be your turn, and at that time, you'll be too preoccupied with other emotions to express something as clear as a wish ..."

Thionnay had a clear wish already - that the numbness in his mind would grow stronger, and that he could be sure his body functions wouldn't betray him here in this corridor.

"... but this wish will return," said the slender Goblin at this moment, "and because your treachery wasn't committed in a Goblin school, we don't see any reason to object that."

The Goblin showed a smile that made Thionnay feel like screaming, and said, "So rest assured, Monsieur l'Ex-Professeur Thionnay - your wish will be fulfilled."

22 - Castle Children

Carl Seeger raised his glass, looked at the woman opposite him at the table, and said, "To better times than we had recently."

A short twist ran through the woman's face. "That sounds as if I should reply something about good cooperation ..."

Knowing exactly what she meant, Carl felt like protesting.

"... which isn't wrong, in some sense, only that for the moment, I'll restrict myself and say, to this evening - cheers, Carl."

He nodded gratefully. "Yes ... Cheers, Laila."

Putting down the glass, he looked around, glanced over the tables, not a single one left empty. "It's a small miracle that we got these seats, at such a short notice, and I'm more than glad about that - at this occasion, I didn't want to be anywhere else, while I couldn't muster any more patience either."

Laila smiled, pleased and without any teasing, as straightforward as Carl had learned to know her, in their few encounters so far. She said, "The first part is easy to explain, while the rest is easy to guess, although I wouldn't mind hearing it explained." Slightly more solemn, she added, "Not at all, actually."

Which fit ever so nicely, because Carl felt ready to use some more words for what was crossing his mind. Before he could start though, Laila asked, "You've been here with Harry, haven't you?"

"Yes, and - ah, that's why ..." Carl nodded, remembering how Harry had introduced him to Luiz Pereira, the host with the good memory for important names. "And that's also why it had to be here - he's the one who introduced me to you."

Laila looked at him expectantly, as if the explanation wasn't finished yet.

Which was true. "And I really wanted to know how you look in civil clothes. Just in case I didn't tell you yet - it's breathtaking."

"Thank you."

So far, Carl had seen her only in battle dresses, as Laila certainly remembered. Had to, considering the occasions, only that right now her eyes were sparkling as if to hint at still another alternative.

Which, in its own way, had some breathtaking effect toward him as well. At this moment, he wished there was a menu card, or a wine card - something to look into and to fill his hands, only he had left the selection to their host, following the habit used at his first time in this restaurant. So Carl said, "For a detective in civvies, it's harder to differentiate, so just in order to leave the job behind quickly - is it correct to say the story is over?"

"As good as." Laila's expression hardened for an instant. "There's still some activity underneath, and this might cause another bit of - er, clean-up, let's say, only what's still going on is beyond our saying, because it plays in Goblin territory." She looked grim. "And playing would be the wrong term for sure."

Then she grinned. "But so what. Not our problem."

Carl was interrupted by the waitress with their hors d'oeuvres. When they were alone again, he said, "Let me ask you just one more question - I promise, afterwards I'll change the subject at once, and this one's mainly for my good relationships with Lieutenant McIlroy ... Which jurisdiction was it exactly where - er, where we lost all traces that might have led to the main suspect in the Garcia case?"

Laila beamed at him. "I like it how you put your words, Carl - lost all traces, that's cute ... While for the jurisdiction, that's really an interesting question ..."

For a moment, Carl thought Laila was trying to match his sarcasm, only her expression told him that her words weren't intended as a joke at all.

"... The final took place on Irish ground. With a woman that might have been registered in France, while natively English. But the major problem is something different - when it started, she was a witch, and this court was what you might call the Supreme Court of the wizarding world ..."

Carl stared at her, again wondering if she was putting him on.

"... only, when it ended, she was no longer a witch. She was a Muggle at that moment, so I guess some ordinary law would have applied to her, be it Irish or English or whatever." Laila smiled again. "Only that this law for sure didn't apply to the one who sent her to the ultimate court."

"A Supreme Court? ..." Carl stared at Laila with some suspicion. "And the judge was the executioner himself?"

"Not him - her ... She calls herself the High Priestess."

From Laila's words, Carl would have sworn she was having fun of him. Except her expression didn't fit, not her voice either. "High Priestess, huh?"

"Yes. Her real name's Aram'chee. She's the one who made me a witch."

"And this is no fairytale?"

"No, Carl." Laila looked in his eyes with seriousness. "Not the least bit. And since it isn't hard to imagine that you'd like hearing more about her - I'm ready to tell you, only something else needs to be discussed first."

"Well - yes, sure, except that I had something more personal in mind, as the topic of our conversation."

"Oh, that might all come together." The sparkling was back in Laila's eyes, making Carl quite expectant to hear more. But first, they were interrupted by the waitress who removed some dishes, then brought others.

Working with knife and fork, Laila said, "It's a shame how we neglect this food, it's really delicious, only there's a ..."

"Why?" he interrupted her. "I'm not treating it with disrespect, I can eat while listening." Carl filled his mouth and chewed, for proof.

"Can you?"

It took him a few seconds before realizing that he could listen only to someone talking, and the only likely candidate had started emptying her dish in silence and with seriousness. Beaten with his own argument, he said, "Okay, so my curiosity will suffer a bit ..."

This was a lie - his curiosity suffered considerably, and Laila's expression told him she knew, from watching his face.

"... but otherwise, what might be so complicated that it cannot be outlined while emptying a glass after this food?"

Laila showed some amusement. "It's not complicated at all. Still, I'd rate the chances pretty high that we'll agree upon two reasons why you'll be sorry, not having taken your share of the blame."

Watching Laila's face, Carl could imagine one reason, hardly suited to be expressed right now. Otherwise, he felt at a loss to follow her thought. But then, he wasn't exactly famous for the slow celebration of foodwork, registered with appreciation that Laila didn't waste time either, and therefor the time span was acceptable after which he said, "Well, any dessert notwithstanding - I'm ready to listen."

"Are you?" Laila chewed - last bites, thank God.

"Yes, I am. What were you going to say when I interrupted you?"

"Oh - something about a tradition." Laila signaled the waiter for the desserts card.

"A tradition?"

"Yes." Laila scanned the card, found the brandy cherries quite appealing, found the brandy without cherries still more appealing and told the waiter so. Then she smiled at Carl. "With this restaurant, and some people from Groucho, and some police lieutenants. ... Ramon Garcia was hired here."

"Oh."

Several answers crossed Carl's mind in rapid succession, each of them dismissed instantly. This topic could only be rated difficult in general and a mine field with Laila in particular.

When he hadn't replied after a moment, Laila said, "Since Ramon's gone, the CEO's seat is vacant."

"But you were his assistant, so it's only natural that you will follow, isn't that so? And I don't think the recent activities ..." Registering that he had stepped right onto one of these mines, Carl hurried on, "You didn't disappoint them, I mean. So isn't the job waiting for you?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then where's the problem? ... Or should I ask, where's the point?"

"I won't take it."

Carl couldn't follow. "Why? - er, why not?"

"I'm not made for the boss woman," explained Laila. "I figured it out recently, although I guess that I knew already before. Cho said, that's fine with her, she's not going to force anyone to some personal luck, or the absence of it, except of course she sees it as my responsibility to come up with another candidate."

"Yeah, naturally so." Carl knew Cho mostly from hearsay, however this description fit exactly what he'd heard.

Laila stared at him. "So?"

"So what?"

"Say, do you need a diagram for what we're talking about? That's hardly a recommendation." Laila's face didn't match the reproach in her words - instead it showed expectancy and anxiousness.

No, Carl didn't need a diagram. He had understood, and for this reason, he seemed in need of a bit more air than currently was passing his throat. Then he became aware that it couldn't be. Then he registered - it had to be, considering Laila's look. Eventually, he said, "Erm - this tradition you mentioned, do I have to take it a bit more literally than expected?"

"Yes."

"But ..." Carl tried to find words, this couldn't be a joke, only she couldn't be serious either, while quite obviously she was ... "That's nonsense," he said eventually. "It's never going to work ... You picked me just because you don't know any other candidate ..."

"That's true," said Laila, surprising him almost as much as a moment before.

"Then ..." Lieutenant Carl Seeger watched another sequence of replies passing his mind, none of them finding approval. Yes, they were all correct, expressed his feelings at this moment, what he'd like to say about such attacks right after some delicious food - except that all of them seemed so useless, in a way. The woman opposite him was only interested in yes or no - not quite true, she was only interested in a yes ...

"You've scared me," he said.

Laila looked joyful, almost beaming. "Why should you score better than the others, Carl? ... That's what I said, some time ago, that's what Ramon said, some time ago - you've passed the test. When can you start?"

"I didn't ..." He stopped himself - he hadn't said yes, true, only he hadn't said no either, by some accident he'd said the same as some other people. Then another thought struck him.

"And you? ... Do you want to continue as before?"

"Well, not quite ..."

"Don't tell me you're going to quit that company! How should I ever get my feet onto ground without ..."

"If you'll ever let me finish my sentences, you'll find out!" Laila stared at him, again her expression not matching her words. "Yes, I have the intention to be assistant as before - only with a certain difference."

"Yes, of course - I'm not Ramon."

"Right."

Watching her, Carl asked, "Well, aside from this obvious fact, and my lack of experience, is there still any other difference?"

"Yes."

He waited an instant, not hearing more. As a result, his own voice came a bit louder than really necessary. "Would you please have the courtesy to tell me about this difference? Short and understandable - I wouldn't even mind a diagram in ..."

"Marie-Christine."

Yes, this was short indeed. So much so that Carl inspected this explanation from all sides, in his mind, time and again failing to find any interpretation other than the obvious one.

Just when he knew he had to answer something, and that these words would sound awfully wrong, Laila said, "I told you - didn't I? Two reasons why these news should have come a few minutes earlier."

"Yes, you did. Although - try as I might, I see just one - because it's the same person that has to recover."

Laila nodded. "Sure - only that someone else might be quite interested to see you - er, sufficiently recovered."

Should there have been any doubt left in him, this remark pushed it off. Carl exhaled. "Did I tell you that I have a strong sense of priority? I learned to shift tomorrow's problems to the back of my mind - actually, works best at a quiet place, less people around ..."

"It just so happens," interrupted Laila, "I know such a place, found it while preparing for this evening. It's famous for a certain specialty."

"Specialty?" Somewhat carefully, Carl asked, "And you're sure the amount of novelties for today isn't enough yet?"

Laila grinned. "It's not that bad. I'm talking about real coffee - what people offer as coffee here around really turns me off."

* * *

Opening the door, Ron found just one figure waiting to enter - that of his adopted brother Harry. Which was only a minor surprise, in particular since the quietness outside had told Ron already seconds before - this could hardly be the rest of his family.

Harry, on the other side, looked more surprised. "You here?"

"Well, I mean sorry for the inconvenience, but you know, I'm at home here." Quite satisfied with his reply, Ron escorted his guest into the living room. There, he explained, "Janine had some shopping in mind, so I took a day off to tend the twins."

"Ah, I see." Apparently eager to return the favour, Harry said, "And because the weather was just too good, you sent her shopping *with* them, am I right?"

"Not at all," grinned Ron. "They do a mini shopping beforehand - if you'd been a bit louder outside, I would have thought it would be them. Anyway, they should be back in a few minutes ... And you? Some weeks ago, I would have said, you come to let Janine breathe free for a while, but now, with some shorties in the castle ..."

"That's exactly why I'm here," said Harry. "To fetch Carole and Diane - you know, the more the simpler." Then he grinned, somewhat maliciously. "And now you're torn between the alternatives - join me and be a good father, or join Janine and be a good husband ..."

"Or stay at home and be a lazybag." Ron laughed. "That's no question at all - Janine's quite concerned to shake off her entire family for a few hours, and unless you tell me you cannot manage alone, my choice is clear."

Of course, Harry didn't say that, while he knew from his own experience that these two devilish girls could drive a saint into early retirement, so Ron felt no reason for some bad conscience. Thinking about the situation in the Irish castle, he asked, "How's the legal state with Carlos and Esmeralda?"

"Awful," replied Harry. "A real mess."

"But I thought you had a deal with this lieutenant, what's his name ..."

"McIlroy?" Harry snorted. "I had, and he kept to his part. It's not him to blame - I even got a call from him because he's pissed off with his own administration. Know what they said? ... They refuse to release Marie-Christine's corpse as long as we don't deliver the children to court's custody."

Ron stared at his friend, just barely avoiding to ask, *Really?* It didn't strike him as a suitable comment at this moment. After some seconds, he asked, "So what are you going to do?"

"Did already." Harry sounded grim. "I spoke with Spinbottle. He said this needs a local expert, only he didn't know any. Then we heard around, and - well, it was Kathleen Miller who knew whom to contact. Since then ..."

"Wait, wait ... Who's Kathleen Miller?"

"Oh." Harry looked astonished, then grinned. "For a while, she's been a hard competition to our sister, if you get my drift ..."

"Really?" This time, Ron couldn't avoid the remark, but now it seemed perfectly well in place.

"In a way, yes, while in another, she was chanceless, didn't intend to either, for all I heard. Anyway, she gave us a contact, and since then, a Mr. Garuthers is giving them hell."

"What's your guess?"

"My guess?" Harry looked at Ron in disbelief. "The only interesting question is whether we have to blackmail the county of Santa Monica by threatening to move Groucho to some other place. Aside from that - of course they'll stay with us." Harry hesitated a moment. "We're desperately trying to avoid remarks like family and new parents and so, in particular because of Esmeralda, but ..." He smiled. "Doesn't matter - that's in good hands."

"Could it be these hands can be seen holding a flute, just in-between?"

Harry looked pleased. "And during, before, and after. She's crazy about music - Gabriel told me we should come with some castagnettes, so she can dance *and* play her own part, without the feeling she would challenge him."

Ron nodded. "That's good to hear. Three sets of parents in two years ..." Then he grinned. "So you and Cho, you have managed to come on a par with us, huh?"

"And even without ..." Harry stopped himself, wrinkled his face. "Sorry, that joke wasn't needed."

"Ah, c'mon." Ron gave him a push. "The sooner you finish sentences like that, the better ... At least, can nobody say you won't be in step with us."

"What?" For an instant, Harry looked confused. "Oh, you mean two at once? ... Yes."

Ron's mind was racing to find something that would pull his friend out of this mood. "You know," he said, "that reminds me of the year when we had our O.W.L.s. Remember? For quite a while, it looked as if you were lagging behind me, and then, all of a sudden, you came up with the missing one."

Harry looked at him. "That's a weird picture, Ron." After a moment, however, he started to grin. "And besides, it's totally wrong, because then, Hermione was far ahead, and now - there's just Sophia."

Ron shook his head. "Never underestimate Hermione - and Viktor, for that matter. Believe me - they've only just begun."

* * *

Coming home, Gabriel found the castle empty - well, not counting Dobby and Winky. However, what he could sense told him some people weren't far away, and the direction from where these signals arrived told him he should come with a swimsuit when joining them.

So he changed from school clothes to swimsuit, jeans, and T-shirt, then he jumped to the beach. And here they were - Ireen with Tanitha some steps apart, as a kind of security zone between her and the battle scene ...

... because this was the proper term, as Gabriel could register at once. Harry and Carlos under tight siege by the two Weasley girls, Carole and Diane alternating between these targets, and Esmeralda who watched the two whirlwinds with some brooding desperation.

Until she saw him. Her face lighted up, her mood jumping from jealous to joyful. "Gabriel! Do you have your flute with you?"

He grinned. "Claro está, Esmeralda."

Hearing this answer, she beamed at him. However for just a moment, because next instant, the two Weasley girls changed tack at once.

Carole. "What did you say, Gabriel?"

Diane. "Are you going to play for us, Gabriel?"

He could feel it - any second now, probably the moment these two redheads would touch him, a screaming Mexican hellcat was going to reveal in full public what competition was running underneath. Instinctively, Gabriel grabbed Esmeralda, put his arms around the thin body, her back to him, so she could face the French invasion ...

His father's voice. "To hear music, you two must negotiate with Esmeralda ..."

"Huh?" Two young faces turned around, stared at Harry in disbelief ... No, three, except the third one didn't need much turning.

"Yes," said Harry, "because since recently, Esmeralda is Gabriel's agent, when it's about music." He looked at Gabriel plus girl. "Am I right?"

Even without the gentle message in his mind, Gabriel would have kept his silence, to wait until this severely baffled agent felt ready to answer. After another second, in which the Weasley twins had turned again, the head in Gabriel's view nodded, and a very determined voice said, "Yes."

Without hesitation, Carole and Diane closed in on Gabriel's agent, started talking, touching, arguing, convincing, pulling forward - no doubt pulling this unexperienced agent over some table which wasn't there, only such a concern would miss the point entirely ...

Gabriel watched as his father talked with Carlos in a low voice. At the first moment, the boy had made preparations for helping his sister, seeing her under this devilish siege, while

apparently Harry could convince him not to spoil the opportunity for some ground-breaking girls' talk.

And Gabriel could feel how the level of common spirit was growing.

Moments later, the three girls stood before him. With great seriousness in her face, his agent told him - they had found an agreement. Assuming he would play long enough, each of them had a wish free, and he himself too, something to surprise them.

Gabriel asked, "And who's going to start?"

As it turned out, the wicked Weasleys had foreseen even that, had offered a truly neutral measure - just in order of alphabet, which meant Carole first, Diane then, Esmeralda afterwards ... Yes, and Gabriel himself at the end, what with his coming late in the alphabet.

His audience settled in a half circle in front of him. About to ask Carole for her song of choice, Gabriel stopped, turned ...

Down the path from the castle came two figures. One of them human, female - Rahewa, in her left hand a leash, and at the end of the leash the second figure - doggish, black and yellow, and obviously a bit scared, considering how the dog's tail hung almost between the hind legs.

Rahewa reached them, stopped, said, "Hi ... Mind some company?" Not waiting for an answer, she knelt down.

The dog, a German shepherd, quickly sat down as well.

Rahewa released the leash, came up, seized in her pocket, dropped something in the circle between Gabriel and the girls. "Here - he likes hunting that."

Gabriel had just time to recognize the thing - a tennis ball, when he saw the dog, which had followed Rahewa's movements, turn around and jump after the ball ...

... to stop at once, just outside the circle, and to retreat a step, tail now definitely tucked between the legs. Maybe it had been the circle of unknown people, small as they were, while the double shriek from the twins at the dog's jump hadn't sounded like an encouragement to come closer.

Esmeralda reacted first. She took the tennis ball, made a few steps toward the dog, offering the ball in her hand.

The dog looked a bit timid, otherwise quite expectant.

"Throw it," called Rahewa, who had reached Harry, was on her way saying hello to Ireen and Tanitha.

Esmeralda threw the ball - a fair distance, considering her age. The ball sailed through the air, landed in the wet sand close to the waterline.

The dog raced after the ball, reached it, grabbed it with its fang - and just at this moment, the last runner of a wave lapped between its legs. The dog jumped in surprise, dropped the ball,

which was carried forward a few feet. The dog stared at the fading wave, stared at the next one closing in on its feet - and barked, twice, rather wimpishly.

Esmeralda went to the dog, spoke with him. Then she took the ball, threw it landward.

The dog raced after the ball, grabbed it, returned to Esmeralda, sat down, ball between its teeth, quite obviously waiting for the next throw.

Esmeralda took the ball, threw it again. A moment later, Gabriel could watch how two French girls approached the scene carefully, to lose their reluctance pretty quickly - and to learn soon afterwards that the difference in age, just one year, was quite remarkable when it came to throwing balls.

The dog, gaining confidence by the second, just didn't take them seriously. Yes, it went after their throws, only to return each ball to Esmeralda.

Gabriel stood up, reached the group with his father, Rahewa, and Carlos. He asked, "Say, what dog is this?"

"I found him outside a French castle," replied Rahewa. "Its former owner - well, we could say she abandoned him."

So it had been Lady Malfoy's dog. Gabriel examined the dog again, not registering any trace that might indicate this former ownership. He turned back to Rahewa. "What's its name?"

"Good question." Rahewa grinned. "We weren't introduced then, and - well, somehow, I failed to ask in time."

Harry said, "Madame Pouilly might know."

"Probably," answered Rahewa, "only - why not letting them find a new name?" Her head tilted toward the group to which Carlos was walking over.

Harry asked, "What do you mean, letting them find a new name?"

Considering the unmistakable implication, also from what he could sense in his father, Gabriel felt sure this question was fairly rhetoric.

Rahewa, somewhat more restricted in her sensory system, looked a bit self-conscious. "Well, you know, I really had the intention to keep him ... Only there's a problem."

Harry asked, "With Clemens?"

"No, not with him ... It's me."

"You." Harry started to chuckle, and Gabriel felt the same - Rahewa, dog animagus in pursuit of her adopted parents' example, couldn't get along with a German shepherd?

"Don't make fun of me - it's sad enough!" Rahewa looked reproachful. "Lady Malfoy probably wasn't the nicest owner, and this dog takes me as her successor, somehow. But the worst - he saw me turning into a dog, actually I did it several times, thought it might help ..."

Gabriel and his father were trembling in suppressed laughter.

"... so, to make it short - he's scared shitless from someone alternating between a human and a dog."

Father and son were almost rolling in the sand.

Rahewa stood up, started to drop her clothes, revealing a swimsuit. She said, "It's not the least bit funny ..."

Father and son lost all countenance.

"Insensible pack," snorted Rahewa and marched into the water.

Recovering, Harry glanced over to the group with a genuine dog in the center, turned to Gabriel. "Clever girl, huh? ..."

It took Gabriel a second to register - his father was talking about Rahewa, rather than Esmeralda.

"... and I bet, she'll be gone by the time someone has to break the news to Cho."

Gabriel kept silent. He knew as well as his father - there was someone perfectly suited to that task. Coming home this evening, his mother would realize that some fate had put a girl and a dog together, never to separate again - not farther than a tennis ball could be thrown.

He felt some expectancy in himself to get in touch with the dog. He would give them some more minutes, then he would take his flute and start playing. And for sure - girls and dog would gather, would listen, would forget that tennis ball for a while. It was just a question of the right tune.

* * *

Frédéric gave his grandmother a proper welcome, then watched as Sandra shook hands with Madame Pouilly. While this wasn't a common habit among English people, Sandra had adapted enough French custom in Beauxbatons, hadn't found it difficult anyway after her years in California.

And besides - Frédéric could imagine a time when her welcome toward his grandmother wouldn't be much different from his own.

"Thank you for your coming," said Madame Pouilly. "While I'll appreciate it always, very much so, today there's a special reason ..." she looked at the girl, "... in particular for your visit, Sandra."

So much Frédéric had known already before, after his grandmother's question whether he could visit her together with Sandra. He had some idea what the reason for this invitation might be, and in a moment, he would find out whether he was on track.

"There's someone in this household," explained Madame Pouilly, "who is extremely unhappy, almost desperate ... A house-elf."

Frédéric nodded inwardly toward himself. Right he'd been.

"His name is Birdy," said Madame Pouilly toward Sandra. "He was Lu ... Lady Malfoy's servant. And now that she's gone, he's waiting to meet his new owner."

Sandra looked astonished. "His new owner? ... But there isn't a new owner, is there?"

"There must be, from his perspective." Madame Pouilly's face showed a mix of amusement, sadness, and embarrassment. "Lady Malfoy didn't free him, before ... I mean, she had no intention anyway, so ... And for a house-elf, that means he must be passed over to a new owner."

"Well, then - isn't that you?"

"No, my dear, certainly not - not from his perspective, and not from mine either, because I have all servants I need. Birdy says, his new owner must be the one who - well, who is responsible for the loss of his former owner."

Frédéric would have found simpler words for that, and for what he could watch in Sandra's face, he wasn't alone with this thought. But then, Lady Malfoy had been his grandmother's friend for some time ...

"That would be Aram'chee," said Sandra. "Only - she won't take him, she wouldn't know what to do with a house-elf."

Madame Pouilly nodded. "Yes, obviously so. And I explained that to Birdy - actually, it was upsetting him quite a lot. Then we discussed it a bit more, and ..."

Frédéric knew already what was coming, started to grin.

"... he said, then it must be someone somehow related to her. And the only person of which I know some relationship to her - that's you, Sandra."

"Me???"

"Yes. You are the heir of the High Priestess."

Sandra stared at Madame Pouilly. Then she giggled, stopped after a moment.

Madame Pouilly asked, "Shall I call him?"

"Er - wait a moment." Sandra looked startled. "He's the one who's been with Carlos and Esmeralda, right?"

Frédéric's grandmother nodded. "Yes, unfortunately so."

"Well, that settles it." Sandra shook her head. "I mean, we have enough with Dobby and Winky for sure, and I wonder how Dobby and Birdy might have worked together, but ... No, I don't think we should remind them of each other."

Madame Pouilly looked relieved, and appreciating. "I had the same feeling, also with respect to Birdy - these events have unsettled him considerably ... But then, what to do with him?"

"That's simple," said Sandra. "I'm going to set him free."

Madame Pouilly smiled. "Yes, my dear, that's pretty much what I expected ... However, before doing that, you must know that the freedom will unsettle him even more - at least right now. Birdy is as much traumatized as these two children ... Sending him off - that would be horrible for him. In a while, maybe ..."

Sandra looked at Frédéric. Feeling sure she was thinking the same, Frédéric nodded. "Yes, I think that's the best idea."

His grandmother asked, "May I hear this idea? Pardon for not following that quickly."

Sandra grinned. "The Weasleys - Fleur, Héloïse, Michel - and Bill, of course." She grinned broader. "Madame, we could turn it so that he comes from you - for a house-elf, Fleur would balance out a lot, if you know what ..."

Madame Pouilly knew quite well, however protested at once, "Oh no, certainly not - he isn't mine, that would be pretense, and besides, I still have some confidence to find a way with your aunt."

Frédéric grinned too. "Definitely, and aside from that - sooner or later she'd find out ..." He stopped in mid-sentence, seeing his grandmother's glance, however without losing his grin.

Sandra couldn't imagine any reason why Fleur should not accept the offer, only Madame Pouilly recommended to ask her in advance, mentioning that most people would consider this normal. So Sandra got her phony, called her aunt, and asked whether Fleur could do with a house-elf, Birdy his name.

Frédéric could listen only to this side of the conversation, however he could watch Sandra's face, and of course he could imagine what Héloïse's mother would say.

At this moment, Sandra explained that Birdy would be found in the Pouilly castle - yes, right, Malfoy inheritance, so far like Dobby, only totally different, and he didn't know yet, only Sandra wanted to be sure ...

A squeak of excitement from the other side reached even Frédéric's ear.

And something else, inaudible again, made Sandra look pleased. She pressed the Off button, looked at Madame Pouilly. "Yes, it's *d'accord* for her, so if Birdy agrees too ..."

"He will, Sandra," interrupted Madame Pouilly. "I take it you are used to an independent spirit as Dobby, about whom I had the opportunity to hear some stories ..."

Frédéric's grandmother wrinkled her nose, while the two guests found the good sense to save their remarks at this obviously painful reference to past months.

Then Madame Pouilly continued, "... that's why I was concerned to find a smooth transit for this poor sod. Maybe you'd like to take him with you, at the end of this visit?"

Frédéric found this a very good idea. He liked his *Grand-Maman*, in some way even more than before, but a visit in the Weasley house would ...

To his disappointment, Sandra shook her head. "No, Madame, first because I have to do another - er, visit soon, but most of all - Fleur said, she would like to come over and fetch him, and - er, she said, she'd prefer if, at that time, we'd be out of the way."

"So, did she?" Madame Pouilly looked a bit startled, however also expectant. "In this case, you should talk with him now ..."

"I'm going to fetch him," said Frédéric, who suddenly saw a chance for another visit of which he didn't even know the destination. Madam Weasley in a four-eyes talk with his grandmother - well, he still could drop through all grids and find himself deposited in Beauxbatons ...

The tiny figure looked terrified, raising pity in Frédéric. "Don't worry," he said, "she's nice, and I heard about quite an exciting order for you."

Unfortunatley, this remark seemed the worst he could have found. Birdy had performed more than his share of exciting orders in the recent months, started wailing and sobbing, while the other house-elves stared at him with uneasiness, anxious not to come closer.

Frédéric grabbed the thin arm and marched back to the living room. He found neither the skill nor the patience to console this trembling figure any further, but then, he didn't search in earnest either.

Entering the living room, pushing the house-elf forward, Frédéric had to fight a laugh. He stopped in front of Sandra. "May I introduce - Birdy - Sandra Potter."

The house-elf mustered some contenance, apparently from bad experience in the past, bowed several times deeply. "Missus Potter, this Birdy is a servant of yours, Missy, and him will do so at your ever satisfaction ..."

Frédéric felt a slight blow in his mind, understood at once. Standing behind Birdy, he had already started trembling too, only from suppressed laughter, and this fully in Sandra's view. Thanks to her support, he could steady and walk to his chair.

Sandra said, "Good evening, Birdy ... Er, yes, I'm sure you will, and the first thing I need is something from your former missus - actually, a pair of socks."

"Yes, Missy Potter, Missus, of ..." The creature was almost flying, barely avoided hitting the doorframe, was back in record time.

Sandra accepted the shapeless roll, only to offer it back at once. "Here, take them."

Birdy obeyed, then stood there, staring dumbstruck at the socks in his hands.

"This is a piece of garment," explaind Sandra. "You got it from me, it belonged to your former missus, and that means you're free ... Right?"

"Am I?" The house-elf seemed at a loss to cope with this unexpected fate.

"Yes. That's the rule - you may ask other house-elves. And to know you in good care, and also some people in your own care, Birdy - I've found a place for you. My aunt, she has two children ..."

At this keyword, Birdy twisted in uneasiness, however looked quite interested.

"... Héloïse is a classmate of Frédéric and myself, and her brother Michel is a classmate of my brother Gabriel. My aunt Fleur will pay you a salary ..."

This keyword seemed to destroy all balance Birdy had regained.

"... only that, for a while, you will pass this salary over to two other children. You know them already, a boy and a girl, their names are Carlos and Esmeralda ..."

Birdy started to tremble, close to another wailing.

Which made Sandra explain quickly, "... so this is your compensation for them, that you were in the house where they've been held. For them it's pocket money - and in a few months or so, when they come and tell you that from now on you can keep that salary, then you'll know that they have forgiven you."

Birdy stopped his trembling, stared at Sandra, started another trembling, only this time from luck beyond grasp. "Oh, Missy, this you have given Birdy so great a favour, me your house-elf is not knowing how to tell his Missy of him the gratefulness of this Birdy has ... Yes, that will this Birdy do right ..."

Close to her limits, Sandra gasped, "Fine, great - and now get your things packed, my aunt Fleur will be here in a while ..."

"Yes, Missy Potter, sure, this happy Birdy will do as his Missy said ..." Retreating, bowing, otherwise with remarkable speed, the house-elf disappeared through the open door.

Frédéric found the politeness to wait still a second, giving Birdy time to hurry out of earshot, before he relieved his almost cramped stomach in a fit of laughter. Recovering, he glanced at Sandra. "That was brilliant - her own socks, from you - that's kind of waterproof for a house-elf, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Sandra, "only it wasn't my idea - your grandmother told me."

Which answered the question how Sandra had known about Lady Malfoy's socks still lying around somewhere in this castle. Madame Pouilly, however, lost no time in returning the compliment. "But the idea with the salary was yours, Sandra, and I'm very impressed ... Such an elegant solution!"

"Well ..." Sandra seemed quite embarrassed. "You know, that wasn't really my own idea either - my father did something similar once, for his younger sister, only she wasn't his real sister, and here it's the same between me and the two, Carlos and Esmeralda ..."

Frédéric recorded this detail in his memory - something he hadn't heard yet, and of course it couldn't be found in the public Potter files.

"... and by the way, he did something else, when he came to the Weasleys - er, it has to do with names ..." Sandra blushed, astonishing Frédéric as well as his grandmother, then continued, "The way he called - er, he called her Ma Weasley, and that's why for me she's of course Grandma Weasley, except most of the time I make it shorter, and ... I thought, maybe ..."

Sandra's voice had trailed off, in contrast to the blushing which had deepened, for compensation. Frédéric turned, to watch his grandmother, who had coloured a bit by herself, who now said, somewhat breathlessly, "Did I understand that right? You - you would like to call me Grandma Pouilly?"

Not looking up, Sandra said, "Yes - er, except I thought of *Grand-Maman*, because it should be French, shouldn't it?"

"Oh, but yes, Sandra, definitely, that's ..."

Frédéric realized that his guess about French welcomes between Sandra and his grandmother had been badly wrong, however only regarding the time frame, because he could watch them right now, and with pleasure - after all, the confrontation with his parents would take place some time soon, and there was no ally like an ally in your own family.

Recovering from some emotion, Madame Pouilly said, "Well, Sandra, as you mentioned another visit, and since I can expect some other visitor the moment you two are off - " she smiled, "thanks to this new terms between us, I really can say, thank you for your visit and don't wait too long for the next, only now it's time, right?"

"Yes, er - Grand-Maman Pouilly." Sandra did the French goodbye, which had a strong similarity to the French welcome. Then she said, "You know - er, it might have taken me some more time, but I thought - when Fleur comes along, and you can tell her ..."

Madame Pouilly hugged her new half-equivalent of a granddaughter. "Thank you so much, ma chère, I will, while I'm confident I won't need it as ammunition."

In this point, Frédéric had his doubts. For what he'd seen and heard, the Weasleys in general and Veela in particular were a bit slower in forgiving than some other people. Except it was a futile thought, as he knew - about the outcome there was little doubt, while the details would probably be kept private. But then again, maybe he knew a channel - starting at Benoît, from there to Héloïse, maybe then first to Michel ...

Sandra grabbed him. "Let's go - you weren't listed in my initial planning for this visit, but I cannot just drop you in Beauxbatons, can I?"

Frédéric lost no time in shuddering from this barely avoided fate. Instead, his mind was speculating - would his guess be right?

* * *

There wasn't a thing so bad, you still could find some benefit in it for yourself ... Sandra had heard these words, or others to the same extent, more than once, from her father as well as from Aram'chee. And to her slight amazement, she found this wisdom confirmed in an unexpected constellation.

Lady Malfoy's plotting had brought a house-elf into the Weasley residence - more exactly the one in the Goblin quarter of Paris. While this was nice and certainly a benefit for Fleur, Sandra herself took profit from another aspect in this sequence of events ... The Malfoy trial in the castle had made the High Priestess public - at least as public as Sandra was concerned. As a result, she could talk with Frédéric about this topic. And based on that, she could take him along when fetching Aram'chee.

A very pleasurable feeling. Of course, Frédéric had no place in the private conversations between herself and the High Priestess, only today something else was on schedule, and Sandra felt sure not to encounter disapproval when coming with him.

At the Crusader castle, Frédéric glanced around, jumped a bit when suddenly Aram'chee stood before him. Sandra said, "Good evening, Aram'chee. This is Frédéric Pouilly - you saw him in the court room, and today - er, I didn't feel like shaking him off first."

The High Priestess smiled. "Oh, really? Then I shouldn't do it either, hm?" She turned to a boy who seemed quite impressed while not surprised. "Good evening, Frédéric Pouilly ... I was looking forward to meeting the one who might find my bond with Sandra quite objectionable."

"Er - no, er - good evening, High Priestess."

Sandra felt slightly surprised by herself. She hadn't expected to hear Aram'chee addressing a possible conflict in some future so directly. Still more, she didn't know why - except that the High Priestess was hardly famous for accidental remarks. And she seemed amused, somehow ...

"Today, I'm just Aram'chee - well, except for a short moment." The High Priestess smiled more. "And I will call you just Frédéric - for what I heard, the name Pouilly is not entirely free of mixed feelings."

Frédéric nodded. "Yes, er - Aram'chee."

Sandra hurried to say, "But we're working on that, and with quite some success. Let's go, then I have to tell it only once."

"So you don't need my help in defending your decisions? That's even better." Toward a gaping Frédéric, Aram'chee explained, "When Sandra tells me first about something, normally it means I should give her arguments to convince her mother."

Sandra felt little risk to need this kind of help today, felt satisfied seeing Frédéric's reaction - for him, arguments within the family were routine work. Then Aram'chee nodded, and all three of them came out in the dinner room of Carron Lough.

This raised some more twisting. Frédéric hadn't known where they would come out. Sandra's parents hadn't known that he would join the party. Ireen hadn't known anything, and the exact moment of their arrival had of course been unknown to everybody - usually no affair, except that they were almost late, and quite some chairs around the table were already occupied.

However, maybe the biggest surprise was Sandra's own, recognizing a very unexpected member in this round, although not sitting on a chair. A dog - it had twisted too, had barked once, followed by some whimpering.

Sandra watched as Esmeralda patted the dog's head. The girl said something to the dog, unfortunately in Spanish, then stared at Aram'chee with some hostility.

However, only for a moment. The High Priestess reached the united forces of upset girl and timid dog, said something to Esmeralda, maybe also Spanish, bent down to the dog, and when she patted the dog by herself and received a licking of her hands after a second, the fire in the girl's eyes faded.

They sat down, the dinner could start. To Sandra's displeasure, she had to tell her own news first, before she could hear the story of that dog. Then she had to wait more because her mother asked some questions, although Cho seemed to temper herself in the presence of Aram'chee and Frédéric. At least, Sandra found approval, and when Carlos and Esmeralda heard that this house-elf would pay them compensation, she received a beaming from the boy and a thoughtful stare from the girl.

Then she could satisfy her own curiosity. It was mostly Gabriel who told her the story about dog lost dog - or left behind. Glancing over to her mother, Sandra could register something rare - hadn't it been Cho, Sandra would have called it helpless humility. She turned to Esmeralda. "Did you give it a name already?"

"Yes."

Very literal, that girl. "Which one?"

"Bolo."

Bolo, as Sandra learned, was Spanish and meant skittle or bowling pin, this name because one could send the dog flying and rolling over by throwing a ball.

Esmeralda looked proud, having found this name. Next moment, she looked somewhat embarrassed when Aram'chee laughed and said, "Yes, but *bolo* also means *fool*, doesn't it?"

Yes it did, but that was okay, according to Esmeralda, because the dog was indeed a bit foolish, had to learn a lot, probably - except that Esmeralda herself wouldn't have revealed this meaning.

Cho turned to the High Priestess. "How come you know Spanish?"

In a perfect imitation of business slang, Aram'chee replied, "That goes with the job, you know - the Spaniards were global players when English was considered provincial and inferior."

Some people had fun - Ireen, for example, while Cho's amusement seemed limited. As a native Chinese, she could live with this verdict, might even consider English as inferior by herself, only she would have grinned more if someone else had received this answer.

Then the dinner reached the state where all people had finished eating. Aram'chee stood up, came to Ireen's place, and said, "Ireen Chee, I was told you have the strong desire of being a witch. Is this true?"

Ireen, temporarily short on words, nodded.

"So be it." The High Priestess returned to her seat, sat down, turned to Frédéric. "That's been the official moment I mentioned. Now I'm off duty again."

Ireen didn't know how to look, and what to say. She borrowed a wand - Sandra's, produced some sparkles, turned excited. Checking the time, Harry said, "I guess Mr. Ollivander's is still open. What do you think, Ireen, is this the right time for your wand?"

Oh yes, quite obviously so.

Sandra could feel the conflict in her mother. Cho wanted to join them, no doubt - only she wasn't going to leave her guests alone in this room. Sandra said quickly, "We'd like to sit at the beach for a while, Mum. What about you - Ollivander or beach?"

Cho sent a pleased glance toward her daughter, an apologetic one toward Aram'chee. "If you don't mind ..."

No, the High Priestess didn't. Sitting close to the waterline, watching some children and a dog, she said, "A thought was running through my mind. I had considered the idea already before, but the recent trial brought it up again. And today, sitting with you two ..." She looked at Frédéric, then turned to Sandra. "There's a question you didn't ask, right?"

Was there?

"You felt surprise about my remark toward Frédéric." Aram'chee smiled. "Probably you would have asked later, or some other day, but there's no need. I said it on purpose ..."

Hardly news for Sandra, while ...

"... because I face another question, and seeing you two makes finding the answer more urgent than before."

The High Priestess had Frédéric's full attention.

"In a world with all people magical," she said, "the question is - what should be the duty of the High Priestess? Originally, this duty was established with the focus on a minority among humankind. While today - a few years from now, magical power will be the norm. The implication raises a conflict. The High Priestess is not supposed to be the ruler of all humankind."

Sandra stared at the woman she had expected to replace.

"So it might well be that there's one final task - to finish the duty, to end the role of the High Priestess. Maybe after a transit period in which this person has to do the opposite, guarding and protecting the last Muggles on earth."

Aram'chee looked almost apologetic. "You will understand that the thought is somehow frightening for myself. Taking this decision - I have to admit, I still shy off from that. But I have found a clear mind, unbiased enough, and possibly challenged enough to reach a normal life soon ..."

She smiled at Frédéric, at Sandra. "We still have years to go. However, you are young, so there is time to grow with this in mind. I feel confident you will be reckless enough, I also feel confident this won't be a selfish decision, this way or the other ... In the meantime, both of you can enjoy your precious youth with a bearable burden."

For Sandra, the thought - at this moment - felt more like a shock than a relief. However, glancing to her side, she saw someone beaming at the High Priestess, and for all she knew, the mind behind this shining face had to be rated as quick.

* * *

Harry examined the small group with the three youngest residents of the Carron Lough castle. Two of them counted five years, the third something around two, according to Rahewa's guess. However, the sleepiness was pretty much the same in all three of them. He asked, "Where are you going to sleep today?"

"My room," said Esmeralda, as tired as determined.

The reason for Harry's question could be found in the delicate organization of children rooms. Yes, of course both Carlos and Esmeralda had rooms of their own, established not long after their arrival in the castle. Only - they refused to separate during night. More exactly, Esmeralda refused.

Taking this into account, Harry had replaced the original beds by larger ones - French beds, actually, offering more room than a normal one while not wasting as much space as a double bed. And each evening, the two shorties had the choice between Carlos' room and Esmeralda's room.

During the last days, it had looked as if a first night of sleeping alone might be in sight. However, with today's four-legged enhancement of the castle crew, this event seemed shifted to an unknown future - there was no question for Harry where the dog would sleep.

For Cho, there was. "And the dog?"

"My room," said Esmeralda, not quite as determined as before while suddenly more awake, and somewhat startled.

Cho sighed. "Yes, of course - where else?"

Harry followed the group upstairs, watched the bedtime chores in the bathroom, his hands simultaneously stroking and holding the dog. Young Bolo would of course have followed into the bathroom, only Harry thought better of it. While Carlos and Esmeralda didn't mind peeing with someone else in the room, Harry couldn't see an improvement from a dog joining the party in addition. At least the door stayed open, so Bolo found no reason to start worrying again.

Teeth cleaned, bladders emptied, pyjamas donned, the multi-legged convoi reached Esmeralda's room. The children had just climbed the bed when another figure appeared in the door - Cho, a quilt in her hands.

"Here," she said, "I thought Bolo should have a bed of his own ... And tomorrow we'll go for a basket, so he knows where ..." Cho stopped, corrected herself, "No, I guess we'll need three baskets. One for this room, one for Carlos' room, and one for downstairs."

"Downstairs?" Esmeralda eyed her suspiciously. "Why downstairs?"

"Well, for noontime," replied Cho. "Dogs do a napping in the afternoon, while you don't, and we cannot send Bolo upstairs while you're not, can we?"

Esmeralda beamed, then watched as Cho placed the quilt on the rug. After Cho's inviting pat on the thick and smooth fabric, Bolo found the courage to lay down directly within this woman's reach. Although his eyes didn't turn from the bed in which Esmeralda was lying, this could be rated as quite some success.

The girl seemed to think the same. When Cho bent down for a good-night kiss, Esmeralda said, "I can't wait seeing these baskets ... But you must come with us."

"You're right," said Cho. "If we'd leave that to Harry, for sure he'd pick the wrong size."

Carlos smiled at once, while Esmeralda had to send an uncertain glance first before she could join the pleasure about this funny joke.

Bolo, by now, didn't care this way or the other. For all Harry could sense, the dog was already sound asleep.

After dimming the light darker than ever before, to Esmeralda's full agreement because poor Bolo certainly preferred darkness for sleeping, Harry waited for Cho to follow, then closed the door. Reaching the staircase, he stopped her, turned her around, hugged her. "That was clever," he said, "coming with that quilt."

"Why clever? ... I just had the dog in mind." But her eyes were sparkling.

"Definitely," he replied. "And this nice shortcut to a certain girl's heart is just a side-effect, right?"

"Yes, entirely by coincidence." Growing more serious, Cho said, "I was thinking about a sabbatical, to have more time for them ..."

Harry suppressed the shout of disbelief that had tried to find its way into his mouth.

"... at least in the next year, until they're going to start school. And maybe not completely, only half days." Cho scanned his face, not learning much, then confessed, "I spoke with Ireen, asked her whether she's interested in a job as an assistant."

"And Chrissy?"

"Chrissy?" Cho grinned as though the question had been quite stupid. "Chrissy will be the one taking over my job, and then she needs her own assistant - and this might be Ireen."

Harry kept silent.

Guessing right about his lack of comment, Cho said, "And with Ireen here in the castle, that's quite convenient, don't you think so?" Then she grinned. "Maybe I should send her around a bit, to get in touch with men, only that's not the most urgent problem."

Harry laughed. "You're building a tribe, rather than a family. And with quite some success, I have to admit."

Smiling archly, Cho asked, "Do you mind?"

"Mind? ... Maybe we should ask Ron and Janine to move over here, then it won't look quite as suspicious as now."

Cho stared in disbelief. "Don't tell me that'd bother you." Next moment, she looked thoughtful. "Although, that might be quite an idea - are you aware that we use hardly half of this castle?"

Turning serious himself, Harry said, "Fine with me. The more children around and together, the better for them."

"Yes," agreed Cho. "Making the borderlines between families fade, that's quite a Chinese habit." Coming closer to Harry, hugging him again, she said, "Although - these two, they already feel like my own, only in the simple version - you know, without this super magic."

Harry chuckled.

"Hold still," chided Cho. "I know they were Marie-Christine's, but there's nothing wrong with this thought, quite the opposite."

"And what about a certain former Mexican?"

"Oh, that ..." Cho shook her head, ignoring her own advice. "That's so long ago - and besides, look at yourself, nobody has second thoughts when you're called Ma Weasley's son."

"True." Harry grinned, suppressed another chuckle with some effort. "Then maybe that's the solution."

"What solution?"

"For Esmeralda. She doesn't want new parents, as she said, because they have a tendency to get lost. But following some examples, she might call you *Ma Potter*."

Cho's head retreated, stared at him with reproach. "Now really! ... I'm way too young for that. Cho's fine."

Harry put her head back at his chest. "Wait a few weeks. Carlos will be the first to call you Mum by accident. And Esmeralda will follow soon."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely ... Unless this dog might need still some other things, and you take care to do the shopping with her, because then it'll slip Esmeralda's tongue still before her brother does."

Cho released herself, looking energetic. "Then let's go."

"To do what?"

"Something convincing toward Ireen, or with her, so she'll accept that job." Cho's smile turned wicked. "She had some funny ideas, what to do with her new wand, might well be we need an experienced wizard to prevent the worst ..."

----- The End -----