

The High Priestess

By

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Table of Contents

The High Priestess.....	1
01 - Day's Work Done.....	3
02 - Night Watch.....	20
03 - History Lesson.....	39
04 - Tourist Distraction.....	58
05 - Well Done.....	79
06 - Release.....	99
07 - Progress.....	120
08 - Tight Schedule.....	140
09 - Skirmish.....	161
10 - Break.....	183
11 - Looking for Help.....	204
12 - Plots.....	229
13 - Ultimate Option.....	253
14 - Conspiracy.....	276
15 - The Last Generation.....	296
16 - The Next Generation.....	315

01 - Day's Work Done

"No!"

The word was uttered with much emphasis, making clear what Harry might do with this bio-improved mash of carrot and lamb, Cho's newest acquisition and supposedly a high-energy food for two-year-olds.

No doubt - had his daughter's vocabulary been large enough, she would have expressed her opinion with the obvious suggestion.

Even so, Harry could imagine anyway.

Well - he had known after a short glance at this jar, on which a smiling moon of fat with eyes, totally unlike his daughter, promised happiness among all family members as soon as the contents were manoeuvred down a young throat. Still, Harry had agreed to give it a try, if only to make a caring mother happy, a mother who - at suppertime for their daughter - would be found in her office.

Harry stood up to shove it - no, just into the waste bin, thereby raising satisfaction in the face of his high-energy daughter. Well, truth to be told, in himself too, although to a lesser degree,

Carefully suppressing a grin, he started to get a replacement ready - rice pudding with turkey. Calling it a foolproof menu was the understatement of the year - the stuff in the trash bin had been Cho's desperate attempt to find *any* variation in the supper for this very determined bundle which, to the outside, went for a perfectly normal baby girl of almost two years. Had been doomed right from the start, Cho's attempt.

Harry had to be careful with his feelings. It would be difficult enough to confess the failure to Cho - even without the triumphant smile in the angelic face of that little monster. Faster than any words, this smile would tell her mother that daughter and father had reached full agreement upon the matter.

Thank God - Sandra couldn't read yet his mind as Harry could hers. Yes, sure, it was just a question of time, and in a year, two at the most ... While for the time being, Harry felt grateful for the unbalanced state. He could read in his daughter's mind like in a book, while Sandra caught only stronger emotions - from a mind as trained in *jaho* as Harry's. In contrast, people less experienced in hiding their intentions were easy prey for the girl.

Her mother, for example.

Sandra Catherine Potter - the girl's official name, as it would appear on documents. This name was the result of long negotiations between Harry and his wife Cho. The mother's choice had been Catherine, after recovering from her disappointment when Nagini, Harry's snake, had told them no, it wasn't a boy inside Cho, it was a daughter.

"Damn - I should have known," Cho had muttered, "how could I ever expect a boy from such a father? You've started collecting daughters five years ago - and who am I to stand in your way?"

Harry had grinned. "If I remember correctly, you've been lying underneath - more or less." Then he had quickly apparated from one chair to the next, until Cho had laughed so hard, she could no longer chase him.

"Let's call her Cassandra," Harry had said, raising a shock of disbelief in Cho. He had been serious but chanceless - no way with his young wife whose determination had found a worthy heir.

So they agreed on Sandra Catherine, which left quite some room for nicknames of any colour and taste.

Normally, Cho called her daughter "Cass". For serious business, she called her "Catherine", and if she would start addressing her as "Sandra Catherine", both daughter and father knew it was time for a compromise.

According to Cho, business work in the office represented the easy part of the day. Negotiating about a few million dollars seemed child's play, compared to the efforts of keeping her position as the major educating force in the Potter family.

It wasn't that Harry could be accused of siding with his daughter against Cho. No, the girl simply had inherited the stubbornness and determination from her father, and the determination and temper from her mother. She was hell on legs - with the legs part true only for a short while, and considerably less reliable than the other half.

There were just two people who could handle Sandra without ever encountering a battle of the tenacious kind, invariably lost by the opposite party. One was her father, who normally called her "Sandy" - quite a joke with the girl's black hair - and occasionally "Sandra". Soon after a quick and uncomplicated birth, it had made *click* between father and daughter - since then, the two were inseparable, had almost always the same opinion, and communicated through channels closed for anyone else.

Of course, part of it was Harry's trick repertoire - mind waves, for example. One in particular, the tickling wave, made his daughter helpless within seconds. Harry used this weapon with care, most often to balance out between the girl and her mother.

The second person who couldn't do wrong with the girl called her "Little Dragon", or "Sun Dragon", developed from "Sandragon", or just "Sunny". This was her godmother, who recently had started her last year in Hogwarts and who came to visit not more often than she could afford, or so she said - Rahewa Lightfoot.

Sandra Catherine loved Rahewa. Rahewa adored the girl, and as Harry knew, she kept pestering her adopted parents to follow the good example and to get a baby child running, if you please, no matter which sex.

To be precise, there was still a someone doing extremely well with Sandra Catherine - Nagini. The snake called her "Missy", and Harry had to register with mixed feelings that the girl's vocabulary in Parseltongue grew quicker than that in plain English. He explained it toward Cho with the simpler structure of that language, while Cho wasn't tiring to hint that their daughter would learn English faster if her father would cut himself shorter on his telepathic tricks.

Probably she was right.

On the other side, once the girl had mastered a word, it came out almost flawlessly. Sandra hated imperfection. She would use a word only after being pretty sure she could pronounce it properly. And nobody in the Potter household used baby language.

Cho didn't - when she wanted to express her tenderness in words, she used Mandarin. Harry didn't - he used mind waves for the same purpose, or he put his lips on this incredibly large head and started humming. And nobody else dared.

This was one of a few rules, had once raised a little row between Harry and his stepmother. It happened not too long ago, and it started with another of the girl's big determinations.

Sandra hated diapers. So Harry had learned to be extremely attentive in the most likely timespan each day, to catch his daughter and hurry toward the bathroom before it was too late. Both daughter and father waited impatiently for the age in which Sandra's control over her own body functions would be sufficient to hold on for more than a few seconds. And Sandra had learned to indicate her state of urgency with a single word - "Shit".

Ma Weasley looked disgusted, hearing it for the first time. She tried to establish nonsense terms like "big job" or "number two".

"Stop it, Ma," said Harry. "It's undeniably shit, Sandra knows what it is, and she can express herself. Please use normal English when talking with her."

Ma Weasley snorted something about seven children, and inexperienced fathers, at the age of less than twenty-three, and that she could do without his admonitions.

Then she gasped when Harry told her that he wasn't going to force anyone to anything, least of all her, only that then she might communicate with her grandchild through letters.

This was followed by a little speech from Ma Weasley which lacked any baby language, came very much to the point ... However, since then, the issue was settled.

In some sense, Ma Weasley had been lucky. Harry had listened to her suada, just smiling, not getting angry at all. Otherwise, the scene would have ended with an accident. If Sandra really got upset, you better ducked low - to avoid dishes and other items sailing through the air. And someone upsetting her father, so much so that she could sense it, was in for a nasty surprise of the hurtful kind.

The rice pudding had disappeared - completely. Sandra's mastering of spoons was still limited, but her ability to move food into her mouth - one handy piece after the other - was flawless, though somewhat frightening for the unprepared Muggle. Now Sandra looked at her father with great seriousness. "Shit."

"Alright, my princess, then let's go to your next throne." Harry stood up to snatch his daughter out of the high chair.

Sandra shook her head, smiled at her father. "Summon!" Next moment, her face looked a bit strained - sure sign that Harry better got jumping, in order to avoid a disaster.

He apparated into the bathroom, summoned his daughter, and managed just in time to get her pants down before a large, healthy-looking pile of shit landed in the pot.

The girl stood up, inspected her result with great satisfaction, then presented her back for a clean-up - with a spell of the gentle kind, after all, who'd use something as rough as paper toward such a nice ass.

* * *

Cho Chang-Potter, chief executive officer of *Groucho Industries*, sat in her luxurious office and stared at the display on her flatscreen monitor. The flicker-free surface presented a list of names, and Cho tried to think about the persons behind the names, about their abilities.

Her own name - after marriage - was the result of a remark. This remark had come from Almyra, Cho's best friend, Rahewa's adopted mother, and Harry's sister in spirit. "Cho Potter?" Almyra had wrinkled her nose. "Sorry, but that sounds like a machine cutting potatoes in the kitchen."

So it had been Chang-Potter. For Cho, keeping her old name alone was out of discussion - for reasons related to another bearer of that name, otherwise known as her father.

The screen showed an organization chart of the growing *Groucho* enterprise. In some sense, this enterprise could be seen as another part of Cho's life-long dialog with her father. The chart - not that she had lost track of its structure, the growth wasn't that fast, but for her current problem, looking at boxes with names offered some help.

Some days ago, Jesamine had announced that she wanted to resign from her position as the CEO of *Groucho Biochemicals* - to have more time for herself, to make the transit from a couple to a family before it was too late. "You can blame yourself, Cho," Jesamine had said, "or maybe your daughter - and since not everybody has such a family-sensitive husband like Harry, I have to slow down a bit ... So please, find a replacement, and please find it quickly."

There was no sense in arguing with Jesamine - first because she was one of the three major shareholders and thus a millionaire, second because Jesamine would keep another job in the enterprise, and - although this was the least important reason for Cho - because she was right. Raising a child didn't go well with the position of a CEO, unless you had a husband to balance out ...

What Jesamine would keep at any rate was the CEO position for *Groucho Triple-A*. This branch was a pretty small one in the *Groucho* enterprise, almost a hobby, but it created more headlines than all the other corporations together - okay, not in the same magazines, but ...

Triple-A stood for Animal Actors Agency, which was a downright lie, in the literal sense. True, it was an agency. True also, Triple-A provided actors for movies - spectator and oldfashioned 2D. True still, these actors looked like animals in the movies - only they weren't. They were Animagi, transfiguring into animal shapes.

There was no question who rated as the agency's star client. Harry Potter - appearing as a dragon, as a Shetland pony, or as a centaur. The pony was something new, developed around the time when Sandra was old enough to sit in a well-secured chair on the pony's back. And the centaur was a fake - conjured up by Harry, following his commands, but so what - with

modern computer technology, colouring the golden shimmer to skin shades would be a piece of cake, while the movements were absolutely natural.

Of course there were many others. Jesamine herself could do a skunk, and was working on a fox. Then dogs, birds - some of them with people from Hogwarts. It was a bit complicated, they had to get their roles scheduled in sync with schoolwork. There had been complaints from the Hogwarts administration, until the agency managed to win a new client - a cat with a very interesting pattern in the face, usually known under her human name Minerva McGonagall.

So who might be a qualified candidate to run *Groucho Biochemicals*?

Cho didn't know yet. All she knew was that Beatrice plainly refused to spend any of her precious time with administration. Beatrice Chagrin - the chief scientist, or so her business card said, while Beatrice thought of herself simply as a potions witch, needing every minute of the day to hold the competition at bay.

Which, somehow, was nonsense. The most serious competition appeared in the shape of a free-lance scientist whose successful recipes were marketed also by *Groucho Biochemicals* - Hermione Krum. But for Beatrice and Hermione, the competition was serious. Hermione did pharmaceutical potions, Beatrice did entertainment potions including psycho drugs, and both of them challenged each other with cosmetic pills and drinks.

Well - from this organigram, Cho wouldn't find an answer. And besides, it was time to call it a day, and go home. Maybe Harry had an idea. "MAGIX, attention."

"Madam?"

The voice was almost a falsetto, would have raised the eyebrows of any other user in the small but growing community of MAGIX users - a pretty new operating system, a mix of traditional programming skills from the Open Source movement with magical ingredients. But Cho preferred a voice interface based on Mandarin, for fun as much as for security, and this sing-song voice reminded her of riksha coolies in Hongkong.

"Shut down."

"Yes, Madam. I wish you a nice evening." The display went blank.

Cho stood up, walked through the door into the adjacent office. Chrissy Vanzandt raised her head, looked questioningly. "Done for today?"

"Yes - and you should do the same."

"Just a few minutes."

Chrissy Vanzandt had been Cho's secretary until, close before Sandra's birth, Cho had been forced to have a break for a while. Less from her own free will, more from Harry's threats to summon Cho out of her office. So almost two years ago, Cho had appointed Chrissy as her personal assistant, entitled to speak in her name while Cho was in her maternity leave.

Coming back, Cho had found no reason to change that, quite the opposite. Following Harry's advice, she had passed over five percent of her *Groucho* share to this Muggle woman with a witch daughter, and had never regretted her decision.

Power games in this company had a short life - anyone in the mood to play them would first try getting Chrissy at his side, only to ask himself shortly afterwards which devil had driven him to make such a bad mistake. Normally, this rhetorical question would be asked outside the *Groucho* building, after having lost the rank and the job which had invited to such a foolish attempt.

"Bye, Chrissy."

"Bye." The woman hardly looked up.

Back in her office, Cho unclipped a small black device from her belt. By most people, this thing would have been called a mobile. In fact it looked very similar, only it wasn't. It was a phony.

A phony did very much the same as a mobile. However, it offered its services in a different way - voice-controlled rather than through dial buttons - and it used a communication technique which was very close to linkports and far, far away from satellite-based electromagnetic frequencies. Yes, there were some buttons, but only for shortcuts. To establish a connection not placed on any of these shortcuts, you had to say the name of that person - and only the first time, the phony would ask for the number.

A phony was quite expensive - about ten times the price of a mobile. More exactly, ten times the price a mobile would have when sold outside some subscription contract. But this marked exactly the point - a phony was a lifetime acquisition, didn't need a contract with some network, worked around the world, and could reach mobiles as well.

Best of all - phonies were *Groucho* products, manufactured by *Groucho Communications*, the newest daughter company and most likely the one that would dwarf the others pretty soon. The established network providers and mobile manufacturers still fought legal battles, only they would lose them without any exception. They had known so in the beginning, but it had bought them time. The lawsuits had drained quite some money from *Groucho's* resources, and *Narita*, their partner in the spector business, hadn't been helpful at all - little surprise, considering *Narita's* own position in the mobile market. However, within the next two years, *Groucho Communications* would reach break-even.

Until then, some of today's enemies would have knocked at Cho's door, asking for licenses, after having realized that the conventional mobile technology was dying. Then they would learn how fatally misguided they had been in first place.

Because Cho had a good memory, and a very Chinese habit of responding favours with favours. She never forgot, and she never forgave.

Some of them would survive - those with enough diversification in their portfolio. The others would follow *Helix* - once a major player, now an entry in the history books of economy. *Helix'* mistake had been to blackmail *Groucho* in general and Cho in particular. They had tried so only once, and although the attempt failed miserably, this had been once too often.

Cho pressed the first button in the top row at her phony, watched as the word *Home* appeared on the display. Moments later, she heard her husband's voice. "Hello, my little big dragon."

It never failed to make her smile. *Little dragon* meant Sandra, and the big dragon was of course Harry. Once - only once - Almyra had asked, "So is Cho the medium dragon, then?" The answer had been a snappish, "I'm not medium." While Remus unsuccessfully had tried to suppress a chuckle, Harry had said, "That's true. She's a big dragon - a little one."

Cho asked, "What are you doing?"

"Drowning a monster. Wait a sec - the last bubbles are just popping."

So he was bathing their daughter, probably together with Nagini. The snake could manage this particular task even better than Harry. With her tail around Cass' chest, and the front part of her body at a handle mounted for this purpose, Nagini could move the girl quickly through the water. Due to the phony's flawless audio transmit, Cho could register that the snake didn't even bother hissing at Harry's shameless lie.

"I'm done," she said. "Can you fetch me?"

"Sure. Ready?"

"Yes."

A short instant that felt like falling, then Cho stood in the large bathroom. By now, close to the end of the bathing procedure, the room showed water everywhere, some of it even in the bathtub.

Not Nagini's fault. The snake could move the girl without so much as spilling a drop. This mess was Cass' work - since Foolish Harry had shown his daughter the trick with the water balls, the girl trained them every evening.

Well, she did so only in the bathroom, after Harry had made clear that the other rooms in the house were no training area for that - not until the girl had mastered the spells to remove the damage.

Harry, wearing not more than pants in this wet environment, came up, kissed Cho, smiling. "Hi, beauty."

"Hi, beau."

It was sort of a ritual. After giving birth to her daughter, and after having regained her old shape - with a little help from Beatrice's potions - Cho made the last step from pretty to beautiful, and Harry told her so. His own title was established later, when Cho became aware that her husband had achieved the figure of a model athlete - simply from walking around most of the time with a daughter at the chest and a snake at the back, or vice versa. The daughter was his free choice, while the snake, considerably heavier than Sandra, was the daughter's choice.

Coming home, seeing this muscular torso, would have been a good reason to delay supper for a while, after getting rid of her business clothes - well, if not for Cass who welcomed her mother with a beaming smile and a piercing shout. "Mummy!"

Cho bent down to kiss her daughter. "Hello, my little one. How was your day?"

"Ginny."

"Ginny? You've visited Ginny?"

Sandra nodded. Then a devious smile spread her face, and Cho quickly retreated before her daughter had time to levitate a dash of water into her mother's face - not that Cho was really secure a step apart, only it would be more stressful for the girl and therefore unlikely as part of a normal welcome.

Cho looked at her husband. "So you had fun while other people were working hard for a dollar, huh?"

"Yep. We went to Milan, there was a fashion show with Ginny as one of the models."

"Really? I must have missed the invitation."

Which was only natural. First, because a fashion show in Milan, eight o'clock in the evening local time, was noon here in Santa Monica, California. Then because Cho had mixed feelings toward Ginny, Harry's step-sister, who worked as a model, slowly approaching a rank in the top twenty of her profession.

But most of all, the thought of Harry jumping through the world with his daughter, most likely also with Nagini, gave Cho the creeps. Not even Harry himself could tell her exactly what took place - was it Harry summoning his daughter, or Cass pursuing him, or did she apparate into something, only to come out at her father? All Cho knew was that Harry jumped with daughter and snake, to reach his destination still with them.

Looking at her husband, she saw that Harry wasn't going to respond to her remark, which was the best he could do. She asked, "So how was it?"

"We had fun ... People too - when Ginny came along with a really dreadful piece of magenta and black, Sandy decided to change it to something reasonable."

"Did she?"

"You bet ... The couturier wasn't pleased at all."

Cho started to grin. "Why not?"

"Well, you know our daughter's preferences - a moment later it was yellow. It looked more joyful, that's true ... Just a bit watering the eyes."

"And Ginny?"

"She took it with grace - probably she's been the only one knowing what was going on ... We had a drink afterwards, and at that time, she could laugh about the scene."

Harry turned to his daughter. "Okay, my little otter - time's over. Out with you." Before the rosy bundle had even time to protest, it came out of the bathtub and floated into Harry's arms - a manoeuver which no longer made Cho's heart miss a beat.

Harry walked to a padded table. "What today? Airstream or towel roller?"

The girl had the answer ready. "Roller."

Harry wrapped Sandra into a towel which covered the little body from the large head to the small toes, then he quickly rolled the bundle across the table, and back again, while muffled gurgling came from the cylindrical shape.

With great pleasure, Cho watched as Harry opened the towel to find a breathless girl, then took a bottle with baby oil and started to distribute it all over the small body. He used his hands - not the most efficient technique, a vaporizing spell would have done the job quicker, but neither father nor daughter would miss this opportunity for intensive skin contact.

For a moment, Cho felt breathless too - when Harry reached Sandra's pussy, incredibly large at this small body. Seeing him at these administrations toward their daughter always had a certain effect toward herself, in particular when Harry was wearing not more than his pants.

Unfortunately, it turned out somewhat difficult - making love while Sandra was awake. The girl caught some of her parents' arousal, would look quite flushed and rather breathless when they had reached the clouds and the rain.

Cho's husband hadn't worried much. Actually, he hadn't worried at all. But Cho felt more reluctant. Maybe it was true that a two-year-old didn't suffer from sexual arousal, only she couldn't push the thought away, which of course spoiled the pleasure considerably.

Harry had completed the oiling. Now the small body disappeared inside a shirt, panties, and a full-body pyjama with a remarkable capability to hold and handle wetness. When Sandra refused to accept any more diaper, Harry had looked around until he found this special fabric. When the girl peed in sleep, the fabric would suck it in and would send an alarm signal. Seconds later, Harry would reach his daughter to change panties and pyjama.

It was about the only time when Sandra showed something like embarrassment. However, within the next four to six months, she would have mastered enough control.

They walked to the dining room. Harry sat down with the girl in his arm. Within the next ten minutes or so, Sandra would have fallen asleep. Five minutes later, Harry would lie her down in her bed.

Cho took her phony, pressed the second button. "Hello, Dobby, Winky, good evening ... We're ready."

Moments later, plates and bowls appeared on the table, sent by the two house elves.

House elves - that was true luxury. Cho could hardly remember how it had been before Harry managed to lure them away from Hogwarts. Both Dobby and Winky were free, worked for a salary, although Winky still had trouble with that. She also had been the difficult part when asking them to work for the Potter household. Harry's announcement that Cho was pregnant hadn't helped much, more the opposite because Winky never had overcome the trauma with Barty Crouch junior. Only when hearing that it would be a girl, Winky had accepted.

Cho watched her husband starting to eat almost ravenously, saw how Sandra watched him too, to close her eyes moments later, her face probably a mirror of her father's feelings with the first food reaching his stomach.

Suddenly, Cho remembered something. "How did it work with the new baby food? What did Cass say?"

"Not much." The girl's father didn't look up, seemed busy with his adult food.

"She ate it??"

"No ... That's the answer to your question as well as her full comment."

Cho sighed. "And then?"

"What do you mean, and then? Then I gave her something to eat - what do you think?"

Cho never had thought anything else, never would. Food was sacrosanct in this household - something to be treated seriously, no subject to stupid jokes, certainly not a means to put pressure into the girl's education ... As if this would work.

But always rice pudding?

"Harry, we have to find some alternatives. Rice pudding with turkey day in, day out - that's not the proper way to feed her."

Cho's husband nodded. "You're right. I think we should try it with chicken ..."

She glared at him.

"... or maybe duck."

Harry looked totally innocent, although Cho felt sure - he knew perfectly well he had disarmed her with this word - reference to Cho's nickname from old times, never spoken out aloud, always good for a hint ... China Duck.

Harry's face showed no expression. "Millions of Chinese ..."

Cho tried to keep serious.

"... get along with rice only. And our rice is the best money can buy, with all the healthy stuff, not the castrated mush that goes for rice here ..."

Which was true - once a month, Harry went shopping in Japan.

"... and she doesn't look as if she'd miss anything. And with the meat - you know which meat has the highest protein ratio compared to weight? ... Mice."

"Mice??"

"Yes. The NASA found out, in the early days of space travel."

"And why didn't they use it?"

"Dunno ... Maybe they couldn't find approval among the astronauts."

Cho stared suspiciously at her husband, and for good reason. The story itself had to be true, because Harry never lied to her - except in obvious jokes like over the phony. But every now and then, Nagini was fed with living mice, with Cass always caught in fascination from this spectacle.

Harry grinned. "I could imagine she would even accept carrot mash in this combination ..."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Well, then ..."

Cho became aware that the discussion was over, the fight lost. It hadn't been a fight - there was nothing wrong with their daughter's nourishment, Cho knew that, it was just that every once in a while she felt an irrational impulse to *do something* ... Probably some sense of hidden guilt - wasn't she supposed to play the caring mother twenty-four hours a day? Instead, she played the caring chief executive officer while Harry was perfectly happy with his role as the house-husband.

Nobody had a problem with that, least of all Harry himself. Occasionally, as Cho knew, he met someone who couldn't suppress teasing remarks, seeing Harry walk around with his daughter. This someone would bitterly regret his remarks still before the end of the conversation - how long was it since Harry had told her about such an encounter? Quite a while ... Cho suddenly realized that her hidden guilt wasn't that hidden - her husband had stopped telling these stories on purpose.

Looking up, she saw him smile at her. "How was your day?"

"Mixed. We need a replacement for Jesamine - she's going to give up Biochemicals. Any idea?"

"Not at the moment. Did she figure out that she's rich enough?"

"That's not the point - and besides, she'll keep Triple-A. No, she wants to increase the family."

Harry grinned. "That's why ... Well, the idea has appeal, no question about that ... Quite inspiring, actually ..."

"Inspiring, huh?"

Several times in the past months, Harry had - very carefully - hinted that he wouldn't mind another child, no madam, not at all. Cho had warmed up to the idea, though with some reluctance.

Cho looked at Harry, at the girl. "If I knew it would be a boy ..."

Her husband kept his face steady.

"... I might send you to get your hands free right at the spot. Not that this is the right time of the month, but a bit of training ..."

"Won't hurt - I fully agree with that."

Cho's smile deepened. "You know what the scientists say? They say, if the man's really exhausted, chances for a boy are significantly better than otherwise. Naturally, the woman can't be the - er, subject at which he's going to become exhausted, so he has to find another means."

"Does he?" Her husband's eyes started to sparkle. "And who might that be?"

"I'll give you who! ... There's a training hall downstairs, remember? You should, after all, you've been the one who built it. Three hours hard training, so you can barely walk to the massage table, which means I have to help a bit ..."

Harry's green eyes were darkening. "That's an excellent idea. Maybe we should start with the walking and your helping a bit, I'm sure that needs more training than my getting tired with *aikido* ..."

* * *

Fleur Weasley passed the guard post with the two Goblins, giving them a smile and a "Bonjour", receiving not a smile - these guards never smiled - but an appreciating glance.

The glance felt totally unlike that from other men, from humans. A French man's glance would have scanned Fleur's body, her face, her hair, to pass quickly over the pram, registering the baby inside and Héloïse outside only as a fact that proved her state - married. While the Goblins ...

Two years ago, the special guard at the Weasley house had been abandoned, only to establish the same guard now fifty yards away, counting for the entire street here at the border of the Goblin quarter in Paris. Never since the uproar five years ago, when Fleur had lost her first, unborn child, another accident had happened, not even an insult shouted in the night - small wonder, these Goblins would shoot first, not caring to ask afterwards.

And they would do it even for an insult, people here in the quarters around knew. Their looks ... When Fleur passed, the guards looked up and down the street in a reflex, then at Héloïse, then at the pram, obviously longing to glance inside, so Fleur made sure to pass close enough for giving them a chance. The glance would end in her face, to check whether she looked okay, and to express their approval and their respect.

Fleur hadn't cared about Goblins in the past. Not for reasons of contempt, only they were Goblins, and she was a Veela. Quarter-Veela, okay, but ... Then Fleur had met Bill, who worked for the Goblins, and then Bill had received this Classified Request, which had earned them the magnificent house Fleur would reach in a moment, and the never-ending support of the Goblins because Bill and Fleur had promised to raise their children in the spirit of friendship between Veela, humans, and Goblins.

Then, after the streetfights, Fleur had felt grateful for the security. When Héloïse was born, three and a half years ago, once more Harry had insisted to select a Goblin as her godfather. He had been right - without saying a word, the Goblins had told Fleur time and again that battalions of them would die in the defense of her children, should the need arise. And this was an incredible feeling for a devoted mother, inevitably leading to thankfulness and sympathy.

The Goblins would give their life also for Michel, although this time Harry hadn't found another excuse, or maybe just because of that - seeing the guards' faces when coming down the street in the company of Harry and his devil daughter told Fleur enough. Harry, the bearer of the Goblin Request, known by every Goblin - Bill said Harry *was* a Goblin, had to be because of the Request, so Michel's godfather was Goblin and human and bearer and that was why Michel seemed still more precious to the guards than Héloïse.

Poor Héloïse - as if she hadn't trouble enough coping with this rival, ten months going eleven. Thank God, the worst was over in this regard.

Fleur reached the house and levitated the pram with both children upstairs. Opening the door, she knew Bill wasn't back yet. Well - hopefully within the next hour, giving her a chance to take care of her children and get ready for the welcome she had in mind. After one week with Bill in Egypt and this country's neighbourhood, Fleur felt a bit - er, single-minded.

Dropping the baguettes she had bought, she turned to her daughter. "Alors, ma petite, what about your hunger?"

"I'm not hungry yet."

Of course Héloïse wasn't - Fleur knew perfectly well by herself, only next moment she would start feeding Michel, and she had learned to ask his older sister first.

The tip had come from Rahewa, her sister Gabrielle's friend in Hogwarts. It was an Indian habit, asking down the scale from the oldest to the youngest. Only, there was a difference - Indian honour demanded to decline until the mouths were filled in reverse order, while Héloïse ...

But it had effect, undeniably. Some days ago, for the first time Héloïse had answered, "Feed him first" - a bit flippant still, as though embarrassed from her own generosity, but her mother's beaming had changed the pouty face to a smile.

"And what do you want to do while he's feeding?"

The most likely candidate would be the picture book in which the touch-sensitive figures talked about themselves, thereby unfolding the simple story. Or the spector - since Cho had

given Héloise the new cassette with *Groucho's* first kid movie - *The Little Witch and the Giants* - this kind of entertainment was slowly climbing the ranks in Héloise's personal charts.

"Ummm ..." The girl looked self-conscious. "Want to watch me play?"

Fleur's eyes widened. "Harp?"

A nod.

"That's a beautiful idea, Hély - table music."

Feeling breathless of joy, Fleur followed a beaming girl, to sit down in her room, opening her blouse, to breast-feed her son while her daughter was doing her experimental music.

The harp was a present from Wynor the Whistler, Héloise's godfather. Half a year ago, when he arrived with this bulky box, Fleur and Bill looked at him incredulously. "A harp??"

The dark, leathery face didn't smile. "It's a Goblin harp - I want to give it a try, and if it doesn't work out, well ..." Then Wynor's voice turned urgent, highly unusual with him. "But don't push her, and don't ever let her be lectured ... Let her find her way."

This way would be long, no question about that. But some weeks after that birthday, Fleur heard these sounds like no others coming from her daughter's room, and a while later, Héloise asked her for the first time whether she'd like to listen.

Shortly afterwards, a very consternated Bill returned from another business trip. "I found out a bit about Goblin harps."

"Really?"

"Yes. They asked of course how our daughter was doing, and I told them she's experimenting with her harp, and they asked a little more ... Well, and I said all I know it's a Goblin harp, and the plate says *Felison* ..." Bill looked worried. "And when I saw his awestruck face, I pushed a bit - and then he told me."

"Told you what?"

"A *Felison* - he said, there are just six known harps of this manufacturer, and if I'd tell him the rest of what's engraved in the plate, he could find out."

"Oh my God - it must have been awfully expensive."

Bill laughed humourlessly. "Expensive? Fleur, these pieces are priceless. I don't know what to say to Wynor the next time."

Wynor the Whistler didn't laughed, because Goblins only laughed about jokes. But with great satisfaction, he used the opportunity to express himself in human slang. "Don't wet your pants, Bill - it's a present like Harry's, and Héloise will have to decide to whom it has to be passed further."

Of course, he had meant Fleur as well - only he would never address her directly with such a disrespectful remark.

Fleur switched her son from her left tit to her right. Breast-feeding at the age of ten month was considered unusual among humans, while not among Veela. And it saved her from the contraceptive potion - Hermione's new stuff was definitely less distasteful, however still leaving room for improvement.

Fleur wondered what a music teacher might think of Héloïse's chords. She didn't really care, and young Michel seemed quite content with this combo of sensations. Which was a relief, because he was a bit - well, difficult, not at all the easy-goer like her daughter.

Michel wasn't recalcitrant. Just - difficult, had wept a lot more than Héloïse, and still did, often for seemingly inexplicable reasons. Everybody told Fleur Veela boys always were like that, nothing to worry about, the only mistake was to expect them behaving like Veela girls ...

Of course, Fleur always had a last resort, even during Bill's office hours. Only - it was a bit embarrassing, for a Veela mother, wasn't it, and then the time difference ... But Michel's godfather could calm down the boy almost at the first touch, with his tricks.

Actually, Harry's daughter could, too. Only there was always a price to pay - Sandra and Héloïse together, that meant asking for trouble. Héloïse would tease Sandra, sneer at her, and then Sandra would respond with one of *her* tricks, then Fleur's daughter would start crying - and next moment Harry had to manage with a boy, two girls, and a snake.

Well, he did, and Fleur herself was the only one feeling embarrassed.

The harp had brought a change, although not for the better yet. Once - only once, Sandra heard Héloïse playing. She stood frozen in a trance, until a moment later Héloïse recognized her, stopping abruptly.

It was the only time Fleur had ever heard the little devil weep.

Just barely, she avoided to order her daughter playing. Harry explained to Sandra that there was just one way to hear this music again - by saying the magic word and waiting patiently. Without hesitation, Sandra said, "Please. Please, please, please," to no avail.

Harry comforted his daughter, probably suppressing a nasty accident in the next second, and found the presence of mind to tell Héloïse that she was the only one who could play that music for Sandy. The half-quarter Veela looked very satisfied, sitting motionlessly otherwise.

Well - if Héloïse was ready to play for her brother, then, with a little luck and some more patience ...

The door downstairs cranked shut.

The girl had registered the sound, stopped playing, her head jerking up. "Papa!" She hurried toward the hall.

Fleur listened to the welcome outside, waited for father and daughter to appear in the door. When they came into sight, Héloïse on Bill's arm, Fleur felt startled - Bill looked horrible, not at all his normal self.

"Salu, ma reine." He bent down to kiss her.

Next moment, Fleur really felt worried - with the weight of his daughter, Bill had almost stumbled, and worse, the expected remark didn't come, that about him being envious at his own son, feeding from such sources.

"Bill - what is with you?"

"Erm - I feel a bit dizzy, must have caught one of the germs that are offered so generously down there."

He obviously tried to sound casual. That, together with the lack of another joke made Fleur feel really alarmed - Bill couldn't use the word *dizzy* without a remark about Veela power.

"Come into the kitchen." Fleur closed her blouse - Michel had stopped sucking already before - and rose to store her son in his bed before she went to feed the rest of her family.

Bill wouldn't eat, also declined the coffee. "May I have a cup of tea?"

Another bad signal. Bill had adjusted to French habits, café au lait was his normal drink. Fleur touched his forehead, sensing palpable heat. "You're running a fever - after the tea, I'll put you to bed."

Héloïse smiled at these words, finding the idea funny.

Bill tried to smile. "That's what I had in mind, only the planning was somehow different ... Sorry, my angel, but I'm afraid we have to delay that - maybe with a few hours sleep ..."

Fleur didn't think so.

Two hours later, she knew it was serious. Bill's temperature had passed forty, his pyjama already soaked, his sleep uneasy, his breath audible.

Past seven. If Fleur had needed additional proof, this was - serious illnesses always started outside office hours. Which wasn't a problem for her, because she knew whom to ask for help. But first she needed someone else.

Whom to ask - her mother or her mother-in-law?

Molly, her mother-in-law, did better with Michel while Fleur's own mother did better with Héloïse, not to mention the language. And Molly would of course try to take over Bill's care, leaving Fleur the children, which settled the case.

Fleur grabbed her phony, punched a button, feeling thankful for great favours - her parents had accepted the idea of walking around with this device only after Cho had implemented a new feature which could suppress any incoming call except for selected numbers.

And she was one of three exceptions.

Her mothers voice. "Fleur?"

"Salu, maman. I'm sitting at Bill's bed - he's caught a fever in Egypt, and I want to go for the doctor. Could you please come over to look after Héloïse and the boy?"

"But yes, my little. Just a minute."

Fleur, about two inches larger than her mother, started to plan her next steps.

02 - Night Watch

Hermione Krum sighed in her sleep, unwilling to lend an ear to this urgent whisper, not in that precious early morning hour before her alarm clock would set off.

A hissing snarl. "Stupid know-it-all! Someone needs you."

That was her phony, with the codeword for *truly urgent*, established by herself, except for the voice which was Cho's - nobody could hiss as malevolent as that.

Except Hermione herself, of course, but who'd wake from his own command?

"Who'ssit?" Her eyes still glued from sleep, Hermione seized for the torture box so it would reduce the volume - Viktor nextbed mustn't wake up.

"Poppy Pomfrey."

The doctor witch ... Wouldn't wake her unless for bad reason, and with Poppy's skill, the reason had to be quite bad.

"Comin'."

Sufficiently awake, Hermione moved her legs to the floor, heading for the bathroom. Some minutes later, she reached Poppy's office. "Mornin'."

The doctor witch of Hogwarts, the British school of wizardry and witchcraft, didn't waste time with apologies. "Thanks, Hermione ... Blood, urine, and sweat."

Hermione, potions witch of Hogwarts with a reputation spanning far beyond this school and its cooperated houses in other European countries, used to play the lab technician for Poppy - in cases that couldn't be cured with one of Poppy's own mixtures. Poppy never had found a taste for Muggle technology, while Hermione lacked any such prejudice. Her laboratory contained everything modern bio-medical technology could offer, and Poppy's aversion didn't go so far as not to ask for help.

Poppy's attempts not showing a satisfying effect - invariably this indicated some rare disease, normally a serious one. And by agreed habit, to prevent Hermione from any premature conclusion, Poppy wouldn't tell her anything until she asked by herself.

They went into the laboratory. Hermione took the urine first, started to work. Then she asked, "Symptoms?"

"Fever, heavy sweating ... No vomiting, no diarrhoea, actually no bowel activity at all ... The wife's been clever enough to catch the urine."

"Hmm ..." Hermione stared at the display of her diagnostic computer. "The urine shows nothing, except for the signs of the heavy sweating. Quite high, the fever, huh?"

"Forty-one five."

"What??"

"Sorry, that's been Celsius ... Er - hundred and six seven."

Hermione smiled admiringly. Nobody could convert between Celsius and Fahrenheit as quickly as Poppy, whose clientele was found not only in Hogwarts but also in Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Drachenfels, the three other schools associated with Hogwarts.

The sweat didn't tell Hermione anything new. She took the blood sample, filled a tube for her diagnostic miracle machine.

Two minutes later, she stared with bafflement at the display. "According to the blood count, the guy's healthy. Not a single leukocyte more than normal."

So it was nothing inflammatory, no viral attack, none of the diseases against which Poppy would fail. That left poisoning, except it couldn't - Poppy would have detected that.

Hermione looked up. "Either it's a disease which totally bypasses the immune system - only that I never heard of any. Or it's a poison you couldn't detect, which I think is impossible ..."

Poppy just nodded.

"... or it's Voodoo." Which was Hermione's term for anything bad as well as inexplicable.

"Then it's Voodoo."

"Did he travel recently?"

"Yes - came back with fever."

"Where from?"

"Egypt."

Which wasn't exactly famous for Voodoo, in contrast to Jamaica, Almyra's realm, or Haiti, Hermione's own playground at some time in the past. Who'd travel to ... Hermione stared at Poppy. "Who is it?"

"Bill Weasley."

So her premonition had been right. Well, Hermione didn't know anyone else working in that part of the world. Fleur was probably quite desperate, although - better Bill than any of the children, Fleur had a tendency to panic if one of her precious brats ...

"He's at home?"

"Yes, and I wouldn't like to move him."

It could mean Poppy wasn't going to expose the patient to the stress, or she wasn't going to expose herself to a screaming Fleur ... Probably both.

But they needed a shortcut between patient and these rooms here. And Hermione knew someone who would provide the shortcut. This early in the morning British time, he still should be awake, which didn't exclude the risk of calling him in bed ...

There was just one way to find out. Hermione seized for her phony, pressed a button. Moments later, she heard Harry's voice. "Hello, Hermione - did you fall out of your bed?"

"Something like that. I hope you didn't fall into yours yet."

She heard the grin through the voice. "Answer denied ... What's up?"

"I need a portkey, Harry. From here to Bill's bedroom."

"Messing with a Veela's a bad idea ..." Harry interrupted himself, suddenly serious. "He's ill and cannot move? Is he hurt?"

"No - just fever. Problem is, Potty and I don't know why."

* * *

"Okay, Harry. Jump minus two minutes."

Cho gulped the last of her tea, stood up from the breakfast table, heading for her purse, phony, and whatever else a businesswoman might need in the office. At the same time, Harry prepared himself - mounting his daughter in the sling at his chest, catching his snake, which was supposed to mount herself at his back, with her head wherever suitable.

Harry and Cho had developed this NASAese after realizing that a countdown provided a perfect method to avoid these useless, nerve-racking two minutes - one waiting for the other, tapping impatient feet, just for the lack of a signal. And Sandy liked the ritual.

"Jump minus one."

Harry stood ready, watched as Cho spoke with the house elves, stored the phony, looked at him to indicate that the last forty seconds could be skipped. He bent down, his lips touched the head of his daughter, like every morning sitting with her back to him, ready to face new horizons. "Okay, Shorty - shoot us down."

The girl's body straightened with this important job. "Five - four - three - two - one - zero."

The last word finished in Cho's office, with Cho appearing a split second later. She kissed her daughter, then Harry. "Okay, you gangsta - off with you."

"Gangsta," echoed Sandra with great enthusiasm. It was her newest acquisition, and woe Cho if she would forget to use the word when sending them off.

Harry said hello to Chrissy, then headed for the *Triple-A* floor, for a change using his legs. It might calm him down a bit, he felt jumpy enough - when calling Fleur this morning, the news had been no news, Bill unchanged with high fever, and Harry had to suppress the urge of jumping to Paris and stressing people's nerves still more.

Sally, Jesamine's assistant for *Triple-A*, greeted them. "Morning, Harry, Sandy, Nagini ... Jesamine's in Bio, to start her clean-up as she said."

"Yes, I heard she'll come over permanently - which'll make your own job a dead end, somehow ... You should make up your mind what's more important for you, animals or career."

Before the young woman could answer, her long hair started to move, without any breeze going through the room, then the foremost strings closed over her face.

Sally blew her mouth free, showing a smile. "We'll see ... I really want to be around when this pitch witch there in front of me's going to have her first role in a movie ... Harry, there's a buck with two zeroes, says she's going to hit the stage within the next three years."

"A sure bet - if you find someone who'd hold it."

The long hair fell back. Harry couldn't see his daughter's face, yet he could feel her beaming.

"Anything new for me, Sally?"

"Not really." The young woman looked toward a pile of scriptbooks. "Everybody wants a dragon, but the scripts are - er, crap." She quickly glanced at Sandra, after this near miss of another four-letter word. "The offer for the cornflakes ad's still pending, and the salary's climbing toward truly obscene numbers, only Jesamine's right with her judgement - it'd burn you forever."

A burnt dragon - today, Harry didn't feel like grinning about the joke. He left Sally, aiming toward the next office.

It was the administration wing of *Groucho Triple-P*, and a better joke than the previous one because this smallest of all *Groucho* daughter companies filled one office room and a large workshop in the basement. Triple-P stood for *Personal Portkey Programming*. Its chief executive officer was Ray Purcell, and calling him with his title would be understood as an invitation to a fistfight - he was an engineer, period.

About a year ago, Harry had finally managed the art of person-specific portkeys. Cho had taken the opportunity - no, not to have her own link between office and home, she liked the luxury of a summoning assistant called Harry too much, but to start a new branch.

At that occasion, Cho also took the opportunity to tell Harry that she could collect daughters much quicker than he, even if just daughter companies. Harry's answer indicated something about alternative contractors for that purpose, if that rubbing-in came once too often, or at the wrong moment. About to search his nose for a good one, Cho stopped - remembering just in time that her husband had mentioned the issue of another child several times, and quite carefully. Since then, Cho kept the presence of mind not to joke about daughters and sons.

At any rate - this company sold personal portkey, very few of them, at mind-numbing fees. Such a portkey represented the ultimate luxury item, money alone wasn't enough to get one, and Cho used them as a bribe in negotiations with great deviousness - however not without making sure that Harry would honour such an obligation. He was quite picky with his customers.

Ray did a bit more. He sold normal portkeys for private customers. In his spare time, Ray worked at Harry's trick, with Harry's full support. The engineer was near his goal, had already managed a portkey that worked for people close to each other, like siblings or long-married couples. While this seemed a good candidate for another article in the *Triple-P* portfolio, these portkeys were still too unreliable.

Harry found the office empty. So Ray would be in the workshop or on a business trip. Well - even if an order was waiting, a day more or less wouldn't matter, would make the piece just more precious to the customer.

Checking his watch, Harry realized that it was time to change dress without untidy haste, and then to reach his appointment - with Tony, his regular training partner in *aikido* and *kenjutsu*.

* * *

Tony Chee, profession movie director and producer, had executed this profession in Harry's first three movies - those in which Harry had played in his human shape, as an *aikido* fighter. As predicted earlier by several people, the first movie presented a story about a young man, falling in love with the sister of his worst enemy. Except that they put an eagle into the story, for good measure, to stand out from the usual crap of Eastern movies, and most of all because the eagle had been quite intrigued by the idea to play with Harry in a movie. So the title had been *The Man with the Eagle*.

Actually - the eagle, usually known as Almyra Lupin, covered two jobs. The first, public one that of an eagle while the camera was on, the second job coming from the eagle's best friend - to watch Harry and this girl, his movie love.

The inevitable sequel appeared under the title *In Search for Freedom*, and the fan community grew very upset because at the end, the young man set his eagle free. Naturally enough, movie number three was called *The Eagle Returns*, with the title alone calling back all those who had watched the other two.

Tony would have liked more. But first, Harry had been busy with roles for *Triple-A*, and then Sandra had arrived. In a year or so, Sandra would be old enough to accompany her father to the set without demanding too much of his attention for simple but urgent body functions.

Most people found the girl extremely demanding, Which was somehow funny - as Tony knew, Harry couldn't imagine anything as simple as the task of entertaining Sandra from dawn till dusk, minus siesta time. All he had to do was taking her with him, by just assuming that whatever they did together was okay. And it was.

Like this training ... Harry and Tony alternated between Harry's own training hall in the basement and Tony's training hall. Until half a year ago, this had been a training hall alright while not Tony's own - just a public one. The arrangement had changed quite suddenly.

When coming into the hall, Harry used to drop snake first and daughter then, knowing that Sandra would talk Nagini into curling so that she could sit or lie comfortably - on the snake, of course - while watching the scene. A moment later, all of Harry's attention would be with his training opponent.

Then, one day, in the middle of an action sequence, Harry felt a yelling in his *haragei*, rolled out of Tony's kicking range, to sprint down the hall where he knew Sandra and Nagini.

Tony reached them a moment later, finding Harry with Sandra on his arm, a snake strongly resembling a cobra in her stance, and a man Tony knew from the set. The man was lying at the floor, twisting in spasms, and his right shoulder and upper arm were swelling by the second.

"Harry - what ..."

"This man - he was seizing for Sandra, and what Nagini felt made her come up and bite him."

"Bite? ... I didn't know she's poisonous."

"Me neither."

Tony wasn't likely to forget the look in Harry's face. "What kind? Is there an antidote?"

"Nagini says no, there isn't."

Tony recovered quicker than Harry. "Trust your snake - and besides, she saved me from a problem - since you're my guest here, Harry, it would have been my duty to kill him, and I'm not high enough at the social scale to do it without getting trouble."

Two minutes later, the man was dead.

Tony felt deeply embarrassed, although not for this reason. "Harry, I cannot forgive myself for having put your daughter at such a risk. Please accept my apologies." With a short bow, he turned, about to leave.

"No - wait!" Harry stopped him, knowing well that this was the last chance to stay in touch with his friend. "You will get rid of that corpse. Then you will spread the story all over - everybody must know what to await from Nagini, when she's protecting Sandra. If you get in trouble from that - tough. When the story's around, you'll come to me ... Then we'll finish today's training."

Tony Chee bowed again. "In your hall, Harry."

At the second training after this episode, Harry said, "We're out of balance, Tony ... You need a hall of your own."

"Yes, I know."

"Why not building one in the basement of your house?"

Tony laughed. "Because it's impossible. There's solid rock underneath ... You know, it's not really a problem, except that they would blow the house on top together with the rock."

Grinning, Harry replied, "You stupid Muggle. Let me show you how a wizard's going to carve a training hall - what do you think how this one's been made?"

Since then, Harry's training felt balanced again, and Tony's almost - for him, the story still had left some ob, but that was okay, nothing to bother with when Harry came closer on the large *dojo*. In *aikido*, Tony felt on a par, while *kenjutsu* ...

Although, today, Harry seemed a bit absent-minded. Tony stepped back, dropped his *bokken*. "What's your problem, Harry? Did your bank call and tell you the last million wouldn't fit into the safe?"

Harry's smile came and went. "Er - yes. I gave them your address."

Tony nodded. "I'm your friend in such a dire need." He walked to the bundle of snake and girl, crouched down. "Hey, little dragon, can you tell me what's Harry's problem?"

The girl studied the Chinese face in front of her with great seriousness, then said, "Dunno" - her answer to all questions she didn't quite understand, without feeling in the mood to admit this embarrassing state.

Harry had reached them. "It's Bill, my step-brother. He ..."

"Fever!" caroled the girl, looking pleased to have found the keyword.

Harry nodded to her. "You're right, my angel." He turned to his friend. "It's a bit high, and our medicine witches can't find the reason." He explained what he'd done the previous evening to make two rooms adjacent to each other, one in the north of England, the other in the French capital.

Tony came up. "Why don't you go and try your luck?"

"Me? ... Tony, I'm good for some bruises, stuff like that. There's Poppy and Hermione - I'd just hang around and waste space."

The movie director with a knack for bizarre Eastern skills nodded. "Only that's exactly what you want to do - and besides, I've heard about some strange bruises you heal."

"So, did you? ... From whom?"

Despite Harry's hard stare, Tony grinned. "Must have been some bird, although it wasn't that little."

The stare softened. "Of course - who else ..."

"C'mon, Harry - the training's over anyway ... Trust your instincts ..." Tony stopped, looked at Sandra. "Or is it contagious?"

"No - Hermione's sure about that."

"Well, then - bye, Harry." Tony bowed.

His young friend showed the flicker of a smile, bowed. "Bye, Tony." A moment later, he had reached that heap of animal and - well, human, or so they said.

Tony watched how the girl popped up, was stored in the slingseat, while the snake stretched upward to place herself around the muscular body. He still could remember a time when this view had given him the creeps.

Next instant, they were gone, and the air popped into the emptied space.

* * *

Fleur stared mindlessly at the scene in front of her. She was sitting on a chaiselongue in the baby room, adjacent to the bedroom. The double-wing door between both rooms had been removed some hours ago, so she could see the bed, the small table at its side, the bio monitor on the table ... And Bill, lying in the bed, under a thin cover that was changed hourly. And Hermione, who had taken over the shift from Poppy a while ago, sitting, standing, watching, changing infusion bottles.

The bottles seemed to empty right into the blanket, passing Bill's body just as an unavoidable detour. The faint beeps from the monitor told Fleur that Bill's pulse wasn't slowing, not at all, oh God, would it at least keep steady?

Hundred and forty, something like that. If it climbed above hundred and sixty, Hermione had said, things would turn critical. All symptoms of a heavy infection - but only to the outside, while inside everything looked fine.

From the chemistry, that was. Except that Bill's curricular system was barely able to cope with the heat, the fever which was threatening to burn him alive. Fluid, fluid, fluid - first Poppy, then Hermione inserted fluid whichever way they found, infusion, injection, after having stopped the useless attempts with pulse-downers.

Because the pulse didn't go down. It climbed. For compensation, the amplitude of the green curve on the monitor was shrinking.

Héloïse sat beside Fleur on the chaiselongue, subdued, silent, while Elienne, Fleur's mother, was taking care of a baby boy who issued a whimpering every now and then.

Please ... Don't let the pulse rise still more, please ...

A sound from downstairs. Fleur didn't recognize, barely noticed when her mother headed for the door.

A moment later, her mother was back. In her trail came Harry with his usual luggage, daughter and snake. Harry here - a comfortable thought, while his daughter wasn't exactly what Fleur had missed, not now, not with the two girls ...

Harry dropped first his daughter, then his snake at the place next to Fleur, made a step toward her, grabbed her for the French welcome. "Salu, Fleur - let me cheer you up."

Fleur jolted, feeling like hit by an electric sting, only it wasn't where Harry's lips had touched her cheeks - it was inside her, in her mind. Then she realized - he'd used one of his tricks toward her.

It awakened her like a shot of pure energy. She watched Harry welcoming Héloïse, saw her daughter startling, smile an instant later - obviously from a similar treatment.

Fleur managed to speak. "Salu, 'arry ..."

Harry turned to her mother - Fleur recognized Elienne's expectant look, no doubt she'd been the target of a welcome wave already in the staircase. Now Harry took Michel from Elienne's arm. And right, as if a switch was turned, the child stopped whimpering.

Fleur looked at Sandra, saw her eyes hanging at father and boy, attentive - well, Sandra and Michel, that was how she'd like things between that girl and her own ...

Harry stood in front of her. "Hey, mother of this hungry young man - has your milk turned sour, or what's up?"

Checking the time, Fleur flushed. "Oh my God ..." With surprise, she realized that the desperate crying she had felt a minute before wouldn't burst out. Quickly, she unbuttoned her blouse, took her son from Harry's arm, felt the sucking start instantly.

And now she had the full attention of the girl at her side. Sandra hardly noticed how her father took Nagini, walked over to the bed.

Elienne looked at the picture with her daughter and her grandson, flanked by a girl at each side, found a short smile. "I'm in the kitchen."

Fleur nodded, her glance barely turning from the scene in the bedroom. Harry and Nagini, close to Bill, apparently touching him while hissing at each other. A moment later, Harry was up, spoke with Hermione in a low tone.

Hermione nodded, said something to him, her face strained. Now both were looking at the monitor.

Harry dropped his snake on the bed, stepped behind Hermione, took her shoulders. It seemed as though he was straightening her body.

For an instant, from Fleur's perspective, the two were looking like lovers - the woman leaning against Harry, her face coming up. Then Harry whispered something in her ear - when they separated, Fleur could see a quick smile at Hermione's face, instantly making room for fierce determination.

Fetching his snake, Harry came back to Fleur. "We checked him both - Nagini and I. Nagini says he feels somehow different, and I'd say pretty much the same, but it's nothing - er, special. His mind's working in high-speed gear - naturally so, with this fever ... But there's nothing to worry about in his mind, Fleur - I mean, he isn't going insane or anything of that kind ... All we have to worry about is the fever, nothing else."

Basically, it was the same Hermione had said a while before, after doing an EEG at her husband. Still - hearing it confirmed from these two mind-readers, Fleur felt some relief.

Harry bent down to Héloïse. "How are you, my little Veela?"

"Papa is ill ... Can you cure my papa?"

Fleur suppressed an impulse to answer her daughter. As natural as it might have been, trying to prevent a guest from some embarrassment - Harry used to go berserk if someone else answered a question that had been asked to him, from a child.

Harry said, "I'll be here, Hély. I'll help Hermione, and your maman ..."

The half-quarter Veela had come to a decision. "Please cure him, 'arry ... Then I'll play for you - and Sandy."

Fleur had to suppress herself again, this time from a gasping. She was about to speak when she felt the light touch from Harry's hand, stopping her.

Harry looked at the girl. "You would do that?"

A nod. Héloise had thrown in everything she had.

"Then I'm sure it will work - your playing is so beautiful, nobody can resist or keep his fever if you're ready for that ... Is it okay if Sandy helps me with your papa?"

A short moment of hesitation, then another nod, and a new look in the girl's face.

Fleur stared at him. "What do you have in mind, 'arry?"

Harry seemed genuinely surprised from the question. "Stabilizing him, what else? You heard it - this offer's ..."

"Yes, but - Sandra?"

Harry knelt down. "Fleur, Sandy's a source of power against which I look pale - you know that. She cannot use it properly, but together we can." He grinned. "She's going to earn her salary - except we have to wait a moment until you two have finished. If I'd take her away from that spectacle, she'd be very ungraceful."

Fleur looked at the power source whose stare hung unwavering at her son, obnoxious to anything else around.

Harry had grabbed his snake, was back at Héloise. "Sandy and I, we'll be at your papa's bed. So Nagini is free. Do you want to sit with her?"

Expectantly, Fleur waited for the answer. The girl had done this in the past, but she had been quite young then - since Sandra was around, this would have been a very bad idea, even in the unlikely case of Nagini's agreement.

A hesitant nod.

"Then let's do it ... Move a bit - okay." The snake was around Héloise, a view which might have sent most other mothers screaming. But not Fleur, and her daughter, comfortably supported like in a hand-tailored seat, Héloise's expression showing how the memory resurfaced.

Harry stepped over to Hermione, spoke with her. Fleur saw Hermione's head snap up, stare at Harry, then at Sandra, then at the monitor ... Then she nodded. Now Harry reached for his phony, probably to talk with Cho. What was it in California - noon? Something like that.

Harry's voice kept low - first neutral, then soothing. Then, for a moment, it bore a steely sound. Next instant, the gentleness was back.

Harry stored the box, came to Fleur. "I told Cho that we're here, and that it may take a while."

"Yes, I heard you talking."

A short grin. "She was a bit worried because of Sandy ... By the way, Fleur, before I forget - when we'll sit there, don't interfere just because Sandy's peeing or whatever. I don't think she will, but it might happen."

Fleur stared at him. "Okay, 'arry. Can I remove it?"

Harry grinned again. "All you can do with a spell. But don't touch her."

Fleur nodded.

Then her son was done with feeding, and Harry had his daughter's attention back. "Sandy," he said, "would you like Hély playing music for you?"

Widening eyes, a nod - for an instant, Fleur felt something in her mind like the opening and closing of a furnace door.

"Then we must help Bill. Shall we do that?"

A very determined nod.

Harry grabbed his daughter, walked over to the bed. A moment later, the bed was moved more into the middle, with the headboard cut off to make room for the two. Harry sat down in lotus position, his daughter in his lap.

Fleur stood up to watch from inside.

Harry's eyes were closed, also those of the girl. The faces looked calm - not masklike at all, just quiet, unmoving, somewhere far away.

Fleur's glance met Hermione's, then both looked at the monitor on which the pulse display had reached hundred and fifty-five.

The pulse rose - hundred and sixty-three, then it dropped, ever so slowly. Frozen in suspense, the two women stood watching - hundred and sixty, hundred and fifty, hundred and forty-five ...

After some more minutes, the segmented numbers had stopped changing. Hundred and twelve. And the amplitude was stronger than for the last four hours.

With a trembling sigh, Fleur turned to Hermione. "What about that?"

"Well - for Bill it's okay. He could hold that for weeks."

Only Harry couldn't, not to mention the girl.

Nor could Fleur herself.

Hermione started working at another infusion bottle. Apparently, she saw her chance to give Bill a fluid stabilizer as well.

Fleur walked back to the chaiselongue, sat down beside her daughter. "They're doing it. The pulse is down."

"This is good, Maman?"

"Oh yes, it is. And it was your doing, my little one."

A nod. "I play for them."

Some time during the next hour, the girl had fallen asleep. And Fleur herself too, only that she came awake now, maybe from the smell that hung around the bundle in her arm. Guiltily, she glanced at Nagini, but the snake showed no sign of anger, its unblinking stare toward the bed while its body served as the most comfortable armchair. Fleur rose to clean up her son and to take him to bed.

For the next two hours, nothing much changed. Elienne came with some food for Hermione, and the potions witch wolfed it down, between bites staring at the monitor on which the pulse display was wavering around hundred and then. Even Fleur managed a piece of baguette.

Then the pulse started to climb again.

When it lingered around hundred and forty, suddenly Cho stood in the bedroom. Obviously, she had taken the route toward Hogwarts and from there through Harry's portkey. Cho stared at her husband, her daughter, stepped over to Fleur. "How's it going?" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Pulse is rising again. For the last three hours, Harry and Sandy could hold it down."

"Harry and Sand ..." Cho stopped, looked alarmed. "Did it rise from me being here?"

"No, no - it started something like fifteen minutes ago. Hermione says it's the final battle."

Cho found a chair, placed it beside Fleur's, sat down. After a moment, her hand searched for Fleur's hand, took it.

The display climbed toward hundred and fifty, then hundred and sixty.

Hundred and sixty five.

Hundred and sixty eight, back to hundred and sixty three. Another flicker at the monitor - up, and down again.

A murmur from Hermione. "The amplitude ... look at the amplitude - it's unbelievable how strong it is ..."

Fleur glanced at her. "His heart - can it hold that?"

"Definitely. Look at the curve - so strong, doesn't shrink, isn't flurry at all ... He's not doing it alone." Hermione stood up to switch the infusion bottle. When her hand touched Bill's skin, she twisted, gasped.

Fleur felt alarmed. "What ..."

"It's okay - I touched him by accident, and that got me a dash of what's playing inside him - them two, I mean." Hermione looked at Cho. "I can't help thinking it's been Harry who did the rising ... As if he'd said, c'mon, Bill, get over with it."

Cho nodded, her eyes not leaving the two figures. "I wouldn't wonder."

A fine film of sweat covered the faces of father and daughter. Hermione had no intention to touch them. "I'll be back in a few minutes - my feeling is, within the next hour we'll need an anti-burnout drink ... Two, actually."

Cho twisted. "That stuff? ... Cass won't drink it, burns like hell."

Hermione had the presence of mind to suppress her know-it-better face. "Yes, but only for people who have to drink it the normal way. The only problem is to tell her that she needs it."

"Then go tell it Nagini - her word's gospel for Cass."

Word? ... Maybe so. Hermione saved any reply, touched the portkey to Hogwarts, was gone.

Fleur pressed the sweaty hand in her own. "Did he tell you what Hély has promised?"

"No - what?"

Fleur told her.

Cho turned around to look at the sleeping girl, turned back, smiling. "A Veela through and through, huh?"

Fleur wasn't sure whether it came as a compliment or a reproach. Anyway, this seemed quite common with Cho's remarks.

Hermione reappeared with two bottles, checked the monitor, pressing her lips. The display showed hundred and seventy two.

For the next fifteen minutes, nobody spoke. Then, almost simultaneously, a sigh from three mouths - the display was wandering ... Downward.

Half an hour later - Bill's pulse was down to eighty five - Harry's eyes came open. A glassy look around, then his lips bent down onto the black hair before him, murmured something.

The girl's eyes opened. A disoriented look, then her eyes steadied at her mother. "Mummy - music!"

Harry looked at his wife, his smile unsteady, his voice croaky. "Hi, beauty ... You've got some daughter."

Who would have to wait still a while for her music - seconds after Harry had sent the last small potion ball down her throat, Sandra had fallen asleep.

* * *

It was a sound that woke him. But next moment, Bill Weasley thought it had been his full bladder, or his dry mouth, or his back that was hurting as though he'd been lying in bed for days without moving.

Which wasn't unlikely, after all, as it dawned on him when he tried to remember what had happened. He'd come home - then ... Things had happened, maybe with him, and maybe he'd find them again in a brain that felt strange.

But first things first. Bill went for the bathroom, startled from his weak legs. Someone had stolen his springiness.

How far could a bladder stretch? Incredible - he couldn't press a bit, yet his water flew and flew. Bit dark, for his taste. And he had time to realize that feeling in his head - like a hangover from a first-rate booze, no headache at all, the stomach just a wee bit edgy, only that reality had these blurred contours.

He flushed. Emptying the second cup of tap water, Bill could hear outside someone coming in a hurry.

With his second step through the door, Fleur had reached him, for an instant frozen, looking at him, then she held him, quite carefully, quite unlike herself. "You're awake? ... How are you?"

Then she hung at him. "Oh, Bill, Bill ..."

He held her, dizzied by the impact, by a familiar wave, although the effect was an unfamiliar nothing - well, nearly nothing. Unbelievable, how weak he felt.

With a happy daughter in his lap, Bill heard the full story. Until Fleur had finished, the bafflement had faded from his face but not from his mind. Fever ... Strange, that.

"... Don't you remember anything?"

"There ... Some weird stuff, although I don't remember any detail - fever dreams, I think."

At this moment, the patience of his daughter was running thin, and she had to tell him her version.

"So it's been you who cured me - you and your music, right?"

Savouring her father's hugging, the girl was too much Veela to accept such a statement without the shadow of a doubt, and too much French woman to question a compliment. Then the delicate nose crinkled. "Papa, you smell!"

Bill laughed. "Yes, my sweet little rose. Let me shower and dress, before you two claim a medal for bravery." Heading for the bathroom again, he heard his daughter ask her mother what kind of medal this was.

The hot water rinsed off the blurring from Bill's perception. It also brought back the memory of some thought, or feeling, during the past two days - something like the same idea rotating round and round, as if a thought had attempted to pop up in thick mud, too light for reaching the surface.

The cold water fully activated his senses - stepping out of the shower, he felt like starving. Shaving and dressing - he would survive three more minutes without food.

The mirror greeted him with a face that might look familiar, once the reddish fur was gone. He pointed his wand. "*Tondobarba*."

Huh?

Bill pointed again, articulating every syllable. "*Ton-do-bar-ba*."

The reddish didn't fade.

Bill stared at his wand, rushed it through the air. Nothing.

"*Lumos! ... Accio slippers! ... Mergallato!*"

It didn't work!!

Dammit ... What kind of fever could burn out a wand?

Bill quickly dressed, went into the kitchen. "Fleur? My wand doesn't work any longer - may I have yours, just for shaving?"

His wife looked at his wand, at him, a strange expression in her face. She seized for his wand, struck it down with a sharp movement.

A rain of glittery sparkles faded in mid-air.

Bill stared at her, took Fleur's wand from an outstretched hand. A split second of hesitation, then he swung it in a half-arc from one side to the other.

Nothing.

Slumping down on a chair, Bill's hunger was forgotten. He had missed the scary show completely, although now he felt truly frightened.

* * *

Harry sat at another kitchen table, his daughter standing on his knees, her body halfway flung over the table plate, supported by his hands. Sandra worked hard at a miracle map that was touch-sensitive and offered a nice set of zoom functions. Harry felt leisurely lazy, while his daughter felt just great.

For good reason. Some minutes before, they still had been hopping through the Hogwarts park like Easter bunnies, together with Rahewa. Sandra's godmother was working at apparition, actually pretty close to her goal, and Harry had given her a demo lesson, jumping ten yards apiece while Rahewa had been trying to follow.

Another good reason was that tomorrow would be Saturday, and the girl, her father, her mother, and her snake - the one which everybody thought was Harry's - would visit the Weasleys, and then Sandra would hear *music*. Tomorrow was somehow terribly far away, but the girl knew it meant one more sleeping.

While the here and now was dedicated to far-away places. Sandra would touch the map, which would zoom into some region on earth, and Harry had to tell her the name of that area, or city, or country.

If this would give a lesson in geography, then only for Harry. At any rate, Sandra's work represented more than an entertaining game, because once a week the girl was entitled to select a place they would visit. She did so with great care, making sure the shape on the map in front of her, the colours, and the sound of what Harry said matched her current mood.

Then Harry had to find a way to reach that place, come hell or high water. As a result, his repertoire of places he could reach via apparition was growing quickly, his global network card for the linkports of *Magical Tours* could earn its value, and the time of father and daughter, on a Firebolt Magnum up in the air, covered a measurable fraction of the week.

All this counted just as preparation. The visit itself would be done with Cho in the summoned trail. Harry's collection of known places grew a bit faster than his list of memorable remarks from Cho, coming out at the destination, though not much.

Touch. "Philippines ..."

Sandra liked the sound of that. Touch. "Mindanao."

What an ugly shape. Zoom out, zoom in. "Palawan."

Better - the island shaped like a snake, and a name like something to bite into.

Touch. "Porto Princesa - your place, Sandy, what with that name ..."

Harry's phony chimed.

Holding the girl with one hand, Harry seized at his belt, came up with the box, looked at the display. Toward a face which had turned, and into a challenging glare, he said, "It's Ron." Woe him if he'd start talking without telling Sandra first who called.

Ron Weasley was Harry's oldest living friend and his youngest step-brother, no matter which counting. Ron worked for the European Council, their expert for magical education, and he

and his wife Janine, awaiting her first child come November, would be part of tomorrow's round in the Weasley house - in Paris, not to be confused with *The Burrow*, the family residence near London.

"Hi, Ron. How's your pen-pushing?"

Harry listened, his eyes widening. "Nothing? ... Did he check with Hermione? ... Yeah, I had the same thought, a burnout gone too far, so it needs ... Oh, did he? And? ... A full cup, and then just a few sparks? Doesn't sound nice ..."

Harry kept silent for a longer moment. "Yes, of course - I have little doubt about that, but a check won't hurt ... Bah, what a nonsense - it takes less than five ..." Harry stopped himself, studying the serious face in front of him. "No - might take some more minutes, here's someone who'll aim straight for her premium ... Yes, okay - see you tomorrow, and remember - gymnastics for a mother-to-be is *not* what you ... Yeah, sure, but I don't mind minding yours too."

Still smiling, Harry pressed another button. Just in time, he remembered. "That's Bill and Fleur, Sandy."

After some seconds, he heard Bill's voice.

"Hi, Bill, Harry here. Listen, Ron just told me you've got some trouble with your magic ... ah, c'mon, don't be ridiculous ... no, really - but our brother had a good idea, just to be sure. He thought we should let Nagini do a check on you - then you know if you're Muggle or wizard ... How good? Bill, if she says you're a gnome, then you're a gnome, no matter what Fleur thinks - but I'm pretty sure ... And besides, there's a young lady here who's playing fireworks in her brain since she heard your name ... Is your kitchen free? ... Okay, living room, then, I'm just going to fetch the two."

Harry clipped his phony. "C'mon, you traveller, let's go."

"Awler?"

Harry laughed. "Yes, this too. Trav-el-ler, we travel to Bill and Fleur and Hély and Michel."

"Music!"

"Hopefully." Harry seized his daughter and went for sling and snake.

Moments later, he stood in the living room of the Weasley house, having crossed an ocean and eight hours time difference.

Bill came in. "The unholy trinity." But his smile was weak.

Harry put his daughter on the floor. While he stepped toward Bill, the girl was already scurrying out of the door.

"Put your hands at her neck, Bill ... Okay."

When the hissing had stopped, Harry turned to his oldest step-brother. "Well - the good news first ... You're not a Muggle."

Relief in Bill's face, renewed concern. "And the bad ones?"

Harry's voice was expressionless. "She says you don't feel like a Muggle, but you don't feel like a wizard either ... It's something new to her - but then, she never met someone with a burnout."

Harry tiptoed to the door, listened, came back. "Bill, we need five minutes for a test. Ready for summoning?"

A worried nod.

"You'll need your Tours card."

Now Bill had understood. With new hope in his eyes, he went for his office, returned moments later. "Okay."

Next second, Harry stood in the Paris Linkport. He concentrated a moment, then Bill appeared in front of him, asked, "Harry, does this already count as a test?"

"Good question - so far, I summoned only wizards. C'mon."

The next port due had Lyon as destination. Showing their network cards, the two men entered the waiting room. Three minutes later, the line shuffled forward.

Harry saw Bill's lips pressed together, almost white. He kept behind, held his breath while Bill walked into the gate ...

... and disappeared.

He found him again in Lyon Linkport. Bill exhaled. "Whew, Harry - I'm so glad - for a moment ..."

"Yeah - to be honest, me too ... C'mon, let's look after our daughters. Ready?"

Bill's nod finished in the Weasley living room. Checking around, they both heard the mesmerising sounds of a Goblin harp coming across the hall. Harry smiled. "Angel music ... Question is, which of the two is the angel?"

"Both of them, what else?"

"Then we shouldn't disturb them, in this precious state ... Bill, did Hermione have any idea how you caught that fever?"

"No. She said - whatever it's been, it must have been in the days before - probably during my trip. She says, such a heavy attack, that cannot linger inside you for weeks, or months."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, sounds reasonable. Listen, we both have a job till tomorrow, when half of the family comes together."

"Do we?"

"Yep. Yours - you'll reconstruct your route in every detail, so we can trace it back, or follow it again."

Bill's head jerked up. "You can't be serious! Imagine it's still there ..."

"That's what I hope." Harry grimaced. "And that's why my job is a bit more difficult, because I have to find a good argument how to sell it to Cho."

"No, Harry - no way. For all I know, you'd even do it with Sandra, and ..."

"Yes of course - she and Nagini together, the magical power isn't made yet these two won't detect."

Bill shook his head. "Forget it. Cho would kill me, and Fleur would help her."

Harry grinned. "That'd be the day ... And before you start getting stubborn, Bill - did you think about the alternative? I figure you want to be a wizard again, right?"

His brother looked sick, started to inhale ...

"Bill, you're not going to lecture me, are you? That'd be the first time, and once too often ... C'mon, relax - I'm not going to play tough and stupid."

"No, you're not - why, stupid alone does the trick."

"That's better, because - I'll need you tomorrow, to take your share of the heat."

Bill grimaced. "Don't think I'm lecturing you, Harry, but you'll need something else, then."

"What?"

"A full-body armour ... Magic-proof."

03 - History Lesson

Ron Weasley, the European Council's chief delegate for EMEC affairs, a tall young man with alarmingly red hair - even trimmed as short as it was - watched with expectation how his friend and brother Harry would touch the issue.

For himself, touching sensitive issues was daily work - in his job, though, while today it was Saturday, and Ron sat with family members in a comfortable living room in the centre of Paris. EMEC stood for *European Magical Education Council*, something like a state in a state but spanning countries, and with these touchy people, *everything* would rate as sensitive. For Ron representing a Muggle administration - the cleverest move he'd ever made - these Magicals felt already betrayed when they saw him.

Why? Because he was a wizard himself.

Ron had started moving figures still as a Hogwarts student. He had honed his skill over years, so today he could claim quite some expertise in telling an audience a nasty truth or two, in luring them into a compromise of the uncomfortable kind.

While Harry ...

His brother was no diplomat, for starters. Much too straightforward, frighteningly honest, downright blunt. Yes, sure, listening to Harry came as a refreshment, after a week with the wand-wagglers ... And besides, usually it didn't matter how Harry would express himself because it was difficult not to like him, easy to get along with him - and a terrible mistake to try otherwise, what with his scary set of skills ...

Only, today Harry wanted to talk his wife Cho into something she wasn't going to buy. He was bound to fail, the poor sod.

Worse still - Harry wasn't entirely aware of the opposition he had to face. Such a bad mistake was highly unusual for him, but in these special circumstances - Ron couldn't blame his step-brother, while at the same time feeling pretty sure this wouldn't happen to himself.

Harry looked as if he thought the moment right. Everybody relaxed, or so it seemed, young Michel on Harry's arm, while the two girls would be found some rooms down the hall, treating each other with harp music from one side and a comfortable seat on a snake from the other side. And the newcomer still out of sight, well hidden in Janine's body, which recently had started showing first signs of her pregnancy.

Ron decided to give Harry a launch. As an experienced negotiator, he did so by addressing someone else, this time his oldest brother. "So what are you going to do, Bill? Any idea?"

"Hmm ..." Bill looked at Harry.

Who caught the opportunity. "As long as we don't know what happened, whatever he does is a shot in the dark, and we shouldn't be surprised if it doesn't work."

Harry sent a glance around. The result seemed to encourage him. "That's why we have to find out what happened to him. For all we know, it must have happened on his last trip. So quite obviously, the first step is to trace back this journey."

Still quiet attention from the others - most of all from Cho, and this was certainly the reason why Harry now looked a bit uncertain. He continued nonetheless. "Best we can do is travelling the same route, visit the same places ... It must have been something magical - something that can be sensed if you're close enough ... er, and if you have someone to - er, sense it ..."

Harry's voice trailed, while the bafflement in his face was growing. At the same time, an expression of guilt - and a fine film of sweat - was spreading in Bill's face.

Ron felt pity with both of them, for quite different reasons. He asked, "What exactly should that be, Harry? ... And who should do it?"

"Erm - Bill's trip probably started with a jump to some hotel, I'd assume. So we do the same. Then he met people, went around, and again we do the ..."

"Who's we?" Cho, for the first time speaking, something glittery in her voice. Probably in her eyes too, except Ron couldn't see them because Cho was staring at poor Harry.

"Well," replied Harry, "that would be - er, Bill himself, then me, with Nagini of course - er, and Sandy as always ..."

"Always, huh?"

Apparently surprised from being still alive and unhurt, surprised more from Cho's calm tone, Harry looked at her - then his eyes widened, and his head jerked around to stare at Bill.

So he'd recognized the plot. Well, could nobody say he wasn't fast.

Bill swallowed. "Sorry, but ... I told them what you have in mind, Harry. Er - it was the only way to stop you ..." Bill's face darkened by the second. "Don't look at me that way - but honestly, I can face a life without magical power better than I can face a life in which I'm the one to blame for what could happen to Sandra, and to yourself."

"You ..."

Ron watched Harry's hands. If they'd touch, forming an arrowhead ... But they didn't.

Harry's voice was icy. "Clever, Bill, really ... One of these days, you'll outsmart yourself, and that'll be the day when you can kick yourself in the ass. Listen, you wonderbrain, what do you think who's got you down from your high-speed fever? ... Huh? ... Who, Bill?"

"Why, you and ..."

"Bullshit - I'd have burned out after the first hour. Sandy was it - all I did was steering the flow, and this alone was a hairy job, take my word for it. Her only problem was to keep going - not from lack of power, just from not being used to such a long task. But the price at the

other end of the tunnel kept her going - the music, so you can rightfully say it was your daughter as much as mine who ..."

"She's mine too."

Harry turned to his wife, nodded. "Yes, she is. This determination ..."

"And that's why the answer is no. And that's why the rest of the team would be underequipped - you just confirmed that, right?"

Poor Harry - beaten with his own argument. Usually, it was his job to do that with his opponents. According to Harry's expression right now, tasting the own medicine had to be a rather unpleasant experience.

But apparently he hadn't given up. Of course not - not him, the one responsible for half of Sandra's determination ...

Fleur spoke. "Please, Harry - the best we could expect is that you'd find nothing, and the worst that you'd catch the same illness. There's no sense in such an attempt."

Harry didn't answer.

Which startled Ron. He knew - Harry would try it alone with his snake, in good trust that Nagini would sense the risky spot soon enough. Maybe he was right, only that Ron could see some alternatives for a first step. He said, "Let's think it over for a moment. If Harry's right, then somewhere along Bill's route is a - a something which makes an ordinary wizard ..." Ron smiled at Bill, "... or a special one, whatever, to catch a fever which ends with the loss of the magical power. Is that correct so far?"

An expectant nod from Harry. A surprised nod from Bill. And a suspicious glare from Cho.

"Then what about the other wizards along the path? What about them? - Did they catch a fever too, or nothing? What about the Goblins, the Muggles? If they're all at good health, then it must have happened while Bill was alone, or it was a very specific attack toward him."

Heads were turning toward Bill.

The oldest Weasley son looked at his wife, grinned. "When I was alone, I was alone - which doesn't mean I didn't have to decline some offers, that's always part of Arabian hospitality ... Goblins weren't involved - I visited them in Cairo, that's all ... Aside from me, there were two wizards, and the rest was Muggles."

"These two - have you been together with them all along the trip?"

"Not quite - we met down there, and at the end ..."

Harry leaned forward. "Do you know how to reach them?"

"Yeah, sure - I have their numbers. Monday morning ..."

"Forget Monday." Harry's voice had this special sound, almost leisurely, which never failed to make Ron's hair rise. "Do me a favour Bill - call them now."

"Now? Saturday evening at nine o'clock?"

Not hearing a reply, Bill found his question answered sufficiently. He came up with his phony, pressed a button. "Said ben Al'jareb, please."

Silence around the table. After a moment, a voice said something in what seemed Arabic, and Bill responded in the same language. After some more sentences, while Bill accompanied his own contributions with smiles and bows, the phone conversation was over. Bill looked up. "Said's okay - no fever, nothing."

He pressed the call button again. "Konstantin Georgiadis, please."

The same pantomime around the table. Then a voice, probably Greek. Bill kept to his French. "Good evening, this is Bill Weasley from Gringotts. Please excuse my calling that late in the evening, but may I speak with Konstantin?"

The answer was unintelligible, while Bill's expression changed from polite embarrassment to deep consternation. "I'm so sorry to hear that - please accept my condolence ... What was ... That's terrible ... Please excuse again ... goodbye."

Bill looked into the round. "Konstantin's dead ... He died two days after returning from that trip ... Fever."

* * *

The excited chatter from the living room faded a bit when Cho turned around the corner, heading toward Héloïse's room. Close to the slightly open door, she came to a stop, stood silently.

This music ... Strangely disquieting, it was. Not what anyone would expect from a girl Héloïse's age. Yes, it could be sweet - for moments, then it would change to something simple, pleasant, then come churning up without any forewarning. Whatever Héloïse played, it wouldn't leave you untouched.

How much of it was the Goblin harp, how much was the girl? Cho knew about two other music styles that were distantly related. One was the music of some guy, Keith something, a pianist. After having studied and played classical piano for years, this artist had started forgetting everything he'd learned - about chords and harmonies, that was, while keeping his skill. Then he had played ... Each performance unique, uncomparable, unrepeatable. There was a series of recordings, from a tournament through Japan - the *Sun Bear Concerts*.

But a Goblin harp created a softer sound than a piano.

And then there were the bamboo flute players in Cho's home country, China. They could do masterpieces with two or three tones, playing them for a quarter of an hour. Of course, a bamboo flute was primitive in comparison, much more restricted in its repertoire.

Héloïse's music floated somewhere in-between, and sometimes high above.

Especially when in a turmoil like now, it hit you in your core. As short as the exchange with Harry had been, it had driven Cho to the limits of her composure. Just the idea of him travelling with Cass - along a dangerous route, fully on purpose waiting to meet something deadly monstrous - was enough to send any mother over the fence, wasn't it?

Only - a confrontation with Harry always came as a scary job. In some sense, Harry appeared like a racing car - steady and solid up to extremes where other cars would have lost balance long before. Problem was, he had no border zone - or if so, Cho wasn't able to recognize it. The bandwidth in which Harry would just turn angry and send stop signals seemed awfully narrow, almost non-existent. As a consequence, you always felt at the risk of driving him beyond the limits.

Cho had done it once - not quite voluntarily, more from her own inability to cope with the situation. An objective outsider might have said she was provoked, okay, only that Cho and Harry agreed in one point - to hell with objective outsiders.

Since then, there had been just one situation at the verge of slide-off, and this time, Harry had sent a stop signal, God bless him for that. It had been about children, daughters in particular. Cho knew - Harry wanted another child. You had to be blind and deaf not to register, seeing him with Michel on his arm was enough - the boy sound asleep for quite a while already, apparently no reason for Harry to drop him ... While Fleur - Cho wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Fleur maintained a log of Michel's on-Harry's-arm time like other people might record their X-ray times.

Except for inverse reasons - for X-rays there was a limit beyond which it became dangerous for your reproduction system. Which brought Cho back to the essential point.

Sure, she would like another child too, if only just to see whether it might have the same set of - er, unusual habits. What made her so hesitant was the risk of another disappointment, more exactly, another girl. No, that was unfair - another child *not* being a son. Stupid bitch that she was, couldn't release herself from the old Chinese prejudice ... And another child would of course deepen her feeling of guilt, when she would resume her office work. Maybe she should ask Harry to cure her from her guilt, probably this was the major problem.

He would do it, and this seemed the most scaring thought. One of his first actions would be to make it public. He would tell everybody, "Hey, did you know, Cho feels guilty because she's not playing the docile housewife."

And some time later, Cho would be cured. The guilt might or might not be present still, only nobody would care any longer, least of all herself. The comments would have done their work. Ron, for example - he'd say something like, "That's totally realistic - it's physically impossible for her to be docile."

The thought made Cho smile. At this moment, the music stopped.

"Mummy?"

Of course - her daughter had known all the time that she was standing here outside for the last two minutes. This belonged to the few little things other mothers didn't have to care about. This, and another minor problem.

You damn better didn't lie to the girl. Not on purpose, not for reasons of politeness, or protection, or exhaustion, or ... just never. Cass knew instantly, probably even before Nagini had told her. Sometimes it felt a bit stressing.

Not for Harry, by the way. He had a built-in lie suppressor.

Cho pushed the door open. The two girls looked at her - Cass, sitting on the stool that was supposed to be the harp player's, and Héloïse on Nagini which was resting on a box, to provide the proper height toward the instrument. So the two were trading again, music for snake. Looked very much like an agreement that would last.

Examining the box more closely, Cho had the distinct feeling it had been hacked together with a few charms only recently. Couldn't have been Bill, so probably it was Harry's work. She said, "Your music makes me feel so many things, Hély - do you know that?"

Yes, the girl knew.

Cho turned to her daughter. "Would you like to play music by yourself?"

A solemn face turned left, then right. "Hély."

Now that was interesting. Cass wasn't going to give it a try - because this had to remain Héloïse's realm, and any attempt would create a competition unwelcomed by both of them.

Definitely not her own inheritance. For Cho herself, competition came as natural as breathing. Although - she had never tried competing against her friend Almyra ... Maybe it was an exception from the rule. But until some days ago, calling Cass and Hély friends would have been the overstatement of the year.

But then, today it was some days later. Seeing them together ... Cho asked, "Ain't you sleepy, you two?"

The two girls exchanged a glance, telling Cho that something indeed had changed between them. Then they nodded in unison.

This was highly unusual, for Héloïse at least. Of course it was only her bedtime, but Cass' siesta time was near enough.

Héloïse looked at Cho. "We sleep in the same bed."

That's why. A novelty, unprecedented, something Héloïse wasn't sure if it would be accepted, so she traded by being obedient ... Or was she simply looking forward to it? In particular because it was Nagini's job to guard the marginal time span until sleep had come, and today Héloïse would be guarded too?

Now a smile spread the girl's face, presenting all the charme of a half-quarter Veela. "You tell us a story?"

The smile would have broken Cho's resistance, had there been any. "Yes I will, you two bed-bunnies. Let me just tell Fleur."

Returning into the living room, Cho went to Fleur. "These are the days of miracles and wonder - our daughters feel like going to sleep, and they feel like sleeping together in the same bed ... And I'm supposed to tell them the bedtime story."

"Really?" Fleur beamed. "That's great - so there's a benefit even from this dreadful thing."

Yes there was - unless Héloïse would realize that her papa wasn't completely cured yet, and would think Cass could help again, and would talk with her, or exchange another of these glances ...

But for the time being, these were two almost ordinary girls in pyjamas, and Cho felt little surprise learning some minutes later that the young ladies waited for hearing the story of China Duck - the story how Cho and her friend Almyra had met.

So Héloïse had remembered, while for Cass the story was new.

When she had finished, Cho looked at Héloïse. "You know that Cass will be gone when you'll wake up, do you?"

A very detestful look. "I know."

"Then sleep well, my Veela sweetie." Cho kissed her, went around the bed to her own daughter, kissed her too. "Sleep well, my Parsel sweetie."

A beaming flash from sparkling eyes. "China Duck!"

"Pssst." Cho dimmed the light and left the room.

Back in the living room, she sat down, looked around - though at nobody in particular. "So which nasty plots did you think up while I've been busy telling a story about the birds at the other end of the world?"

The flash from Harry's eyes, and his short grin, were like a déjà-vu, only that the previous occasion had been just a minute ago. Again Cho looked around. "Will nobody answer me? That's a bad sign."

Harry answered her. "Ron and I were roasting Bill about every step of his trip. And there's a very interesting coincidence - Bill and this Konstantin made an excursion to some ruin of a Crusader castle, while the other wizard, this Said, didn't come along."

"Why not?"

"We don't know why. Could be he knew it already. Could be he didn't like the idea of visiting something on Israeli territory - could also be he didn't like the idea of visiting what's been a Crusader castle."

"Where is it?"

The answer came from Bill. "Near Tiberias, and close to the Lake Tiberias."

Cho, who hadn't seen much of a religious education, and if so, more about Buddhism and Taoism than about Christianity, looked blank.

Bill explained to her. Tiberias, or Teverya for the Jews, and Tabar'ije for the Arabs, occupied a truly historic place. It was here where the religious part of the Talmud had been written down. And about two hundred years earlier, the Lake Tiberias - better known as the Sea of Galilee - had been the scene of a spectacular walk - or so the contemporary narrators said.

"Holy Jesus."

"Yep - that's him allright." Ron grinned about this cross-breed of Californian slang and Christian myth, expressed by a suspected Buddhist at hearing about a place in the centre of Jewish-Arabic conflict territory.

Cho turned back to Bill. "And - what about this place?"

"Well - it has towers, a building, partly reconstructed ... There's a well, and we went down the shaft, because there's a tunnel down there, and they said once it offered a path all the way to the lake ... Then we had coffee in the town, and then we went back to Beirut."

"Maybe it was the coffee."

"In this case, we should hear about inexplicable cases of fever all over Middle East." Bill wasn't smiling. "It's a crowded place there."

Cho looked at Harry. "And what does this mean to you?"

The father of her daughter wasn't smiling either. "It means that someone has to check it, in a way that we can say *Forget it* or quite the opposite - from a wizard's perspective."

"It's a tourist attraction, huh? ... Well, in this case, have fun at your trip - provided that's the only place to visit. I mean, with so many people visiting, that can't be the origin."

"Erm - not quite." Harry looked at her without expression. "This reconstruction has been finished only recently, before that, it was closed for public traffic ... And the project was entirely Muggle-driven."

Cho felt her neck hair rise. Damn Potter, known as her husband, would never hesitate to present an ugly truth squarely into your face.

Nor did he now. "For all we can see, Bill and this Konstantin might well have been the first wizards there for quite a while."

Cho grimaced. "And the someone who's going to check it - who is it?" As if she didn't know.

"It will be a team - a Muggle, a Goblin, a wizard, and a non-Muggle of dubious state." Harry looked entirely non-joking. "The non-Muggle, of course that's Bill. The Muggle - that'll be Tony ... The Goblin - we'll ask them, but if we have a choice, it'll be Urion the Unvarying ..."

"Then it'll be Urion - with you asking?" Cho's voice was close to a snarling.

"Yes, probably so. And the wizard - that's me ... Oh yes, not to forget ..."

Cho's breath froze for an instant.

"... a snake too, because we didn't plan getting infected."

"And what if that's the place, but she doesn't sense anything?"

Seeing Harry's sympathetic glance, for a split second Cho expected a soothing wave from him. However, he did it with words. "We'll send Tony with Nagini around. If they cannot find anything, I'll talk with Sirius."

"Sirius??"

"Yes. We need a volunteering wizard. A prisoner, maybe sentenced for life - with the chance of getting his freedom at the risk of losing his magic ... But that's speculative, I'm not going to believe for a second that a magical power which can do that to Bill won't be recognized."

"Does it mean you won't touch the place?"

Harry looked into Cho's eyes. "I'll watch my every step. If that's the place, and that something's still around - who said Bill won't be infected a second time? We don't think so, but - that's the base on which Fleur was ready to let us go."

Cho looked at her step-sister-in-law.

Fleur said, "If 'arry cannot get a volunteer, I'll do it. In the worst case, Bill and I come out as Muggles with wizard children - that's not so particularly new ... Of course, assuming that 'arry and Sandy are ready to cure me."

Ron said, "There's no need for that. All you have to do is to watch the place and wait until the next wizard tourist comes along. The only problem is to track them down to their home, and to find out what happens with them afterwards."

The thought had quite some appeal for Cho, much more than this plan. Harry watching his every step ever so carefully - that sounded exactly like a drinker leaving all the nice bottles untouched, a picture she wasn't quite ready to ...

"That's why we have to do it pretty quickly." Harry looked at Ron. "We cannot let them stumble into disaster, not after we ..."

Cho couldn't stop herself. "Are you in charge of all evil in the world?"

Harry grinned at her - he really grinned. "No. And besides - why should this be evil? ... Is a virus evil?"

"I'd know some other measures Bill could take. Hermione isn't the only potions witch around, and maybe Almyra's mother has an idea, or ..."

Harry interrupted her, something rare. "Yes, Cho - these are all measures to get him his magic back. But now that we have a justified suspicion about that place, it's a matter of - let's say, self-esteem, to avoid a term as questionable as morale, or ethics."

With some effort, Cho kept silent. If she wasn't completely mistaken, Harry cutting her short had been another of these signals close to some limit. He had taken his decision.

* * *

The conversation had changed to other topics, after everybody had recognized that Cho seemed ready to give it a rest. Well - maybe not ready, but giving it a rest allright. And it had been Ron again to raise the issue, with this admirable fluency which Percy, the other Weasley son in politics, couldn't even dream of.

Harry felt grateful for Ron's tactful steering, and pleased seeing him move the figures in the room, still more pleased because Ron had - quite selfishly - started to talk about his central issue.

The unborn son.

For Harry, the surprise had been nil when Nagini, about a month ago, had told him the sex, and he had told the others. Weasleys could only do sons - with Ginny as the notable exception. Yes, of course, there was Héloïse, except she was Fleur's work.

"Anything else would have been nonsense," said Ron at this moment, earning a laughter already because he was talking about this fact, and how many sexes were left for a non-boy? "Imagine it would have been a girl - that poor thing, competing at one side with Sandra, which would have been reason enough to climb back inside right on the spot ..."

Yes, he had a good timing - waited the moment to let the laughter ebb.

"... and at the other side with Héloïse, which would be a lost case - Veela have this built-in unfairness, so that ..."

"Unfairness?" Fleur tried looking upset. "This family is sworn to fairness, this house here is one proof, and that motionless bundle there on 'arry's arm is another proof. That's exactly what you should expect from a politician ..."

For an instant, people had looked at him, reminding Harry of something he'd almost forgotten - there was indeed Michel on his arm. The youngest Weasley was such a lightweight, compared to the usual load ... True, Harry's subconscious kept constantly on guard, almost in a reflex checking into the baby boy at the slightest stirring or irregularity in his breathing. Only there wasn't any.

Since that boy was around, Harry couldn't help thinking that something in the knowledge about Veela was missing. The official reading said that male Veela had none of the power for which the females were famous, and nothing else which would make them special, compared to normal humans. But Harry had his doubts - doubts that were growing each time he and Michel were together.

He felt pretty sure that a male Veela - even a half-quarter Veela like Michel - had something like the inverse of the female power. A sensitivity, and that was why Michel responded so strongly and instantly to his presence, or that of Sandy. Just because a Veela could drown everybody in emotions, the scientists had assumed that any special sensibility had to be counter-productive, so evolution would have eliminated it long before. But what if not?

People working in a hall full with noisy machines learned to hear words spoken in an almost normal voice. Male Veela - if every female could drown them, those with strong genes and those with crap material alike, how would they be able to find a partner of choice? If every race on earth was conditioned for the survival of the best, then Harry could only be right.

Which didn't mean he was in a hurry to talk with Fleur, or Bill. Time would tell.

Harry's thoughts wandered to Goblins. Would be interesting to know which quality, or appearance, made a Goblin boy or girl a partner of choice. They were extremely reluctant with such information, and he, Harry, was the last to ask - because they would answer him.

Because he was the Ambassador.

This was the proper title for the one who held the Goblin Request. Harry had been assigned after destroying Voldemort. This assignment, in turn, had made him a Goblin, because only a Goblin could hold the Request. Harry grinned inwardly about himself - a Goblin lacking any skill to find a valuable Goblin girl.

Since this letter had arrived, Goblins no longer called him "Mr. Potter". They called him "Ambassador". Of course this was a translation - the closest thing to the original Goblin word. The bearer of the Goblin Request was considered a messenger of a supreme force, of a higher will. If this sounded religious, then only in human ears. At any rate - for the Goblins, Harry represented the perfect example of what this term expressed. Hadn't there been a supreme force which kept bending odds and chances until, finally, the Dark Lord of the Evil had lost his life from his own foolish and desperate attempt to survive?

The Goblins were as reluctant to tell him things as Harry was to ask them questions. Still, around seven corners, he'd heard that they felt extremely pleased with him - for a long, long time, no other Ambassador had shown such clear signs of the force he was supposed to represent.

Which made the burden just a bit heavier.

Still, meeting Urion again would be nice. Urion with the many Un-names ... They had met years ago, during Voldemort's attempt to fulfill his promise and free the dark wizards that were kept prisoners, guarded by Goblins. Urion's men had killed all assailants who weren't quick enough to freeze and surrender at the first word from this remarkable commander.

Except for one, who escaped into the tunnel system of that gold mine, using Sirius as cover. It gave him another half hour, then Harry found him.

Having Urion the Undestructible at your side provided a good feeling. This Goblin was so much matter-of-fact, with this strong sense for flaws and glitches in a plan that might cause an unnecessary risk - which didn't mean Urion would hesitate taking a risk, deadly or otherwise, provided it was unavoidable ...

"... he's fallen asleep - with open eyes, that's how you can distinguish between him and Michel."

Coming awake, looking up, Harry found all shades of smile rest on him. Maybe this was a good opportunity to talk about his discovery - the male Veela sense. Harry the scientist would be something new, and Ron would come over the smallest gap in his argumentation like an eagle out of ...

Then a thought struck Harry, made him almost gasp. He turned to Bill. "Say - after you recovered from the fever, was there any difference in Michel's behaviour toward you?"

"None that I know of." Bill pursed his lips. "But this doesn't mean much - I've been different enough myself, so I might have missed it ... Why do you ask?"

Harry shook his head. "Could be I'm on a totally wrong track. Check it for some days, as objectively as you can ... Then we can talk, and then I'll tell you."

Fleur looked at her son, at his godfather. "Did you find something, 'arry?"

"I'm not sure. According to the books about Veela - male Veela, it's nonsense. But maybe it's not."

"Pah!" Fleur's expression was detestful. "Books about Veela - 'arry, they tell you just what's impossible to hide. In one sense, Veela and Goblins are very similar - they can live without everybody knowing their most intimate secrets."

Janine asked, "And you just discovered the most intimate secret of male Veela, 'arry?"

Harry smiled. "Dunno." Then he pointed at Janine's belly. "Maybe this guy in there finds the competition harder than Ron has expected - maybe it's wishful thinking ... Anyway, in a few minutes, there's a young lady with a short-fused bladder, and then I need my hands free." He stood up, walked to Bill. "Here - he's yours again."

Cho had watched the scene. Now she looked at her husband. "He didn't stir a bit when you passed him over. Does that mean anything?"

"Could be. But as I said, it might be wishful thinking."

Curiosity had gripped Cho. Harry knew what to expect at the end of the day here, which would be followed by still some more hours of a Californian day.

However, Ron wasn't much better with unsolved riddles. "C'mon, Harry - you're not the scientific type, which means nobody gives a damn if you're wrong ... And this isn't politics where you have to hone every word. So what's about Michel and his father?"

Five people were looking at Harry. The sixth just kept sleeping. Harry shrugged. "I think male Veela are as special as the females ... I think they have a sense where the females have a power. It's not limited to their own race - that's why Michel and I ... And if that's true, it's strongest in babies, like with other senses in such a critical phase of life ..."

"You mean he would sense if Bill has changed?" Fleur's face showed hope and expectation.

"Yes, that's what I think."

Bill said, "So if there's no difference, Harry, what does it mean?"

"Don't take me by my word if I'm wrong." Harry grinned wryly. "But I think your power is still there - except that it's locked."

Bill snorted. "Yeah, that makes a big difference, really."

His native brother was quicker. "Sure it does. Look at someone under the Imperius - behaves like a scatterbrain, except he isn't. All you need is the counter spell, then he can think straight again ... If Harry's right, all you need is a counter spell."

"Of course, that reduces the problem considerably." Sharp replies weren't Bill's habit - still, he was a Weasley.

Fleur smiled at him. "Don't be unthankful - you'll be recorded in the books as the wizard who found the fourth Unforgivable Curse, just by being the first who suffered from it."

Listening to Fleur, Harry's confidence grew by the second. Maybe only because it made the problem look like something handy ... Just another Unforgivable Curse, four rather than three. And probably not irreversible because there was only one of them without a counter, and only because death was the end of any magic ...

Was this true?

Next second, an alarm ringed in Harry's mind, and he shot up to reach a bed with two girls in time before the second of them found reason to complain, next morning.

* * *

A two-year-old bursting of energy, after a good-measured siesta, made no good company for people whose body clock was ticking around midnight. Therefore, Cass coming awake usually gave the signal for the Potter-Chang gang to bow around, smile, and get lost.

Toward Santa Monica, where a hot afternoon told people what a bad mistake it had been not to call the maintenance crew for the air-conditioning.

Cho felt betwixt and between. This was partly to the jump through eight hours of daytime - she would never get used to that like Harry or Cass. The other part was of course her feeling about what her husband had in mind. That he would do it without Cass felt less a relief by the minute.

Said husband tickled their common daughter and said, "Let's go for a swim."

This sudden change of tack baffled Cho for just a second. Then she became aware that Tricky Potter had expertly combined fun and business - his business, for a change. Their usual place for swimming was Tony's pool, because the movie director had had the good sense of buying an estate at the *wrong* side of Santa Monica, getting twice as much square footage for a fraction of what Cho had paid, using it for a little lake he used to call swimming pool in all humbleness.

And besides - it was the wrong side of the town only for the wrong people, those who felt alarmingly uncomfortable meeting slitfaces in shaggy clothes all along the way, clothes in which you could hide everything from a pile of *shuriken* to a light submachine gun.

The slitfaces said this kind of clothes were today's fashion, man.

They also made Tony's little place the safest spot around - for himself, for his guests ... For Harry and Cass, whether guest or not ... For Cho herself too, more because she belonged to the former two than from her origin.

Cass looked at her. "Swim!" The word wavered somewhere between a jubilation and a command.

A grinning Harry stepped closer, kissed Cho lightly. "C'mon - you can sit in an armchair, with a cool drink, and make Tony's eyes pop."

"Yeah, I bet - there'll be half a dozen bikini models around, and what they're making pop is very distantly related to eyes."

"Bikinis, sure - Tony sees them all the time. No - you ought to wear this swimsuit, the red one that's called light, only most people would call it semi-transparent, and some ..."

"You're unbelievable - all you have in mind is talking him into this stunt, and I'm supposed to make sure he cannot think straight ... By the way, it's only semi-transparent if it's wet."

Harry's smile was a bit teasing, and a bit something else. "It's only halfways true. Tony will say yes before I can finish my third sentence, that's for sure. Otherwise - of course I thought you'd come into the pool for a moment ... I mean, who wants to think straight?"

"Mummy. Gettup!"

Cho did. So many inviting signals were irresistible. One, in particular.

Her estimation wasn't quite correct. There were only four long-legged figures with lots of sun-tanned skin, bulging here and there, among them Annabel, Tony's current favourite. Then Tony himself, of course, and some men.

Harry's appearance had quite some effect toward the female part of the crowd - as if a drill sergeant had shouted at them to keep the body straight and the bosom up and the ass swing. Cho's own appearance did little to change that.

But Nagini was enough to keep them at some distance.

Tony greeted Harry and Cass, turned to her, bowed. "Cho - welcome here. I always hope you come for business, but I still more hope you come for a swim."

Cho smiled. "Hello, Tony. Wait and see."

"That's what I had in mind."

Considering the usual crowd in the movie business, Tony felt like an oasis in a desert. He could play the game like any other, without losing his manners. His greeting, for example - he could tell you how sexy you looked without kissing and touching and grabbing. And now, while Cho dressed down to her swimsuit underneath, he did as promised, with open interest, and appreciation, while not undressing her with his eyes.

The pool was magnificent, no less. Only one side reminded of an ordinary pool, with the basin's border painted and plastering above, while the other sides of this irregular shape were formed almost like a lakeside. Then, Tony used a wizard service for maintenance - awfully expensive that, but these wizards kept the water clean without using chlorine. It was perfect for Cass.

Like any other newborn child, Cass had been able to swim and dive. Unlike others, she hadn't lost this ability - maybe because she could be found in the water several times a week, not counting the bath in the evening, or maybe for some other reason. At any rate, water was her element.

Even so, there were quite some eyes which didn't leave her. Among them Tony's - he knew perfectly well that Cass was no more at risk than a beaver, that Harry's mind was running a monitor at her even if he dived into the dark part of the pool where the bottom was covered with black sand, disappearing for something like two minutes ... And still - since the scene in the training hall, of which Cho had heard only later, Tony took no chances.

Another reason why she liked him a great deal.

Cho climbed out, leaving behind her daughter who had grabbed Nagini's tail, using the snake like a scooter to zoom through the full length of the pool. Seizing for a towel, Cho walked to Tony. "It's unfair."

"What's unfair?"

"Harry promised me your eyes would pop, seeing me in that suit - especially when coming out of the water. And what happens - you can't take your eyes off that girl."

Tony didn't turn. "My dear Cho, it's all a balanced harmony. You being here is already an unfairness toward the other girls, while your daughter takes my attention from this spectacular view." He grinned. "At least she's naked."

"Maybe I should try that, too."

Tony's grin turned to a smile. "You shouldn't. True, you'd just look beautiful - while now, you look downright forbidden."

At this moment, Harry came up from some dark corner, reached his daughter and her snake, calming down some people who had looked quite startled for the last minute, after he was gone for so long.

Tony turned to Cho, his glance wandering upward, from her legs, over her body, coming to rest at her face. "As I said - forbidden."

"Don't let Annabel hear this."

"Why not? Isn't it true, in the literal sense? She'd fully agree." Tony chuckled, his glance already back at Cass. "And otherwise - it's always the first child that gives women the last touch, so you and Annabel, you're playing in different leagues."

"Hear the expert! ... And what does the second child?"

Tony's head wheeled around to look into Cho's face, turned back toward the pool and the girl inside. After a moment, he said, "It balances."

* * *

Back home, after a supper at which Sandy had refuelled herself with an impressive pile of rice pudding and turkey, Harry found some time for himself. This was because weekends counted as Cho's time with the girl.

More exactly - the girl's time with her mother.

With Tony's agreement to join the evaluation team, the only missing partner was the Goblin, preferably Urien the Undeserved. Harry intended to talk with the Goblins next day in Los Angeles downtown - he would have preferred his old contact in London, except on Sundays, Gringotts residences were open only till noon. Three o'clock in the morning local time? No thanks.

So it would be Gidelin Gelbrad, the local manager. And because they were still quite foreign to each other, Harry wanted to be prepared when asking for help.

His first action was to get his magic map ready and to study the area around Lake Tiberias, at the highest zoom the map would offer. As much as this magnificent piece did - telling the history of the touched spot was no part of its features. So Harry did something rare - he fired up his computer to gain more information.

It had been Deborah, the wife of his godfather Sirius Black, who showed him how to roam the Internet with a search engine. Not that it was complicated in any sense - type in the word, because you prefer keyboard and mouse over voice control which for you is reserved to spells rather than computers, and voilà - a hit list of matches.

Most of it was crap - advertisements of hotels in or near Tiberias. In some sense, Cho seemed right - tourists plenty, regardless of the fact that a day without the *brrrap* of an automatic rifle came rare in this area. But Tiberias was about sixty miles north of Jerusalem where the shooting was worst, forty miles east of Haifa, with the Syrian border passing right through the lake ... Tiny country, this Israel, by all means.

And there was a summary of the town facts ... Less than thirty thousand people now - according to Californian standards, Tiberias looked like a toy city in a toy country. While the other facts ... Almost seven hundred feet below sea level, which made it among the lowest-lying cities in the world. If the historical dates were correct, the town had been founded while Jesus was still alive, getting its name from the Roman emperor Tiberius. Became a center of rabbinical schools over centuries ... And Saladin took the town from the Crusaders in eleven hundred eighty-seven ...

Saladin? It ringed a bell, only that Harry rated poor in wizard history and less than poor in Muggle history, with the only non-embarrassing knowledge in Goblin history, and a remarkable knowledge of details in Giants history ...

Anyway - this should be the date when the castle had fallen to the Arabs also. Only that the castle was nowhere mentioned, and Harry hadn't asked Bill for a name.

Should he link to the NLML, the National Library of Magic Literature? They had a reader service through the Internet - awfully expensive, and senseful only if you had a bandwidth good enough to watch a movie ...

Harry had the money and also the bandwidth, however he had no keywords to look for, with the exception of the town's name. That might come ...

"Are you busy?"

Cho - for her, working at the computer was more sacrosanct than for himself. Well - he had no enterprise to run. "No longer," he replied. "I was in the net, looking up Tiberias. Does the dragon sleep?"

"Yep. And guess what - she's caught the habit from Hèloise, to ask for a bedtime story. I figure I've got a job for the next five years."

"Did she really ask?"

"Yes she did. 'Story?' As if you could say no after such a question."

"Yeah ..." Harry grinned. "Against knowing better, against deepest revulsion inside yourself, facing the inevitable fate to follow ..."

"Don't tease me!" Cho looked a bit self-conscious. "You know that's a sensitive issue."

"What - the story or the story-telling?"

Now she glared at him suspiciously. "Did you listen?"

Harry laughed. "Didn't need that. For the next two weeks, there's no question what kind of story she'll expect - that of a certain bird, and that of another bird, although then the other bird was no bird yet ..."

Cho sat down on the table next to him, which brought her legs under the short skirt very prominent into his view, making it a bit harder to concentrate on this conversation. She asked, "Harry - what does she think about me?"

"Huh?"

"Cass. What do I represent for her? I know I'm her mother, but a mother shouldn't be surprised to hear that a story needs twenty-five repetitions before another one's due."

Harry took his eyes off these legs, looked into Cho's face. "In the shortest form - she thinks you are you. She has no prejudices - none. She has strong wishes, sure, but she can distinguish

between a wish and an expectation better than most people, us two probably included ... No, there is a prejudice - it must be rice pudding with turkey."

Cho smiled, looked wondering again. "Compared to the standard, I'm a bad mother ..."

"True."

Startled, she looked at him.

"And I'm a bad father, because I don't earn money, and because I let her get away not wearing diapers, and because I fail miserably with carrots and lamb ..."

A short grin from her.

"... and, most notably, according to this standard, our daughter is a frightening monster." Harry put his hands on the knees right in front of him. "You know all that, Cho, and you know that, as a result, Sandra Catherine Potter would smash any psychological test, now as well as for the next twenty years."

"Yes, I know ..."

"She takes you as a given, which doesn't mean she takes you for granted, not at all. Look at how she handled the story with Héloïse and her music, it's very informative."

"In which sense?"

"Well - she heard her play, and then Hély refused to play further. As hard as it took her, Sandy understood instinctively that there is an individual will and that she has to negotiate. And remember how she mastered the failure in her first negotiation ..."

"It took you quite some efforts to prevent a nasty scene."

Harry waved dismissively. "Sure, she's two years old and hasn't her power fully under control. But the essential point is, she didn't run around shouting *She must, she must*. Same's true toward you, me, Nagini ..."

Cho laughed. "As if Nagini would ever say no to any request she can fulfill."

"Most likely not. But Sandy doesn't think of her as a servant. And she doesn't think of you as a servant." Harry emphasized his argument by poking his finger into her thigh.

Cho didn't protest, which seemed a promising sign. But her thoughts were still somewhere else. "Do you think it will hold between Cass and Hély?"

"I bet ... They can give each other so much, as different as they are - Sandy's more powerful, but Hély's older ... Sandy can make dishes fly, but Hély's a Veela ... Hély can play her music, and Sandy can talk a snake into quite some tricks - that's base enough for a friendship."

Cho studied the finger playing on her skin. "Hély has a brother."

"So?"

"That makes our daughter handicapped."

The finger stopped playing.

"That mustn't be, must it?"

With new spirit, the finger inched forward while its owner explained, "They say parents as young as us are ideal. Normally the drawback is that these parents cannot live out themselves ... I'm still waiting for this dreadful day, when I cannot live out myself."

Cho moved a bit, so the finger found the path further free. "While my only problem is that I live out myself day after day."

Harry sighed as theatrically as he could, which wasn't much in general, still less right now with his thoughts somewhere else. "Yeah, it's a terrible fate - freedom of choice's a burden, that's why I'm always asking Sandy what to do next ..."

"For what I can see here, you have quite a clear idea what to do next."

"Do I? ... Must be some effect from the visit at Tony's ... All this naked flesh ..."

Cho gasped a bit, which had to do with a finger that seemed having reached a target. "Tony says the second child balances."

"The wisdom of an old Chinese ... Then maybe we should balance ourselves, just to lay a good omen?"

Cho's voice sounded innocent and seductive at the same time. "What's wrong with this table? Next to a computer - these are the modern times, Horny Potter."

"You're absolutely right." He didn't have to push hard - she stretched down at the table almost by herself. Thanks to some supporting movement, he also had little trouble stripping down her panties. Then he bent closer to inspect his finger's target at the highest zoom rate, found it very inviting, and very tasteful.

"You ... it's the man who should get exhausted before the sperm regatta's started, not the woman ... You - ahh - you got it all wrong ..." However, Cho's protest couldn't find plenty of support, not even by herself. Maybe he hadn't got it wrong, after all.

Harry had heard about other statistics too. For example those of men at the eve of a battle - if they could, they fucked like rabbits, with an astonishing quota of male results. But he had been wise enough not to mention them.

And statistics wasn't what filled his mind now.

04 - Tourist Distraction

"In the mood for a walk?"

Rahewa Lightfoot, seventh-year in the Gryffindor house of Hogwarts, waited while her friend Vanessa Parthcombe tried to figure out which opinion this frequently changing mind of hers would come up with.

Finally, this mind's speaking organ asked, "Now? In the full heat of the sun?"

Rahewa kept silent. She never answered questions which, at best, could be rated as rhetorical while the average judgement would classify them as pretty stupid. Quite obviously, it was Sunday afternoon in early August, quite obviously also, her own question had implied a walk *now*.

Vanessa knew that. It had taken Rahewa the most part of four years to find out that this girl wasn't as stupid as she sounded often enough. Over years, Vanessa had perfected the art of creating a smoke screen behind which an intellect clearly above average kept hiding. If you had her looks, if you were always carrying a trail of lovesick - or plainright dumb - boys, maybe this was a sensible thing to do. Intellect didn't rank high.

And so Vanessa had fooled Rahewa quite successfully.

Perhaps also because Rahewa would carry another trail, in some sense similar, except that - like a lizard - Rahewa could cut her trail quickly and effortlessly. The boys following her weren't attracted by her looks. Rahewa looked okay - slender, athletic, and recently even her breasts had developed a decent shape. But where Vanessa attracted beauty freaks, Rahewa attracted Quidditch or *aikido* freaks. The Gryffindor Seeker, the Hogwarts Seeker, and also the Seeker of the EMEC team, was Rahewa waiting for the second time in her career that someone caught the Snitch before she could do it.

It had happened once, in Rahewa's first year as Seeker, and only because her opponent, Cho Chang, had used a superior broomstick. Since then, her former opponent made sure this won't happen again. A month after the Firebolt Three hit the market, Cho had sent one, and the twelfth piece in the first, still limited, and sold-out-of-the-factory series of Firebolt Magnum broomsticks had become Rahewa's - with the effect that her opponents, at best, could come on a par from their equipment. Which wasn't enough to beat her.

But otherwise, these boys appeared mostly as stupid as those following Vanessa. Just different.

Then, the year arrived in which to choose optional faculties. Rahewa selected Astronomy - for an Animagus with the ambition to follow her step-mother's trail and transfigure into birds, this was an obvious choice.

To Rahewa's total bafflement, she saw Vanessa enter the same classroom. To her gaping surprise, Vanessa took the seat right next to her.

"You here??" Rahewa could have sworn Vanessa would be found in Divination.

For a moment, a wild grin spread the lovely face under this lion's mane of dark-blond hair. And with the second shock of the day, Rahewa registered why - she had asked a stupid question, Vanessa had recognized it, to grin diabolically - and not to comment on it.

What Vanessa said instead was, "I need a rest from these jerks."

Still startled from her own failure to keep self-indulgent standards, Rahewa asked a second question - not stupid at all, although still totally outside her common habit. "And why - er, just this place here?"

"Because there's no seat at your other side." Into Rahewa's stunned look, Vanessa added, "I need someone who can kick them in the balls ... And I guess I can trade. So - think it over."

Later, Rahewa had little memory of this first Astronomy lesson. She knew pretty well what Vanessa had meant when mentioning a trade. It had to do with boys - Rahewa could beat them in Quidditch, beat them in *aikido*, and beat them just so, while otherwise she felt sort of clumsy with them. Her old friend Damon offered no help in that because - well, for whatever reasons ... Therefore, Rahewa still had way to learn.

Coming to lunch, Vanessa caught her, asked, "So?"

"I'm not sure, but I think I'll kick a few balls to see how things develop."

"Great ... Then let's settle it right away."

Grabbing Rahewa, Vanessa marched to her own seat and told Gary - Good-looking Gary, whom everybody thought to be her favourite, he himself included - that his seat was unfortunately reserved for Rahewa, and that Gary please might move his, admittedly sexy, ass.

Good-looking Gary turned out less good-mannered, and not the least good-natured. For what Rahewa learned afterwards, she should have thanked him because Gary became the launching factor in this unlikely friendship between herself and Vanessa. But in these first minutes in public, nobody could trace any thankfulness between Rahewa and Gary. What the spectators reported later had more to do with Gary very baffled first, very upset then, very flat and pained a moment later. His unfortunate reaction had been to seize for Vanessa, probably to tell her she couldn't do that to him, badly mistaken in this judgement as Rahewa showed him. No, she didn't kick his balls - she put him flat, held him in a grip that seemed light, and pierced a finger into one of these spots Kenzo had shown his *aikido* students.

For once, Rahewa's own supporters proved useful. They warned her that Gary and his clique were up for revenge. So Rahewa made sure to offer them what looked like a good opportunity to catch her by surprise - outside the buildings, even without her poodles, this way avoiding the risk of noise.

This clique counted for people, Gary included. Their own planning wasn't very detailed, only that the place seemed perfectly suited for a little gang-raping. They knew about Rahewa's *aikido* skills, and were prepared for that.

They were totally unprepared for Rahewa's six-inch twin blade knife, a relic of some past and recently held in a kind of hibernation. The event was over seconds after it had started - two of

them had arms dangling limp from severed tendons, the third busy keeping his bowels inside a deep cut, and the fourth was probably still running. Rahewa had a broken arm - they had used a Quidditch club.

Gall-spitting Gary's family came with a lawyer. Rahewa's step-father Lupin, still more her godfather Harry, seemed eager to fight the battle with the help of Mr. Spinbottle, their own lawyer. Dumbledore, the Headmaster, found something better.

Rahewa volunteered to be interrogated under the impact of Veritaserum, with two spectator cameras recording the full procedure. Then Dumbledore sent a cassette to that family and left them two options - to send their son to another school, or to watch the recording in public TV.

This was the story how Vanessa, within two weeks, had changed from prey to predator. Rahewa's own change had taken longer.

Not earning an answer to her question, Vanessa said, "I have a better idea. We go for a swim at the lake. Then you can jump and dance with your dogs, with me just sitting there, holding court or whatever."

Rahewa nodded. "It's a deal. Get moving."

What Rahewa planned was biding her time until five o'clock, when she could jump to Santa Monica to find a Sunday morning breakfast scene there, and all the while tiring her two poodles so much that they would be calm enough for playing with - or being played by - a two-year-old.

Romeo and Juliet were dancing like rubber balls, quickly jumped into the knapsack which could mean just one thing - some excursion outside. Rahewa shouldered the knapsack and went downstairs to reach the broomstick racks.

The two dogs counted as her own as much as Hogwarts'. Twice so far, Juliet had thrown pups, seven the first time, eight the last time. While not magical at all, both litters had created a project in Care of Magical Creatures, with Samantha, the teacher, at least as mean and watchful toward the students as the mother herself. After eight weeks, the pups were sold, with the money shared between Rahewa and a rather unofficial account - to serve for purposes which could hardly be covered by standard rules.

Following Vanessa's advice, Rahewa had invested part of her own share in two parties, marking the end of these projects and also making sure that other students - now and for litters to come - treated Romeo and Juliet as precious poodles rather than damned dogs.

The girls reached the lakeside. Rahewa freed the two snowballs which would melt neither in the sun nor in the water, then stripped down to her swimsuit underneath.

Vanessa examined her friend with a critical glance. "Hey, Rage, you look sharp ..."

Rahewa managed not to blush - thanks to her friend's relentless work. Earlier that summer, at the beginning of this year's swimming season, Vanessa had taken a look at Rahewa's outgrown swimsuit and then had pulled her into the next shop worth the effort, which happened to be in Paris, just a few staircases and some linkports away. There, Vanessa had talked with the saleswoman to come up with a piece pretty quickly.

In a way, it was fairly unpretentious, cut in straight angles, what you'd expect an athlete wearing, hiding a lot, even the uppermost part of Rahewa's legs which, according to Vanessa, could outperform all others. The suit was really built for *swimming* - Vanessa knew this prerequisite.

Only it was the thinnest fabric Rahewa had ever seen for such a purpose. It painted her nipples no matter which state.

"... the bees will come swarming any second ..."

Probably so, and this was the reason why for Rahewa such an occasion still felt one part lesson and three parts leisure. At least, the bees would hang more around Vanessa than ...

"... afraid the scientist won't be among them."

Rahewa's head jerked up, to stare at her friend. She felt the blood rushing into her face. "What - what scientist?"

Way too late, the question, not to mention her expression while asking. Vanessa, for a change, took over the role usually reserved for Rahewa herself - keeping silent and expressionless rather than answering something as obvious as that.

How did she know??

Said scientist was an exchange student from Drachenfels. He had arrived in Hogwarts two months before the end of last term, to be as close to the sources of Potions wisdom as possible. His name was Clemens Stein.

Normally, Clemens would be buried in some laboratory, bending over a cauldron, a book, or his own writing. Only, Potions meant Hermione Krum, while Quidditch meant Viktor Krum, and the Krums used to bring science and sports people together, for example at invitations to a tea inside, or a picnic outside. And so Rahewa had met Clemens.

Since then, she encountered something quite unfamiliar to her - an accelerated heartbeat outside the *aikido* training hall and without being up in the air on her Firebolt Magnum.

Clemens gave a damn for the houses of Hogwarts. He had been found sitting at the Slytherin table, at the Ravenclaw table, at the Hufflepuff table, as if touring through the social structures of the hosting school. Recently, however, he seemed having settled for Gryffindor.

Had probably to do with Hermione Krum, his tutor and example - she had been a Gryffindor.

Before Rahewa found an opportunity to ask her friend, the first bee came closer. Thank God, it was Vincent Clapmore, a sixth-year for whom the main attractions were Romeo and Juliet. Vincent had participated in both pup projects. Vanessa held some doubts that the dogs caused the only reason for Vincent coming along whenever he found them, particularly so in the last year. Rahewa, in contrast, didn't think so - Vincent behaved just too perfectly normal.

And he had manners. Vincent didn't ask why Rahewa looked so embarrassed. "Hi, Rage - hello, Vanessa. Need some help in drowning two poodles?"

"Sure - c'mon." Rahewa went into the water, followed by Romeo, Juliet, and Vincent.

The poodles - actually mini poodles - liked swimming, up to some point. What they liked still more was riding on a swimmer's head. With Vincent around, there were heads enough for both of them, and the dogs enjoyed the ride, which invariably ended with the swimmer diving down, causing the dogs to swim on their own.

When Rahewa felt like having done her share of poodle-carrying, she inhaled deeply and dived down. She wasn't quite as good as Harry, however one minute thirty seconds was easy play, and enough to feel the quietness and the coolness down there in the lake.

Coming out, Rahewa walked to the blanket on which Vanessa was still sitting dry and with a T-shirt over her bikini, seized for a towel. "Won't you go into the water at all?"

"Maybe later, when ... Uh-oh."

Rahewa looked up, followed Vanessa's glance, and froze.

* * *

Vanessa watched the two teachers and their guest come closer. A married couple, both of them teachers, and both at the same school - you might think this would be unusual. But not here in Hogwarts, which seemed to work like a damn marriage bureau. Hermione and Viktor Krum represented just one of several couples, the others were Rahewa's step-parents, Remus and Almyra Lupin, and the oldtimers Severus and Samantha Snape.

Oldtimers compared to the others, that was - by common standard, Samantha was still quite young while her husband could only hope to get as old as he looked. Maybe his wife was a bit ...

"Good afternoon, myladies." Viktor Krum, Flying and Quidditch teacher at Hogwarts, performed this wrinkling of the face which, for him, went as a smile. Not that Vanessa objected, not at all, actually - funny as he might look in somebody else's eyes, this teacher could have accelerated her own heartbeat any time ... Well, if not for his wife, who was a hell of a piece by herself ...

"... decided to take Clemens away from his cauldrons and to throw him into the misera plebs ..."

By trained reflex, Vanessa drew a face of polite blankness, quite as if she hadn't the foggiest what this Latin meant, while taking it for a compliment just as well. At the same time, she could register that Rahewa still wasn't getting anything her beloved teacher and trainer was saying. Next instant, Vanessa saw something else - Hermione Krum's eyes resting on her, and the Potions witch looked as if she could see through the dumb facade and still a bit deeper ...

"... in your case, is more of a splendid society. I hope this doesn't cause an inconvenience with you?"

Still startled, while not as much as her friend, Vanessa found her speech. "Not at all, Prof - it's more of a present, isn't it? ... Hello, Clemens, sit down, or jump in the lake first, whatever suits you."

A quick grin from the young man, giving proof that his English was good enough to register the hidden joke, then Clemens sat down. "Hello, Vanessa - Rahewa."

The Krums walked away to find their own place, in fair distance from the students around.

Vanessa examined the exchange student, who was ostensibly busy not to stare at Rahewa while she was toweling herself, probably grateful that these movements hid some trembling. Well, thought Vanessa, his own mistake - not glancing, because Rahewa certainly would be worth a look, or two ... She was a slow developer, but in a year or so, her body would have reached its final shape, and that would be a gorgeous one. Maybe even faster, if someone would show her what hormones were good for ...

This handsome scientist might be the one. At least, he had Vanessa's own approval, provided he could issue the better half of a sentence every now and then.

Right now, as it seemed, he could not. Vanessa took this for a good sign and decided to start the conversation going. "How's your brewing, Clemens?"

Another quick grin. "Still needs some improvement ... But the taste's okay."

Which meant either he had fallen for Vanessa's bluff, playing the beautiful dummy, or Clemens was treating her with her own medicine. A short glance sideways told Vanessa that Rahewa still was fighting her shock, toweling shoulders which had dried a minute before. Vanessa asked, "What are you working at? Or is this a secret?"

"How could it be a secret - as long as I'm still working at the basics?"

That was interesting. Clemens damn well knew what he was aiming at, had just no intention to reveal anything. Had Rahewa noticed?

Probably not. "Was it just Potions that brought you here?"

"Mostly, yes, but not quite. The language was another reason - and then of course the fame of Hogwarts." Again this short grin. "Was a good choice - as it turns out, Hogwarts has more to offer than potions and fame and English."

"Oh, really? ... Like what?"

"Ooh ... this magnificent landscape, for example."

Seeing Vanessa's glance, Clemens laughed out loudly. "And some remarkable girls too, as you know perfectly well, don't you?"

Vanessa looked as stupid as she could. "Beats me ... Tell us about them - no, tell us first how you'd know, sitting all day long in some workroom."

Clemens smiled. "As you certainly remember, brewing potions is mostly pretty boring work - cutting pieces of whatever, and then sitting and waiting while the stuff's boiling, or making sure it doesn't. So basically, it's as entertaining as watching paint dry."

Which exactly matched Vanessa's own opinion.

"So what's the solution of that problem? ... Gossip, of course."

"Gossip?" Vanessa glanced at Rahewa, not finding much support for her act, looked back at Clemens. "Never heard of. How does it work?"

"Well - like, one day you're invited to some tea, meet some people, see some girl. Then, next day, you ask your tutor, this girl from yesterday, who is she? ... That's how it starts."

Now Clemens had Rahewa's full attention. No - he'd held it all the time, only now Rahewa was staring directly at him.

Vanessa asked, "And how does it continue?"

Clemens' glance returned to her. "Then your tutor says, find out by yourself - seems as if your tutor knows too much, or maybe wants to tease you a bit, as unlikely as that seems ..."

He'd scored! Rahewa grinned.

"... so you follow her advice, and what do you find? Most of the time, this girl's together with someone who'd be called *blondes Dummchen* in German, and somehow it doesn't fit. And then you - but I think that's already a good explanation of what gossip means."

He'd scored again - Rahewa looked extremely pleased.

Vanessa made a last try. "This term - what was it ..."

Clemens interrupted her, almost impatiently. "Drop it, Vanessa - you're too good to be true."

Well, then. "Okay, you wise-ass, then let me return the favour - you're working at something very specific, except you don't feel like telling us!"

Now Clemens looked pleased. "See what I mean?"

"We can find out! Easily."

"Yeah, sure." Clemens' tone made clear - he was just too polite for responding, and pigs can fly.

Vanessa felt challenged more than enough to storm forward recklessly. "Within five minutes - and you'll be the one who's going to tell us."

Clemens crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm listening and watching."

Rahewa's glance, quite alarmed, went between her scientist and her friend, who just said, "Aside from a famous Potions teacher, you give a damn for Hogwarts and what it can offer ..."

Clemens interrupted her. "That's already wrong."

"Okay, I stand corrected." Vanessa grinned maliciously. "But when you came, you gave a damn ..."

She'd scored - Clemens' cheeks flushed a bit.

"... because all you had in mind then was having the best teacher you could find. But Hermione Krum is just one of several options, she's not unchallenged in the world - there are others."

She had Clemens' attention. "Such as?"

"Beatrice Chagrin."

Clemens' eyes widened. "You're well informed for someone giving a fart for Potions."

Vanessa nodded, looking triumphantly. "In a minute, you'll know how come. Anyway - I think it would be a bit difficult to get a recommendation from our Potions witch that would open the doors of the other one, right?"

"It's not impossible, but ..."

"Maybe not, but there's another path." Vanessa saw that Rahewa was about to protest, hurried on. "They both work for the same company, I think you know that ..."

Clemens nodded.

"... which is Groucho Biochemicals. This company has been founded by ex-Hogwarts people, with the major stockholder being a woman by the name of Cho Chang-Potter. Did you know that too?"

He did.

"Well - said Cho Chang-Potter is the wife of Harry Potter, not quite unknown by himself. And this Harry Potter ..." Vanessa stopped while Clemens was waiting for the punch line, turned to Rahewa. "Tell him."

Her friend glared at her. "No, I'm not - and you're not telling him either, if you know what's good for you."

Clemens stared at her, back at Vanessa, looking bewildered.

Vanessa came up, moved to her friend, hugged her from behind and, over her shoulder, looked at Clemens. "This girl here's the goddaughter of Harry Potter, which means she's as good as a ticket to Groucho Biochemicals ..."

A choked sound just in front of her, while Clemens looked speechless.

"... The only problem is - this girl, which normally doesn't even know what frightened means, at this moment is scared shitless your only interest in her would be this connection ..."

Vanessa waited a second, until even Rahewa in her worried state couldn't help noticing that Clemens' face had turned dark red.

"... while I for myself don't think so. And now - if you'd excuse me, I guess I should have a look at Romeo and Juliet - the dog version, I mean."

Vanessa placed a light kiss at the burning cheek of her friend, moved up, and called, "Hey, Vincent - where did you bury the poor poodles ..."

* * *

When the doorbell chimed, Harry looked at his daughter with some relief. "That must be Rahewa." He headed for the door, hoping dearly he was right - patience with people being late wasn't exactly Sandy's strongest, despite of what he had told Cho about their daughter's tolerance toward individual will.

Of course it was Rahewa - who else would come to visit Sunday morning at breakfast time? The girl looked as if she'd run. Harry stepped aside. "Come in - there's someone who can't await seeing you."

"Sorry to be late."

Without even snooping, Harry could feel how Rahewa was radiating with excitement while she opened her knapsack to let out the two poodles. They instantly raced toward the kitchen, their claws clacking on the wooden panels.

A mind-piercing squeak came from that direction - Sandy had detected them. Rahewa just found the time to wheel her around once, then the girl was struggling like an eel to reach the floor, to be almost run over from the two dogs which started to lick her face, raising a stream of pleased gigglings.

Cho watched the scene. "I wonder if Nagini's jealous."

Harry exchanged a short hissing with his snake. "She has trouble to understand the concept of jealousy. I'm not sure whether I could explain it sufficiently."

Cho snorted. "Of course not. That would be the blind teaching colours."

Rahewa, just before taking her first bite, said, "Pity you cannot Parseltongue, Cho."

"Hear that unthankful brat!" Cho glared at the teenager, hardly six years younger than herself. "Just wait - then you know by yourself, and then you can ask Cass to translate."

A moment later, Cho stared with surprise at the result of her remark - a Rahewa deeply blushing, her eyes keeping at the table. "Hey, Rage - did I say something wrong?" Cho turned to her husband, looking a bit uneasy.

Harry examined the girl. Suddenly, he started to smile. "She's just embarrassed because she's late ... Something very important must have kept her - I wonder what that might be ... Erm - did I say *what*?"

Cho stared at him, back at the girl. Then she also started to smile. "Which is just another proof - God punishes small sins immediately, giving you a big mouth just at the wrong time ..."

"Please ..." As miserable as Rahewa seemed, the radiating wasn't going to stop, and it couldn't be blamed entirely to her burning cheeks.

Cho stood up, moved over, bent down. "C'mon - who's the lucky one?"

A whisper, almost inaudible. "His name's Clemens."

From own hard experience, Harry's question was a natural reflex. "Does he know about his luck?"

"Erm - I'm not sure." But with a heart as full as hers, Rahewa didn't need any more prompting to reveal the story how her disgusting friend had pushed the matter so shamelessly.

Cho turned to Harry. "Then it's obvious what we have to do. We must make sure this Clemens won't have a chance to meet Beatrice - then, if he's still hanging around, we know there must be another reason."

Seeing his goddaughter twist, Harry said, "Look at it the other way - we invite him, and Beatrice too, and see what happens ... Then, if he's still hanging around ..."

Rahewa twisted again. Apparently, she was unable to see the benefit in either approach.

Cho asked, "Do your parents know?"

"How could they? It's just an hour ago ..." Rahewa looked alarmed. "Please don't tell them."

"No we won't." Harry tried to keep serious. "This will make sure they'll never find out - why, nobody would tell them, so how should they wise up?"

Rahewa nodded, seemingly satisfied. Next moment, she twisted again - Harry's theatrical voice had reached even her troubled mind. "You mean ..."

Harry nodded. "Check yourself in a mirror - then you know who'll tell them."

A deep sigh from the girl indicated that she was about to realize the inevitable. But strangely enough, she no longer looked desperate, more the opposite. Next moment, her food forgotten, she sat down to catch a two-year-old and to cuddle her.

Harry and his wife looked at each other, beaming, remembering their own experiences at a time when Rahewa hadn't even joined Hogwarts. Then Harry checked his watch. "Time for me to talk with the Goblins." He reached for his cup.

"Goblins?" Rahewa seemed to have found some mind capacity for more news. "What about them?"

"It's about Bill." Harry summarized the events of the recent days, while Rahewa listened with growing concern. "I'm going to talk with them at Gringotts downtown - there's a certain Goblin I'd like to have in our team, his name is Urion ... It just fits you're here because I didn't plan to take Sandy with me."

Now Rahewa looked truly worried - Harry doing something without his daughter, this had to be more than serious.

Said daughter had heard about Bill and a cure, reminding her that she hadn't told Rahewa yet the most important news. So she grabbed her godmother and said, "Music!"

"Music?"

Sandra nodded. "Hèly music."

After a second, Rahewa understood. "Really? So you've finally got what you wanted - and all this because you helped curing Bill."

Another nod.

Cho was about to tell Rahewa how Cass had found a new friend, and was trading with a snake that went for a chair, when she suddenly stopped, looking at her daughter. Sandra had noticed that Harry was preparing to leave - to do some travel without herself. She stared at her father in perplexion and disbelief.

Rahewa tried to calm her down. "C'mon, babe, Harry will just visit the Goblins to get their help for curing Bill, and in the meantime, we can do our own ..."

She didn't come any further. Nobody could blame her, but it had been the wrong signal. Definitely.

All Sandra had understood was that her father was about to do something that would take place without herself, that this something had to do with curing Bill - and this, quite obviously, would put her music in jeopardy.

She didn't protest. She took action to save her music.

Harry stopped, turned, made a step toward Sandra. At this moment, realizing what he was about to do, the trance-like state broke. He stared at his daughter, at Rahewa who sat there, glassy eyes, her torso slightly swinging from side to side, then at his wife who looked very much the same.

With his next step, Harry had the girl with the burning eyes grabbed, took her up. "It's okay, Sandy - we'll do it together. We'll go to the Goblins, to call them for help. Now calm down."

"Music." Nobody would have associated this miserable voice with the same mind which - a second before - had sent an Imperius toward three people.

"Yes, my sweetheart, you'll get your music. We'll do it together, and we'll tell Hély, and Hély will play your music."

A deep sigh of relief was the answer.

Cho and Rahewa had come awake from their own trance, staring wide-eyed at a two-year-old. Rahewa looked at Cho, at Harry. "What was this?"

"Don't you recognize an Imperius? ... The poor thing thought if she's not part of the action Héloise won't play her music any more."

Cho stared at her daughter. "Poor thing ..." Her voice betrayed her own words.

There was awe in Rahewa's glance. "Three people at once ... We're lucky Harry's immune from the Imperius, really, we are." Her head was shaking. "Almyra won't believe me when ..."

Cho's head wheeled around. "No! Please don't tell her."

"No I won't." Rahewa could hardly speak from giggling. "This will make sure she'll never find out, hehe - why, nobody - hehehe - would tell her, so how should she know-ho-ho-ho ..."

With an expression of helplessness, Cho looked at her husband, not finding much comfort there, as Harry was already shaking in the first fit of his own giggles.

* * *

"Mummy!"

So sieasta time was over. Cho went up immediately to catch her daughter with the short-fused bladder and the great dislike of diapers.

Rahewa had left at the time Cass was put to bed. While this matched common habit, today a neutral observer might have sworn Harry's goddaughter seemed a bit impatient, almost couldn't await her own goddaughter being sent asleep. And Rahewa hadn't even once hinted that she would like joining Harry in his journey toward a historical place below sea level.

Very unusual, that. And so very understandable.

While her own daughter ... Cho knew she had no choice - the moment Harry would have left, hell would break loose in this house. She hadn't agreed yet expressly, but what difference did it make - they both knew. Still more difficult was it to suppress a constant stream of remarks like, "But please make sure she's safe, Harry." As if he wouldn't do that by himself ...

Cho would stay off, she wouldn't join them. Even so, she would be unable to work, would sit with sickness in her stomach, waiting for their return. Damn super wizards - and witches, for that matter, at the age of ...

The doorbell chimed.

Cho headed for the door, taking Cass with her - partly to make sure the girl wouldn't hurt herself when left alone, still more because you better showed her a visitor rather quickly, once she'd heard the doorbell.

A Goblin! Cho was embarrassingly unfamiliar with Goblin appearances, but this seemed a military officer, although he wasn't wearing a weapon, at least not openly. His face - well, a Goblin face, what else could you ...

"Good afternoon, Mylady. My name is Urion."

Of course. Three hours earlier, her husband had ever so casually mentioned that he'd like to work with this warrior, if possible, and now said warrior was standing in the door. At this moment, and with some relief, Cho heard Harry's footsteps behind her.

"Urion the Unexpected!" Her husband beamed, celebrated a bow. "I'm thankful you could make it so quickly, Urion. Come in and be our guest."

"I came when I heard the message, Ambassador." The Goblin hadn't bowed in return, but his right arm was held across his chest, probably the military version of a salute.

Harry turned to his wife. "Cho, Sandy, this is Urion the Unmistakable - he commanded the counter action in the assault against the wizard prison, after Sirius had played the undercover agent."

"Only the Goblin troops, Ambassador, as you certainly remember."

Which was a hint at Harry's action in this event, who hadn't ignored any of Urion's orders but who had moved at his own before Urion had a chance to tell him differently. With appreciation, Cho realized that for once there was a Goblin who didn't die in awe, seeing her husband.

"Urion," continued Harry, "this is my wife Cho Chang - like yourself, she thinks certain tasks should really be left to Goblin warriors ... And this is our daughter Sandra Catherine - like myself, she thinks she must put her nose in everything ... Sandy, this is U-rion - he will help us to cure Bill."

The girl examined the leathery face while the Goblin stood unmoving. Then she said, "Uh-rion?"

"Yes, that's me, Sandra Catherine."

About to smile at him, the girl stopped, looked questioningly at her mother.

Fortunately, Cho knew why. "You may call her Sandy, or Cass, or whatever, Urion - if she hears her full name, she thinks she did something wrong because that's my way of chiding her."

"Somehow, that sounds familiar." The Goblin smiled at the girl. "Then I'll call you little princess, because that's what you are."

Cho suppressed a remark while her daughter rewarded the Goblin with a beaming smile and all people present with a mind wave like a gust of sirocco. "Help Bill. Music."

Urion looked at Harry.

"I'll explain inside - the story's a bit longer, and I figure you'd like a drink."

Yes, Urion would, didn't object a generous brandy, which struck Cho a bit weird before she realized that for Urion, until a few minutes ago, it had been close to midnight.

While Harry told Urion the story, Cho could study the figure and the face, most of all Urion's reaction to what he saw and heard. Broad-shouldered, big for a Goblin, and remarkably composed. When Cass curled into Nagini, Urion had watched without so much as blinking an eye. Maybe the members of the Ambassador's household were commonly known among the Goblins, only Cho didn't think so.

Harry finished, "We should check it as soon as possible. If that's the place, every wizard tourist is at risk."

Urion spoke for the first time in the last twenty minutes. "What exactly's our goal, Ambassador?"

"To find out if this castle holds an unusual magical power. That's all."

"Assume there is. What then?"

"Then we'll inform the authorities, so this place can be closed and secured. Later ..." Harry explained his idea of a volunteer from the wizard prison.

Apparently, Urion couldn't find much taste in that. "A Goblin might be immune from this power."

"It's not impossible." Harry's eyes met the Goblin's. "Could also be they suffer still more, and I'd never forgive me if Urion the Undisputed would find entry in the case record as Urion the Undiscriminating."

Cho glanced at her husband with bewilderment. Harry playing jokes with Goblin names - that was unusual, regardless of how nicely he had sent his message.

Harry recognized her glance, smiled. "Urion's second name is - er, subject to speculation. Sometimes that's quite useful."

The Goblin confirmed this with a nod toward Cho, turned back to Harry. "Who else will come with us?"

"Bill himself, then a friend of mine whose name is Tony Chee - he's a Muggle, which is his main qualification in this issue. Then Nagini here ..." Harry pointed at the snake, "... and Sandy."

Cho had gone tense, was biting her lips.

The Goblin looked at the girl for whom the world seemed quite in order that way, back at Harry. "I noticed her - remarkable magic, Ambassador. Is this the reason?"

"Not quite - erm, no, in a way you're right. It has to do with music." Harry explained how a Goblin harp in first place and a triple Imperius at bad last had brought a two-year-old into the investigation team.

Ah, look there - even Goblin eyes could widen. Urion shot a short glance toward Cho, looked away. Then he turned to the girl. "I can give you your own music, little princess."

A determined head turned left, right. "No. Hély music."

"Then ..." Urion looked at Cho. "Mylady, once I heard a Felison played - something never to forget ... And I remember something else I won't forget - how a boy disappeared into a tunnel of a gold mine, to perform a task he thought necessary. I was quite surprised to see him again, some time later ... He was very stubborn, that boy - I guess it's been put into his genes."

Cho loved him for that - for his offer toward a stubborn girl, and for his encouragement toward herself. In some sense, she also felt grateful that Urion hadn't made some questionable promise like, "I'll make sure nothing will happen to her." For all Cho knew about Goblins in general and Urion in particular, this would have been utterly dishonourable.

While the other half of her mind gave a damn for honour, wouldn't have objected hearing just that.

* * *

Life without magic was hell. Bearable, agreed - though hell just the same. Every minor task a nuisance, travelling a painful experience - thank God the linkports still worked for you. And the glances from the others who knew - pitiful, compassionate, fuckingly tactful. Suddenly they used their wand discreetly, as if they were taking a sip of booze early in the morning, or a noseful of dope any time of the day.

Calling Bill edgy would have been polite. He wasn't built to blame himself - aside from the fact that this would have been nonsense. He tried not to blame the others either, least of all his wife, because this would have been the most stupid nonsense, or so his better self told him.

But then - whom else to blame?

Didn't work that way. Worked so badly that Fleur yelled at him, "Goddammit, Bill, do me a favour and scream and stomp and bite pieces off the furniture, but stop looking like a beaten dog. I'm going to call Fred and George - they have to come with a full-body armour, just for teasing the hell out of you. Since you cannot curse them, there's little risk."

Bill wasn't built to beat his wife either, although he'd never felt as close as then. Next moment, he was drowning in a wave of dizziness, and seconds later, they were fucking until his eyes felt like going cross. Praise the Lord for big favours like Veela wives.

Except that, after a while, the anger was back. You just couldn't fuck as much as you were mad.

His children saved him from going nuts. Sitting with Michel in his arm while Héloise was playing for her father would put Bill's mind at ease - for another while. Then he would try to imagine how Muggles went through life, going about their business without the slightest trace of magic.

What a depressing thought.

When Harry arrived, Bill felt ready to do anything. A second infection? Why not - after all, maybe it worked like a switch, light changing with darkness every second time. Still, Sandra

on Harry's arm took him by surprise. "The last time we spoke about this thing she was out of the game, Harry. What put her back in?"

"Music."

"Ah, yes, of course."

Edginess was a burden because it made you sarcastic, and sarcasm was a trapdoor you could fall in any time - for example when Harry didn't answer, taking your stupid wisecrack literally. So Bill swallowed his pride while not his sarcasm. "I'm sorry. Would you have the overbrimming grace to tell me a tiny bit more? But please no details - Heaven forbid I might suffer from that."

Harry's lips twisted. "You mean, just the overall picture?"

"Yeah, right! I mean, just between the two of us." And never mind a snake and a two-year-old listening with almost the same expression in their faces.

"Okay, then ... She's in because of music."

"Thank you, Harry, that enlightens me a great deal. You saved me from months of scratching my head, lying sleeplessly at night, always this unforgettable picture in my mind how this great mystery's been solved - erm, I mean the other way ..."

Harry stopped him cold - literally. The wave in Bill's mind felt like a blast of ice water. Although his words hurt more. "Listen, Bill, if you want to play the asshole with me, that's fine, although Ron's better in that game. But down at the street is Urion the Unforgiving - right now he's going to have a chat with the street guard - and if you are planning to do it in his presence, you'll learn how badly wrong this idea is ... Okay, you're pissed off, but you still have the magic everybody has."

"Everybody? ... What magic is this?"

Harry grinned. "The magic word."

Neat and clean - Bill had to admit that. "Okay - now I'm really sorry. Please excuse my bad mood. Would you - please - now ..."

"Well, as I said, it's about music ..."

Bill felt his teeth clenching. Just in time, he saw the sparkling in Harry's eyes, kept silent.

"... she was afraid that if she's not in, Hély would stop playing for her. Well - erm, she sent an Imperius to Cho, Rahewa, and myself simultaneously, and although I could keep clear, we decided not to take any more chances of such a misunderstanding."

Bill stared at his step-brother, seeing enough in Harry's face to know this hadn't been a joke. "Whoa."

"Said the barkeeper when the fan spread it all around ... Ready?"

Of course it took still a few minutes. Fleur came in, and while Harry told her how his cute little monster had cursed her way into the team, Bill headed for his office to arm himself for the journey. Which didn't mean arms - as an experienced Middle East traveller, he knew a weapon far more effective.

Money.

Bill would have jumped to Tiberias, only he couldn't due to lack of magic. Harry would have jumped first and summoned them then, only he couldn't, due to lack of knowing the location. Urion would have neither, because Goblins couldn't apparate.

But they could be summoned, thanks for small favours to Allah, Jahwe, and God. So Harry summoned them to the Paris Linkport. And look there, another man was waiting there.

"Bill," introduced Harry, "that's Tony Chee, my friend and *aikido* partner, publicly known as a movie director ... Tony, that's Bill Weasley, my oldest brother and recently a bit short on magic."

Bill shook a hand that felt hard, quite callused. He wondered if Harry could summon a Muggle - meeting this Tony here probably meant he couldn't, but somehow it wasn't the question Bill would have liked to ask here, especially not after this little exchange some minutes ago.

Apparently, Harry had done some homework, and probably at the *Magical Tours* website because he said, "The only link to Tiberias is from Haifa, and the only link to Haifa's from Tel Aviv, because they're all so good neighbours down there, and the next link to Tel Aviv ..."

Bill missed his magic while not his knowledge, and this made him already feel better. "Forget your route, Harry - there's a shorter way. See that link to Beirut in twenty minutes - that's ours."

"Beirut? ... They have no connections ..."

"That's the official plan. In Beirut, official rules mean a rat's ass, Harry ... Trust me, and now let's check in."

In Beirut Linkport, Bill went to a certain desk, asked for a certain man he knew from earlier negotiations. With this man, for good measure and reasons of politeness, Bill had to negotiate three minutes, which was extremely quick according to Libanese standards. Then the deal was settled.

Bill returned to his teammates. "It turns out we can use a non-standard link, normally open just for mail. By the way, that's exactly the route we took at this excursion, so you might keep your eyes open, in case it's the route and *not* this place."

Some minutes later, they stood in Tiberias Linkport. Seeing the figures in combat dresses, Uzi submachine-guns in their hands and the fingers never far off the trigger, Bill felt grateful to know a Goblin and a little girl in their group - nobody would suspect them of some terrorist conspiracy.

He was right, they didn't fit the Arabic suicide command pattern. This was the good news. The bad news - they didn't fit any pattern whatsoever, reason enough for an Israeli guard to stop them.

A young female sergeant - actually quite good-looking, however unsmiling, while her comrades kept their positions and their guns ready, said, "Good afternoon, sirs - would you please specify your destination, and where you came from?"

Bill made a step forward. "Yes, sergeant. We come from Paris via Beirut ...

The girl didn't like this at all. The cool politeness in her face faded rather quickly, giving room for still cooler awareness.

"... our destination is the Crusader Castle near the lake."

"The castle's closed on Mondays."

"Is it? I'm sure they'll open for us."

"You ain't bothering much with standard link routes and with standard opening times, huh? What's the purpose of your visit?"

"This is a scientific investigation. Not having tourists around is even better."

"Scientific?" The sergeant, who could fill her combat jacket so nicely, glanced at Sandra, the snake, the Goblin. "From which institution?"

"Gringotts."

If the word Beirut had wiped off any friendliness, Bill's last reply revealed open hostility. Small wonder - Gringotts meant Goblins, and Goblins refused to fit into the simplistic friend-enemy pattern that was the preferred perspective of these ...

"What are you going to investigate?"

"You may ask Gringotts for that."

Bill's last reply did it. The girl was about to send them back when the Goblin stepped forward. "Sergeant, my name is Urion. I am colonel of the Goblin Army, detached to escort this crew on their journey. Is there a reason to prevent us from performing our task?"

Read, *Are you ready to raise a diplomatic accident?* Bill kept his face steady.

The sergeant's face was mask-like. "No, colonel."

"Would you like to have us escorted to that castle?"

Read, *Are you ready to raise a military accident by insulting a Goblin officer?*

The girl wasn't. Bill showed her his Gringotts identification, fake-save like all Goblin certificates, and a minute later, they reached the short line of cabs outside.

The cab driver, an Arab, probably also knew that the castle was officially closed. However, he didn't bother to tell them, a sign of good entrepreneurship, but maybe he just gave his passengers credit in their ability to open doors.

Sitting in the passenger seat, Bill became aware that he was paying a high price for that wee bit more space, compared to the others on the backseats - car accident statistics showed awfully bad numbers for this position. He felt grateful that, on the way back, it would be Harry who ...

Or maybe not. Bill turned. "Do we need the cab afterwards, when we're done?"

Tony looked self-conscious. Harry gave the answer. "Yes."

So he couldn't ...

"I'm sorry." Tony's voice sounded deeply embarrassed. "We checked it the other day - Harry can summon me, only there's a minor POA problem."

"POA?"

"Yeah - puking on arrival ... And to be honest, it's not minor."

"Okay." Sitting straight again, Bill hoped the twisting of his shoulders would be related to the driver's style. He could keep his chuckling silent, but he couldn't suppress it.

Against all odds, they reached the castle unharmed and with the cab still operative. Bill showed the driver three hundred-pound notes, ripped them in two halves, gave him one pile. "Wait here. The other half will be yours back in Tiberias."

The driver's outburst of cusswords made clear what he thought of standing with his car in the full heat of the afternoon sun. Even so, Bill felt save to find the cab waiting for them - tripling the fare had been the right move, in particular as it came in two instalments.

He reached the others, who were standing at the small portal in the outer wall. From a military standpoint, this wall seemed pretty useless - not high enough, no platform on top from where the defenders could throw arrows, boiling tar, or plain shit onto attackers. So apparently its main purpose had been to keep the driftsand out of the castle yard. Today, however, looking from a business perspective, this wall separated the paying visitors inside from the ignorant Philistines outside, and the portal was the place with the cash register.

Which looked empty, deserted, without a bell to ring.

Tony inspected the lock. This model was unlike anything the Crusaders might have built. He looked at Harry. "Shall I climb over the wall and call for someone, or do we use a little force?"

Bill answered first. "Why not just apparate inside?" The portal consisted of vertical iron bars, with the castle yard clearly visible - this couldn't possibly be a problem for ...

"Because I want to check every step I move." Harry hissed something to his snake, which hissed something back. Then he touched the portal, again talking with Nagini.

Click. The door swung open.

Harry turned. "Allright, Bill - try to walk the same path as the last time, and do it slowly ... Urion, Tony, please watch our progress - when I wave, you follow and we watch yours. Okay?"

This wasn't exactly the Goblin's view of things, but Harry was right - he, Bill, was the scout, and Nagini was the sensor.

Hopefully.

Bill went through the door. Checking around, he saw that Harry with the girl and the snake was following some steps behind.

What had they done the last time, he and Konstantin? Looking around, commenting on the reconstructed building, exchanging comments on those Crusaders who had built such a nice castle, were dead and gone for centuries.

Konstantin was dead and gone too, only just for a few days. Had he caught it here?

Bill walked forward, toward the building. The path was flanked by a few trees, probably thanks to manual watering by the maintenance crew - the well was operative, although every bucket of water had to be hauled up from more than hundred feet below.

There was the well, framed by a circular wall, with the small crane on top. They had replaced the original rope with a thin steel cable - visitors to be carried down on this little stool certainly trusted the cable more than a rope, Bill himself had thought the same ...

"Fever!"

Sandra's voice - alarmed, frightened, more panicky than anything Bill had ever heard from that girl. Stopping in mid-step, he wheeled around to look at her, the movement never finishing in place - all he realized was Harry gone, no longer trailing behind while at the same time something sucked him in.

A fleeting instant later, the world materialized again. There was the wall, the open portal - and there was Harry with Sandra and Nagini, and next moment Tony stood there while Urion was looking for any sign of movement inside.

Of course - Harry had jumped outside at Sandra's yell, had summoned him a split second later. Bill looked at the girl, who stared into the yard, now looked away. Seeing him, Sandra seemed to relax a bit.

Harry caressed her. "Did you feel the fever?"

A nod.

"The fever that was in Bill?"

Another nod.

"That was good, my sweetie. You saved Bill from that fever, and we'll tell Hély, and she'll play your music."

"Yes."

Bill felt the girl's glance rest at him. He made a step toward her, touched her face. It sent a slight shock through his mind, swallowing the remark he'd planned, that he would make sure Héloïse heard about that.

Sandra's smile came still a bit shaky. "Bill. No fever."

05 - Well Done

Tony Chee, usually known as a movie director with little chances for an Oscar while much fun at the set, could also direct his own moves quite well. This made sure he could tell his actors what to do, and this formed the base on which he and Harry had come together - first at a party, then at the set, finally in *aikido* training halls.

Right now, however, Harry played the director, and Tony, did the actor.

The moves Tony had to carry out were pretty simple, which was good because Harry didn't use a megaphone. He used a snake. It complicated matters a bit that Tony was awfully bad in snake language. Normally that felt perfectly okay, only today he could have done with a larger vocabulary.

Larger than zero, that was.

But they got along, he and Nagini. Sure, the first seconds had been a bit weird, with the snake around Tony's body, her head over his shoulder, close to his ear - after all, a deadly animal so tightly at your precious skin, after you witnessed how someone bitten by her had looked a minute later ...

Not that Tony expected Nagini to bite, not at all, really - it was just the knowledge ... And he had never expected the snake being that heavy - it explained where Harry got his muscular torso from.

A hissing.

Tony stopped, retreated some steps, tracing back exactly the way he had advanced seconds before. Then he turned ninety degrees, again stepping forward, slowly, every second aware that the next hissing might stop him once more.

Didn't. Having passed twenty steps, Tony turned ninety degrees toward the previous direction, moved forward again.

That Goblin ... Tony had little experience with Goblins, he knew them from Gringotts, yes, but bankers were bankers were bankers, weren't they? While Urion - he hadn't liked the idea a bit, that it should be Tony who was going to run along the borderlines of a twenty-step grid through the castle yard. "This is my task, Ambassador," Urion had said.

Tony had heard that term before, once when he and Harry had visited Gringotts together. Afterwards, all he learned from Harry could be summarized as, *Ambassador was a title ...* Well, he'd never guessed. What the title meant was still a bit unclear to him, and most people would agree that this counted as the interesting part. You couldn't ask the Goblins, you couldn't ask Harry, and you couldn't ask his wife. In contrast to the former two, Cho would tell him, only that this would be like spying out on his friend. Tony would have to wait and see.

And today he had seen that this title seemed good enough to stop a Goblin colonel. "Your task is to take risks, Urion," Harry had said, "while Tony's here because he doesn't take a risk. We

know that this power doesn't affect Muggles." Then Harry had grinned. "Who'd believe me that Urion the Uncompromising takes an avoidable risk?"

Goblins could well look upset - Tony had learned that also some minutes ago ...

A hissing.

"Got you, Nagini." Stop - retreat - turn - walk. When Tony felt sure the next hissing would come, it didn't. The path was free. He reached the building without any further comment from the snake, stopped, turned, looked around.

There seemed no question left, but just for good measure ... Tony approached the spot from the other side, and right when he thought it would, the hissing reached his ear.

A small arc to the side, another approach - yes, sir, this cleared the last doubt. Tony walked to the portal where the others stood waiting, turned to Harry. "You've seen it, haven't you?"

Harry nodded. "So it's the well - something down there."

Tony looked at Bill. "Have you been down the shaft?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"There's a tunnel - you can climb off the stool and walk the tunnel, to be hauled up later, or you can keep seated, just having a look at it."

"What did you do?"

"I went down first. Then, until Konstantin arrived, I checked into the tunnel. When he was down, I took his stool upward and he went into the tunnel ... It's nothing spectacular, except that it's so old and that people built it for deadly serious reasons, working hard ... There's no mysterious cave, or box, or whatever."

Harry asked, "What did you feel down there?"

"Of course it's a bit creepy, floating down toward the water. Otherwise ... I was shivering - it's cool, and after the hot sun ..."

"That's the only reason?"

Bill looked at Harry. "Good question ... I cannot say there was a sting or a shockwave or anything of that kind - touching this little angel here's a stronger thrill often enough." Bill smiled at Sandra.

Tony tried to imagine how it looked hundred and fifty feet down a well shaft, came to the conclusion that it didn't look at all, unless you had a light. But Harry had a light - his wand, or maybe Bill's wand which right now came as useful as an umbrella. Wrong - an umbrella protected also against the sun.

While Bill's wand didn't. "Harry," asked Tony, "want me to go down there?"

"Evenutally, yes. But not now. We don't know how this hauling device works, and what's more, I don't want any wizard or Goblin close to the centre of the power field."

"Then what else?"

Harry looked toward the cab. "Bill, can you give the driver his money and send him off? That guy makes me nervous."

Bill headed toward the car, to deliver the counting half of the payment, careful not to touch the car which all the time had been exposed to the sun. It gave Tony time to think about Harry's nerves, well-known for their delicate composure. So his friend was planning something unlawful, at least didn't exclude it, and made sure there was no witness who might count as such.

The cab drove off in a cloud of dust which was more impressive than the sound of the engine. Bill's expectant grin confirmed that he shared Tony's conclusion. "Okay, Harry - what now?"

"Hmm ... Does anyone know something we still can do, before coming back with better ideas and some test tools?"

"Test tools? ... What test tools?"

"No idea, but then I'm no scientist." Harry looked over the castle yard, examining the well, the building, the large tower at the end. "We have to make sure no other wizard's going to the well, or down the shaft."

Tony tried to imagine how the Israeli authorities might react to such a demand. He didn't expect them to like the idea much. At this moment, Urien said, "I can call guards, Ambassador. They would detect the wizards and warn them off."

Tony could already see the headlines in the newspapers. *Shooting between Israeli Army and Goblins near Tiberias.*

Obviously, Harry could see them too. "Maybe we should try to behave like good citizens first. If it doesn't work ..."

"Whom do you want to call? ... Police?" Bill's respect for the idea seemed quite low. Or maybe for the police.

"Still simpler - we've met some authorities, haven't we?"

"What? These soldiers?" Bill looked incredulous. "You must be out of your mind, Harry. This sergeant will be delighted, seeing us again. Her cooperation will break new records, no doubt about that."

"Let's see." Harry grinned wryly. "Shall nobody say we didn't try - and besides, this isn't our territory. They would come anyway, so if it's us who called them, maybe they can overcome their prejudices ... But first, let's call our wives and tell them that the scary part is over."

Bill and Harry went some steps apart, took their phonies to calm down two women, one in France and one in California. Tony felt glad to be free of this burden. He looked at Urion. "You're the military expert here. What do you think of Harry's plan?"

"He's calling for trouble."

Tony added this to his small collection of knowledge about Harry's relationship with Goblins. So an Ambassador could be criticized by a Goblin colonel - maybe not by the arbitrary colonel, because Urion didn't look arbitrary ...

"But of course he's right - there's no way to avoid trouble, and if you have to dance anyway, best you can do is making the first step by yourself."

* * *

Harry couldn't help thinking that he better *not* apparated right into the linkport hall. Appearing just in front of the army guard - it didn't feel as if this would speed up things ... Except some bullets, maybe.

So he jumped to the outside of the building, walked in, approaching them - a single figure, without a snake because he had left Nagini with Tony, and without a little girl because he had left Sandy with Bill. Close to Bill - for a dedicated music fan, this could hardly be wrong. So his daughter had agreed readily.

The soldiers watched him stepping closer. Harry felt the moment when they remembered him - two steps into the hall, which seemed pretty fast, but then they were trained to recognize faces, and this wasn't exactly Tokyo Linkport. He stopped in front of them. "Sergeant?"

"Yes?" Her face expressionless.

"We need help. We found something dangerous - something that should be locked against public traffic. We want to inform the authorities, and since we're not familiar with the responsibilities, I thought it was simplest coming to you."

Referring to her competence had been okay - she looked a wee bit friendlier. "Dangerous? ... What is it?"

"We don't know yet. We could locate it, that's all so far. It's in the castle yard - I thought you might come and have a look."

The young woman - twenty-two if she was a day - looked uncomprehending. "But what is it? Something you suspect a bomb inside, or what?"

"No - nothing like that. It's something contagious, raises a fever which can end fatally. One victim so far, and I'm concerned about the tourists there."

Which brought the previous conversation back into her memory, and washed off the friendliness. "How did you come into the castle yard?"

"Through the door, what else?" Harry tried to look impatient, which he was, and like someone answering stupid questions, which he wasn't. "Wouldn't it be simpler to discuss this right at the place?"

The sergeant with the prominent female attributes stared at him suspiciously. "The other people you came with - where are they?"

"Still at the castle - waiting for me to come with someone who has the authority to lock the place. Now - am I right here or ..."

Suddenly the muzzle of this sub-machine gun was pointing at his chest. Until a moment before, it had looked more like a toy than a serious weapon, like something Muggle children would use and pretend it was a Martian beam laser, only lacking the silvery polish you'd expect from the Martians. At this moment, however, it looked like a tool to kill people.

Harry stared into the woman's face. "What's this?"

"Don't move. Your description's exactly what I'd expect to lure an army patrol into a trap ..." The woman glared at him. "... and for a damn scientist you're just too calm in front of a gun. Why ain't you shitting your pants?"

"Because it smells!" It was out before Harry could stop himself.

She showed a short grin.

"Listen, sergeant - I'm an English wizard, except I live in California. I'm used to be threatened by weapons, although most often these weren't guns, But that's pretty irrelevant, because all I want is someone official up there at the castle. I'll sit in your car, just to show you it's not a trap ..."

"You bet - mister, this here's the land of suicide attacks!"

Well, there she had a point. "What can I do to ..." Harry stopped, started again. "Sergeant, do you remember the little girl? ... That's my daughter, she's waiting for me - is this enough to tell you I'm not going to kill us all?"

Seeing her still hesitate, Harry was about to jump outside and come in again, just to show his goodwill, when the woman came to a decision - maybe from his voice, or his expression of genuine anger. "Okay, mister - wait a second."

She rattled something to her comrade, who looked like a seventh-year in Harry's eyes, probably was, and obviously lower in rank. The young man walked outside, to fetch a jeep, as Harry learned a moment later. Then the woman spoke into her walkie-talkie, for Harry the most outdated communication device he could imagine. Although, this bulky piece fit exactly his opinion of armies - why simple if it could be primitive, expensive, and error-prone?

"Let's go, mister."

Sitting in the passenger seat, the young man driving, the sergeant with her gun behind him, Harry explained how his brother had returned from a Middle East trip, to catch a fever, to survive just so while his fellow who had joined him on that trip had died. Telling the story

wasn't made simpler by the young soldier's driving style, but then maybe it was the jeep to blame, bearing no resemblance whatsoever with the shiny off-road vehicles which crammed the streets in Santa Monica twice every day.

Esp - hep - pecially not - hick - with their comfort on roads designed for pilgrims and camels.

They reached the castle. A command from the sergeant stopped the car, in some distance from the small portal. Another command glued the soldier to the car while the sergeant followed Harry to the portal. She inspected the door. "Was it open when you came?"

"When I pushed it, it was open." Harry's answer sounded casual, well trained from earlier experiences in similar situations. And it was no lie.

Which didn't mean she believed him, only it wasn't important enough. The sergeant registered the other figures who had been sitting at the wall, pressed into the scarce shadow, and now were coming up. She looked at Harry. "Allright - where's the dangerous thing?"

"There - the well, probably down the shaft. After we sensed it, we checked just enough to be sure it's the well, then ..." Harry stopped because the woman was no longer listening, looked around, apparently missing scientific equipment.

And therefore highly suspicious. "What exactly did you do here? How do you know there's something contagious in the well?"

This was the moment Harry had been dreading, only he saw no choice. "We went the same route Bill had taken on his trip. When we came close to the well, Sandy sensed it first, and we jumped back. Then we ..."

"Sandy? Who's Sandy?"

Harry took his daughter from Bill's arm. "That's Sandy, my daughter - Sandra Catherine. She has quite some magical power ..."

The young woman stared at him, at the girl, an expression in her face as if she couldn't decide whether to laugh or start shooting. Sandra, in return, stared at the woman to figure out if this unpleasant aura might be something that was directed against her father, in which case she ...

Harry said quickly, "It's okay, Sandy. We have to tell this lady what happened."

"Bill. Fever." And a fierce glare.

"Indeed? ... Hrmph - and then?"

"Then we sent Tony - he's the only Muggle, and for them it's not contagious, so he wasn't at risk, coming closer. He scanned around, until we knew definitely it was ..."

"What - with your daughter?" The sergeant seemed not ready yet to believe the story, only she wasn't going to believe that Harry had used a two-year-old in place of a magical Geiger counter.

"Er - no. He did it with Nagini - er, that's the snake. She's not as good as Sandy, but almost - and we think she hasn't caught the infection."

"No - of course not. How could she? ... She?" The sergeant caught herself close to a hysteric giggle, steadied again. "That's the craziest story I ever heard - okay, I'm ready to accept this isn't a stunt to kill an army patrol, but otherwise ..."

"Sergeant ..." Harry had no trouble to make his voice sound pleadingly. "I know how it sounds - I have trouble enough with other wizards, I mean, with Sandy and Nagini. But our problem is - if a wizard comes too close to that something down there, he loses his magical power, and most likely the fever kills him. And that's not a joke."

The woman glanced at Bill. "You mean he's a Muggle now?"

"Not really - Nagini says he doesn't feel like a Muggle ..."

"Nagini says, huh?" The sergeant's lips were twisting. "Would you please ask her how I feel?"

Harry saw his chance, waved to Tony, who stepped closer with the snake. "Nagini, this woman wants to know how she feels for you. Please tell me."

"She is a Muggle, master. She feels a bit desperate, like someone anxious to do the right thing. Some moments ago, she was still a bit fearful, but she has calmed down. She wants to believe, only she doesn't dare to believe."

"Thank you, Nagini."

Harry turned to the woman whose lips no longer twisted, whose eyes had grown considerably during this short exchange. "Shall I quote literally?"

"Er - yes."

He did.

It cut a severe blow into her view of things, only she was a sergeant of the Israeli Army, famous for their toughness. "How ... how does she do it? How can you talk with her?"

"That's a longer story, sergeant - but if that's what's needed to make you close the place, I'm ready to tell you."

For a second, Harry thought he had a deal. Then the woman shook her head. "No way. I cannot close the castle - I just don't have the authority. They'd ..." She snorted. "I can see it just before my eyes - me coming along, telling them I closed the castle because there was someone with a snake, yes, and a little girl ..." She started to giggle.

"Then tell me *who is it* that can close the place."

The sergeant stopped, stared at Harry as though awaking from a dream. "It's run by the Tourist Office, which is run by the Tourist Department, which belongs to the Ministry of Public Relations - if all of them would believe you, then maybe in a few months ..."

Harry started to regret not having accepted Urion's offer.

"Mister, this is Israel - five million people, which means on a good day, if people can make up their mind, you'll find five million opinions how things should be run, only we hadn't a good day recently ..."

"Sergeant, please!" Harry pointed at Urion. "The colonel offered to occupy the castle with his warriors and lock out all wizards - but I didn't think it senseful to save a few wizard lives by letting Goblins and Israeli kill each other."

The woman nodded. "Yes, you got that right - it's the only idea I can imagine which is still worse than climbing up the ladder of Jewish authorities."

"Thank you sergeant - that clears the issue."

"What ..."

Harry had his wand already out, pointed at the small crane. "Sandy, watch."

A tiny ball erupted from the tip, buzzed through the air, crashed through the windowpane into the small control cabin, exploded inside with a loud bang, sending splinters in all directions. Harry aimed lower, sending a second ball of nitroglycerine toward the cable drum. This crane wouldn't haul down another person soon.

Just when the first explosion faded, things around him started to develop.

The sergeant brought her eyes off the rumpled piece of Muggle technology. With a short twist of her shoulder, simultaneously pulling the gun-strap, she sent the sub-machine gun off her back, flying in a half-arc toward her other hand.

Before the gun could reach its destination, it was stopped by Urion, whose long fingers closed around the shaft, not pulling further, just holding, his eyes telling the woman this wasn't going to happen. The Goblin's movement had looked like an integral part of what had been started with the twisting of her shoulders.

For an instant, the sergeant glared at the Goblin colonel, her eyes telling him to go to hell. Before either of them had time for a remark, a *brrraap* could be heard from the jeep's location, and another sound from the wall as if several woodpeckers had found the stones worth a try, all of them at the same time.

"Oh, shit!" The sergeant dropped the wrenghing contest with the Goblin. While Harry, Tony, and Bill were busy seeking cover, she sprinted through the portal, an angry fist raising into the air.

"Hey, you ..." She coughed, bent over like kicked into the stomach, crumpled down on the ground in slow motion.

And only now, Harry's mind registered what he'd heard at the same time - the second *brrraap* from below, and the whining sound of some other bullets coming through the portal.

* * *

Laila Belezikijan, sergeant in the Israeli Army but currently very much out of combat, felt consciousness return to her mind. She was pretty sure she wouldn't like the state in which she would find herself, and right - as awareness kicked in, a terrible pain from her belly started draining every other emotion.

But the pain hardly found time to make itself heard when it already faded, as though a thick-panelled door was closed, cutting out the frantic noises from a crowded market, creating quietness inside, and the knowledge of agitation somewhere beyond these thick walls.

"Hold still!"

Opening her eyes, Laila decided this command had been aimed at her, because there was a young woman who gently pushed her arm down, a clear signal not to move.

Now the woman said, "I don't like to strap my patients, particularly not if they're fully awake. Please keep still, because I'm going to do a bit of delicate work with your interior ... And relax - don't tense your stomach. Do you feel pain?"

"Er - no. Just for an instant, but it's gone."

"Right, and that's how it'll stay for the next minutes. So you don't have to expect stabs or piercing or anything, that's why you can relax your muscles. Right now they feel as hard as wood - I cannot use that. You can talk, but please don't laugh."

Which of course, for a moment, almost made her so.

Trained to look first and ask then, or maybe to look first, shoot then, and ask at the end, Laila let her eyes wander around as much as she could - lying on a table or plank bed, barely padded.

Was this an OP?

If so, then certainly the weirdest she had ever seen. Not that she had seen that many, more in TV than in reality because she had never caught a bullet before, and combat troops preferred to stay out of hospitals.

But she'd caught one, hadn't she?

Oh yes, she had. Chaim, this asshole of a trigger-happy motherfucker, had been so decent to shoot before even looking, and it had hit her in the stomach. This, of all possibilities. They said you'd recognize this kind of hit instantly, without even looking, and they'd been right. But this thick door kept it outside.

"By the way," said the woman, "the rough part's over already. We took out the bullet a minute ago, kept you stupefied until we had it out - would have been a bit hard to keep you calm on *that*."

This young woman hardly looked like a surgeon. White coat over clothes looking perfectly normal, none of the green, baggy full-body suit you knew so well from the TV soaps. No surgical mask either, not even gloves - my God, where ...

"Where am I?"

"This is Hogwarts, the wizard school in England, and we're here in the medical wing - hell of a wing, that is." The woman grinned. "My name's Hermione Krum, I'm the Potions witch here, but I have extended a bit - I mean, I know what I'm doing here, no need to get your knickers in a twist."

Laila Belezikijan realized that this advice could be taken almost literally - her own body was lacking all the surgical clothes and fabrics too, she was just lying there in her underwear - panties and bra, with a thin blanket covering her to the hips. It wasn't cold, and her combat dress had to be a bloody mess - still, somehow it felt a bit disquieting how casually this woman seemed to go about her work.

Because this work had to do with Laila's belly.

Then she recognized the needle in her arm, and the infusion bottle hanging above, and a pressure at her upper arm, leading to a monitor - the first piece of equipment looking familiar, beeping, showing green digits. And there was a young man behind that woman, working at a table.

He looked like a student, and the woman didn't look a day older than Laila herself. For her, this was no reason to worry - in Israel, you got used to seeing young people at work. You got likewise used to seeing young people die.

The woman held something that looked like a thin hose. "I'm going to play a bit inside your stomach. There's a mini camera on top - I'd be grateful if you don't twist, and I promise you it won't hurt."

That's what they always said, right before ...

With some effort, Laila Belezikijan kept steady, watching how the hose moved inside her. To her surprise, that woman was right - the touch felt gentler than a peeking finger.

But how could she feel it? How had she been anaesthetized? "What kind of anaesthetics do you use?"

The woman smiled. "The best - something money can't buy. It's called Harry Potter."

At this moment, Laila realized that two hands were lying at her shoulders, close to her throat, very lightly, and of course exactly the same temperature as her own skin.

She twisted involuntarily.

As if that door had been opened for a short instant, a light wave of pain rushed through her. At the same time, the woman, her eyes not leaving a second monitor, said, "Shhht - not moving, please. This picture of your inside is difficult enough."

"What - what's he doing?"

The woman - what's-her-name, Hermione? - walked to a table, came back with a steel mirror, held it before Laila's face so that she could see the scene behind her head.

That young man - without snake, without daughter, sitting calmly, eyes closed. And his hands on her shoulders.

"Do you recognize him? ... Okay, that's Harry, he's my anaesthetist in this operation. I don't like my patients unconscious, and local anaesthetics are clumsy and insufficient, and besides - for what I'm going to do, I want your bowels to cooperate. That's why I asked him."

"But what's he doing??"

"He's blocking the pain - as simple as that. He does it with his mind, toward your mind, and all your other organs can go nicely about their business." Seeing Laila's alarmed face, the woman sat down, touched her hands. "It's - say, do you have a name?"

"Belezikijan. Laila Belezikijan."

"Okay, Laila - I'm Hermione, and over there that's my assistant Clemens, and behind you that's Harry. We're all Magicals, and what we're doing here is ordinary wizard work ... Okay, Harry's a bit special, you won't find many wizards who can do his trick - actually, you won't find that many Potions witches who can do my trick, but it beats a Muggle surgery any time, because if you hold still for a few minutes, the wound channel will be repaired."

"A few minutes?"

"Yes, that's the advantage of magical surgery. The bullet went through your liver but had the grace not to damage too much of your bowels. And it stuck inside, so there's no exit wound ..."

Liver??

Hermione saw her glance. "Relax - repairing a liver is the easiest part. If we had to close holes in ten of your intestines, it would have been harder ... Alright - now, if you'll be a brave girl and lie quite still, I can start fixing you. I'll comment on it - for Clemens as much as for yourself, so you know what's taking place ... Okay?"

Laila nodded, surprised about her own calmness. This thick door seemed to cut out panic as well.

The witch was busy with the hose again, moving it slightly up and down. "What I'm doing is to repair each damaged layer bottom-up, or inside-out. This way, I can check the result one layer after the other, and we need only marginal quantities ... And this thing here's a great help, because you can watch what's going on ... By the way, it's Muggle technology through and through, Laila, so you see, we ain't narrow-minded here ... Clemens, the fibre stuff, please."

In the next minutes, Laila watched how the doctor witch and her assistant sent some fluids inside her, little more than drops each time, using another hose, then watching with the bodyscope how inside herself holes closed, to start with the next layer. She could watch the bodyscope display on the monitor herself, only it didn't tell her a great deal.

"Okay, so much for your food machinery ... Now comes your liver, and then we can finish with your muscles and your connective tissue. For what I can see, you need your liver intact, huh?"

Which seemed to be a decent hint at her booze consumption.

Laila didn't bother to blush - for her profession, there were worse risks than that. "What kind of stuff can repair a liver?"

The witch grinned. "A bit of this, and a bit of that - the exact recipe is the reason why my salary as a teacher here's just pocket money. But I can tell you - the major agent is dragon blood, because I know that Clemens has recognized that already." She turned to her assistant, who grinned back.

Dragon blood??

Laila decided not to ask for more details, wasn't interested to feel an urge to throw up here at that table.

"Yeah, here we go - it's like new. Laila, in half an hour or so, you can test it with a stiff brandy, or whatever's the poison of your choice."

"Brandy sounds okay."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it? ... And now for the rest, so your next push-ups won't hurt - or any other gymnastics, for that matter ..."

The witches' grin left little doubt which kind of gymnastics she was talking about, while Laila could see how a faint blush crossed the young man's face. All the time, he had looked at her like any assistant doctor, but suddenly he seemed to have trouble glancing in her direction.

Which reminded Laila that her bra wasn't exactly the army model.

"So far, so good. Look here." The witch held the mirror over Laila's stomach so she could check the wound - which no longer was a wound, just a scar, although still bright red and deep, very much like a gunshot wound after three months healing.

"Please touch it ... Press a bit ... How does it feel?"

"Pretty good ... I mean, almost normal, I can hardly believe ..."

"Yeah, it's magic, isn't it?" The witch moved behind her. "Harry?"

As though the door was opening again, only now the noise from the market had faded. Still, it brought in a rush of coldness, and suddenly things felt a bit rougher than before.

This Harry stepped around, looked at her, smiled. "Hello, sergeant. I'm glad that Hermione could fix you."

"Er - hello, Harry. Call me Laila."

"Okay, Laila. I'm sorry for that - it was my mistake, I should have warned you before ..."

"Forget it - it was Chaim, and when I'm done with him, he can use his ears for signal rockets, believe me."

The witch stepped in. "We're not quite done yet - Harry, can you get rid of that scar?"

He looked at her belly. "Yes, I think so."

Once more Laila felt alarmed. "What are you going to do?"

The witch answered before he could. "Harry's our specialist for beauty surgery - scars, bruises. Unless you think a gunshot scar decorates you better than a decent bikini figure, he'll make it disappear."

Laila stared at the beauty surgeon's forehead where an oddly shaped scar was quite prominently visible.

He recognized it, smiled. "Don't worry - the doctor's health's always the worst." Looking at her own scar again, he said, "It's a bit deep - I think I'll get me some help."

"From whom??"

"You've seen her." He seized for his handy, held it up, pressed a button. A moment later, Laila heard a girl's voice. "Yes, Harry?"

"Rahewa, can you come here to Hermione's rooms with Sandy? There's a scar that needs treatment."

"Okay. Comin'."

Laila looked at him. "Your daughter?"

"Yes - remember what I told you about her power? With her help, it'll take just a few minutes."

"Ah, yes - of course."

Of course??

Moments later, the door opened, and a teenager stepped in, the girl on her arm. "Here comes the little dragon with the big ..." The teenager's glance had fallen on this young assistant, and the effect was, in a way, more dramatical than anything Laila had seen in this room. The voice stopped like cut, while a deep colouring was creeping up the teenager's throat, into her cheeks.

Watching the young man, Laila could see him suffering similar symptoms.

Then the big girl had delivered the small girl, was in a hurry to leave.

Laila looked up, her eyes meeting those of Harry. "There's fever, and there's fever, huh?"

He smiled. "Definitely so, except sometimes the cure's simpler - from some perspective, that is."

She laughed. "Oh yes."

He sat down, the girl in his lap. "Sandy, this is Laila."

Two big eyes were staring at her. She could recognize some of the father's features in the girl's face ... Would be interesting to meet the mother.

"Lai-la."

"Hello, Sandy. Harry says you two can heal my scar."

The girl looked at her, then - following Harry's pointing hand - at her scar. Then she nodded. "Heal Laila."

Two small hands came to rest on her belly. Two bigger hands followed. Next moment, Laila felt something like an inaudible hum, quite a pleasant feeling, almost arousing.

While the two faces at her side were calm, unmoving, eyes closed. Studying them, Laila felt as though watching an optical illusion - one moment, they looked different, next second, they seemed like a smaller and a bigger version from the same model.

Some minutes later, Harry's eyes opened a split second before the girl followed. He examined her belly, bent down to his daughter's ear. "It's gone, Sandy. Look - the scar's gone, and you did it together with me."

For an instant, Laila felt as if standing in the Negev desert, a gust of the chamsin blowing into her face. Then it was gone, only the beaming face of that little girl was left. "Laila healed!"

* * *

Guest suites were quite a convenient installation, in particular if there was more than one sub-suite around the central room in which people could meet. In one of the bathrooms, Harry helped Sandy using the toilet before he did the same by himself - feeling grateful that Sandy, some time before, had accepted the strangely limited excitement of other people about her interest in their own shit.

In another bathroom, Laila was showering. Her blood-soaked combat dress had already been cleaned before, now the rest of her clothes were going through the express-order cleaning machinery of the house elves. For this purpose, Harry had shown her the small lift and had introduced her to Arbogast, the servant picture.

Done with their bladder and bowel business, Harry and his daughter marched into the central room where Nagini lay waiting. From the table, they started negotiating with Arbogast about rice pudding and turkey.

Rice pudding - certainly, sir. Turkey? Arbogast was afraid, offered duck instead.

"China Duck," caroled Sandra. She had taken Arbogast as the most natural thing from the first moment.

"It's Scottish duck, Missy. Would this be acceptable?"

Sandra looked at her father. When Harry signaled that this was indeed acceptable, the girl nodded graciously.

"Very well, Missy. What may I offer to you, sir?"

Harry, who had been given carte blanche by Laila - "Whatever, and lots of that" - decided to join his daughter with the duck while opting for a different taste in the rice, plus a large bowl of salad.

At this moment, Laila appeared in a bathrobe, to inspect the lift with low expectancy. Much to her surprise, the flimsy pieces were back, cleaned and ironed yes, only the bullet hole in her undershirt was still present.

She disappeared in her room, returned quickly in full dress. Harry wondered whether a female sergeant would be equally quick with a cocktail dress, doubted it very much, however decided not to investigate the issue further. They weren't short of conversation topics anyway, not at all.

They sat down around the table, Sandra in Harry's lap due to lack of a high chair. Next moment, plates, bowls, and dishes appeared. While Sandra started eating at once, Laila needed a second to gasp. "Today told me a few things, Harry. One of them is - I'm definitely born into the wrong race. If I didn't get the message already watching your tricks, this room here makes it clear ... A servant picture, really."

"Yes, I know. On the other side - when I was a student here, we missed items as simple as a copier. And a computer - nobody knew what that meant. Things are balancing out, although I have to admit that so far the Magicals had the better deal."

Laila wasn't in the mood for philosophy. She was in the mood for food, diminishing the pile on her dish with great energy, appreciatingly smiling at Sandra who did much the same. Watching more closely, Laila said, "She doesn't spill a single grain of rice ... Strange, somehow I thought, a girl with such powers must be chaotic in matters of daily life."

Harry's voice resonated with pride. "Sandy hates imperfection."

"Yeah, obviously."

"That's why she doesn't use a fork. It only looks as if. You could take it away, the bites would move just the same."

Laila looked respectful. "I don't think I'd like to take her fork away - I wouldn't like to mess with her at all, but with her food ... No thanks."

Good instincts she had, like every sergeant. Harry bent down. "Sandy, may I have your fork for a moment?"

The girl nodded, offered the instrument with her right hand while continuing to move nice little morsels of rice or duck into her mouth, and to chew them.

Laila looked awestruck. "Yeah ... Quite an ordinary witch girl, by all means."

Sandra didn't bother looking pleased. She was eating.

After some more bites, the woman seemed to remember that the day hadn't been quite ordinary either. "Harry, please tell me what happened after I caught that bullet."

"Well, not much, in a way. The first moment was a bit tricky because Urion - the Goblin - felt tempted to grab your gun and return the fire, but he thought better of it just in time. And your comrade - I think he recognized you the moment you fell down, at any rate, he didn't shoot more ... Because I wasn't sure, I disarmed him ..."

"Disarmed him?? How?"

"It's a spell - the disarming spell. Originally it's used to take a wand out of someone's hand, but it works with guns too."

"Harry, you might teach me that some time ... Okay, please go ahead."

"I think I could have taken his gun with my bare hands. He was so worried, the poor guy ..."

Laila snorted.

"... and to be honest, you didn't look well - not a bit, actually, Heavy bleeding, and quite dark. So I decided to take you and come here to Hogwarts - the most direct route to find help ... That's it, basically."

"Ahh - not so quickly. How did you take me?"

"You know what apparating is? ... Well, apparating someone else works too, if you know how it's done. It's called summoning. When I tried it with my friend Tony - that's the one who held Nagini - he was sick, had to - well, erm, reverse eating ..."

Laila grinned. "Don't confuse me with a woman, Harry - I'm a sergeant."

Harry let that fade uncommented - even under the combat dress, there was little doubt because of two prominent arguments, not to mention the picture of her at the surgery table. "Whatever - I stunned you first to save you from the pain, and it worked - all you were losing was blood. Then Hermione took over, and - well, you should know more about the surgery than myself."

Laila glanced at him. "How is it to anaesthetize someone? Are you in a trance then?"

"Yeah, something like that. You're not aware of what's happening around - it's kind of a conversation, like talking with a spirit."

"What did my spirit say?" The woman looked a bit self-conscious.

Harry smiled. "Nothing specific ... No, really - it wasn't a big deal, I mean you weren't dying or so, just pained. It's - like small talk, in a way, as if you'd say, Can I fetch you another drink, your glass is empty - something like that."

"Harry, you're lying shamelessly, but you do it in a nice way."

"No, I'm not - besides, Nagini would hiss if anyone in this room would be lying ..."

The woman nodded, accepting this fact much easier than his description.

"... of course it's a bit different - you're not really talking, you're thinking, and in words it would be something like, You're suffering, let me help you, or so ... But it's nothing compared to someone who's about to die - then you really have to argue."

"Argue?" Reconsidering Harry's words, Laila asked, "You did that, huh?"

"Yes - once, in the first weeks of fighting between Magicals and Muggles."

"And? Who won?"

Harry beamed. "She's quite alive - one of the teachers here."

"A propos teachers - this Hermione, is she a plain ordinary witch like you're a plain ordinary wizard, with a plain ordinary daughter and ..."

"No, she isn't. Hermione's one of the two leading Potions witches in the world - you must know, this kind of limited competition is the toughest challenge she can imagine."

Laila watched Harry's devious grin. "You know her well, do you?"

"Oh sure - we were classmates, and we're friends since the first year here in Hogwarts ... Aside from her job here, Hermione's a freelance contractor for Groucho Biochemicals - actually, her closest competitor also."

"Groucho ... I heard that name." The woman looked up. "What's your connection with Groucho?"

"The company was founded by three witches from here - one of them is my wife."

"Aaah ..." Laila grinned. "One big little cosy connection, huh?"

Before Harry could answer, there was a knocking at the door. He went over to open, found a well-known face smiling at him, said, "Hello, Almyra - come in."

Returning to the table, Harry introduced, "Laila, this is Almyra Lupin, my sister in spirit ... Al, this is Laila Belezikijan, sergeant in the Israeli Army."

The sergeant inspected the newcomer with open curiosity. "Hi - call me Laila, I wonder how Harry managed with my family name." She turned to him. "Say - your brother Bill there, and your sister here - how come they all look so much like you?"

Almyra answered for him with a deep grin. "Harry's collecting family - but this little dragon here's the first genuine product."

"And what about his own?"

"He didn't tell you, did he?"

"No - we were too busy shooting each other, maybe that's why."

Almyra grinned still broader. "That's unusual, normally Harry prefers to touch his women personally ..."

"Thanks a lot, Al." Harry glared at her.

"Why - it's true. Look, Nagini isn't hissing." Almyra turned to the other woman. "Harry's story starts with the day when his parents were killed. He was one year then, and right after that, the killer made his biggest mistake ever - he tried to kill Harry."

The sergeant nodded. "Yes, that explains a lot."

Did it?

Harry said, "That's enough biography, Al. Is there any special reason for your coming?"

Al glanced at Nagini. "I guess I better keep to the truth, so - no, it was just female curiosity."

Laila laughed.

Harry didn't. "Your own, or someone else's?"

It was Sandra who saved Almyra from answering. "Shit!"

"Then up we go." The air popped into the space that had been filled by the Potter-Potter gang.

When Harry returned, two young women smiled at him knowingly. For all he could guess, they had used the short time to exchange a maximum of information.

Almyra said, "Harry, I told Laila how I became your first patient."

Laila asked, "Harry, did you ever treat a male patient?"

He sat down. "Sure - Snape, for instance, another teacher here, and also for a scar."

Almyra looked at her fellow gossip. "But that's an exception - Harry has clear preferences."

They both giggled.

With little success, Harry tried to look upset while the two women exchanged some more remarks, having much fun at his cost. He liked Almyra too much, just couldn't be angry with her, and he felt an obligation toward the other woman who had taken a bullet for which he kept himself halfways responsible.

Then he felt Sandy falling asleep, arranged her more comfortably in his lap. Seeing that, Almyra asked, "Shall I take her with me, Harry?" Her grin was quite teasing.

"No thanks. She's lying well where she is."

Almyra turned to the sergeant. "Doesn't mean anything - Sandy would never rat out on him."

Harry could feel that his sister's joking was a bit too much for the sergeant, probably for the usual reason - because it wasn't far-fetched enough. So he said, "Give it a rest, Al - there are some serious topics too." Then he turned to Laila who seemed grateful for the change. "Your comrade should know where you are, that we didn't kidnap you - Bill promised me to explain that to him, because I was a bit in a hurry ..."

The woman nodded. "I appreciate this hurry, really I do."

"Yes, probably. Hermione suggests that you stay overnight here - she doesn't know details about the army drill, nor do I, but she'd prefer if you don't stress the new tissue too much in the first hours." Harry extracted a phony from his pocket. "Here - you can contact your unit, it works like a handy, except that it's voice-controlled. Please keep it."

"Really?" The woman inspected the small device. "It's a phony, isn't it? Ain't they very expensive?"

Almyra said, "Only if you have to pay for them. Look at the backside - see the manufacturer plate?"

The sergeant beamed. "That's great ... Thanks."

"Like all good presents, it comes for quite selfish reasons." Harry pointed at the last short-cut button in the lower row. "Here - that's a direct contact to mine, and mine has a short-cut to yours. I hope we can stay in touch as long as this story is running."

The woman looked at him. "Definitely, Harry. I'm somewhat limited, but sergeants are quite inventive."

"Thank you, Laila, I appreciate that. For the damage - please tell these people that we'll compensate them for the cost, and the loss of income, as long as they can keep it shut for a few days - the well, I mean, walking along elsewhere's probably not contagious for a wizard."

"I'll manage, believe me - it's not as if I couldn't play with explosives by myself." The sergeant grinned. "Just one more question - how can I travel back, Harry?"

"If you can wait till afternoon, when it's daytime in California, I'll come along and give you a lift ..." Harry smiled, seeing her face. "No - not summoning, a portkey, that's puke-safe. If you want to travel earlier, or still this evening ..."

"For God's sake, no! ... This is luxury here, and I guess I've found someone who'll answer me some more questions." One woman looked at the other, found a nod. "If the army gets me back one day after a shot through the liver, they won't have reason to complain, what do you think?"

Harry didn't know.

Suddenly the sergeant twisted. "I just thought - Harry, would this Hermione sign me a paper?"

"Sure - why?"

"Well ..." Laila looked embarrassed. "I just realized - aside from this little hole in my dress, I have no proof whatsoever that I've been shot."

06 - Release

Harry's call from the Crusader castle reached Cho around eleven. She had been sitting at her desk, officially thinking about the replacement for Jesamine. Only - this task wasn't likely to bear results soon, so it wouldn't hurt if she felt too absent-minded. Or too fearful, truth be told.

Hearing that the strange power had been located gave Cho leeway enough to concentrate on her work. She decided to continue with what she had started, only this time seriously. Her first step was to make a phone call - a phony call, to be precise - and to fix a lunch date. Her next move brought her at the door to the neighbour office. "Hey, Chrissy, can we talk?"

"Sure, boss."

"Don't boss me!"

In a good imitation of a Southern Louisiana slave, Chrissy sang, "Yassuh, ma'm, suh."

Cho smiled, turned serious again. "It's about the new Bio CEO. I'm going to make some suggestions, and I want to hear your comment - uncensored, I mean as prejudiced as you can. Okay?"

The Muggle woman with the witch daughter leaned back. "Shoot."

"Well, then ... I assign you CEO of Biochemicals, and I get me a new assistant."

"Gaah."

"Why not?"

Chrissy grimaced. "That's a relegation, isn't it?"

"It's a matter of perspective ... Someone once said, rather the top guy in a small town than number two in Rome."

"Yeah - only, when the guy said that, he was number one in Rome, and that's a good position to spread bullshit like that." Chrissy wrinkled her nose. "If you'd ask me to do it, I figure I wouldn't turn you down ..."

"But I won't - it was just a question." Cho hadn't expected another answer. "Okay, number two ... Bill Weasley's not gaining back his magic, and for him that's reason enough to accept the offer."

Chrissy smiled. "Nice idea, no matter which state he is ... But I don't think you'll win him over."

"Why not?"

"He's *that* tight with the Goblins." The woman put thumb and index finger together. "And besides - Fleur had to agree on that, which is unlikely because from Paris to Santa Monica, that's really a decline."

Cho thought for a moment. "Could he do it from Paris?"

The number two in *Groucho* shook her head, although hesitantly. "Probably not ... the time difference's too big - unless the whole branch is moved over, which would mean quite a bunch of new contractors ... No - either here or no deal."

"Shall I ask him?"

"It's your family, you should know better than I ... Ask Fleur - if she tells you to go to hell with Bio, which I think she will, you can save the embarrassment of asking him."

Which was a good advice, and quite an obvious one, now that Cho thought about it. Only people tended to miss the obvious when relatives were involved - actually one of the reasons for this conversation. "Okay," she said, "then let's come to the next idea - Fred and George Weasley. Their business instinct ..."

"Is such that they have built up a nice business of their own. What makes you think they won't laugh into your face?"

Chrissy's question was only natural - over the past years, *Swashbuckle Sweets* had developed from a single shop with a mail order branch in the back room to a global player, with customers worldwide and a chain of franchise shops - so far only in Europe.

However, Cho saw a possibility. "Because they don't have to give up the sweets, quite the opposite. We create a new branch - Groucho Sweets - and one of them takes over that, while the other takes over Biochemicals ... Or we run it all under Biochemicals, and they share the CEO position."

Chrissy's eyes widened admiringly. "That'd be a coup!"

"Yeah ... Problem is, they really prefer to be top in small-town - and what's worse, Swashbuckle isn't that small."

Chrissy's face showed excitement. "And what if you go still a step further? If the prophet won't come to the mountain, why not moving the mountain to the prophet?"

"Huh?" Hearing about prophets, Cho's mind filled with an imaginary picture of a small town in Israel, and a castle near some lake.

"Move Biochemicals to England. Put it together with Swashbuckle, and offer them the European branch of Groucho - with these two companies first, and room for expansion later. Isn't that top enough?"

It would drive Groucho to the limits of their financial capacity - maybe the idea came a bit early, only they were short of a competent CEO now, and if Chrissy made a suggestion like that, she had at least a rough estimation that it could be mastered.

"It would solve another problem," added her assistant. "We're near bursting point here - if we don't move something out, we have to expand."

Cho nodded. "That's a brilliant idea ... I'll tell your boss to remember that, when you come next time for a better salary."

The woman sighed theatrically. "Only she won't listen."

They both grinned. Chrissy would not come - like for all members of Groucho's higher management, her salary was a respectable fixum which didn't change, while a significant part of their income required a profit at the end of the year. Jesamine's premium correlated to the success of Biochemicals and Triple-A, while Chrissy - like Cho herself - would earn a premium if Groucho altogether made a profit. Cho's influence on the amount was limited because this decision would be taken by more people. Even so, everybody knew about her good memory - for favours as for insults, or threats.

Chrissy asked, "Some more candidates?"

"Maybe one." Cho smiled. "I'll learn more about our chances during lunch."

* * *

The man sat alone at the bar of the *Luiz Pereira*, a restaurant that had opened not too long ago and therefore was still an insider tip. Pretty soon, everybody would know about the excellent food served here, and then it would be difficult to get a table at such a short notice. But Luiz' fame hadn't spread yet, so right now, shortly before lunch time, it was almost empty.

The man liked these quiet minutes a great deal. He wished Luiz all the best, only he wouldn't help spreading, for quite egoistic motives.

Maybe also because he was more of an insider, could have told about more than the delicious food and this bar, in which the barkeeper knew when to keep silent and how to serve a cold beer.

The man wouldn't tell. For him, this seemed a fair deal - keeping his mouth shut about Luiz' history, and letting other people sing his praise. He also used to pay for his drinks, with one exception - when Luiz saw him, the host would invite him to a single glass of red wine. Politeness demanded to accept that while exchanging a few words of small talk. The invitation represented Luiz' way to tell him the restaurant was clean, and accepting it could be understood as his own way of telling Luiz that this was just fine, and better kept that way. In addition, it could be seen as a way to tell himself he was clean, and better kept that way.

The man's name was Ramon Garcia. A lieutenant in the LAPD, the Los Angeles Police Department.

Lieutenant had been Ramon's rank for quite a while already. He no longer thought he would ever make captain. The odds were against him, would always be. His refusal to howl with the wolves wasn't the worst - every now and then, the police department needed someone as captain who couldn't be bought, if only as a showcase. But there was another reason.

Ramon was a wizard in the Muggle police.

Eventually, they had found out - simply because Ramon had shown his magical power during an operation, when this had been the only possibility to save a life. Naturally enough, the saved life had told about. It had earned Ramon a special award, and the eternal mistrust from his fellow detectives, most of all from the saved one.

The first lunch guests entered the restaurant. Through a mirror across, Ramon could check every newcomer without looking directly at them. After all these years with the police, it was difficult to look like the average barfly when glancing at someone. Most people felt startled when he looked at them.

A few didn't. One of them had just entered the room, stood there for a moment, checking around, marching straight toward Ramon's stool. He turned. "Hello, Cho. Let me buy you a drink, so I can say it wasn't a bribe, treating me for lunch."

"Hello, Ramon." Cho climbed the stool next to him, looked at his glass, ordered the same. Then she raised her own glass, said, "To the bad old times," and took a long gulp.

"To a better future." Ramon followed her example.

"I'll take you by your word."

"Uh-oh ... But while on the subject - you look better than ever."

Cho smiled. "You look better than the last time."

That was Cho alright - never shy of reminding people that the last time they had looked at her through the bottom of a liquor bottle, more or less. Next moment, Ramon realized that she did with him much the same he was doing with Luiz, and the thought made him grin.

Cho looked at him with a question in her eyes - understandably so, it hadn't been funny the last time. So he explained, "I was just thinking - you'd be a good cop, Cho, you have a nice way of telling people to stay at the good side of the street ... How's your family?"

"Jumping through the world, and scaring the - well, they're doing okay."

Ramon could sense some story behind Cho's words, only she wasn't going to tell - not now, at least. And obviously, this wasn't the reason for her invitation, which reduced his guesses to half. For a detective, this should count as progress, only that the other half was hardly the topic Ramon would like to discuss during lunch.

But he would discuss it, should the topic arise. Because that was the least he could do, and because that was all he could do regarding this topic, after what had happened about a year ago.

It had been a bad time, at the end of which his girlfriend had told him she could deal with a cop, or she could deal with a drinker, but only with one of them at a time, and that's why she would leave him. Which she did.

Her name was Marie-Christine. An actor, famous enough to be mentioned every now and then in some magazine or other. Ramon didn't need these magazines to think about her, he could do that quite by himself.

And Cho was a friend of Marie-Christine, at least had been. Ramon wasn't sure whether Cho was still in contact with her, but if so, this might be Cho's reason to talk with him - for all he found in the magazines, Marie-Christine's private life left almost as much room for improvement as his own. And other than that, he wouldn't know why Cho wanted to talk with him.

"Shall we sit down? I'm hungry."

The waiter guided them to their table.

Ramon said, "I have to make a confession. I took the liberty to order for both of us - because its paella, because it's the best in the valley, because you cannot make paella for a single person, because it takes a while, and because I know that you don't like waiting that long for your food."

Cho smiled. "You're a caring guy, Ramon. You're totally right - and it's a shame how this talent is wasted, not finding a target, month after month."

So he had guessed right.

"Although there's a target that would suit perfectly."

"Except maybe the target has a different opinion - unless I'm totally mistaken in what you're heading at."

Cho grinned - quite deviously, which should make him as suspicious as toward a crackhead telling him where to look for the culprit. Only that hope and desire were allying to drown his mistrust.

"You stopped drinking, didn't you?"

He nodded.

"And you can have a beer - which is quite remarkable, according to what I've heard. I was told the only way to keep clean is not a single drop."

Ramon smiled. "Basically, that's correct. Sometimes, Luiz offers me a glass of wine, which I accept for a certain reason. And sometimes, I get myself a beer to show off."

Cho looked pleased. "Which means you won't be more than someone can stand at the same time, right?"

"You know how it is with the drop too much - what's spilling over is more than this particular drop, quite a lot more actually."

Cho looked triumphant, definitely a reason to feel worried. "You're totally right once more. So the solution is obvious, isn't it? You must stop being a cop."

"Yeah, sure, no problem - does it have time till after lunch? Because ..."

"Ramon." Cho's voice, not snappish at all, stopped his bad joke. "You don't have a future in the LAPD, we know that both quite well. What's more important - you've done your share, this job's more than someone can stand a lifetime ... When did you stare at your service revolver the last time, thinking it over?"

Ramon twisted, not daring to answer. It had been two days ago.

"And she's not doing well. She needs a caring hand."

He swallowed. "Cho, maybe I could give up being a cop. And then? What should I do? I didn't learn anything else, and in my age, it's not ..."

"Work for Groucho."

"What? As a security officer? No thanks ... I mean, nothing against Francesco and what he's doing, but that's no job for me." Francesco Lopez, an ex-Pinkerton detective, was the Chief Security Officer of *Groucho Industries*.

"Who said you should do security?"

"Then what else? ... Sales? Marketing? Administration?" The way he listed the alternatives, they sounded like insults - Ramon was aware of that while unable to change it.

Cho stared at him. "No. CEO of Groucho Biochemicals."

His laugh was short and bitter. "I'm sorry, Cho. I didn't mean to sound like that."

"I did."

Ramon stared at her, slowly coming to the only possible conclusion - she was serious. "That's ridiculous."

"Why?"

Cho moved the next fork of paella into her mouth, was chewing - sure sign that she felt quite on track, in contrast to himself who had lost ground contact. "Because I don't know zilch about manufacturing, that's why. The idea is downright crazy - I cannot read a balance sheet, I cannot distinguish between ..."

"Ramon!" Cho's voice grew a bit sharper. "Assume for a moment the police chief would be a good chief - what does he know about catching criminals, about forensics, ballistics, or whatever?"

"He's good at politics, which I'm not."

"The moment you'd start doing politics, Chrissy would have you by the balls. If you'd ever fall back to the booze, I personally would have you by your privates." Cho didn't grin at these words. "Aside from that - there's room for a mistake or two."

Ramon tried to steady himself. "Cho, did I ever tell you that three of the five people who can scare me answer to the name of Potter? And right now ..."

Cho looked simultaneously flattered and insulted. "Which are the other two?"

"One is Marie-Christine, and the fifth's someone we don't need to discuss here, in particular since he's locked away. It's too big a step at once - be realistic, Cho, I'd be bound to fail."

She studied him, chewing, then she gulped the bite. "If I could offer a smaller size, maybe I'd do it, only we need someone for Biochemicals ... Are you ready to answer me four questions?"

"Sure."

"Can you deal with people, yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Can you distinguish between crap and cranky, yes or no?"

"Er - yes."

"Can you work in a team and take an advice?"

"Yes."

"Would you give your left ball to have this job?"

"Erm - I'm not ... No."

"But you would give it for mastering the challenge *and* having Marie-Christine back."

Four questions, she had said. But then, this hadn't been a question, had it? ... Whatever - he nodded.

"Good. You get it for free, because I can hardly imagine Marie-Christine would appreciate such a deal."

Ramon looked alarmed. "Wait a sec - I didn't hear myself saying yes already ... Cho, please, gimme a day - that's a lifetime decision, it's certainly worth a bit of thinking ... Your offer comes a bit suddenly."

Her glance wasn't exactly disappointed, not approving either. Why, of course, in the Potter household lifetime decisions were taken in a fraction of a second, everybody knew that ...

In his current state, Ramon could have done with a stiff brandy - only that this would have been a decision by itself. He looked at Cho. "Is it appropriate for the CEO of Groucho Biochemicals to be scared shitless?"

"The question didn't come up so far, which means there is no rule yet ... Why?"

What a stupid question, only she looked quite solemn. "Because ... No - forget it. I know already what would happen, if I came back tomorrow to say no - and that mustn't happen,

won't happen again - you promised me to watch about that, right?" Ramon bowed. "Cho Chang-Potter, I'm your man."

She nodded. "You'll regret it twice a day, but not when coming home."

Ramon knew what she meant, only that in his imagination this home suddenly seemed to fill with another person - not every day, with her own job, but ... He glanced at a beaming witch. "Are you in touch with her?"

"No. For some reason, it cooled a bit recently - and this deal gives me a handle to change that."

So she was about to kill two birds with one stone - quite typical of her, although Ramon had no reason to complain since he was doing exactly the same, was even sharing one of the birds with her ... Well, not quite - certainly Marie-Christine had a different meaning for Cho, although he'd speculated more than once in the past about the exact nature of the relationship between ...

"Yes."

"Huh?"

Cho smiled at him. "I answered a question that would never come. It was Harry I learned that from."

"Learned what?" With some desperation, Ramon felt his cheeks colouring.

"To anticipate delicate questions, and to answer them honestly. The effect's disastrous," now Cho grinned, "but only at the first moment." Her face turned serious. "But that's been long ago, while something else is still valid - we owe her, and this obligation's staring into my face whenever I look at Cass."

Ramon knew what she was talking about. It had to do with their child, and a gruesome plot from a time before Sandra Catherine was born - Marie-Christine had been the one to uncover the plot, the first step to make it fail.

Thank God, his face had steadied again - strange how much a cop with so many years in the service could feel embarrassed about something like that. "I'll write my resignation ... Does it have time till after lunch?"

"That's early enough." They laughed both. "And for the other half - let me make the first moves ... It might come as a little surprise for some people."

Which probably included himself. Not the announcement, or whom he was bound to see again - just the day and time and location. Compared to today's surprise, this would be a small one, in some sense, only that the thought was enough to make Ramon's bones feel like jelly.

* * *

Harry did what he called *delivering Cho* - jumping into her office, of course with Sandy and Nagini, then summoning Cho, finally saying goodbye after listening to the ritual statement without which Sandy wouldn't leave - "Okay, you gangsta - off with you."

This done, he jumped to Hogwarts for a similar purpose - to deliver a sergeant of the Israeli Army at her home base, or somewhere close. Cho knew what he was going to do, had expressed mixed feelings more with glances than with words. From her view of things, the sooner that sergeant was off the better. Apparently, Almyra had also delivered - a report, no doubt quite detailed.

Harry came out at the Hogwarts Express platform - the closest point outside the school's protective zone, which made apparition impossible. Walking toward the buildings, he heard a shrill whistle from across the lake. Glancing over, he saw a waving figure. From that distance, all he recognized was - it could be Laila.

It was Laila - in a swimsuit lent by someone who was a bit slimmer, or just less muscular, especially around the chest. Harry said, "Hello, Laila - your eyes are quite good, and your whistle is truly remarkable."

"I'm an army sergeant, remember?"

Yes he did, remembered also that she'd told him not to confuse her with something else, which right now seemed more difficult than ever.

"... And besides, how many people walk around with a girl in front and a snake on the back? ... Hello, Sandy."

"Laila. Swim."

The scarcely dressed sergeant looked at Harry. "Has this been a command?"

"There's room for interpretation. Mainly it means that Sandy's going to swim. It also means she recognized your state of having been in the water, and maybe being in the water again soon - but you don't have to, Sandy respects a No thanks on a good day." Harry started to undress his daughter.

Moments later, the girl scurried to the water, followed by her snake.

Laila stared at the two, back at Harry. "Are you going to let her jump into the water alone??"

"What do you mean, alone? She's not alone, Nagini's with her ... Just watch."

Harry could feel how startled Laila was. Probably her face would show it too, only his glance hung at the scene in the lake, where Nagini was playing snake scooter for Sandy.

A short laughter of relief at his side. "I've seen weird stuff this day, but trust me, this here beats it any time."

"Did you come around in the school?"

"Yes, I think so. I attended a Transfiguration class with Almyra, and a Potions class with Hermione, and a Charms class with that McGonagall woman. But the best was History."

"History??" Harry remembered how boring this had always been, with ...

"Yes of course - imagine, a ghost as teacher. The first minutes, I really had to concentrate just for seeing him, then I got used to it."

"What did the students say?"

"Not much." Laila seemed to shrug. "Apparently they're quite used to visitors, Muggle or otherwise. I think in a kibbuz school I'd have got more attention."

Harry grinned without turning. "I think in seventh year you'd have got more attention too."

Laila laughed with pleasure. "That's where I've been - but I took a backseat."

"That's why ... Did you see our training hall?"

"Yes, that too - I watched for a while, and realized that I'm not up to that level. Our army's more about guns than combat without weapons - that's a specialty of the Mossad."

Feeling Laila's glance at him, Harry nodded to indicate yes, he knew she was talking about the Israeli secret service.

"In the hall," explained Laila, "'I had the honour to watch the star among the students ..."

It was Harry's turn to feel pleased. The star could only be Rahewa, no question about that.

"... which was quite impressive, in particular after I've seen her blushing a day before ... And I was told there's an ex-student against which this Kenzo would be in serious trouble."

"That's exaggeration - I think we're on a par." Being the result of a truly British education, Harry might have denied still more, however the *bushido* codex demanded to be honest.

Maybe Laila had recognized it, at least she kept silent for a moment, examining him all the time, unscrupulously using the fact that Harry's gaze was stuck to his daughter in the lake. Then Laila said, "I heard the smaller half of a few stories - about this guy Voldemort."

"Then you should have heard how I came across all these weird skills - not to forget Nagini ... Anyway, someone like you, who's fighting a battle all year long, shouldn't be too impressed about that - I mean, counting all the encounters together, my fight with Voldemort was less than a six-days war."

"So what? If I'd put all my minutes in combat together, I'd come up with less."

At this moment, Sandy was approaching the lakeside.

Harry made her float into his arms, quite swiftly, raising a gasp at his side. Then he drew his wand and covered the girl in a stream of warm air. Still holding it, he finally looked at the woman. "I think this counting leads to nowhere ... What I was trying to say - I certainly

disagree with a lot of what's happening in your country, but I can distinguish between politics and military issues, and - well, I think it's a tough job, and I figure you're good at it."

"That's music to my ears ... But Almyra warned me, she said watch out, Harry's great in talking girls into something."

Harry stared at her incredulously.

"Actually she was talking more about fighting than - er, other kinds of action, but ... Little by little, I know what she means."

"You must be joking." He busied himself with getting Sandra back into her clothes.

"Not at all. She told me how she became your first patient ... She said, first he talks you into some stunt, then you get hurt, then he sort of saves your life, and as a result - er, you feel like jumping for him through fire rings."

Harry looked flabbergasted. "Did she really say that?"

"Not with these words ..." The woman's glance hung at Sandra. "What she really said was, then you feel like wax in his hands."

"That's nonsense - I'm not much of a sculptor - and besides, I wouldn't know how to improve *this* shape ..."

"Thank you."

"... so as far as I'm concerned, I'll bring you back to Tiberias, and that's it. I wasn't planning to send you into some fight - I mean, at least not from my side ... What's more, there's someone who'd give me hell if I tried."

The sergeant was seizing for her bag. "Do I get something to eat before we travel? That's the first thing you learn with the army - eat when there's food around, you never know what comes next."

"Yes, sure ... It's funny, Cho - my wife - has exactly the same principle, about food, I mean."

"Really? In which army has she been?"

"None - for what I know, she learned that on her journey from China to England ... But I guess she'd qualify as a sergeant easily - maybe except for the gun part."

"You mean she can whistle loud enough?"

"Definitely." Harry looked around. "Did you walk?"

"You got it ... These broomsticks weren't quite my taste, and this school's a bit short of jeeps."

Grinning, Harry took his wand, used it toward a tree stump. "I know a shortcut - touch this."

Laila stared at the trunk, back at him, suspicion in her face. "And then?"

"Then you'll find yourself at that train platform over there - it's less than half the distance from here."

"And the side effects?"

"There are none - it's a portkey, not summoning. We'll do the same when travelling back to Tiberias."

Still with some reluctance, Laila touched the stump, was gone. With daughter and snake mounted, Harry followed, found her glancing around like a soldier behind the enemy lines. "How was it?"

"Well, I figure I won't get used to that soon. A jeep's more like my choice."

"They're so bumpy."

Laila started to walk toward the building. "Once I'm a ghost like that history teacher, floating will be okay, I guess. Until then - a bump tells you that you're there, and that it's real."

"A jeep to Tiberias would take quite a while, what do you think?"

"Yeah, sure, you can kill every metaphor by driving it too far - and jeeps too, come to think of it. Anyway, if ..." Laila's voice trailed off.

Harry glanced at her, waiting for her sentence to finish.

She looked wondering. "I just ... You know, there's this old saying, if God had wanted to make us fly, he'd given us wings, and I was about saying something similar about being here and there almost at the same time, and only then I realized you're doing just that all the time. And it's not you alone ... I'm asking myself - what do we Muggles have in compensation for the lack of magic?"

"Immunity from a certain fever, for instance."

The answer didn't satisfy Laila, only Harry had none better, nor had she. Having reached the school, the small excursion into metaphysics was stopped abruptly by something more handsome - a Hogwarts supper.

They were offered places at the teachers' table. So shortly after his breakfast, Harry restricted himself to some tea while Sandra found the plates invitingly enough to try a bit here, a bit there. Of course, she had been swimming, but still it was interesting to see how her standard preferences seemed temporarily out of order. Which didn't mean Sandra would accept the same food at home.

Laila, in the meantime, did a serious job of refuelling.

Harry talked with his friends, however somewhat absent-mindedly, as he was watching the scene at the Gryffindor table, in particular that between some seventh-years, and musing idly whether the distance between some seats at the same table was really shorter than that between two tables. For what he could see, Rahewa's friend Vanessa was doing quite some

conversation, between - and compensating for the lack of contribution from - Rahewa and this Clemens.

He remembered well how difficult it could be to cross certain bridges.

Eventually the supper was over. A few minutes later, his sergeant stood in front of him, heavier by some food and some goodbyes, lighter by some thank-yous and some of her own goodbyes. "I'm ready."

"We'll do it from the platform."

Walking to the place where Harry had started the vast majority of all his travels, his companion had quite some questions about portkeys, and linkports, and why they didn't work in the school, and why linkports didn't work for Muggles, and why his portkeys did though.

Harry explained what he knew - that a magical wave pattern prevented apparition and all similar techniques in and around the school, for security reasons, and that he was at a loss to explain the origin of his monopoly. "I've inherited quite some weird stuff from this Voldemort, that's all I know."

"Then why don't you travel around, building Muggle portkeys all over the world?"

"Why should I?"

"I can give you two reasons. An egoistic one - you'd become the richest man of the world. Or an altruistic one - being the only one who can do it, it's your obligation to do it."

"Are you trying to provoke me?"

Laila's face showed astonishment. "No - why?"

"Then your naivety is the genuine article - what do you think how long I'd live?"

She wasn't following.

"Imagine - I'm the only person worldwide who could render all airlines obsolete, plus maybe bus drivers, railways, and whatnot. How many weeks would I have? How many attempts to kill me would I survive? Eight weeks maximum, that's my guess."

"Sorry - you're right. Stupid of me not to think of it." Laila's face had coloured.

"These phonies," Harry pointed at his own device, then at hers, "are something similar. Only there's an industry behind, that's why killing a single person wouldn't save a dying technology. But even so, they do what they can to throw spanners in this work. If you're fighting against a billion dollar business, make sure the fight cannot be won by killing you."

Then he grinned. "And for the other argument - I'm rich enough, not to mention my wife. The richest man of the world is a paranoid lunatic - challenging him is the last thing I have in mind."

They had reached the platform. Keeping to a tradition, Harry walked to the small plate which had served as portkey so often. "Here, that's my standard item ... I'd like to have another look at the castle - from there, I'll send you to the linkport. Is this okay with you?"

"Hmmm ... Would you be interested in meeting a nice captain, who happens to be my superior, and telling him what happened?"

"Well, not really - only if you'd be in trouble without that."

"I'll manage." Laila touched the plate and was gone.

Following, Harry came out just inside the portal gate of the Crusader castle, two steps away from the sergeant. The portal was closed, the castle yard empty, and the scene at the well looked unchanged - except for a sign that read *Out of Order*.

Laila looked around, then at him. "That's it?"

About to nod, an idea crossed Harry's mind. "Can you do me a favour? Would you take Nagini and walk with her to the well? If she hisses, stop and come back."

Laila didn't look excited. "Allright - one has to be cooperative toward someone who saved your life, right?"

Harry told Nagini what she was supposed to do, then turned to Laila. "Come to my side, so Nagini can move over."

Laila looked around. "Please don't ask why, and please don't comment on that, but I feel like doing something truly pervert in public."

Harry suppressed any comment while not his grin, in particular because, a moment later, he could hear the expected remark. "My God - it's incredible how heavy that snake is!"

Then Harry watched the woman with the snake walking toward the well, slowing down when coming nearer, slowing down more - but not stopping until they reached the wall around the opening. After a look into the shaft, Laila turned around and called, "She didn't hiss. What now?"

"Come back!"

When Laila stood in front of him, Harry asked Nagini, "What about the power? Didn't you feel it?"

"No, master. There's nothing."

Harry took her back from the sergeant, walked already forward while the snake still was busy to arrange herself around his body. Near the point where Sandra had sensed the power for the first time, he bent down to his daughter. "Sandy, can you feel the fever that caught Bill?"

The head in his view was shaking.

He made some steps. "Can you feel it now?"

"No."

He reached the well. "And now?"

"No." Almost impatient.

Harry looked down into the well shaft. All he could see was a circular wall which quickly faded into darkness. And he himself had destroyed the mechanism that might have carried him down for a closer look.

He walked back to Laila. "The power's gone ... They can send people down again - the sooner that crane's repaired the better, because then we can have a look by ourselves."

"The power's gone? ... You mean it doesn't exist any longer?"

Harry shook his head. "Most unlikely. I figure it's somewhere else - and that means it's not something local. It can move."

This statement sounded familiar to the sergeant. "If it can move, it's not something - it's someone."

* * *

The call reached Bill in his office at Gringotts. It was Hermione - she had found a recipe for a potion to cure wizards who had lost their magic power, and she wanted to know whether they should give it a try.

"Sure - that's exactly my problem. Now?"

Hermione sounded a bit hesitantly. "Gimme a day to collect the ingredients. And don't put too much hope on this attempt."

"Why not?"

"I'm not entirely sure whether that's a reliable description. It reminds me a bit of a drink to regain lost virility ... But at least it doesn't look dangerous, so I thought it's worth trying."

Bill didn't know what to think of that, learned more when he reached her laboratory next evening, after a cumbersome journey through some linkports. On Hermione's table rested a book that looked older than old. It even smelled of age. He asked, "Where did you find *that*?"

"In our library, where else? Must be among the oldest books you can find there - or in any other library, for that matter."

So Hermione, in her own style, hadn't accepted defeat. Probably she had started rummaging through dusty bookshelves right after her patient - meaning Bill himself - had been saved by someone else. Giving him back his magic would re-establish her reputation as the number one potions witch.

While Hermione started to prepare the brew, Bill tried to read the description in the book, with little success - due to the old typeface, due to the old grammar, and also because Potions

never had been a course of his choice. Even so, he got a feeling what Hermione had meant when warning him in advance. Basically, he felt ready to believe that this stuff was at least unharmful - maybe not completely, but he would agree to take a little risk in order to regain his magic power.

Then Bill's glance fell onto an entry in the list of ingredients that was decipherable even for him. He stared at it incredulously, looked up at Hermione. "Say, do you take this list literally?"

She didn't punish him with contempt. "I know what you mean. But I have no choice - and besides, all this stuff's still in use."

"But ..." Bill's finger pointed that particular entry. "Did I get this right? *Tears of a lovesick virgin*?? I can't believe it."

Hermione's face showed a mix of amusement and embarrassment. "Yeah, sure ... If it doesn't work, I'd be grateful if you don't run around telling everybody what we tried here."

"Certainly not - they'd laugh about me still more than about you ... But tell me, how did you come across that?"

Now Hermione grinned. "Tricks of the trade."

Bill's curiosity awakened. "Please - I just cannot imagine how you managed to collect that. Did you beat a virgin until she was crying?"

"Of course not." Hermione chuckled. "Much simpler - I found me a lovesick virgin and told her a joke. When she stopped rolling around, I used a pipette. So you see - if someone doesn't want to tell you a trick, most often it's because the trick is so simple."

This wasn't entirely new to Bill. "I could do with a little laughter for myself. Can you tell me that joke?"

Hermione glanced at the small cauldron, turned back to him. "Sure - it's not a short one, but we still have to wait. It's the story of the bewitched frog."

"That old tale??"

"Well - maybe you know only the kid's version. I'm talking about the adult version."

Hermione had his full attention, because she was right - Bill had heard only the kid's version.

"A young witch is walking home. Suddenly she sees a frog sitting there in the grass. The frog says to her, 'Please take me with you, I'm a bewitched prince.' Well, she thinks, it's not out of the question, so she takes him home. There, the frog says, 'If you could kiss me, I could return into my human shape.' Well, she thinks, it's not out of the question, so she kisses him. And right - next moment, a handsome young man is standing in front of her. 'Oh, great,' she says, 'so it's really true.' Says he, 'Yes, but it only holds till midnight, then I have to change back into frog shape again. But if you would sleep with me, the spell could be broken forever.' Well, she thinks, it's not out of the question, and besides ... So she gets laid by him."

Seeing Bill's expectant grin, Hermione continued, "When they're done, he says, 'That was great. But I wasn't entirely honest - I'm a wizard who does this frog trick just to have a little fun. But no hard feelings, okay?' And off he goes."

Bill was chuckling in amusement.

"Funny, huh?" Hermione glared at him. "Wait a second ... The witch takes it very badly, to be treated like a simpleton, and she's looking for revenge ... Well, some time later the frog's sitting there and sees a young woman comin' along. So he says, 'Please take me with you, I'm a bewitched prince.' The woman does. In her house, he says, 'If you could kiss me, I could return into my human shape.' Without hesitation, the woman does, and he's standing there. She looks a bit familiar, but so what, so he says, 'It only holds till midnight, then I have to change back into frog shape again. But if you would sleep with me, the spell could be broken forever.' She agrees immediately, and they do it."

Hermione paused, looking malevolently. "When they're done, he says, 'I wasn't entirely honest - I'm a wizard who does this frog trick just to have a little fun. But no hard feelings, okay?' The woman smiles at him and says, 'That's only fair, because I wasn't quite honest either - when a man sleeps with me, his dick turns into a pretzel.' And as she speaks, he feels how just that's taking place."

Bill no longer chuckled. "Very funny," he said.

"Wait, wait - the story isn't over yet." Hermione's eyes were sparkling. "The wizard says, 'Please, please, make it straight again.' Says the witch, 'I'm sorry but there's no counter spell. However, there's one last chance.' The wizard gains new hope. 'So please tell me, what do I have to do?' And the witch says, 'There's time till midnight - if, until then, you manage to fuck a woman, the spell's broken forever.'"

Despite himself, Bill started to giggle. Next moment, he started to laugh, couldn't stop. Each time he tried to calm down, the picture of the pretzeled wizard stood before his inner eye, sending him into another wave of chuckles.

Hermione looked satisfied. "That's a good one, isn't it? ... And can you imagine how the effect is toward a girl not quite as familiar with the male anatomy than a little later in her life?"

Yes, Bill could. "Who is it?"

"That's confidential." But Hermione was grinning broadly.

Which gave him the feeling he knew the donor, leaving only a small list of candidates. Two, actually - his sister-in-law Gabrielle and Harry's goddaughter Rahewa. Except he didn't know which of them still was a virgin, which of them a lovesick one, and besides, he had more important issues at stake.

Then the potion was ready, and Bill was ready too. The taste and the smell were unremarkable, nothing specific - at least not turning your stomach upside down. He emptied the cup. "And now?"

"The book says, the effect kicks in after a few minutes, and develops to full strength during the next two hours."

Bill sat down. "Then let's give it fifteen minutes ... To be honest, I don't think it will work, but at least I've learned a good joke."

For the next minutes, they spoke about the visit in Tiberias. Bill told Hermione about what he had witnessed, and she told him about the operation that had taken place next door.

A knocking at this room's door interrupted them. Hermione turned. "Come in."

Bill watched a young man entering the room, saying hello and, at the sight of Hermione with a visitor, about to retreat quickly.

Hermione stopped him. "Clemens, this is Bill Weasley, the man who lost his magic in a fever ... Bill, this is Clemens Stein, my apprentice and some time soon a serious rival of Beatrice and myself."

They nodded toward each other. According to Hermione's face, Clemens still was something else, only Bill had no idea what, and whether this had any relevance.

The young man looked at the scene, apparently recognizing that some potions treatment had taken place. Then his glance fell onto the book. The effect was remarkable and almost like the transmigration of the frog in the joke - a second before still a slightly self-conscious young man who felt misplaced, this Clemens suddenly had the stance of a competent scientist, although not a day older than before. He turned to Hermione. "You tried this medieval recipe, right?"

"Yes." With some effort, Hermione managed not to have her jaws fall down.

"Doesn't work." The young man looked at Bill. "How long since you took the potion?"

"Er - bit more than ten minutes."

"Try it."

Like a doctor, telling you to check whether your leg still was hurting. Without a word, Bill took his wand and rushed it sharply through the air.

Nothing.

Young Clemens nodded. "Don't hold your breath waiting for the effect. There's none."

"How do you know?" Hermione was staring at him in astonishment.

A shrug. "I tried it - even with some variations."

Apparently, this was surprising news for Hermione, indicating that this young man had a background not completely revealed to his teacher. But she had a sense for priorities in her questions. "So it's a fake?"

A short moment of hesitation. "Not necessarily - maybe it's just incomplete. At least, the most important stuff is missing in the list."

"Which is what?"

Clemens smiled at her. "Let me answer this question after I've found out for myself whether I'm right."

"Of course." Hermione smiled back. "And the author of this document left it out on purpose, to create a riddle for every witch and wizard to follow his tracks?"

Clemens surprised her again. "No, that's not how people thought at that time. When they wrote something down to publish it, they did it accurately. But he couldn't - otherwise they would have killed him right after the first publication."

Bill couldn't follow. If there was anything in which he felt still less expertise than Potions, then medieval history. But according to Hermione's face, this Clemens had given one hint too much for her genius brain.

* * *

As small as the hall was, compared to international standards, in the eyes of sergeant Laila Belezikijan, currently on guard duty here, in the Tiberias Linkport, it looked quite spacious. This was of course an optical illusion, created by the absence of any passenger at this dull time of the day. Still, from an army perspective, which was accustomed to small huts and narrow buildings, the linkport was roomy.

While, considering some other halls she'd seen recently, it had to be called a rathole.

Today was her first duty here, after she'd been shot down and cured so astonishingly quickly. And for good measure, she had taken Chaim again as her fellow guard. This should tell him something. While staring mindlessly toward the other wall, she wondered if he had read the message properly.

Maybe so, maybe not - Chaim was still quite unexperienced, so the finer details might have slipped his attention. What the message meant, in the good old tradition of army command structure, was this - from an official standpoint, his bad mistake of shooting her had been forgiven and was no longer an issue, while on a private level, he still better watched his privates if they would meet somewhere with nobody else around.

The duty gave a good example for the complex nature of the finer details. There *was* nobody else around, only Laila had no intention to treat him now and here. Revenge resembled a delicate fruit which demanded some time to ripen.

The reaction of the others seemed to accelerate the ripening. An ignorant outsider might have expected that her superiors and her comrades would be happy to see her recovered so quickly, would congratulate her for her good luck after such bad luck, and express some awe, at least some admiration, for a surgery that had left no trace outside.

Ha.

Laila was no outsider, therefore, she hadn't been surprised at all when recognizing the mistrust, the disbelief, the mockery. The best she could expect was the unspoken suspicion that she and Chaim had plotted a crazy story to give her two days off duty. The worst were

those who believed the story. Somehow, being cured by Magicals seemed more shameful than being killed by the enemy - or the own comrades, whatever.

To Laila's surprise, this reaction left a sting inside her. True, in a few days, weeks at the most, nobody would mention the accident again - unless as an invitation for a fistfight. But she couldn't come to terms with the way how things were looked at, not this time.

It was unfair. But there was something more. Most things were unfair, without anyone bothering about that. You got a meal if you reached the mess in time. You stayed alive if you kept out of the way bullets went - or explosives. You got awarded, maybe even promoted, if you stepped *into* the way bullets went - well, sometimes. All this had nothing to do with fairness - the concept itself was an invention of British colony officers to prevent others from treating them with their own medicine.

Laila had known that for quite some time. And then she had met some British people who exercised fairness without ever mentioning the term. As a result, she found herself infected with a deep desire to do them justice, if only in conversations with her comrades.

Except this turned out impossible.

Had it been a simple British army hospital, for some reason, instead of an Israeli one, fine. Nobody would have objected. Well - except for herself, because with a bullet through your liver, you had less than an hour.

Again and again, the scenes in that wizard school resurfaced in her memory. These hands on her body - those of Hermione, the surgeon, those of Harry, the anaesthetist, and those of that girl Sandra, the scar healer.

The most accurate description was - she felt traumatized. Not by the accident, not by the bullet, just by the gentleness she had encountered afterwards. For a sergeant - no matter which army - this presented a difficult experience.

Figures appeared in the hall. Probably from that small scientific congress - the quota of Magicals in such a meeting certainly was high enough to raise something like a rush hour here, still more so as they apparently thought better than staying overnight. After hours in Tiberias, if cities like Beirut or Cairo were a linkport jump away? Nobody in his right mind would do that, provided the mind was a magical one and would be carried through a linkport.

Which made Laila aware of the other sting, the other unfairness. She was no Magical. She was no witch. The best she could muster was a bitch, ha ha.

One of the figures caught her attention. Not from a guard's view - a middle-aged man, business suit, caucasian face, certainly no terrorist. But he looked as though he'd started the good life already during the congress. Heated face, unsteady walk, barely keeping himself under control.

A moment later, Laila registered something that made her step forward. Without knowing exactly why, only that the man didn't fit the pattern of a drunken congress member. She reached him, saw the sweat on his forehead, at his temples. "Are you okay, sir?"

"Well, not quite ..." The man's glance toward her was more thankful than annoyed. "I guess I've caught some infection - I feel like running a fever. Hopefully, a night's sleep ..."

Fever.

"Excuse me, sir - you're a wizard, right?"

"Huh? ... Yes, sure, what would I do here in a linkport otherwise? Now, if you have no objections, I'd like to reach my hotel as quickly as ..."

"Just a moment, sir. I think I know what kind of infection you've got. Would you please sit down for a moment?"

The promise of a quick diagnosis calmed the passenger's mood. He followed Laila to a seat, slumped down, obviously more than ready to pass over responsibility to some expert in Middle East fevers.

Laila seized for the small device. She had carried it around all the time - in her pockets, not outside. Now was the time to use it. She pressed the last button in the last row.

Several seconds passed.

"Hello, Laila - that's a nice surprise, hearing from you." He sounded a bit breathlessly.

"Hello, Harry. I hope I didn't catch you at an untidy time."

Harry laughed. "I'm here in the training hall with Tony. We try to kick each other - that's why it took a moment, and that's why I may sound out of breath." Laila heard the grin through his voice. "It's eleven in the morning here. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. But right at my side there's someone who seems not quite as fine."

"What's the problem?"

"He's a wizard, and he's caught a fever ... Oh, sorry - we're here in the Tiberias Linkport. It's a congress member. Could be something quite ordinary, but wizard and fever, here in Tiberias ..."

All joy had lost his voice. "You're right. I'll be there in five minutes."

07 - Progress

The meeting would start any second now, which probably meant they still had to wait a while. Seated comfortably in a chair that bore little resemblance with the standard furniture of Hogwarts - or Drachenfels, for that matter - Clemens Stein used the time to study the other people in the room.

There was Jesamine Grubbly-Plank, for example, chief executive officer of *Groucho Biochemicals*. In some sense, that made her the boss of Hermione, Clemens' own boss, who had caught him fully by surprise when she came to announce this meeting in Santa Monica and that she expected him to come with her. Clemens didn't know why, although he had some feeling.

Considering her rank, considering also that *Biochemicals* gave the reason for the meeting, this Jesamine was sitting quite relaxed, apparently not caring much whether the official part would start next minute or never. At least, she sat at the front table, which faced the U-shaped round of the other seats.

One reason for Jesamine's relaxed state seemed obvious - there was someone else still higher in rank, this someone had taken charge of the meeting, and this could only be Cho Chang-Potter, the one people were waiting for. Still, somehow it didn't fit. From the little Hermione had told Clemens about this company, he had gained the impression this ex-teacher was doing a serious job - certainly more than warming a luxury chair every once in a while.

Then there was Chrissy Vanzandt, personal assistant of the big boss. Chrissy had one of the audience seats, however at the end and therefore close to the front row, ready to jump and assist any time. She was sitting calmly too, which meant whatever was holding her boss off, it didn't need her assistance.

There were further some other people, all of them CEOs of other *Groucho* branches. Clemens couldn't remember all their names, didn't care either because some other people in the room took considerably more of his attention.

Beatrice Chagrin, for example, Hermione Krum's hardest competitor in the field of advanced Potions. At their introduction, Beatrice had smiled and said, "I heard rumours about you, that's why I welcome this opportunity to meet you personally. Hermione's sometimes scarce with detail information."

Clemens had nodded and smiled, still fighting his surprise. Whatever he'd expected - not a young black woman who might raise quite some thoughts in your mind, with Potions as the last of them. But he knew for sure - Beatrice was the unrivaled master of psycho drugs, like his own tutor was the master of pharmaceutical potions.

Well - when Clemens came to Hogwarts, Hermione had taken him by surprise too. She fit the common expectation of a sickle-nosed, grey-haired potions witch no more than this Beatrice. Hermione was even younger.

And then there sat still another young woman in the room. She had nothing to do with Potions, so much Clemens knew for sure. Her name was Marie-Christine something - they didn't bother much with family names here in California - and she was an actor, employee of

Groucho Spectors, if this term was appropriate for actors above a certain level of fame. Clemens had no idea why Marie-Christine joined the meeting.

But then, according to her expression, Marie-Christine herself had no idea either. Clemens had watched how the other celebrity in the room had talked with her, looking more joyful in this conversation than otherwise, and obviously not telling her more.

Harry Potter.

Just for watching this person, Clemens wouldn't mind waiting another fifteen minutes. Well, not the person alone - Harry had arrived with the little girl and the snake, without raising so much as an eyebrow from anyone in the room. And, as if this was the most natural thing of the world, he had placed the snake on the table and the girl on the snake before walking over to that Marie-Christine. This spectacle alone was worth a look.

Then Harry had returned to his seat in the front row, exchanging a short remark with the little girl and - if Clemens' ears hadn't tricked him - another one with his snake. Parseltongue.

Harry Potter looked unremarkable, sitting there. He hadn't looked unremarkable when walking - his movements seemed extraordinarily controlled, though effortless. There hadn't been a discernible difference between the movements with his load - girl in front, snake behind - and those without.

And then his eyes ... Too old for such a young man - the only trace of his history that could be recognized in his appearance. And very disquieting when he looked at you. Harry had smiled at their introduction, had said, "Hello, Clemens, nice to meet you. I hope we can talk a bit afterwards." At that time, Harry appeared like an ordinary young man with good manners, except that all Clemens could see was the godfather of Rahewa, a person for whom she was ready to kill or be killed. That much he'd found out.

A moment later, Harry's smile had faded. This had nothing to do with Clemens himself or Rahewa, only with the situation at hand. Even so, the effect was that, like in a reflex, Clemens checked his memory whether he'd done everything right.

It would be very unpleasant to find yourself as the reason for this look - worried and piercing at the same time. First because of the person behind, and then of course because of Rahewa.

Who hadn't been invited to that meeting, for which Clemens felt grateful. The situation was new and exciting enough without this additional thrill.

The door opened. Two more people entered the room.

The first was obviously Cho Chang-Potter. In contrast to her husband, this woman looked remarkable every second of the hour. More than that. Very Chinese, even in her business clothes. Very beautiful. And right now she was beaming, escorting the second person to a seat next to her in the front row.

A man, middle-aged. His body language revealed enough to know that this counted as a very exciting moment for him, while at the same time his face looked totally unimpressed, with a pair of cold eyes scanning the entire room, and back. Next moment, the man's eyes found a focus, and for all Clemens could see, this focus was that other woman, Marie-Christine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my dear friends ... Welcome to this meeting, and thank you for your coming - although I know that your curiosity would have brought you over anyway because all you have in place of an agenda are some rumours."

Cho Chang-Potter smiled into the round. For a short moment, Clemens felt her eyes resting on him. Then she continued, "So check yourself whether your guess was right when I'm going to announce the planned schedule for today. There was just one topic, and this was the introduction of the new CEO for Groucho Biochemicals - the one who's going to replace Jesamine because she wants to have more time for her family while keeping Triple-A as her only job here."

Clemens saw indeed surprise in some faces, but the only reply came from that Marie-Christine. It was short and wordless - a choked sound while she kept staring at the only person who could possibly qualify as the new candidate.

"He's sitting right at my side," dissolved Cho any doubt left. "His name is Ramon Garcia, and until some days ago, he was lieutenant of the LAPD. It was a bit difficult to pull him over - for a while, he didn't stop telling me that he's not qualified for the job."

The beautiful face turned into a devious grin. "As you know, I accept such statements only from the person in question, but in this case, I had to break that rule - after I made clear that I won't accept this nonsense even from himself, he finally agreed. And here he is."

Cho paused for a moment, still grinning, particularly so toward that Marie-Christine who looked perplexed. Then she continued, "Well - if you listened carefully, you certainly noticed that I spoke about the *planned* schedule. While it's still true that we have just one topic, the agenda has changed. The reason is the actual situation, more exactly, the spreading disease which is called *wizard fever*. Groucho Biochemicals is challenged to come up with a vaccine good enough to let the infected people survive, if not more. For this goal, we need a project manager. Due to its importance and urgency, this task leaves no room for anything else. And when considering the mysterious circumstances of this fever, you'll realize that an ex-police lieutenant suddenly is perfectly suited for the job."

Cho turned to this ex-lieutenant for a moment, then back to the audience. "Jesamine agreed to wait a little longer before passing over the CEO job. For Ramon, in a way, this allows for a smoother transit than expected. But there's nothing smooth in the current situation, which only confirms the old wisdom that you get nothing for free ... At any rate, he'll take over the planned job as soon as possible - so consider this meeting as his official introduction - and we only can hope that soon is the right term."

With growing excitement, Clemens became aware that his feelings had been right. Little by little, he got an idea why he was here.

At this moment, Cho said, "To put you into the picture and to show you what we're facing, Harry will give a summary of what we know about the wizard fever. It so happens that he's a first-hand witness." The woman turned to her husband. "Harry?"

The young man nodded, looked into the round. "We know how it started, and where - but unfortunately that's the only part for which I can give you detailed information. Some weeks ago, two wizards made a trip to a Crusader castle near Tiberias in Israel, close to the Sea of Galilee, which is also called Lake Tiberias. There's a well in the castle, with an old tunnel that

once ran from the castle to the lake. The two wizards went down to inspect the tunnel - and that's where they got their infection. Until the evening of the next day, they were running an extremely high fever, without showing any signs of a normal infection. One of the two was better off because he knew people to help him - among them Hermione here who was in charge of his medical treatment." Harry looked at the potions witch sitting at Clemens' side.

"So he survived, while the other died. The survival seems somehow incomplete because he lost his magical power - completely. To figure out what happened, we traced his trip back and checked that place. What we found was a strong magical power. Sandra and Nagini," Harry pointed at the little girl and the snake, "could sense it from a distance that was apparently far enough to avoid an infection. We took measures to block the access to that well. However, when we checked again a day later, the magical power was gone."

Clemens, who knew a little more about the measures taken and their side-effects, was busy matching his knowledge with the new information.

"From what happened next, we can conclude that this power has left that place and now is moving around. A few days later, a wizard was detected in the Tiberias Linkport who had caught the same fever. They notified us, we brought him to Hogwarts, and saved him. But apparently he wasn't the only one infected, and the others didn't know about us, nor did we know about them. Then came the first reports in newspapers, and since then the wizard fever is known in public. It has spread into the Lebanon and from there into Turkey. The infection is almost always fatal without the proper treatment, and those who survive have lost their magical power ... The spreading of the disease shows a strange pattern - however that's not our main issue here, our goal is to find something that keeps the infected wizards and witches alive. Anything else comes later."

Into the short pause after Harry's speech, and before his wife could take over again, the little girl said, "Fever!" - toward nobody in particular, but at the same moment Clemens felt a wave rushing through his mind.

Having witnessed some events in Hermione's treatment center, he knew the origin - Sandra. Glancing around, Clemens tried to figure out whether the others had felt the same, and if so, whether they connected it to the girl.

While Harry bent over his daughter, probably to calm her down, Cho said, "Okay, that's the outline. Anything else is already part of the project, so - Ramon, it's your game."

The man at her side nodded. "Thank you, Cho. Well, ladies and gentlemen, you've witnessed the two shortest introductions that ever took place - one of me as the new kid in town, the other of the wizard fever and how it started. And while the first was quite to my taste, the latter left some questions unanswered. But we'll come to that in a moment."

Clemens registered that the man no longer showed any trace of nervousness. For this ex-lieutenant, directing a group of multi-million managers toward a project goal seemed not much different from sending a bunch of detectives toward a serial killer. Maybe even simpler.

"Cho told me that I can use whatever resources I need from the Groucho enterprise, including all of its branches." Ramon Garcia showed a dry smile, looking into the round. "Since I'm not part of the hierarchical structure, and since I don't even know how it works, I'll do it the simple way - I'll come to you, to the people on top. I'm pretty sure I'll need help from

Communications, maybe from Triple-A, and definitely from Triple-P. The only branch that might stay out of the game is Spectors, but don't quote me if I come tomorrow and ask for a camera team or whatever ... Okay, so much for *my* outline. What will follow now is the kick-off meeting in which Biochemicals plays the major role, and in which Harry will fill in the gaps left a moment ago. For anyone else - you're welcome to stay, and free to leave if some other business is waiting for you."

When nobody moved, Ramon Garcia grinned. "That's what I thought - I shouldn't have announced that I'll squeeze Harry a bit more. But that's okay, there's room enough here, we're not tramping on each other's feet, and the room isn't leaking."

Some faces looked at him wonderingly. Cho said, "Ramon, I think you should explain what you just were talking about."

The man flushed a bit. "Sorry, some culture shock at my side. You know, I'm used to kick-off meetings in which such a room is crowded by two hundred-odd cops. And because here like there it's about something that kills people, the scene felt quite familiar to me."

"And what did you mean with the room isn't leaking?"

"Oh, that." Ramon looked embarrassed. "A major problem at the police is always that someone's leaking the news to the press. What I meant was - I don't think that's the problem here."

Cho smiled. "You're right in that assumption."

Ramon twisted. "Sorry again. But I'm sure I'll get used to the standard here quicker than the other way around." He turned to Harry. "Let's come to the questions about the events so far ... Did I get that right - you've treated two people, and both survived?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't we use that treatment for all of them?"

"Because it's impossible. In addition to conventional techniques, the treatment involves Sandra and myself, and it drives us to the limits of our mental capacity ... Maybe we could treat one person a day, but I don't think we could do that for a long time."

"Are there currently other patients under treatment?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Harry's face turned expressionless. "First, because nobody contacted us. Second, because we don't travel down there to fetch the next-best wizard or witch. Whom should we take, whom let die? It would be like playing God." He stared at Ramon. "We keep our capacity for cases of personal interest."

The new task manager nodded with the same lack of emotion. "The conventional treatment - how far does it hold, or help?"

Harry turned to Hermione at Clemens' side. "There's the expert."

Hermione said, "Not at all - that's the short version. What we achieve is to save the patient from dehydration, but we haven't found any means to attack the infection itself."

"Hmm ... Do you have any idea where to find something better?"

"Could be."

Ramon smiled. "That's awfully good to hear. Then let's talk about this *could be* and make it a *will be*."

"Certainly - but not in this round."

Hermione seemed totally relaxed while treating some high-ranks like children that were sent playing because the adults had some important business. Clemens, at the same time, was no longer calm and relaxed, although this had nothing to do with the question how many people might or might not listen when the topic was discussed.

Ramon looked at Cho, to see whether she wanted to give the farewell to the others.

When she just smiled at him, Ramon stood up. "Okay - ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention, and for your patience with me - now and in the near future. We'll have a ten minutes break, and unless you're pretty sure our potions witches expect you in the smaller round after the break, the party's over for you."

A woman Clemens only remembered as the head of *Groucho Spectors*, while not her name, stood up and said, "That was the cleverest push I ever got ... Ramon, I'm sure you'll do well." Grinning broadly, she turned to the woman at her side. "Marie-Christine, do you think you're expected in the smaller round?"

Clemens realized that this had to be some kind of insider joke, in particular since this Marie-Christine seemed unable to come up with an answer. Looking over, he saw the reply had caught Ramon on a similarly wrong foot.

Before any of them could react, Harry said, "Yes she is."

* * *

Marie-Christine Thérout had mastered her initial surprise, had also managed the first words with Ramon since a year or so. Now she was sitting in her chair - calmly to the outside, while her thoughts were racing. Suddenly and unexpectedly, her world looked totally different.

Ramon was back in the picture.

How much, that had to be seen. Although - if Cho was ready to let him run *Biochemicals*, then there seemed little doubt about her personal outcome. Ramon not being a cop anymore, no longer a slave of the bottle - if there was a problem left, then on her own side ... From one minute to the other, the roles had changed - Ramon counted as the one with an orderly life while her own ...

But Marie-Christine knew that her plans and appointments for the next three days were already past. Glancing over at Cho, who started to beam whenever their eyes met, was enough to know how Ramon felt about her, and that there was more to his appointment as the new CEO than met the public eye.

God bless Cho - ex-lover, still friend, always ready to point at her daughter and to explain that Cass was the living sign of a life-long obligation, just because Marie-Christine once had made the right prediction about a sinister plot.

Had Harry played a role in this move? Unlikely, which didn't mean he had any objections. He felt the same obligation, only that from Marie-Christine's perspective it was long balanced - since the scene which still lurked in her nightmares, when a knife - about to cut through her throat - suddenly fell to the floor, after a green flash had left Harry's closed fingertips.

Why had he said she was part of the smaller round? Maybe just to release her from Sylvie's joke, and Ramon as well. This kind of gentleness would perfectly match his normal behaviour toward her. Only - something in his voice had indicated there was another reason.

The break was over.

Ramon said, "Okay, let's start with our project kick-off. Hermione, you said you might have some idea. What do you have in mind?"

"Just a guess." Hermione grinned. "But I'm ready to bet this year's royalties that Clemens here, the young man at my side, has a very clear perception of what we should do."

Heads turned to the young man, whose cheeks started to flush.

Ramon asked, "Is she right, Clemens?"

"Er - yes ... I mean, I have an idea, and it's more than guesswork, only it has never been tried before - at least not that I know of, so it's still unclear ..."

Hermione said, "Let me tell you why I brought him into this meeting. Certainly not because Clemans was running around shouting, I know what to do. But the other day, I tried an age-old recipe toward Bill - an attempt to give him his magic back. I'd scanned through the library for quite some time, had found that book I was sure nobody had ever heard of for the last five hundred years - and guess what? Clemens comes in, has a look at that book, and says *Forget it, doesn't work*." Hermione smiled. "You know, I always try not to be so pushy, that's why I thought this round is the best opportunity to squeeze him a bit."

Clemens' face now looked dark-red.

Beatrice said, "In case you didn't know yet, Clemens - nobody who's challenging Hermione has to wait long for a reply." It earned her some chuckling in the round. Then Beatrice asked, "But you didn't start to investigate this issue last week, did you?"

"No. I started it when I came to Drachenfels."

Into the stunned silence, Harry said, "Another crusader. Hello, Clemens - welcome to the club."

For a moment, the young man showed total bafflement, to hear himself compared with Harry Potter, who had spent seven years to destroy Voldemort. Then Clemens said, "I didn't look at it that way. It was ... I didn't fight an enemy - it was just that ... a personal reason."

When nobody spoke, he swallowed, looked at the table while speaking. "I have a sister, Clara's her name. We're twins, and we did everything together, until ... When I got the invitation to Drachenfels, I was the only one. It was ... She convinced me to go to that school, and I told her that ... Well, since then I'm looking for a way how to give someone magical power who should have it but for some reason hasn't."

Ramon said, "It was kind of you to tell us about that background, Clemens. Needless to say that it shoots your qualification here into the stratosphere - " Ramon raised his voice a bit, "and needless also to say that this information won't leave this room."

Harry turned to Ramon. "Unless it's he himself who tells this story someone else, which I hope he does."

Ramon nodded, looking a bit curious about Harry stating something as obvious as that. Then Marie-Christine saw how Clemens' face, which had settled back to normal during his explanation, was colouring again. She realized - it was time for a visit in the Chang-Potter house, to exchange the latest gossip.

Toward Clemens, Harry said, "At first glance, it looks as if your idea is something to help the survivors regaining their magical power. But apparently you think differently. What makes you think it helps to survive the infection?"

"Because there is no infection."

Clemens no longer looked embarrassed, continued before anyone could protest against his statement. "If you look at the test results from those patients, you see there's none of the effects that normally go with an infection. What's happening to them is this - something attacks them, more exactly, their magical power. This power tries to fight back. The effect is a raised body temperature - actually so much that the patient dies. We've heard about survivors - my assumption is that they just had a weak power which didn't muster enough resistance to make the heating dangerous. So it's all about magical power, nothing else ... If you want to call that infection, okay - as long as you don't imply anything else with that term."

Ramon looked questioningly at Hermione, waiting for her comment.

It came immediately. "Don't ask me whether he's right. But it fits perfectly the data we have - there's nothing that would contradict his definition."

Ramon said, "So he's right unless someone can prove otherwise. Then let's come to the big question ... Clemens, what's your idea, and why didn't you try before?"

The lonely twin said, "If I tell you what it is, you know the answer to the second question ... It's unicorn blood."

A gasp in the round, while Marie-Christine saw how Hermione nodded with an expression of deep satisfaction. Probably some remark from Clemens, exchanged in Hogwarts, had raised this suspicion in her.

Harry asked, "Hermione, do you remember our detention in the Forbidden Forest?" Toward the others, he explained, "Someone had killed a unicorn - Voldemort, as we found out later, or Voldemort and Quirrell. And I found it ... That was when I met Firenze, the centaur." He turned to Clemens. "Yes, now it's clear why you're so reluctant to try your idea. Gaining back your magic, only to be damned forever - what a choice."

Clemens shook his head. "No, my problem was that I had no unicorn blood, and I couldn't move around asking people for that - not without getting a kind of attention I didn't need ... But this myth about being damned - like so many others, it's a bit unspecific. We use unicorn hair, unicorn horn - provided we can get unicorn blood without hurting or even killing the animal, there's nothing that would make our action evil. It's ..."

"... the intention that matters," completed Harry his sentence with a smile.

"Right - and I don't think we'd need much. The trick is to use it as the controlling agents ..."
Clemens looked into the round. "Do you know how a transistor works?"

Some heads were shaking, Marie-Christine's own included. Ramon looked as if he'd heard something once, and long forgotten. Hermione simply said, "Yes."

Of course.

Clemens said, "It's pretty simple. On one side, you have a power which is strong but unspecific, unshaped. On the other side, you have the shaped pattern, only it's weak. What you need is a means to put the pattern onto the power, as a perfect duplicate of the original, only suddenly a thousand times stronger. That's what a transistor does."

Cho said, "Harry's a transistor."

Marie-Christine understood her instantly. "Right - and Cass is the power he's shaping."

Clemens' eyes widened. "Yes - exactly, and I saw it with my own eyes when you healed this scar." Then the first grin appeared in his face. "Although I have to say - most transistors are smaller ..."

Laughter in the round.

"... and weaker too."

Into the new laughter, Harry asked, "If the unicorn blood is the shaping agents, what is the power?"

"The wizard's own magic," came the answer. "Remember how the attacked people react - it takes quite a while, it's nothing like a spell that does the job in an instant. That's why I'm pretty sure the defending power is basically sufficient, only the attack somehow corrupts the defense. And here the unicorn blood should come to help."

Beatrice said, "Sounds reasonable to me - and that's the first thing I hear which brings myself into the game. For a normal vaccine, I can't help much, other than listening to Hermione and telling her how brilliant she is." Beatrice smiled at her competitor. "While Clemens' last remark indicates something that's much closer to a psycho drug, which is my own specialty."

Clemens said, "I think it's somewhere in the middle."

Jesamine spoke for the first time. "Clemens, you're the missing link. You *must* come to Biochemicals."

Hermione said, "Of course - what do you think why I brought him here?"

After the short laughter, Ramon asked, "And how do we find unicorn blood?"

Hermione looked at Harry. "If you could convince Firenze to help us a bit - there are enough unicorns in the Forbidden Forest, and if all we need's a blood sample, for a good purpose ..."

Harry nodded. "I had the same idea."

Ramon asked, "Assume we have it - Clemens, do you know how to proceed further?"

"I have a concept, pretty detailed, but I'd like to discuss it first with some experts." Clemens looked at Hermione, then at Beatrice.

Harry said, "In this case I'd suggest splitting this round into two groups, because I'd like to discuss some other aspects of the wizard fever which have more to do with the attacking force. This might be something criminal," Harry looked at Ramon, "or something of dark magic." He looked at Marie-Christine.

So she had been right. Harry's intervention some minutes ago had been more than simple politeness. Marie-Christine felt her pulse accelerating - after all this time as an actor, Harry still considered her as someone whose opinion in this topic mattered. For the second time in this room, a wave of pleasure rushed through her mind.

Harry turned to the young man with the non-magical sister. "Before we split, I'd like to ask one last question - even if it's a bit personal ... Clemens, if I understood you right, the unicorn blood is the agents which guides the magical power in the patient. True?"

Clemens nodded.

"Then, how could such a potion help your sister?"

The young man had the answer ready. "I always felt sure there's magical power somewhere inside Clara. It's only blocked - don't ask me why, and how, but since this fever is around, since I know about people with blocked power, the last tiny doubt is gone."

Which explained why Clemens was beaming so happily.

* * *

The groups had split. Some doors further down the floor, Beatrice, Hermione, and Clemens were discussing how to mix unicorn blood with other ingredients for an efficient cure. Cho and Jesamine had returned to their normal business. Harry with daughter and snake, Ramon, and Marie-Christine were the ones left in the meeting room. Ramon had moved one of the tables, so they could sit close and look at each other.

Harry said, "Finding a cure for the victims certainly is the most urgent issue, but this can't be all. Something out there does the attacks, and I want to know what it is."

"And then?" asked Marie-Christine. "Assume you know - are you going to fight it?" She looked as though this was a crazy idea, while she nonetheless expected Harry answering with yes, and wasn't sure whether she should help under these premises.

"I don't know," replied Harry. "The question implies too much - that it's something you have to fight, that you can fight it ... What I have in mind now is to discuss the known facts with you, and to see whether this shapeless something can be outlined a bit tighter."

Ramon asked, "Am I here as an ex-cop, as a task manager, or both?"

"All I know is that your job does *not* include to identify and locate this something." Harry smiled. "I'm not your employer - actually, your employer mightn't be too happy about you sitting here."

Glancing to his side, Ramon said, "I can live with that - as far as I'm concerned, I feel quite happy sitting here."

Harry didn't need his *haragei* to feel the waves that went between Ramon and Marie-Christine. He said, "Let me tell you the facts and see if they trigger some association. It won't take too long, then we can split this group again."

The two faces opposite him seemed to consider this prospect as equally promising and frightening.

"The first mysterious fact is of course the place where we located this power. A tunnel, deep down in a well, which is placed in a Crusader castle near the Lake Tiberias."

Marie-Christine said, "It triggers so many associations - it's too much. Three major religions, ancient history ... Just add King Lionheart and tell me he was the one who built the castle, then the confusion is complete."

Harry nodded. "Right, and it's just a short jump from King Lionheart to King Arthur, and magical swords ..."

Ramon grinned. "Just another six hundred years, if my history's right ... And what if that power was there long before the Crusaders came? If it's just by accident that the castle was built at this place?"

"Then it would make more sense," replied Harry. "Because it seems as if the restauration of that castle, or maybe just what they did down in the tunnel, started the events. Some power, in a kind of sleep for a very long time, is awakened by workers coming a bit too close ..."

"They were too noisy," said Ramon.

"Take the joke seriously," said Marie-Christine. "This something had a fixed location, it could be awakened, or activated, and it could change its location." She turned to Harry. "How did the power feel?"

"Nagini says, it was just the strongest magic she ever felt ... In a way, Sandy's remark is even more informative - when she felt it, she said, *Fever*. That means, she recognized a characteristic pattern - the same she felt in Bill when we helped him to come through his fever."

"Did it feel evil?"

Harry shrugged. "My two witnesses have very different opinions about that, only neither of them is particularly helpful. For Nagini, evil is an almost unfathomable concept, while for Sandy, Bill's fever and her music are inseparably linked ..."

"Hely music!"

After this statement from his daughter, Harry had to inform the other two how a - possibly evil - power had finally led to the fulfillment of Sandy's greatest wish. "You see," he finished, "this very personal perspective won't bring us any further."

Then he described the development after the second victim had been found. The fever wasn't epidemic - it spread only at a certain place, and this place was moving from Tiberias through Israel, through the Lebanon, into Turkey, as if a contagious object was affecting only those coming too close to its course.

"For me that looks very much like a person," said Marie-Christine.

"That's what Laila said - the Israeli army sergeant who was involved in the story. She said, if it can move, it's not something, it's someone."

Ramon grinned. "I know what it is - Harry, this place, this Lake Tiberias, isn't it famous for people resurrecting? Well, the last time we were better off because now, by some bad accident, it was Voldemort who got the ticket for resurrection, and he's come back with a very unpleasant skill."

Marie-Christine looked at him in disbelief. "That's distasteful, Ramon! I thought you were a true catholic ... Really!"

"Sorry - cop's joke, you know."

"You'd better use your cop's habit and look at the events from a criminalistic perspective. That'd be more helpful." Marie-Christine still looked very upset.

"Okay, okay ... What do we have, from a criminalistic point of view? There's someone - I call it a person because otherwise, it's of no interest for a cop ... What's his *modus operandi*? He comes close to people and does something to them which ..." Ramon looked at Harry. "What's the purpose of the attack - to kill them or to destroy their magic?"

But it was Marie-Christine who answered. "See - you can do much better. That's an essential point! ... I think the goal is to destroy their magic."

Harry said, "I think the same - and that's why Ramon's joke is still lingering in my mind, because it was Voldemort who tried that the last time."

"No, 'arry." Marie-Christine shook her head. "He tried to destroy the wizarding world, which is not the same."

"Whatever," said Ramon, "and before my joke's haunting us too much - what's the motive? Because that's question number two for every cop."

"Beats me," said Harry.

"Me too," said Marie-Christine.

"Then let's make it simple - for all we know, the motive is to destroy magical power wherever it's found because, for some reason, magic is evil."

"No," protested Marie-Christine, "your statement contradicts itself. If magic is evil, then destroying it is just the method which only proves that there is a higher motive."

A snorting sound came from Harry. The other two looked at him, and Marie-Christine asked, "Don't you agree?"

"No - I mean, yes I agree. I just thought - sorry in advance for my version of a bad joke, but this would indicate it's the Muggle version of Voldemort who's running around."

Ramon raised his thumb, careful not to give any further comment. Marie-Christine asked, "Are you serious?"

"No - because this is also a contradiction in itself. It has magic, there's no question about that, so it's not a Muggle creature."

Ramon said, "There's still something that's bothering me. We said this someone came awake because some tunnel workers made too much noise. And then? Nothing happened at first ... Then came two wizards down into the tunnel, got infected - or attacked, whatever. This someone stayed where it was - as we know for sure because that's how you found it. And suddenly, a day or two later, it's gone. Why? Why did it go?"

Harry asked, "Why should it stay?"

"It didn't move after it had been troubled in his sleep. It didn't move after some wizards had come down. Okay, maybe it's a little slow at coming awake, understandably so after hundreds of years, but you see what I mean - what happened that made it go?"

"Dunno."

"Of course you know." Ramon stared at Harry. "Look at the timetable - *you* happened. This someone left the place right after you came and detected it."

Harry shook his head. "Doesn't make sense. If it's about hiding, it would have been much simpler to stay down there and just do nothing."

"Maybe it cannot avoid attacking people."

Marie-Christine's head came up in a startled movement. "No, Ramon. You weren't quite correct, although I think you've pointed out the crucial point."

Ramon smiled at her. "Now what? Am I right, or am I right?"

"You're right in the question, what happened that made it go? But it wasn't Harry that happened - he never came in touch with that power, he never felt it. It was Cass - *she* sensed it, and for me that means, this someone sensed her."

* * *

Rahewa had trouble with her food, serious trouble. Not that it would resist - for the untrained eye, the scene looked like an ordinary lunch in Hogwarts, the house elves had delivered a first-rate meal, and the fork worked fine, thanks. The problem rested beyond the boundaries of her dish. The problem had three parts, each of them easily identifiable.

Part number one was sitting opposite the table - Clemens, who had returned from California so late that Rahewa hadn't seen him at breakfast. Clemens had met people who were very important to her, he had been there for some reason she hadn't figured out yet, that's why it should be only natural to ask him one question after the other, shouldn't it?

Probably so.

Except - part two of the problem was her own self. If there was anything still more impossible than eating at this very moment, then this was asking him these questions. Not now, not here, not in public - why couldn't the rest of the school just disappear?

As if this would enable her to ask.

Part three of the problem was sitting at Rahewa's side - her friend Vanessa, miraculously managing one bite after other and, this was the bad part, one question after the other. Like at this moment. "Hello, Clemens. How was your trip?"

"Very interesting."

"That's good to hear. Was there anything particular - I mean, worth mentioning at this dull, boring lunch?"

"Actually yes, now that you mention it ... The weather there's still hotter than here."

Clemens seemed at ease with the world, smiled friendly toward Vanessa, who continued eating and asking, totally unimpressed by the clear message he'd sent. "What kind of event was it, there?"

"A meeting of Groucho Biochemicals. To be precise, there were people from other Groucho branches too, because someone new was introduced." Clemens looked at Rahewa. "An ex-lieutenant from the Los Angeles police - he's going to work for Groucho."

"Ramon Garcia??"

"That's his name. So you know him?"

"Yes."

Vanessa looked at her friend, whose face had changed colour from these few words, waited a moment, all too ready for passing the burden of conversation over to the other two. But no such luck. So she asked, "Why did Hermione take you with her to that meeting?"

"To bring me in touch with Biochemicals, I'd say. I met the other star at the Potions sky, Beatrice Chagrin. And I met Jesamine Grubbly-Plank, the head of Biochemicals."

"And?"

"What and? We talked."

"Oh, really?" Vanessa managed not to clench her teeth. "How are they? Did they say something specific?"

"Beatrice was a real surprise. Young, black, and extraordinarily good-looking ..."

This came as nothing new to Rahewa, but hearing it from Clemens was hardly suited to improve her state.

"... and Jesamine said I'd be the missing link for Biochemicals."

Despite herself, Rahewa's head came up, staring at Clemens. What did he mean?? It had sounded as if, right after lunch, he'd start packing to move.

For a split second, their eyes met. His' were widening, and next moment, an eternity too late, Rahewa realized why - he'd seen something in her own face he hadn't expected, or not to this extent.

Looking at his own dish, Clemens said quickly, "I've got an order ... No, actually I've got two. The first is about a potion, Hermione and I, we'll work together - here in Hogwarts."

The relief was so strong, for a moment Rahewa felt almost sick from the surplus adrenaline still running through her veins. This was why she missed the beginning of his next sentence.

"... tell you something. Can we meet after lunch?"

It took her another moment to realize that Clemens was asking her. She nodded, murmured, "Yes," while her thoughts were already racing ahead. An order to tell her something? Somehow, this sounded like an order from Harry, only she couldn't ... My God - had he tried to play postillon d'amour??

After a few seconds, she calmed down. No he hadn't. Not Harry. Not her godfather, who knew better than anyone else how she was suffering, who knew so well that any intervention from outside would make things worse.

"... an order. Do you get paid?"

Her friend Vanessa had shot her next question - only, somehow, something had changed. She was no longer trying to squeeze Clemens. Apparently, she too had witnessed the five-seconds

drama a moment ago, and now was doing what she could in steering the conversation toward neutral waters. God bless her.

"I don't know. The question didn't come up."

"Didn't you ask?"

Clemens laughed. "No, I didn't. Somehow, we had other issues to discuss. And besides - the people there didn't strike me as exploiters, really, not the least bit."

"No, probably not." Vanessa dropped her fork. "Since it's obvious that I won't get the answers that would interest me, why ain't you two stop playing lunch and meet outside, so I can squeeze Rage afterwards?"

"Why don't you return to this old habit of yours - playing pretty and stupid?"

"I'm not playing pretty!!"

Clemens grinned. "That's true. And I think what you suggested was a good advice." He looked questioningly at Rahewa. "Shall we?"

She was aware that, a second from now, the entire Gryffindor table - or maybe the entire school - would watch how she and Clemens were leaving the hall together, way before dessert was served.

Be it. She gave a damn.

* * *

Clemens felt surprisingly calm, considering the situation, in particular taking into account what he was planning to tell Rahewa. But then, he'd taken the basic decision already a day before and, in a way, things had accelerated only a bit more than expected. For example from Vanessa's suggestion.

And from this look, of course.

It had been naked fear. Clemens wasn't slow in thinking, not at all, but normally it would have taken him a day - at the least - to cross-check all other possibilities what this could mean, after he'd said something that could be understood as him leaving Hogwarts. Not that there were so many possibilities, other than ...

But he was still running in high-speed gear - an effect that had started in the meeting with Hermione and Beatrice. This black beauty offered him a drink and said, "It's a brain booster - take it as my welcome present and as my first contribution to this project."

The effect was terrific, although - as Beatrice explained - this was what she called the *retard* version, meaning it didn't kick in as strong as another form while lasting longer. At this moment, Hermione had shown one of her diabolic grins. Probably some story from the past, at least she hadn't given any further comment.

Anyway - the result was that their meeting had brought a clear idea what to do, once the unicorn blood came along, and that Clemens' own thinking, about more private matters, had made a similar quantum leap.

And so he had interpreted this look in a fraction of a second, had been able to take a decision at lightning speed, to talk in an almost normal voice while his inner self was bending in a storm of emotions.

Still - if Vanessa hadn't made it possible for both of them to leave, he'd lost his composure moments later, he felt sure about that.

While now, walking at Rahewa's side, alone with her for the first time, not even her poodles around, ahead of her by a tiny bit of precious information, more than eager to balance out this difference in knowledge ...

They reached a place near the forest. Clemens saw two gravestones - no, could be three, there was a very small one ...

"That's my favourite place," explained Rahewa. "There, these are the graves of Hagrid and Flitwick - they died in the Battle of Hogwarts ... And this here, that's Lousy's grave."

"Lousy?"

"Yes ... A dog - he died in the Muggle attack, and it was my mistake. Harry said it wasn't, but I think it was."

Rahewa's voice was mostly casual, only at the edges Clemens could hear something as though she might burst into tears any moment. He said, "This Harry says a lot of things ..."

Rahewa wheeled around, stared at him, her eyes suddenly dark - a look that made him continue very quickly. "... but for all I've heard and could hear by myself, he knows exactly what he's saying, and he never lies."

The steel in Rahewa's eyes softened.

"He said something to me that made me start thinking. And that's why I wanted to talk with you."

"I thought you should tell me something."

"Yes, that too - or maybe it's the same ... Er, it's a bit difficult to figure out where to start, because normally, you should start at the beginning, only here ..."

She looked at him with an incredible mix of emotions - a bit of disbelief, hearing him issuing such unqualified speech bubbles, overlaid by an expression as if she could listen to that forever.

Well - a picture told more than thousand words, they said, but Clemens knew something that told still more. So he made a step, took Rahewa by her shoulders, and kissed her.

For an instant, she froze. Then she melted into his arms.

A memorizable moment later - could have been two, in retrospect - they were sitting in the grass.

Rahewa looked around, then at him again. "That it's happening here, at this place ... Most of the important moments in my life took place here - that's the best omen I can imagine."

After another moment, or two, Clemens asked, "How come?"

"It was Harry's place. Hagrid was his first friend, and over there - see the black spot? That's where Hagrid's hut stood, only later it was Samantha's hut, until it was destroyed by the Muggles who shot Lousy ... Well, when Harry wanted to talk about something, most often he did it here - and many of the events in my life have to do with him."

"Tell me."

"Yes, I will, only that's a long story, and the lunch break's over soon. But it's time enough that you can tell me what he said to you. How was it?"

"This story is probably not quite as long, but still more than I can tell now, that's why I want to explain ..."

"No, please! Tell me what do you think of him ... And of Cho, and Sandy."

"They are ... incredible. Impressive."

"Not scary?"

"Maybe for a moment - until you start talking with them. You know what he did? He compared me with himself - another crusader, he said."

"Really?"

"Of course that's nonsense, but ..." Clemens told Rahewa about his sister Clara, and what was driving him since he was in school, and what had brought him into this project.

Her look was melting his inside. "Poor Clara. But I'm sure you'll find the solution." Then Rahewa smiled. "So Vanessa was right when she said, you know exactly what you're doing."

"Of course she was right - she's very clever, your friend."

"And very pretty."

"So?" Clemens spent another moment or two to make clear how irrelevant that was.

Then Rahewa asked, "Why did you keep it as a secret all the time?"

"Well - for once, you're not running around telling everybody that you're in search for a potion that turns Muggles to wizards. I remember how it was when I mentioned it once - I was a first-year at that time ... Since then ..."

"Did they laugh at you?"

"Of course. The other students did ... The teacher was nice - she said, you have a long way to go, Clemens, but I won't be surprised when hearing it was you who found it ... I'll never forget that - it kept me steady whenever I thought it's impossible, there is no way to go ..."

His explanation was interrupted again.

"And yesterday, in this meeting, of course I had to explain about my background. Then Ramon thanked me and said something like, this information won't leave this room. And then Harry said something - and that's why we're sitting here now, rather than next week, or still later."

A beaming face of expectation. "What was it?"

"He was talking to Ramon, not to me. He said, unless it's he himself who tells this story someone else, which I hope he does ... I heard that and thought, what nonsense is this, of course it's my decision whom to tell ... And Ramon looked as if he thought the same ..."

Clemens shook his head in admiration. "Only a moment later, I realized what he'd done, what he'd told me to do - in full public, not even looking at me, and nobody else had caught the message ..."

"Except Cho."

"Yes, certainly ... Only - later, when we talked with each other, there wasn't the slightest trace of another hint, no smiling, no grinning - nothing. No - in the middle of the Groucho meeting, with everybody listening, he'd told me, Clemens, go and tell her that you love her - and so I'm here to tell you - Rahewa, I love you."

Another few moments passed. Then Clemens asked, "How did he know?"

Rahewa blushed sweetly. "Remember the day at the lake? When I had to leave for my visit at them? ... Er - when I arrived, it took him just a minute, then he asked, who's the lucky one? And I told them your name."

"Okay, so he knew about your side of things. But how did he know - I mean, what if I didn't respond the same?"

"You did, don't you?" After another interruption, Rahewa said, "He has this *haragei*, he can sense a lot even without his snake." Then she giggled. "Although - I think everybody knows already ... Remember how I came into the OP with Sandy?"

After some more of these moment full of non-verbal communication, Clemens suddenly laughed. Seeing Rahewa's questioning look, he said, "Yes, of course they know. After the meeting, Cho said, I guess you prefer Hogwarts as the project centre, but even so, I think we'll meet again soon." Clemens giggled. "At this moment, her remark sounded perfectly normal in this situation - only now, in retrospect, I can see what she really said to me."

"What did she say?"

"You're visiting them quite often, right? ... Well, I think what she said was an invitation with a timer on it - meaning, once you two have settled, just come together before running into a conflict of interests."

Hearing that, Rahewa beamed. Next moment, she turned dark red.

Recognizing it, Clemens had a pretty clear idea which thought had crossed her mind. He bent closer and whispered, "There's no need for pushing things. I think she only meant day trips anyway."

Rahewa didn't look at him when she said, "I know for sure that she wasn't drawing any such line ... And besides, who said I'm not interested in weekend trips?"

"We'll handle it as we feel right ... At any rate, first it's the other way around - Harry's coming to visit here."

Rahewa's eyes lighted up. "When?"

"Today ... He wants to meet a centaur, to get his help for collecting unicorn blood."

08 - Tight Schedule

Looking over the Great Hall of Hogwarts, Harry found no nostalgic feelings inside himself. Maybe he was too young, not long enough out of school. Only - this here seemed so different from where he had lived for seven years. Yes, every single stone was still the same, the Headmaster still the same, and Harry could trace each of the new developments back to their origins, since most of them had started when he was a student here. But now they were in full swing, and it made a hell of a difference.

He had grown up in a climate which knew no contrast sharper than that between Muggles and Magicals. In his last year, the two worlds had met in a clash. Now they got along.

True, all people in Harry's view were Magicals. Only, they might as well have been Muggles, from the look of things. Jeans, for example, appeared as the most ordinary piece of clothing here. The students had walkmen, ghetto blasters, personal computers, and mobile phones. Getting caught with a beeping mobile in class meant a week *social service*, so Harry had been told by Almyra, a week during which the mobile stayed confiscated.

The remark had made him grin. First, because social service looked pretty harmless, anything other than hard work. The house elves still did the real work, had no interest in clumsy students confusing their routine. So the culprits would do errands, travelling through the linkport network that connected Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and Drachenfels. It didn't surprise Harry to hear that the intended punishment had quite some attraction.

His grin had still another reason - Cho. She was a very active sponsor of Hogwarts, donating a certain quota of phonies plus one spector each year - to be used as awards for excellent performance. It was nice, the students worked hard to win such a premium, and it was first-rate marketing. There had been some opposition in the beginning, fading quickly when Cho had donated a phony for each teacher.

Sure, they didn't beep in class. Phonies could tell a caller that right now was a bad time. But a student could forget to switch on this lock as easily as he could forget to switch off the beeper on a simple mobile.

Almyra, at Harry's side, bent closer. "Look at our daughter. Something happened."

Suppressing another grin - Harry had recognized the change first thing when sitting down for supper at the teachers' table - he asked, "What do you mean?"

"As if you didn't know. Yesterday, this young man visits you in Santa Monica, and today, the two have found the words that were stuck in their mouths all the time. Purely coincidence, huh?"

Looking totally innocent, Harry said, "Maybe not. Beatrice doped him a bit."

"What??"

Harry feigned surprise. "Yes, sure - the brain booster, so he could check his potion design better. I guess clear thinking helps in more romantic matters too."

Remus Lupin, Almyra's husband, who was sitting at her other side, started to chuckle.

Almyra looked at him, back at Harry. "I can't help thinking you two are laughing about me, and trying to push me toward a comment that's totally out of place here."

"What makes you think so?" asked Remus. "We're just happy for our daughter."

"Hrmpf." Almyra wasn't stupid enough to believe him, except that any further remark would put her too close to the comment she tried to avoid. "What did Cho say about him?"

"She thinks, if we want to see Rahewa in the near future, we have to invite him too. Which is fine with me," Harry looked totally expressionless, "there's room enough in this - er, house."

Almyra snorted. "Of course - right what you should expect from your oldest friends. But the day will come, when Sandy's in that age, and then ..."

"Why - Sandy's exactly what Cho had in mind, and me too." Harry's face showed almost genuine astonishment. "You know how it's between Sandy and Rahewa - we cannot afford to keep them separated for such a long time ... And besides, the other day, when you talked with Laila, your view of things was somehow totally different - do I detect there a certain double morale?"

Remus asked, "Did I miss something then? What did she say?"

"Ohh - just girl's talk." It was Almyra's turn to look expressionless. "Harry must be confusing what he heard with what he thought."

Remus nodded. "Probably so. Everybody knows, he's famous for that."

The hall started to empty. From the spot at the Gryffindor table which had been the focus of their attention, a girl came closer. A moment later, Harry recognized her - Vanessa, Rahewa's friend. Once or twice, she too had been a guest in Santa Monica - not more often because Vanessa didn't like to "mess around in other people's family," as Rahewa had reported.

The girl reached the table, greeted the teachers with a nod, looked at Harry. "Good evening, Mr. Pot - er, Harry. I came to ask - er, if you'd lend me your daughter for a while."

This request was kind of surprising. At her visit in the Potter-Chang house, Vanessa's habit toward Sandy had been natural enough, only it hadn't struck Harry as a case of mutual attraction.

Registering his glance, Vanessa added, "Er - actually, I know why you're here, and that it's still a while before it's time to reach the forest, and maybe you'd like to meet some people while Sandy's outside, or doing a tour through the Gryffindor tower ..."

Harry waited a moment if the sentence would finish, which wasn't the case. Then he said, "You're surprising me, Vanessa - but why not, if Sandy agrees."

The girl with the lion's mane blushed a bit. "To be honest - there's still another reason. Right now I need something to cuddle - must have to do with some people around and their effect toward others, if you know what I mean."

A perfectly understandable motivation, although Harry felt sure that Vanessa had confessed it only as a precaution - toward him and his snake, people were quite careful to avoid half-truths. He smiled. "Yes, I know what you mean. Go ahead - it's your job to convince Sandy."

Vanessa bent closer to the little girl. "Hi, Sandy - do you remember me?"

"Vanes-sa."

"Right you are. Do you want to come with me for a while? We can say hello to Rahewa, and meet other girls, or hear some music."

Probably quite on purpose, Vanessa had mentioned two magic words. After a short moment of hesitation, Sandra nodded, came into Vanessa's arms.

Harry said, "Just keep in mind - if she says, Shit, be quick to reach a toilet."

Vanessa nodded. "I know the drill from Rage, and I've seen some baby shit before."

She had made a step when Sandra realized - the invitation didn't extend to more than herself, reason enough to protest. "Nagini!"

Vanessa stopped, looked at the table on which the snake was curled, back at Sandra. "She's too heavy for me, Sandy - I'm not as strong as Harry. And besides - if you want to play with the poodles, we can leave Nagini here ... Okay?"

Another moment of hesitation, while Vanessa had the wisdom not to argue more. Then she had won, walked back to the Gryffindor table, where their arrival raised some squeaks from other girls.

Harry wasn't even sure whether one of them had been Rahewa.

* * *

The small room looked really uninspiring.

Ron Weasley, glancing over his nominal office, realized this sad fact not for the first time, only that most often it didn't bother him much. He used to be outdoors a lot - which meant indoors in some wizard schools. But today, facing a severe problem, trying to come up with a solution, the dismal picture before his eyes had a depressing effect.

He might have walked through the streets of Paris instead - they were inspiring enough. Only Ron needed papers, information, his magical map with these nice zoom functions, so he was fixed to this place.

The only alternative would have been to do it at home. However, Ron preferred separating office hours from after hours, and as long as he hadn't cleared his mind about what to do next, sitting at home while not answering Janine's remarks was an invitation for trouble.

She was a bit touchy - naturally enough in her state of pregnancy, not her usual habit. While Janine's quickly changing wishes and desires were just an extension of her normal behaviour.

Recently, arriving at home was always good for a surprise. What would she present as today's supper?

Would she await him in the kitchen with something to eat? Or was she waiting with nothing but herself, impatient to pull him toward the bedroom right after he'd crossed the door?

Not that Ron had objections against such a welcome, no sir ... Only that, eventually, some food would rank on top of *his* priorities.

Survival of the self, survival of the race ... His current problem also had to do with survival - that of some wizards. The *wizard fever* had reached Istanbul, had caused quite some casualties, and was entering Greece. While the public attention here in Western Europe still was limited, not much different from that toward other diseases in some third-world countries, Ron's own attention climbed to red alert.

A short look onto a map of Europe explained why.

Depending on how this strange epidemic would spread, the next target might be Bulgaria. And there, not too far from the border to Greece, you would find Durmstrang - one of the four schools which represented Ron's working territory.

In his best-case scenario, the path of infections would miss Durmstrang. Some students might catch the fever during a visit at home, but it was certified knowledge that the victims weren't contagious.

They were only bound to die.

In this case, Ron would have time until the fever had crossed the Balkan countries, with Germany and Drachenfels as the next station to worry about.

The realistic-case scenario found Durmstrang right in the middle of the infection path. Realistic because this fever seemed attracted toward places with a high concentration of Magicals. In this case - Ron didn't want to think about this case. Would Durmstrang still exist afterwards?

Aside from the walls, that was.

And then, at bad last, there was his worst-case scenario, and this one really gave him the creeps. In this scenario, Durmstrang was hit broadside, and the fever took the opportunity and the shortcut to reach Drachenfels, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts - through the linkport network.

If this would happen ...

Ron had talked with Drilencu, the Headmaster of Durmstrang. He had asked him to close the school, to send the students home until the fever was somewhere else, and - most of all - to discharge the linkports.

Failing to reach an agreement, Ron had asked Drilencu to close Durmstrang against any contact to the outside, of course including the linkports.

Failing again, Ron had pleaded to shut down the linkports, if nothing else.

This stupid Bulgarian ... "What's the sense?" Drilencu had argued. "Even if we do all that - a week later, maybe two, the fever will reach the other places anyway."

Ron had explained that two weeks might make a difference.

"If you think Durmstrang is an affordable loss, think again," had been the answer. "By some accident, the frontier's here in our neighbourhood. Well - if there is a chance at all, if there's a cure within reach, then you might forgive me if I keep the pressure equally high for all of us in the European Council."

Which was understandable, in some way even the best strategy Drilencu could take. Except that Ron might not forgive him. He was ECMA only in second place - for him, losses in Durmstrang were, if not affordable, then preferable over losses in his own neighbourhood.

Clever Drilencu knew that. Nobody could stay completely objective in such a situation. Ron could admire the Durmstrang Headmaster - between waves of hate and frustration. He would have preferred to direct his feelings toward the real culprit, if there was any, but Drilencu represented all he had.

And some hope. That the *Groucho* people found an antidote. Or someone else.

Ron stored his map away, shut down his computer. There was nothing to make up his mind about. Cutting the connections to Durmstrang from the other side was no solution. Either the same fate hit all of them, or the survivors in Durmstrang would break with the ECMA first thing afterwards.

Ron jumped to his home, an old building in Argenteuil, at the outskirts of Paris. Born and raised in *The Burrow*, easily the craziest piece of architecture you might ever find, Ron had never developed a taste for bungalows and other house forms without a decent amount of staircases. And Janine thought the same.

His jump brought him to the outer door. Ron couldn't warm up too much for these point-to-point jumps which were the habit of his friend Harry - from the spot near the desk to the corner where to drop the coat, only with something like fifty or five thousand miles in-between. And besides - Ron *liked* climbing staircases.

Janine awaited him in the kitchen, with some food under construction, which in Ron's current state felt like the better alternative. And someone else was there, chatting with Janine in quick French, although still with this accent not fading ever.

Ginny, his sister.

Ron greeted his wife, then his sister. "Are you looking for something more solid than shrimps, salmon, and caviar?"

"This wasn't the first thing on my mind coming over, but since sitting here with Janine, the smell's enough to corrupt all my good intentions."

Ron inspected his sister with eyes as critical as those of fashion editors, only from a different perspective. "If Mum would see you like that, she'd start crying."

Ginny shrugged. "Life's a compromise - I'll accept your invitation, and after the meal, if Henri would see mee like that, *he'd* start crying."

Without turning from her pot, Janine asked, "Henri?"

Hearing the interest in her voice, seeing the look in her brother's face, Ginny grinned. "Henri's the photographer in the session we had today - and to answer your obvious question, he's crying easily, if you get my drift."

"A gay," muttered Janine, "what a bloody waste."

"But otherwise he's quite conservative," explained Ginny. "Always the Seine and the churches of Paris - other people are luckier, they'd shoot in Athens, at the Parthenon, or at some temple on Crete ... I mean, we're shooting the autumn collection, which would look weird under palms, agreed, but ... At least it's the setting sun, thank God for small favors."

"Huh?"

"Yes - as I said, Henri's a traditionalist. For the autumn collection, it must be the setting sun, which means you can have a decent amount of sleep, while for the spring collection, it must be the rising sun ... Getting up five o'clock on a winter morning, then you ask yourself what you're doing there - other people just place a battery of spotlights and give a damn for the sun."

Ron asked, "Then why don't you tell your agent to make contracts only with them?"

"Unfortunately, this a - artist of Henri's better than the others ... And of course he's right, you cannot beat sunlight, no matter how many spotlights."

Thinking about the places his sister might have preferred, Ron drew a face. "You're lucky to be here, rather than in Athens. Crete might be clean, but Athens - if the wizard fever's not already there, it will arrive any day now."

Ginny wasn't impressed. "Even if I'd catch it - true, it's essential to survive, but otherwise? For me, to be a witch is more of a burden than a help. The agencies are somewhat prejudiced in this matter ... And for the survival, I know who'd help me."

"Is this your only comment?" Ron stared at her in disbelief. "Maybe you've lost contact with reality, there in your fashion world - people are dying, within the next days Durmstrang might be caught, soon afterwards the other schools, and you're sitting there chirping, *Even if I'd catch it!*"

"I have lost contact with reality?? ... People are dying in car accidents, in terror attacks, of AIDS, of the unlucky fate to be in a war zone, and simply of hunger! A few hundred wizards don't even make a dent in the statistics - that's reality, my dear Ron ... If you think I'm egocentric and narrow-minded, then think again - maybe I am, but I'm not alone with that."

Janine said, "If you two want to have some food, you better cool your temper." She started to fill dishes.

Ginny looked at her brother. "Okay - for Janine's food, you can call me everything."

Ron, feeling hungry himself and knowing his wife well enough, didn't accept the offer. However, he didn't stop looking sour either.

Janine turned to her sister-in-law. "What do the Muggles think about this fever? Did you hear any comments?"

"Sure. In my *fashion world*, Henri isn't the only gay, as you know. And for them ... Remember how it was when AIDS came up? People said, what do I care, I'm not homosexual - only the homosexuals had a totally different perspective. And now there's something that's dangerous for Magicals. So you can imagine what the Muggles think - some of them are gloating, some of them say, poor Magicals, am I glad I'm none, and most of them just give a damn." Ginny looked at her brother. "Of course, I can quote only my *fashion world*."

Seeing his wife's grin, Ron answered, "Yeah, okay, I take it back - or better, I confess to be narrow-minded in my own way. Only - by some accident, I *am* a wizard, who deals with some wizard schools across Europe - and if the fever catches Durmstrang - these idiots won't agree to close the linkports - then next day it's in Beauxbatons and Hogwarts and Drachenfels ... And two days afterwards, I can look for another job."

"Oh ..." Ginny looked startled.

Ron found no taste in savouring his small victory in this discussion. "It's a race against time - Groucho Biochemicals is working to find an antidote."

"What's the state?"

"Harry said they have an idea, and it looks promising. He didn't say more, which probably was the best he could do ... They know what's at stake, and Harry knows for sure. That's why I try not to call them more often than once a day."

Janine said, "If 'arry calls it promising, then I'm sure it looks really good. He's learned to be careful with his promises."

Ginny nodded. "You can say that."

"I know, but ..." Ron's expression grew sombre. "A new potion - normally it takes months. They have to be quicker than quick this time."

* * *

Having finished a longer conversation with Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Harry walked down the staircase to notify Almyra that it was about time. She had promised him to help finding Firenze. Almyra would sail across the Forbidden Forest - as a falcon or as an owl, whatever suitable - and look for the centaurs. Then she would either fly to the border of the forest where he would be waiting, or simply run a circle around Firenze to give him a message. The centaur could read such messages quite well.

But first, Harry had to find his daughter. Having her with him when meeting Firenze was essential.

It had been a new experience, to know Sandy somewhere else while first going through a lesson in some medical treatment with Hermione and then sitting with Dumbledore. Maybe Fawkes - Dumbledore's phoenix - had been a bit disappointed to find him without the girl, yet still with the snake. Fawkes and Nagini, this would never be a close friendship. But they got along, probably something like mutual respect.

So where was Sandy?

Harry knew - to find her, all he had to do was switching off his conscious thinking. Nothing in the Great Hall. Nothing in the Entrance Hall. Reaching the outside, he could see them in some distance.

And he could hear them.

What he heard was guitar music. Walking closer, Harry recognized the tune - Greensleeves, that old traditional. And someone singing. Was there one guitar or more?

Reaching the spot, actually quite close to Hagrid's grave, Harry saw - just one player and singer, a student, except he played a twelve-string guitar, creating an incredibly rich sound for a single instrument.

The other people sitting there in the grass were Rahewa and Clemens, side by side and arm in arm, Vanessa and Sandy, placed on a blanket, and two other students, a boy and a girl, also holding to each other.

And the two poodles - on the blanket of course, one at each side of Harry's daughter. Sandy herself sat motionlessly, mesmerized, staring at the singer and his instrument.

The young man had finished Greensleeves a moment ago. Now he was playing and singing a song unknown to Harry - a vivid march song, which felt somehow strange because the story was quite sad. Something about some old grey goose who'd died, and that someone should tell Aunt Rhodie, and how the goose's husband and children were weeping and crying.

For what Harry could sense, his daughter wasn't the only one sitting transfixed. He bent down to Vanessa, sitting with her back to him. Close to her ears, he whispered, "Very cuddlesome."

"Gawk!!"

Thanks to gravity, the girl didn't jump, but almost. Vanessa exhaled deeply. "My God, can you scare people."

The song had finished. Only now, Harry's daughter turned to look at him, not showing any surprise. "Michael music."

"Hello, everybody." Harry looked at the young man. "Hello, Michael - who's found whom?"

Vanessa hurried to explain. "Well, you know, after Sandy had said hello to quite some people, she really wanted to have music - after I'd promised her. First we tried with a walkman, only that wasn't what she wanted. Then Aileen here - by the way, that's Aileen and Jeremy - so Aileen said, if we have to compete with a harp, there's only one who can do that, and she

asked Michael, and so we're here." Vanessa looked at the singer, some wondering in her face. "I didn't know - I never heard him playing like that before, and sing."

Harry said, "Must be Sandy's effect."

The young man didn't reply. Instead, he blushed.

Which hadn't been Harry's intention. So he quickly asked, "The way you can handle that guitar - I think that's more than enough for public performances. How come you do it so secretly?"

"It's no secret ..." Michael showed a short grin. "You cannot play a twelve-string secretly, that's impossible. But my style's folksong, traditionals, and that's kind of exotic these days." He looked into Harry's face. "You know when it started? When the Muggle camp was around Hogwarts - with the campfires in the evenings, and people playing guitar ... That's where I got my addiction."

Harry examined the face. "I'm sorry - I don't remember you."

"Of course not - I was a first-year then, had trouble reaching the camp without getting caught." Michael smiled. "But I remember you - " he turned, "and of course Rage ... The squad patrol nobody could beat."

Rahewa looked pleased, and Clemens seemed very interested to hear more.

Someone else couldn't care less about old stories. With some impatience in her voice, Sandra said, "Music."

Harry bent forward. "Sandy, we have to go. We must find Firenze and talk with him."

"No. Michael music."

There he was, caught in a trap. Visiting Firenze had to do with healing Bill, sure, and this had to do with music. But suddenly, Sandra had an alternative - in case Hely's music would be at risk.

The young man saved him. "I'll play two more songs - a German one for Clemens, and a Canadian one for Rage ... And when we meet again, I'll play more for you. Okay, Sandy?"

With great relief, Harry saw his daughter nod. Some more minutes - it wouldn't make much difference. He looked into the sky to see whether he could detect Almyra - how embarrassing to be late for a meeting with a centaur. But the sky was empty.

Well - she certainly wouldn't mind flying through a warm evening's air.

Michael's first song was the German one. Harry didn't understand a word, but with the young man's explanation that this was about two king's children who couldn't come together and died in trying, and with the slow, sad melody, he felt touched even so.

Having finished this song, Michael said, "And this is the tribute to Rage and to Canada - Summertime Dream."

This song was very rhythmic, quite joyful, apparently selected also as a tribute to a young love. Michael finished with the last lines:

*"So if you come round when the mill shuts down
you c'n see what chivalry means
Let's steal away in the noonday sun
it's time for a summertime dream."*

He cut the last chord with his hand over the strings, stood up. "That's it for today. You were a great audience." Toward Harry, he added, "It's as if a circle closes - I heard my first serious guitar when you and Rage were running Muggles patrol, and today I played for your daughter - and for those two." He made the slightest movement with his head, winking toward Rahewa and Clemens.

Harry took his daughter, looked at the young philosopher. "Only for them?"

Before Michael could answer, which was unlikely anyway, Harry asked, "Would you accept an invitation even if you have to sing and play for your supper?"

"Erm ..."

"Think it over. At least, you wouldn't be the only student from Hogwarts invited for such an occasion."

Michael smiled. "That's fairly obvious."

"Yes it is, isn't it?" Harry returned the smile. "Of course we'd invite a balanced number of guests from here ... Thanks for your music, and for your help a moment ago."

Walking toward the borderline of the Forbidden Forest, Harry felt the young man's stare following him. Still smiling, he suppressed an impulse to turn and wave. Heroes of ex-first-years were obliged to keep their reputation.

A moment later, the task ahead started to occupy his mind.

* * *

Almyra felt this borderless rush of excitement and joy, carried by her wings across the Forbidden Forest. Free like a bird ... Although gravity kept pulling at her like at anyone else - there was no thermic here over the cool forest - the sense of freedom still intensified as she could climb with her own power.

Harry envied her for that, as he had frankly confessed. In his dragon shape, the best he could muster was a flight of little more than five minutes, ten at the most. While for Almyra, as a falcon, one hour meant easy play. And as an owl, shortly after dusk when the trees still released the accumulated heat of the day, she could sail soundlessly, effortlessly, sail and sail.

Even so, Almyra had something in common with her brother in spirit. Returning into human shape, they both used to be ravenous, greedy for food, piles of food.

Did he feel the other desire too, after a flight? Almyra had never asked.

Falcons didn't grin. Otherwise she would have done so now.

Almyra had already passed several unicorns. This was another experience offered only to her bird shape. The beautiful creatures stayed calm, provided she kept some distance in height. Did they recognize her as a human?

The centaurs did, Almyra felt sure of that. She had passed them occasionally in the past, and each time she'd seen their glances following her. Not unfriendly, not inviting either.

Well, today she would be a bit more pushy - once she had found them.

Checking the places where she had seen them before, Almyra found the first empty, the second, the third. And now?

She turned in a wide arc. Memorizing all the openings she could remember, she flew back toward the school, criss-crossing from one spot to the other. They couldn't afford a failure, time was running short. Maybe it was a bit too early in the evening - if not now, they would try it deep into the night, and Harry would have to find a means to comfort his daughter in the dark forest.

That was - assuming Sandy reacted like other little girls in the darkness under ... There!

A light figure, from the distance easily confused with a unicorn. Only it wasn't. It was a centaur, and Almyra knew only one of such a light colour.

He stood under the treeline at the end of an opening - as if he'd known for a while already, had awaited her there, close to the border of the forest, close to the point where Almyra would have been forced giving up hope.

And right next to him, she saw a half-dead tree on which she could touch down easily. This was hardly coincidence. She came to rest on the selected branch, folded her wings, stared at him.

He just stared back.

Nearly perfect. The only ones missing were Harry and his daughter. About to rise again, Almyra stopped. Her sharp eyes had registered a movement - a second centaur, closing in rapidly, surprisingly light too, only ...

Too quiet to be real. Too golden.

Almyra watched the phenomenon she had seen twice before - Harry's Golden Patronus, apparently sent in search for Firenze. Soundlessly, it broke through the underbrush, circled around Firenze, who kept waiting motionlessly. An instant later, the golden centaur disappeared.

They didn't have to wait long until light steps could be heard. Then Harry came out into the opening, with Sandy in front.

Was this supposed to be a private conversation? Nobody had indicated that, and Almyra's claws felt glued around the branch.

"Harry Potter, the boy who lived ... Now you're a man, and you come in quite some company."

"Good evening, Firenze. In spite of my company - seeing you, somehow it feels as if nothing has changed."

"But things have changed, haven't they? Here you are, living proof that my people can fail in reading the stars properly."

"Except for yourself."

"What makes you think so? I didn't read them any different from Bane, or Ronan, and the others."

"But ..."

Almyra watched Harry swallow a needless remark while registering the implicit information - Firenze had done what he'd done in full knowledge that it seemed bound to be useless, according to what the stars predicted. This was certainly something to remain speechless for an instant ...

What if Harry had known it from the beginning? Which role had the thought played for him that there was a centaur not ready to consider him doomed?

Although - wasn't it true? Regardless of his knowledge, this centaur hadn't *accepted* the fate of doom.

It looked as if Harry had come to the same conclusion. He pointed toward her position.

"Almyra over there helped me to find you - I think you know her already ... And this here's Sandy, the daughter of Cho Chang and myself."

The centaur looked at the girl with the jet-black hair. "Was this name your wife's choice, Harry Potter? She likes playing games with names and hair colours."

Almyra knew what the centaur was hinting at. Cho had met Firenze once - at this occasion, drugged from a heavy concussion of the head and still more from a Veela shawl, Cho had said, "Fiery Firenze, fair-haired fairy horse."

She could see Harry's lips twist. "Maybe so, but that's just short for Sandra, which was our compromise because Cho didn't like the name Cassandra - although she calls her Cass, which is short for Catherine, her second name."

"So you share the playing with names, you and your wife - up to some point."

Harry didn't respond.

His daughter did. After having stared at the centaur all the time, she said, "Fi-ren-ze. Man. Horse."

The centaur made a step toward her. "Little girl with the many names, I've been waiting to meet you. Now that we have met, I'll wait to see which name you'll make of yourself."

"Unicorn."

Firenze waited a second for more, but Sandra didn't bother providing details. So the centaur looked at Harry who explained, "This is an evening of closing circles, Firenze. On my way here, I met a student who was a first-year when we met the last time - maybe you've heard his guitar music ..."

"Michael music." About this topic, Sandra could contribute more.

"Yes, his name's Michael. And there's another young man, whose name is Clemens - he's the reason that I'm here, and the topic's the same as when we met for the first time - unicorns, and their blood ... We're in desperate need of some unicorn blood, Firenze - I'm here to ask for your help."

Harry gave a short explanation of the situation. He finished, "Clemens is waiting outside the forest, in case you want to ask him some questions."

The centaur studied the girl again. "Why did you come with your daughter, Harry Potter?"

"I felt it mandatory to come with her. She sensed that magical power - someone thinks that power started to move because it sensed her ... I cannot explain it better, but it was more than for reasons of courtesy toward you."

"Then trust your instincts still further." Firenze raised his arms. "Sandy, come with me to find a unicorn."

Even a falcon could be startled - Almyra had trouble to keep her wings calm. Although it looked as if she was the only one afraid of this idea.

Sandy came into Firenze's arms. After a moment, in which the two looked at each other eye to eye, the girl was placed on Firenze's back, close to his neck so she could grab his mane. Harry had conjured up a ribbon, tied it around her chest and around Firenze's neck.

A moment later, the centaur with the girl on his back stepped into the forest.

* * *

Harry felt something he was considerably less used to than most other people - the nervous tension of someone who can only sit and wait. Praying he took the right decision. Hoping he wasn't going to feel sorry soon.

He trusted Firenze. Absolutely. The centaur had saved his life, had saved him and Cho in an exam patrol. He knew what he did. He was careful. Still ...

Things could happen to two-year-olds. And to them, they happened quickly.

The least of his worries was that Sandy might panic. She was too young for that. She was even too young to know how to get frightened. Darkness had never been a reason to imprison her in some lighted room - not with their many travels through time zones.

And this moment when she and Firenze had looked at each other - like a flash of mutual understanding, something that could drive parents into jealousy.

Other parents, that was. Although - Harry felt grateful that Cho wasn't around at this moment, for more than this reason. That reminded him ... He looked up, winked at Almyra.

The falcon sailed down to the ground. For a fleeting instant, a young woman stood there, then an owl appeared on that spot, made a kind of fluttering jump, and landed on Harry's free shoulder - the one opposite Nagini's head.

Harry said, "Hi, Al ... You're probably right to keep that shape, too many humans might scare the unicorn, when it comes ... If it comes - although, somehow, I've little doubt ... What a strange conversation, me running a monologue and you just sitting there ..."

He felt a gentle peck at his earlobe.

This, together with his nervousness, made him giggle. "Hey - you're playin' the perfect owl, okay - only for me that feels very much like my sister in spirit nibbling at my ear, and this is a bit more than Cho and Remus would agree upon ..."

Another peck.

"You're teasing me, that's unfair." Harry kept his voice low, which only increased this atmosphere of a forbidden intimacy in the Forbidden Forest. "I know why you're doing that - it's the revenge for my remarks at supper ..."

A beak, designed to cut pieces of meat from a body, stroked the skin at Harry's neck.

"Stop it - you don't know what you're doing ... Or still worse, you know exactly what you're doing. Maybe owls don't feel shame, but imagine, later - we look at each other, turning red - I'd never be able to explain ..."

The bird stopped.

"Whew ... Did you hear how Firenze said he's been waiting for her? As much as it seems to help now, I'm not sure whether I like the implications. It would mean, they're reading stars about Sandy like they did about me, and this ..." Harry's voice trailed off.

Before he could say more, there was a pressure at his shoulder when the owl took off to reach a branch overhead.

Had she heard something?

Moments later, Harry heard hooves on the ground. Then Firenze appeared - Sandy on his back, exactly where she'd been placed a while before, and in his trail ...

A unicorn. White, delicate, beautiful.

Harry rose, slowly, carefully. Made a step. His voice low as before, he asked, "Sandy, will the unicorn help us?"

A nod.

He made another step, sent a careful mind wave, raised his arms, reached the head. A first touch ... Another mind wave of calmness, thankfulness, building trust. His next step brought him to the animal's flank.

Harry stroked its neck, sending more waves, suppressing the feeling of treachery - his fingertips were not only caressing the creature, they sensed for the veins. There ... He had the syringe ready.

Without further hesitation, he pushed the needle through the skin, felt the slightest twist in the unicorn, sent another message with his mind, pressed the piston down, thereby injecting a small amount of salty solution, and then - steadily, Hermione had said, slowly but steadily, pulled the piston up.

The small cylinder filled with a fluid that looked black in the dim light.

Harry extracted the needle, put his finger onto the microscopic wound, sent another wave. "Thank you, my unicorn. You've been so helpful."

He looked at his daughter. "That's it. You can send it home."

The girl simply raised his arm, said, "Goodbye, unicorn."

A step backward, another, then the white body made a half-turn, moved forward, was gone.

* * *

Clemens sat in the grass, Rahewa at his side, and felt wonderful, more alive than ever, excited, thrilled - and so tired. The longest day of his life, it seemed. After one of the shortest nights, for the time difference between California and Hogwarts.

After Harry had disappeared in the forest, the group had faded quickly. Jeremy and Aileen had thanked Michael, who just nodded absent-mindedly, still musing about Harry's remark. Then they'd left.

Coming awake, Michael had said, "See you," had started walking toward the lake.

"Mind some company?" Vanessa had asked him. Not awaiting an answer which never came, she had followed.

Which was the signal for Clemens to do a bit non-verbal small talk. As inviting as this summer evening was - with the task ahead, this felt just like the proper amount ... Not to mention his tiredness.

And with these poodles around ...

Then Rahewa said, "I could get used to such evenings - sitting outside, listening to a guitar. Add a campfire ..."

"Maybe a beer or two ..."

Rahewa giggled. "Campfires and beer - the Muggle camp Michael talked about, for me it was as attractive as for him. Only that I didn't start playing guitar ... But it was there that I got drunk for the first time in my life - and for the last."

She told him the story how Harry had sobered her up, sending her into the lake. "I was so ashamed, and embarrassed ..."

"For being drunk? That's unusual."

"Not if you have a father who's killing himself with the bottle. But the worst moment was when I came out of the water, sober enough to realize what I'd done, standing there stark naked ..."

"How old have you been then?"

"Twelve. It was ... After *aikido*, in this recreation room with hot and cold tub and the steam room, we'd seen each other naked, only there at the lake it was something totally different."

"Of course." For Clemens, this topic seemed - somehow - badly suited to be discussed further. "Well - beer's just one possibility. But I'm sure we can settle to such a habit - with us providing the drinks, and Michael the music ..."

Rahewa giggled again. "I bet - as long as it's not us alone."

"A personal troubadour?" The thought made Clemens smile. "No, that's not what I had in mind, as romantic as it sounds. But ..." He stopped himself. "Why are you grinning so madly?"

"Didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

"Well, maybe it's not that obvious for someone who hasn't seen him before, like me - even that, with all the other boys around ... Although, Harry saw it, or maybe he sneaked a bit ..."

Damn Harry and his big shadow. "Would you mind telling me what you're talking about?"

Rahewa's first answer was a kiss, then another. Then, "About Michael, you dummy. Drinks are okay, but what's more important is to come with Vanessa."

Clemens stared at her. "You're sure? But he's one year younger!"

"So?"

"Well, ten years from now, it doesn't matter, but ..."

"But now it matters, huh? ... Harry was a fifth-year when he fell in love with Cho, who was a sixth-year then."

"They're special anyway." Even though his remark hardly rated as derogatory, Clemens could sense in Rahewa's reaction that he was skidding over thin ice, hurried on to reach safer

ground. "I mean, for all I know, they were bound to love each other anyway, for a higher purpose - for them certainly no reason to complain. But here ... At any rate - even if he was a year older, it wouldn't help him much."

"In a sense, Van registered him today for the first time. She followed him, remember?"

"Well, yeah, big deal - she's a very gentle girl and was in a hurry to leave us alone, and he can really play guitar, and sing."

Rahewa kissed him on his cheek, on his ear which was thrilling enough to forget unicorns, and whispered, "You're a potions chauvi, you are."

"What?"

"Yes, you want to have a monopoly - girls are supposed to fall in love only toward potions wizards, not musicians ... But you said something nice about her, so I'll forgive you."

Clemens exhaled theatrically. "Whew - lucky me."

Next moment, he was lying flatly in the grass, a hand like a spade at his throat, another barely touching his solarplexus. "Watch your language, young man - don't challenge me."

The poodles watched - unmoving, since Rahewa was on top.

While toward Clemens, the effect was different from what Rahewa might have expected. He closed his eyes, murmured, "I surrender - you can do with me what you want."

Next instant, the hands were gone. Opening his eyes for a moment, Clemens saw Rahewa sitting at his side, suddenly very composed. In a casual voice, she said, "She's been under siege from boys for years. And now there's someone who's not storming forward shouting, look at me, look at me ... I could imagine that's just what she's been waiting for ..."

Maybe so. Clemens, for his part, could imagine many things, many scenes which all had in common that Vanessa was somewhere else ...

"... super, Sandy - you're a genius girl!"

Clemens came awake with a jolt. Sitting up, he saw Rahewa standing there, the girl on her arm, and Harry with his snake.

The little girl looked at Clemens, beamed. "Dozy-dog!"

He rose quickly, looked at Harry who smiled and said, "You're paying the price for Beatrice's dope."

"You - you have it? Did it work?"

"Here."

Harry's hand held up something, recognizable only by the metal parts softly reflecting the moonlight - a syringe, the glass cylinder totally black.

"You really did it." Clemens felt awe-struck.

"Sandy did it - the true fairy queen. She rode a centaur and came back with a unicorn."

Clemens's emotions were so strong - somehow, he managed not to hug and kiss Harry, instead turned to the other two, and since Sandy was blocking his path, she became the one getting kissed.

The fairy queen's giggle sounded very much like that of a two-year-old.

* * *

Hermione wished she had something to do. Something senseful, better than moving things from left to right and then, at second thoughts, from right to left. But there was nothing. The potion was ready.

As ready as they could make it, with the current state of knowledge.

It had taken the most part of an hour, with Clemens and herself agreeing on the basics and compromising on the details - why not, one guess was as good as the other. The first patient would tell.

Hermione had thought she was used to waiting. Waiting on a patient's bed, waiting for slower people to grasp an idea. To her surprise, she was totally unprepared to wait until Viktor and Harry would return with a patient from Bulgaria.

Because the two might come back as patients themselves.

True, it was unlikely. Harry had taken Nagini with him, leaving Sandy in the hands of Rahewa, who had muted the girl's protest by suggesting that they might look for Michael and his music. The snake should be sufficient to sense any dangerous spot.

Still - Hermione couldn't remember a comparable situation. So far, she had always been part of the action. Now she was sitting here, trying not to bite her nails.

She looked at the young man opposite the table - thinking of him as an apprentice seemed no longer suitable, which was fine with her because she welcomed a professional fellow as much as a new challenge. "Assume it works - what are you planning to do next?"

"What I'm ... I think there are some more people in this project - you, Beatrice, Ramon ..."

Hermione waved dismissively. "Cut the crap - this is *your* story, I'm the first to admit, beating Beatrice only because she's not around, and you know it too, so Ramon will do what you suggest ... Then what comes next?"

"Erm - first let me thank you, for your trust, and your help - you're very generous ..."

"No I'm not!" Hermione's voice was a bit shrill. "Just fair, or realistic, although right here I feel at the edge of panic, but maybe that's realistic too ... Will you now answer my question?"

"Yes - treating patients, that's all what I have in mind. Getting the mass production organized, fine-tuning the stuff ... Anything else comes later."

"And your sister?"

"We've waited so long - a few days more won't hurt. Once the mass production is running, I'd like to test it with Bill Weasley first."

Hermione nodded. "Sounds reasonable ... Sorry for my edginess, but this waiting here's tearing at my nerves ... Tell me a story or something, before I start screaming."

"You screaming? ... After you've encountered so many dangerous situations, with Harry and others?"

"That's something else - you're in the midst of trouble, you have no time to realize how scared you are, and - " Hermione grinned, "with Harry at your side, you just don't dare to panic. It would be so embarrassing ..."

"Tell me - how is it with him at your side?"

This suggestion alone - to tell old stories - had a calming effect toward Hermione. She smiled. "Why don't you ask Rahewa?"

"Because she's so prejudiced - if you don't say ah and oh at the right moment ..."

Hermione could laugh about that, realizing that Clemens' exaggeration had been on purpose.

"... and besides, I think you've experienced more dangerous situations with him than Rahewa."

"Is that what she said? Did she never tell you about this lunatic who shot at them when they were on patrol? Or how she saved him from a bad curse at the Beauxbatons ball - the little girl with the big knife?"

Clemens stared at her. "Rage??"

Hermione grinned. "You thought Rage is short for Rahewa, and simpler to pronounce, huh? ... Think again."

"Well - it already crossed my mind how much her nickname seems to fit ... Say, how did these two come together, Harry and Rage?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "Harry must have been her hero long before she came to Hogwarts ... About this part, you may ask her yourself. Anyway - when she was in first year, the Gryffindor Quidditch team needed some new players. Harry decided to switch from Seeker to Beater - together with Ron. He and Viktor made a test with the new class, and what he came back with was Rahewa ... In this year, they didn't win the cup only because Cho caught the Snitch - thanks to a superior broomstick. Since then - well, I think you know that she's still waiting to be beaten again in catching the Snitch."

"That's the background? Quidditch?"

"That's just how it started. Then came *aikido* - officially, Rahewa was much too young for that, only Harry found a way to bring her in. Then the Grass Dance group, the accident with Gérard, and finally the story with her mother and her father ..."

From Clemens' face, Hermione could see that all this was new to him. "Now you have some keywords, that should be good enough to get the stories from herself. I'll tell you just the part about her natural parents, because you mightn't hear that from her - at least not voluntarily."

Hermione told Clemens how Harry had organized the treatment of Rahewa's mother until her death of leukaemia, how he had bought Rahewa's freedom from her father, and how he had found step-parents for the girl.

Clemens looked thoughtful. "That explains a lot ... And for him? Why did he do all that?"

"Yes, why? ... It wasn't because he felt flattered, that's for sure. She was a loner - probably Harry sensed something in her that reminded him of his own situation. And then - one came to the other, resulting in a network of mutual obligation - they're both crazy about obligations ..."

"Oh, really?"

Hermione laughed. "So you realized that already?"

"It's a bit hard to miss ... For all I know, Rage would kill for him - or die, whatever's suitable."

"Absolutely ... But don't get that wrong - Harry would do the same for her. She found the house in which Voldemort and Wormtail were hiding, that's something he'll never forget."

"Hmm ... Maybe I should have found me a girl with a simpler family background."

Hermione chuckled. "As if you had a choice, after all ... But you can take it easy - if your potion works, and you can cure Bill, then you'll find yourself at the same page in Harry's little book of names and events."

This prospect seemed more of a burden than a promise for Clemens, or maybe Hermione's remark brought them back to the present in which they were waiting, not knowing if the potion really was a cure. At any rate, they both fell silent for a while.

Then, returning from another memory trip, Hermione said, "Let me tell you how Harry met Firenze for the first time. It was my first experience with a dangerous situation, and Harry in the middle - quite typical actually because he has this talent to find help at the worst moment, from a totally unexpected ..."

She stopped, hearing noises outside. Next moment, the door opened - in came Harry, moving backward, carrying a stretcher with a young man on it, and Viktor at the other end.

Hermione's relief drowned in the wave of professional reflexes, seeing the patient they had waited for the last two hours. She directed Harry and Viktor while they moved the figure up onto a table. Seconds later, she had the monitor sensors attached. Checking the data, she said, "There's no way to make him drink. We have to do it as an injection."

While Clemens prepared the syringe, Hermione found the time to kiss her husband and to say, "Am I glad to see you again ... Who is it?"

"His name's Krasimir Valchev, that's almost all we know about him ... An ex-student from Durmstrang, his younger brother is still in school - he was just the first we could catch."

Clemens had the syringe ready. "Hermione, would you ... You're more experienced in that."

"Yes, of course." Hermione found the young man's vein, pierced the needle into the flesh, slowly injected the fluid.

Harry had grabbed a chair, sat down behind the patient, placed his hands at the sweaty throat.

Checking the monitor, Hermione saw the effect from the potion kick in - accelerated pulse, the previously weak amplitude increasing ... Was it just the potion, or did Harry something other than sensing?

The amplitude was still growing - more than Hermione liked to see. Before she had time to worry in earnest, the green line faltered, flashed once more, went flat.

Harry's eyes came open. "He didn't make it ... He's dead."

09 - Skirmish

Clemens felt stunned. Wrong - he felt empty. No, he didn't feel at all. He had killed someone, a young man named Krasimir something. His potion had killed him.

He wasn't entirely stunned either. He could feel a bit - Rahewa's hand stroking over his head. She was trying to console him, to tell him he shouldn't blame himself.

But whom else?

Hermione, because she'd been the one who did the injection? Nonsense. There was no one to blame but himself. His potion was no cure, it was a poison.

The door opened. Someone said, "Here you are - I was looking for you."

This someone had Harry's voice. Glancing up, Clemens saw him standing there, Harry's face not revealing anything.

Rahewa said, "Harry - Clemens thinks he killed this Krasimir. Please tell him it's not true."

"But he did, didn't he?"

Watching the exchange, Clemens saw how the words struck Rahewa like a blow in the face. Staring speechlessly at her godfather, the girl's eyes started to fill with tears. Though for himself, Clemens felt relief - the first real feeling in a while. Someone had said it, someone who refused to lie, no matter which reason.

Harry made a step forward, grabbed Rahewa, hugged her.

Clemens saw her going rigid, then twist, then relax - all in a quick succession. Probably some mind wave - Harry and his helpful tricks. But then, maybe Clemens himself wouldn't mind such a wave, right now.

Guided by a gentle push, Rahewa sat down again at his side. She was still looking at Harry while her hand, like in a reflex, was searching for his own.

Harry sat down opposite. "I have to tell you a story. It's nothing new for Rahewa because she was present then, but somehow I have to tell it for her as much as for you, Clemens ... It's the story how I killed a man because I had no other solution. His name was Gérard. Gérard Pouilly ..."

Stunned again, only in a different style, Clemens listened to a story of love and betrayal, affection and hate - of sex and crime, involving Harry, Cho, Marie-Christine, and Gérard. A story which ended with a green flash, erupting from Harry's closed fingertips, transforming this Gérard from a madly sneering lunatic to a dead corpse.

"I killed him to save her," finished Harry. "Now tell me, Clemens, what's the difference between this story and your own here?"

Clemens swallowed. "It's ... There are ... No - just some minor details. There's no important difference."

"Very good." Harry's face didn't change. "This Krasimir would have lived a few more hours. But he died from your potion ... Would you do it again?"

What an unfair question! How could he ... And this merciless stare!

Next instant, Clemens realized what Harry meant. "Er - I want to know exactly what happened, and what to change before ... But then, if you come with another patient, I'm ready to try."

"Good ... Tomorrow morning, some people will arrive here in Hogwarts. One of them is a pathologist from the Law Enforcement Squad - he'll examine the corpse to figure out what happened. Another one's the chief of the Squad - he'll interrogate you about this killing ..."

Clemens twisted, more from Harry's choice of words than from the prospect of meeting a high police officer. Killing - not accident, not fatal treatment, not lethal outcome ..."

Rahewa pressed his hand. "Don't worry - that's Sirius Black, he's Harry's godfather."

Harry grimaced. "You shouldn't have told him, Rahewa - aside from the official aspects, it was planned to have some cathartic effect, like what this Commissaire Domingieux did with me afterwards ... But it'll work even so - Sirius's impressive enough for that."

Clemens nodded. "And then?"

"A bit later, Beatrice will arrive. The three of you - Hermione, Beatrice, and you - will stay together until you come up with a potion that works."

Clemens nodded again. "Yes."

Harry looked at Rahewa, with an expression that had changed completely in a fraction of a second. "Still mad at me?"

Her head was shaking.

"Good." Harry looked at Clemens again. "You'll have a bad night, do you know that?"

"Er - I'm not sure."

"The after-shock. I hope it'll kick in soon, because the sooner the better - we need you with a clear mind tomorrow. At least - " Harry smiled, "you're in the best hands I can imagine." He stood up, about to go.

Clemens stopped him. "Wait a second ... You've been - you were sensing him, when ... What did you feel?"

"When the effect started, it was as if you'd set a prairie on fire. He was quite astonished - it came so totally unexpected. A moment later, when he died, the surprise was still bigger."

It sounded like bitter sarcasm, only that Harry quite obviously tried to report as precisely as he could.

"He hadn't even time to be disappointed ... Don't get me wrong, Clemens - I think you're on the right track with that potion, except that it would be helpful if the patient can survive the cure."

Clemens felt his jaws clenching.

Harry hesitated a moment, came over. "We have little time - sorry if I'm pushing you through the fast-forward ..."

Clemens felt two hands at his temples. Next instant, a wave was rushing through his mind ... Not a comforting one, quite the opposite - a hellish burning, although not painful, a presence utterly surprised - a very short moment of piercing pain, followed by a fading into blackness.

Without another word, Harry turned, reached the door, was gone.

Until then, Clemens already felt the tears well up in his eyes.

* * *

Cass was in bed, having fallen asleep before Cho had finished the first sentence of her good-night story. Small wonder, after such a long and eventful day - she'd nearly fallen asleep in the bathtub, which was why Harry had bathed with her, preferring his own support rather than that of Nagini.

Cho had watched, had watched afterwards when Harry had oiled and dressed the girl, without bothering to dress himself first.

She closed the door of Cass' room. Before returning into the living room where Harry was sitting in a chair, meanwhile in shorts, staring aimlessly ahead, she went into the chamber behind the bedroom that served as a large-scale wardrobe.

When she came out, her dress matched exactly her mood. She approached Harry's chair from behind, put her arms around his neck. "How do you feel?"

"A bit of sadness - for a young man who died, and for a young man who ..." Harry tensed for an instant, sniffed. "What I can sense and smell here has little to do with sorrow."

"Quite the opposite ... It's the Chinese mourning ceremony." Cho's right hand trailed down his chest, over his stomach, reached the waistband of his shorts, opened the button and halfway the zip, moved inside.

"Is it widespread in China?"

With satisfaction, Cho recognized him responding to her attack - his voice a bit breathlessly, but most of all his flesh in her palm, hardening under her grip which was one moment soft, hard and piercing the next second. "Its knowledge is limited to an elitarian circle." While answering, she opened the zip completely to release him from the pressure, only to squeeze him in her own hand.

His moaning was just the audible echo of her own sensation.

Cho moved around, to strip down his shorts and to present herself in this special dress - a cheong-sam of thin silk, red, in a way quite traditional, except that the slits were longer than usual, and more to the front than at the sides.

She spread her legs, exposing them in full length, separating the rest of the cheong-sam from a broad ribbon that was dangling right in front of him, hiding and promising at the same time. Then she thrust her hips forward - slowly, once.

His reaction was a single twist - from the part of his body which filled her vision so prominently, showing a glistening sign of his arousal.

Her own state was very much the same, only hidden beneath the ribbon. From experience she knew - this chair was just too narrow for both of them together. She grabbed him, gently this time. "Follow me."

Walking toward the bedroom, Cho felt him twist in her hand, heard him gasping, "Be careful, or we have an accident before we reach the bed."

This confession sent a wave of triumph and pleasure through her body. She let him go - what she had in mind wouldn't take long either way, but ... In the bedroom, she turned, let him pass. "Lie down - on your back, arms to your side, and don't move."

He obeyed, his eyes wide open, very dark, following her movements.

She climbed onto the bed, stood over him, her legs spread and visible again, the broad ribbon playing over his expectant flesh.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, moaning.

She sank down, slowly, inch by inch, the thin fabric folding in waves on his stomach. Her hands disappeared under the silk, taking him, opening herself, guiding him toward the waiting entrance.

Her own sigh drowned in his ragged breathing.

She dipped down once, twice, for teasing as much as for smoothing the path. Then, pressing hard, she moved herself onto him fullsize. And up again, and down with full force.

Harry arched up, only she didn't pause, kept moving while she felt his spasms, heard him issuing a choked groan, his face distorted in a grimace of torture and ecstasy.

She was racing toward her own orgasm, ignoring - no, savouring the sounds from his mouth, in these seconds he would have spent motionlessly, had it been his choice, in the short timespan until she stopped suddenly, her body rigid to the outside, twisting only inwardly at the waves of heat and lust that spread from her center upward and outward, pressing a short cry from her lips.

She fell down on his chest, powerless.

When her breathing had calmed a bit, Cho glanced up. What she would have liked to do now was to kiss him, to nibble at his throat or his ear - only then she would lose him. This was one of the rare moments when her limited height bothered her a bit, while her economic sense prevailed. Sitting up, she kept him safely and softly caught - nibbling she could do any time.

Harry looked at her. "Some mourning."

"Certainly. The only breach of etiquette is the colour of this piece - of course it should have been white, except this here's my only one in this special design."

Harry's hands moved along her thighs, trying to reach under the garment, and probably to reach the spot where they were still tightly connected. She stopped him. "You're supposed to mourn, not to play."

"There's more to celebrate than death ..."

Holding his hands at his sides, Cho moved a bit, raising a small gasp. "Sure, you told me - these young lovers, for instance ... Although they still have way to go until they can celebrate like us." She moved again, hearing another sigh and feeling first signs of new spirit in this particular prisoner.

"There's more ..." His voice was a bit unsteady. "I didn't tell you all."

"Oh, really?" She swayed carefully back and forth. "Then do it now."

"It's hard to concentrate in this position."

"Is it?" For a change, Cho moved a bit from side to side. "Then please tell me how come you feel more concentrated by the second?"

"Not guilty, your honour ... Some devil's riding me, red and black and ..." Harry's words ended in another gasp as she had moved again, slightly upward and forcefully downward.

This game was quite to her taste, only that her own control wasn't unlimited either. "Tell me - what else happened today?"

"It's not so much what happened but what did *not* happen. This Michael, for example ..." Harry didn't continue, kept looking at her expectantly.

"What about him?" She moved again to send new encouragement.

"He - aah ... He loves more than music, only his other love's kept still more confidential." Harry grinned. "But of course, nobody can control his emotions."

Of course. Her husband, currently serving as a mustang - and savouring it as much as Cho herself - had detected this with his *haragei*. But ... "Whom? Rage?"

"No, much better - the one that called for help to get some music, Vanessa ... For him, it must have been like a dream come true. I told him he might expect some invitation - including himself, his guitar, and some other people from Hogwarts."

"An - ah, even number of people, I assume."

"What else?"

Cho moved again - doing conversation had a softening effect on Harry - maybe a partial one, only this was the part that mattered. "Can it be you're trying to seduce some young people?"

"Quite impossible. I'm seducing nobody, it's more the opposite as it - ah, feels right now ... I've been blamed to seduce older women, still more to be seduced myself by them ..."

Something in Harry's eyes made Cho suspicious. "Anyone I don't know about? Maybe some military rank?"

His grin was devious. "Nope."

Too late, Cho realized that she had asked two questions but received only one answer - still worse, she didn't know which one he had answered. Pride forbade her to ask again. Which didn't mean she had no other means - she stopped her slight rocking. "Go ahead - then I'll go ahead."

"There was an owl sitting on my shoulder ... Pecking at my ear - a sharp beak stroking your throat, the effect's terrible ..."

"What??"

Her best friend, trying to ... For a moment, Cho lost her concentration, in particular since this was her weak spot - a thought that made her defenseless and vulnerable. Until the moment was over, she had lost her position too, was lying on her stomach, her arms tied to her side by strong hands, Harry's weight pressing onto her.

Apparently, he had sensed her startling. "She's been teasing me - the return for Remus and myself teasing her about Rahewa, at supper ... And of course she'd been flying for a while - did she ever tell you about this - er, exciting side-effect?"

"Did she tell you??"

"No she didn't ... Didn't have to - it's unmistakable ... Well, not for everyone."

His damned *haragei*. "That was unfair - you know how delicate this issue's for me."

Harry's lips played with her ear. "Yes I know, that's why I told you ... There'll never be anything, but setting each other on fire is such a nice game ..."

Which only proved there *was* a sexual element in their relationship - well, nothing particularly new ...

Harry's weight was released from her. Next moment, Cho felt how the cheong-sam was shifted upward, somehow wrapped around her wrists so she couldn't move her arms while his own hands were free.

Maybe the manacling wasn't as tight as it felt. Or maybe the fabric would split when trying. Or maybe Cho wasn't interested to find out. At any rate, Harry's hands pulled her backward, spread her legs, moved them onto his thighs. She felt him at her entrance, resting there, next moment starting a short visit, only to leave again.

"You know what's still a better game? Setting you on fire." Cho felt his hands stroking her, teasing her, pressing her most sensitive spot, while the visitor from moments ago came snooping again.

She was trembling uncontrollably, helplessly exposed to his cruel, pleasurable treatment. Into this burning sensation, his mind wave found her totally unprepared - his own arousal, reflected, deflected into herself. She climaxed instantly.

Regaining full consciousness, she expected him to follow, to meet this playful visitor for a serious conversation, waited impatiently to be pressed down by Harry's full weight. But he didn't move.

"What are you waiting for? C'mon!"

His hands released the cheong-sam from her shoulders, pulled it downward, exposing her breasts, cupping them, then squeezing hard. She moaned.

The hands moved back to her shoulders, pressed them onto the mattress, She felt his first hard thrust, shaking her entire body.

"That's better."

The thrusts continued, accelerated. Then she felt a new wave flooding her mind, raising new flames out of the afterglow.

She wanted to protest. There was a short moment in which she was still master of her thinking, in which she would have been able to shout and tell him it was his turn alone, with her watching attentively.

Somehow, she missed that point. Then she didn't care any longer, about anything else.

* * *

Beatrice Chagrin, acknowledged master of psycho drugs, wished she had ever come up with a potion that - put into the morning coffee - would bring her truly awake.

Four o'clock in the morning, said her inner clock. While here in Hogwarts it was ten o'clock, the people around Beatrice running their ordinary day rhythm, although this wasn't an ordinary day. The sharp creases in the face of Hermione, sitting opposite her, gave testimony of that.

Beatrice suppressed a yawn. In a moment, Clemens would enter the room, the meeting would start, and the unchallenged drug of mother nature would solve the problem - Adrenaline. She studied the pathologist's short summary. Pretty clear, in a way. Pretty clear also what had to be done, and that it involved her own specialty.

Not quite as clear, though, how to achieve the effect. Beatrice looked at Hermione. "Are you blaming yourself?"

A piercing stare, tempered instantly, the voice however still snappish. "You're not really awake yet, that's why I'll forgive you this question."

"Well, that's answer enough. You, Clemens, probably 'arry too - is there anyone who isn't blaming himself? Normally it's the other way around - success has many parents, while a failure ..."

"You know, we're all so noble here."

Beatrice chuckled, raising a short twist of Hermione's lips. Then she said, "I take it you realized already how lucky we were."

A wondering look, then a snorting. "Yeah, sure, it's quite obvious - after all, it could have been someone important ..."

Beatrice shook her head. "You're not your own self either, 'ermione - normally you're quicker. Imagine the test patient would have been someone with perfect health, and strong ... Then the first fatal cases would have occurred during the subsequent treatment campaign - there would have been many of them before we'd recognized what's going on."

Hermione stared at her, slightly blushing. "You're right, and I didn't see it ... Please tell nobody."

"No. In particular because it's fairly obvious to everyone who wasn't busy blaming himself - or herself ..."

"Okay, okay - I know, self-reproaches, like self-pity, are a particularly pervert form of wasting mental energy, so I'll stop right now."

Beatrice smiled. "Who said that? ... 'arry?"

"No - Samantha. She said she found out after setting the world record in this discipline."

Beatrice remembered the teacher from Texas, doubted very much that Samantha had set a world record. Probably she had made this confession as a nice wrapping of some ...

The door opened.

Beatrice watched Clemens entering the room, sitting down. He looked self-contained, determined, clear-eyed. She said, "Hello, Clemens. Sirius must have done a miracle on you."

A quick smile. "Hi, Beatrice ... He did okay, but I got my brain-washing already before."

Probably Harry. Beatrice pointed at the report sheet. "Did Sirius tell you what the pathologist found out?"

"No."

"Heart failure ... An atrophy of the left chamber, nothing serious under normal conditions, turned critical and then fatal under a massive stress attack."

Clemens nodded. "That fits. The potion's too strong."

"It's not," said Hermione. "It's too strong at once, which isn't the same. We have to slow it down, but only a bit."

Clemens shook his head. "No. It's too strong."

Hermione's head snapped up, glaring at him. "Read the autopsy report - then you'll see that I'm right."

"Yeah, sure - if a matchstick's not enough to carry the weight, then two will do the job, huh? ... Except the weight's a ton, even ten matchsticks ..."

"Why don't you read the report? It's ..."

"Because I got something better than this report!"

"Something - what?" Hermione looked flabbergasted.

Much calmer, Clemens said, "Harry played the last seconds of that guy for me ... I mean, what he felt sensing him ... There was something - we made a mistake, somewhere."

"Of course we made a mistake, but everybody agrees that we're basically right, so ..."

Beatrice interrupted her. "Arrows."

They both stared at her. "Huh?"

"The picture Clemens used - it reminded me of an Indian tale, about arrows."

Hermione's face expressed serious doubt whether Beatrice was truly awake and a real contribution to this meeting. Clemens looked expectantly. "Tell us."

"There was an old chief, about to die. He called his sons, presented a bundle of arrows, and said, the one who can break this bundle will be the new chief. So they tried - the oldest son first, the second, the third. Nobody could break the bundle. So they said, it's impossible ... The old chief took the bundle, seized for the first arrow and broke it, then the next. Aah, said his sons, this way it's simple of course. Yes, said the chief, that's the lesson - united you're strong."

Hermione looked at her. "And then?"

"Then the old chief died with his mind at peace."

Clemens chuckled. "Nice tale - and like all good lessons, it lets the essential question unanswered."

Beatrice presented two small flasks. "These are my arrows - which doesn't mean I'm playing chief here ..."

The other two stared at the flasks with widening eyes.

"... It's the brain booster - undiluted, mind you - one for each of you. You'll drink it, and then you'll examine the recipe again, together."

"And you?" Hermione's expression was suspicious.

"If it's just about slowing down the effect - I know how to do that, I don't need a boost for it. If it's something else, I'm chanceless ... And one of us should remain sober - if I have to wake you up later, when you're paying the price, because there's some urgency ..."

Clemens reached for a flask, turned to Hermione. "Why did you grin so madly, when I took this stuff the last time?"

"Did I?" Looking innocent, Hermione seized for the other flask. "I can't remember."

Beatrice watched the young man's face turning around toward herself. "But you remember."

A nice, clean blackmailing. Clemens wasn't going to drink unless someone told him. Beatrice asked, "Isn't it a German tale - the one about the wizard apprentice who wanted to know too much?"

"*Der Zauberlehrling*." Clemens nodded. "Yes it is."

Beatrice waited a moment, watching two faces, both looking expectantly, only with different hopes. Then she said, "Once I developed another booster - not for the brain, more the opposite. The field test involved myself as well as Hermione - except that I was the only one who knew in advance." Beatrice presented her most seductive smile. "Shall I continue, *Zauberlehrling*?"

Poor Clemens, his face dark red, didn't know where to look. "Er, no ... Sorry." He quickly emptied the flask.

Hermione followed his example, her own face showing satisfaction about an instructive lesson, a bit of embarrassment about her own role in this story, and a bit more of something that had little to do with embarrassment.

Moments later, the two doped potions experts looked normal again - to the outside. Only their way of talking sounded quite unusual - rapid, short remarks, incomplete sentences, little more than keywords.

They had lost her within seconds. After a while, the clipped speech, together with the short, sharp gestures, had a hypnotizing effect toward Beatrice. Her mind drifted off, back to the time when the field test of her other potion had taken place.

Her own test, with the undiluted version - something never to forget ... Then the *retard* version in which the ecstasy potion showed all qualities of an addictive drug - not physiologically addictive but ... Hermione, involuntary test candidate, was the best example.

They had an unspoken agreement - once a year, around Christmas, Beatrice sent her a small bottle ...

Every once in a while, Beatrice wondered if she should send the same present to the one who had played the male role in both tests ... She had seen it in Clemens' eyes - the instant when he completed the story by himself, when he recognized the linking element between Beatrice and Hermione, between the undiluted and the retard version ... Well, what Clemens didn't know was the dark side of the story, which involved Cho, and Voldemort - they had the wisdom not to treat it as a dark secret, and the people knowing the story had the decency not to spread it wider than necessary ... Someone would tell Clemens eventually, just to prevent skeletons from growing in the basement. This someone would probably be Rahewa - but not before the two had ...

A tingling between her legs told Beatrice that it wasn't the best idea to think about this topic in a state half-asleep, after a night lasting no longer than four hours - not in this meeting supposed to yield a result in matters of life or death.

The two were still rattling along.

This apprentice looked very handsome. Under different circumstances, it would have been quite enchanting to teach him a bit more - about some natural potions, using a natural cauldron ... Had Hermione played with the same idea? ... Not seriously, just in her fantasy? Most likely so - wasn't it an almost natural thought to fantasize about?

Damned! She quickly had to find something else to think about - before someone registered her state of arousal. Only the thought was just too intriguing - sitting calmly here, already close to a climax, while the other two, heads together ... Beatrice felt her nipples stiffen, and a wave of heat rush through her wet core. This was madness. She ...

The rattling stopped. The two looked at her. Hermione said, "We found it."

"Really?" Beatrice could only hope her flushed face counted for scientific excitement.

"A multiplier - works like a catapult. We shouldn't have simply added the unicorn blood to the standard anti-burnout stuff ... Anyway, it seems as if there's no need for a slow-down."

"Well, then ..."

Clemens stood up. "I'm going to prepare the new combination." He left the room.

Hermione rose, came over, stood behind Beatrice. "Did you have fun?"

"What?"

"Telling our young man naughty stories, and then sitting here and day-dreaming?"

"What are you talking about?" Next instant, Beatrice froze. Two hands touched her neck, stroking slightly, reaching her shoulders, moving deeper, caressing her breasts, raising a strong response from her nipples.

She couldn't suppress a trembling. A whisper in her ear. "The *Zauberlehrling* called the spirits, and they went out of control."

"Please ..."

"Please what, my little witch? ... You forgot that I'm doped, that all my senses are working at peak level - your scent's unbelievable."

Her eyes closed, unable to protest, Beatrice felt a hand trailing down, over her belly, reaching the skirt of her dress, moving between her thighs.

A ragged gasp - probably her own. Her legs felt powerless, barely mustering the strength to spread a bit wider.

"Aah - just what I thought, as wet as dreams can go. Imagine ..." the hand was moving under her panties, "right now, the door would open and Clemens would come back for something."

Feeling Hermione's finger pressing, Beatrice moaned, twisted, the first constrictions running up her thighs.

"You need some sleep. I'll bring you to a guest room."

It took Beatrice a moment to register the change, to realize that the hands had left her body, to be grateful and bitterly disappointed ... She had compromised Hermione, apparently, and this had been the reply - well, nobody had to wait long ...

At least, Hermione guided her along some floors that were empty at this time of day. Unbearable the thought someone would see her now.

Hermione reached a door, opened it with a key card, went inside without waiting for her. Beatrice followed, closed the door, looked around. A small salon - across, Hermione was passing another door. Following her again, she reached another room with a large double-bed, and a door leading to what had to be a bathroom.

Hermione turned around, closed the door, looked at her with dark, pitiless eyes. "Did I scare you?"

"Er ..."

"Yes I did. Only that's not all I did - and I'm not finished yet."

Beatrice felt two hands moving under her dress, stroking her thighs, which seemed unable to carry her much longer. The hands reached her panties, started to pull them down.

A gentle push was enough - she fell backward onto the bed.

The hands stripped her panties off, parted her legs, and slowly, ever so slowly, shifted her dress upward.

The pulsing and throbbing in her core was almost overwhelming. Glancing up, Beatrice saw Hermione's face - deep concentration, desire, hunger.

The figure in front of her knelt down.

Beatrice closed her eyes, waiting impatiently to feel greedy lips and a shameless tongue devouring her succulent flesh.

* * *

Vanessa felt aptly tired of always being the one who drove the conversation forward. Now that these two had found together, couldn't they contribute a decent amount of table small talk at this Saturday lunch?

No, obviously not.

Clemens looked like death warmed over. He had explained why - a brain dope, taken this morning, only that it was the speedy version and that now, with the lunch almost over, he could hardly keep his eyes open.

Vanessa asked, "Why don't you go to bed?"

"Cannot. Later."

His speech came strangely blurred. Vanessa looked at Rahewa. "He doesn't know what he's doing - let's bring him into his room."

The suggestion made both of them blush, which was pretty ridiculous. Vanessa asked, "What are you waiting for?"

"Harry."

"He won't arrive before afternoon ... What about Hermione?"

"Isn't off better ... Worse."

"Damn." Vanessa looked at her friend, realizing that she couldn't expect a decision from there, turned back. "Clemens, that doesn't work. You need sleep - now."

"No ... Maybe some fresh air."

Vanessa stood up. "Allright - let's go."

For a moment, it seemed as though Rahewa was doped too. Vanessa had already reached the other side of the table, trying to raise Clemens out of his chair before Rahewa started to move.

"Need some help?"

Glancing up, Vanessa saw Michael standing there - for a change someone who looked normal and awake. "Yes, please - this young man here needs fresh air, he says. What he really needs is some sleep, but for some reason he cannot, so ..."

With Michael's help, they moved Clemens up. Once upright, the drugged potions wizard could walk by himself. Leaving the hall, Vanessa wondered what picture they might present to the other students. At least, nobody commented aloud.

Outside, Michael steered Clemens toward some trees. Reaching their shadow, he stopped him. "Sit down."

Clemens obeyed.

"Fine, fine ... Lay down."

"No. Mustn't sleep."

"You won't." A gentle hand pressed Clemens' shoulder down, not finding much resistance. When his head reached the grass, Clemens was already sleeping.

Vanessa watched Michael kneel over Clemens, check his pulse, sniff his breath, examine his complexion. Now Michael looked up. "He's drugged ... I don't know what it is, but it doesn't seem dangerous."

"No it's not - a brain booster, he got it quite officially." Vanessa waited to see if Rahewa could sit down by herself, then followed her example. This done, she looked at Michael. "You're quite helpful, in many ways, as it seems ... Thanks."

Michael glanced at Rahewa, back at Vanessa, suspicion in his face. "I'd rather you'd tell me what's going on here."

"I'd like to know by myself - all I know is, we didn't poison him, and he's waiting for Harry."

Rahewa spoke, her voice miserable. "They had a session to redesign his potion - he, Hermione, and Beatrice. Beatrice doped him for this purpose - she knows what she's doing."

Michael still looked sceptical. "Hopefully."

Something like defiance appeared in Rahewa's face. "Yes she does. Harry used this dope more than once."

"Great. Wonderful. Only that's not the best qualification I could imagine ..."

Vanessa waited for the inevitable - her friend attacking, maybe seriously hurting, Michael for this blasphemy. And yes, Rahewa's hands moved indeed - only to cover her face while she started crying.

Michael was closer, and quicker. He grabbed Rahewa's shoulders, pulled her toward him. "Hey, c'mon, Rage - I just meant, Harry survives everything ... If you're sure Clemens is okay ..."

A sob. "Yes."

"And what's so sad that you have to cry that much?"

Another sob. "Yesterday, they treated the first patient with his potion. He - he died."

"That's tough ... And today they changed it? ... And now you're waiting for Harry to fetch another patient?"

The head under the short black mane nodded.

"What did Clemens say? Did they find the mistake?"

"Yes."

"Then stop worrying - the next patient will live, I'm pretty sure, because it's a matter of statistics - people make mistakes, but not twice in a row ... Why don't you lie down and sleep a bit, too? We'll watch, and wake you when Harry comes."

Micheal looked up, his eyes signaling Vanessa to take over.

Rahewa didn't need much persuasion. After a moment of embarrassment, she was lying at Clemens' side, her arm over his chest. A minute later, her breathing showed the regular rise and fall of a sleeper.

Vanessa smiled at Michael. "It's impressive to watch you handle a crying girl ... Most boys I know would have been frozen in horror - in particular toward Rage."

Michael shrugged. "It would be too much saying I know her, but ... Anyway - handling a crying girl's fairly simple. Simpler than ..."

Vanessa waited a moment if his sentence would finish, then asked, "Where did you learn that?"

"I have two sisters. And I played in a band, for a while. Somehow, you find a lot of crying girls around a band. Girlfriends, groupies, that kind."

"Was it there that you learned about drugs?"

Michael looked pleased. "Yes."

"Was it a good time? Sex'n drugs'n rock'n roll?"

Michael's face closed like a mask. "Sure, that's why I left. You know - leaving when the party's at its best."

"Sorry - I didn't mean to be offensive ... It was just - you looked so, er - delighted when I asked."

"Yes."

Vanessa waited for more. "Why?"

A short pause, then, reluctant, "It was your question."

"My question??" Vanessa stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

"But I mind, if you please."

Michael's face came up, showing a grin, then he looked at the grass again. "No. It's nothing."

Vanessa shifted herself at his side. "I'll count to three. Then I'll start crying - and then you *must* tell me."

Michael looked at her, his face expressionless. "You saw me checking him. Then you used your brain, skipping all the stupid remarks, and asked an intelligent question ... Oh, forget it."

"No I won't! ... What's so special about using your brain and asking an intelligent question?"

"Nothing, basically. Except ..." Michael sighed. "I don't want to be offensive either, but ... You can act differently quite well, can't you?"

Vanessa felt speechless.

"I watched it often enough ... I hated it seeing you act like that, and at the same time, I felt pleased seeing you treat them that way." Michael's face was pinkish. "But you didn't treat me that way. That's all."

That was all? ... Certainly so. "How did you know it was play?"

"Guess what?"

"Sorry - at the risk of sounding stupid, but I cannot."

A quick smile, gone. "There were a few situations that gave me - er, made me suspicious - as I said, in theory I'm kind of an expert regarding girls. Then - you were just too good. While in the band, I saw my share of really stupid girls - every once in a while, they have a single thought, and then they cannot talk fast enough to blurt it out, beaming like a price winner ..."

Vanessa started to giggle.

"... while you - you were always the perfect no-brainer, all the time ... And then you and Rage together - this was the last proof."

After a moment of silence, Vanessa realized that she was still beaming like a price winner. It startled her a bit. Scanning for a more harmless remark, she reconsidered Michael's last words, found something - hardly suited to calm down, only her question was out before she could stop. "And in practice?"

Some seconds passed. "Still improving."

"You ..." Vanessa swallowed. "You're scaring me a little."

"Why?"

"You know why - after you just made clear that I can count two and two ..." Vanessa tried to smile, failed.

"You don't have to ... Being scared, I mean."

"Michael ..." Vanessa felt herself blush. "I don't know what - sorry, drop that, I know what to say, it's just a bit difficult ... You're serious, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'm serious."

"I feel so - unexperienced in this situation." She made a sound somewhere between a snort and a giggle. "It's crazy - all the time, I was playing the expert, telling Rage how to parade in front of the boys, and now ... I cannot promise you anything ..."

"I know."

"No you don't!" Seeing him twist, Vanessa calmed down. "Sorry, but - right now, I'm too embarrassed even to touch you, it's just my pride that helps me telling you this, after all that talk about intelligence and cleverness ..."

Michael smiled. "I know exactly how you feel. For years, I tried to build up the courage - and here we are, prompting each other, changing roles every two minutes."

"And now? Are you courageous enough?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you say it?"

He looked into her eyes. "There's a spell in words ... Today, it's all new to you. You don't know what to think of me ..."

"That's not true - I know very well what to think of you. You're the gentlest guy I ever met, each time we meet you reveal new qualities ..."

"Okay - but you don't know what to feel. I'm not asking you for anything - well, maybe that's not quite true, but ... If you ask me again, tomorrow, day after tomorrow - if you come and say, tell me, I'll say it."

"It's a deal."

After a moment of silence, Vanessa said, "It's amazing ..."

"Yes. It's unreal."

"No - I mean, if that's your style with little experience, then I wonder ..." Vanessa shook her head. "That was unfair. Forget it."

He smiled. "Never."

Seconds passed, each of them building up more tension. It seemed impossible to say anything without triggering side-effects, without revealing hidden - or not so hidden - meanings. Vanessa asked herself whether she shouldn't grab him, tensed more just from the thought.

Then Michael asked, "Do you want me to play some music?"

An excellent idea, it seemed. Obviously, his thoughts had been running in a similar direction, and holding a guitar would prevent him from doing something else with his hands.

Only that music ... "No," she said. "You'd have me crying before the first song's finished, and that might give you the wrong impression ... Let's talk. Tell me about you."

"What?" Michael looked disbelieving. "Me sitting here, running an endless monologue about my precious ego and its unique features?"

Vanessa laughed out loudly. "You're funny too ... Yes, that's exactly what I want to hear - an endless monologue about your ego and its unique features - or about your sisters, your time in the band ..."

"And you? Isn't this a bit unbalanced?"

"Maybe so. But you've watched me for years, right? ... Well, Michael, you're pretty new to me - I wouldn't mind a few facts. By the way - do other people call you Mike?"

"Only once. A mike's a microphone, something like the front-end of a loudspeaker - that's not exactly the picture I have of myself. Okay, I don't think I'm an arch-angel either ..."

Listening, Vanessa wondered if she would ask him again, and when. Free of obligation, he'd said, but of course there was an obligation - at least to accept his feelings, if not more. She would have liked to return them, to feel on a par with him.

She, Vanessa Parthcombe, acknowledged master of the courtship manoeuvres in all variations, felt like a third-year at her first date. But only in one sense.

* * *

Sitting on a bench in a small park, watching the entrance in some distance, Harry had a few minutes to relax, and to reconsider the events of this morning - morning for him, while here in Varna, at the Black Sea, it was already late afternoon.

The building in front represented a part of the Varna City Hospital. Some moments ago, Viktor had disappeared in the entrance, in search of some authority that might be willing to offer them a wizard fever patient.

As ridiculous as it seemed - they had trouble finding another test candidate. Durmstrang had none, didn't know anyone to fetch without the hassle of papers, and doctors, their deep mistrust toward any outsider ... What a mess.

Well - it was understandable. *We're looking for a wizard fever victim to treat him with a new cure ... No, it's not the first ... No, the other died.* A normal doctor would call the police.

Only there was nothing normal in this situation. The wizard fever refused to follow any known medical pattern. Also, when arriving in Hogwarts, the scene had looked strange too.

Harry had arrived with Cho and Sandy. Cho wanted to visit Almyra - for some girl's talk, as she'd said, making him wonder if his ears would ring during that time. Cho would further take care of Sandy - in case nobody else volunteered, which was unlikely.

Outside, they had found a group of four young people - two sleeping, two awake. They had left a beaming Sandy with Michael and Vanessa, after instructing them to let the others sleep until further notice.

After Cho assured him she would find Almyra without his help, Harry had looked for the other people - finding Hermione asleep too, and Beatrice as the only team member awake, although looking a bit dazed. Well, she had been called in the midst of the night.

At least, Beatrice could tell him that a new sample stood ready to be tested. So Harry had met Viktor, and together they reached Durmstrang where their first task had been to deliver bad news.

A figure appeared in the entrance. Viktor.

He didn't wink, was heading toward Harry's bench. Which could only mean - no luck, no candidate. When Viktor reached him, Harry asked, "What did they say?"

"In the short version - go to hell. In the long version - go to hell and don't come back." Viktor looked frustrated. "I'm ready to kidnap someone - what do you think?"

"I think that's not a good idea. This candidate might die too, and then? I escaped a prison before, only that this time we'd have no excuse."

"What now?"

"Is there another hospital?"

"Probably, except we can forget it. Call Ron to let him make an official request - without a form in triplicate, these schamanes ain't going to tell you the time of day."

"We can place an ad in the newspaper - I'm sure some desperate family is ready to give it a try."

Viktor nodded. "Let's jump downtown and have a coffee - this place here's depressing me."

Some minutes later, they were sitting in a garden café, trying to come up with something quicker than an advertisement in a newspaper. Viktor said, "I could try calling some people. Of course, my list of contacts is pretty short, after ..."

Nagini hissed, "Master, the power is here."

"Where?" Harry felt his neck hair rise.

"Close - I cannot locate it better."

Harry looked around, not seeing anything out of the ordinary - the same old woman as before sitting at the far end of the café, another woman standing at her table.

There was ... A wave of something - gone.

He checked again, trying to locate its origin, no more successful than Nagini ... What was different than before?

Only this woman, who now moved through the garden, coming closer. Harry tried to examine her with his *haragei*. At the same moment, she looked at him, and he froze.

He couldn't move a muscle, couldn't even glance over toward Viktor. The woman filled his vision and his mind.

"You found me a while ago, wizard. Since then I was searching for you."

Harry wasn't sure whether these were words or thoughts. It didn't matter - as long as he could speak, or think. "Who are you?"

"I am the High Priestess."

It told him nothing, except that the woman looked quite different from the figure in the Tarot cards. Not brilliant, more solemn, however very sensual ... Ageless, with a body that would attract glances everywhere, with eyes that ... Harry tried to break the spell of these eyes, couldn't.

"When we met the last time, you were in company of someone else, wizard. Where is she?"

"We didn't meet before. Anyway - you're the last I'm going to tell."

"You have no choice, wizard."

"Oh, really? ... I heard that before." Harry tried to do something more than giving sarcastic replies, failed.

"You remind me strongly of this other spirit. Why is that so?"

"It was me in disguise, that's why."

"Your answer makes no sense, wizard. It was not you. Why are you resisting my order?"

"Maybe I missed the word *please*." The reaction to his wisecracks was null. "You're killing people - wizards, witches. I'm not telling you anything."

"I take their magic. They don't deserve it."

"And as a side-effect, they die ... What do you mean, they don't deserve it? Who are you to decide about that?"

"I am the High Priestess, it is my purpose. They violated the rule. If they die, it is destiny."

"Some destiny! Which rule did they violate?"

"The magical world is supposed to keep hidden and separate. It is my duty to ensure that."

"You're a little late, huh? Where have you been some years ago when it started? It was the darkest wizard ever who broke the barriers between the two worlds - you may blame him, nobody else! Where have you been then?"

The ageless face looked sad. "I may have failed. Guide me to this dark wizard."

"Don't you listen? You're too late - I killed him." Harry felt a change, however not enough to break free.

Something like curiosity was showing in her face. "You are special, yes. There may be a purpose unknown to me, perhaps the reason for my failure ..."

When the woman hesitated, Harry went for his chance. "Maybe you're not quite as omniscient as you think."

"I am not omniscient. I am the High Priestess, bound by the rule. But the mystery may be solved when I meet this spirit who is so similar to you."

"What do you want from her?"

"I need her for a purpose."

"Very informative - actually, I heard that before too, only a bit more detailed."

The woman looked astonished. "Who said so?"

"Voldemort, this dark wizard. His idea ..." Harry stopped, realizing that he was revealing too much. "Never mind - forget it."

"Was this the reason why you killed him? Then you did right. But my purpose is not evil. Now guide me to her."

"Certainly not."

Her eyes seemed to burn into Harry's mind. "Guide me, wizard."

The feeling was somehow familiar, strange only in its incredible power - an Imperius spell like he'd never felt before. Still, it was as if every ounce of pressure would increase his natural armour. His own free will, as if hidden in a shell, was inside him, undiminished, waiting for the right moment to break free.

Harry remembered a similar situation - when Cho had been captured in an unbreakable sphere, only that he'd been the intruder then, who had succeeded coming through by dropping the attack completely. He could only hope this woman didn't have the same idea.

Apparently not. All he felt was a still increased pressure. If there was a chance, then in the short instant of his refusal. There was a spell in words ...

"No!!"

He had surprised her - really, he had. In this moment of astonishment, he felt free, master of his senses, muscles, magic ...

Harry jumped, came out at the hospital - just the first target that had crossed his mind, far away from all places more familiar. He wheeled around to see whether she would follow him, saw nobody.

He was free. But he had left Viktor behind.

Next second, he realized that there was no time to think about clever plans for rescuing Viktor - as soon as this High Priestess had recovered from her surprise, she would interrogate him.

Harry inhaled, concentrated at the sequence of actions he had in mind, jumped ... The garden café, Viktor sitting motionlessly, the woman standing there, motionless herself ... He touched Viktor, jumping, summoning at the same time, coming out at the hospital once more. Too close - where was a place to reach without revealing anything?

Of course. The second jump brought Harry and Viktor to the Crusader castle, where all this had started.

"Viktor? ... C'mon, wake up." Harry sent the stunning spell, anxiously waiting to see his friend move, aware that any moment another figure might appear behind him.

Viktor moved. "Wha ... Where are we?"

"In the Crusader castle. I thought it better to leave quickly."

"Leave? ... Why - what happened?"

"We met the High Priestess."

The picture was not likely to fade - in the short moment when he grabbed Viktor, looking up to see what she was doing, not finding the time to register it fully, to feel surprise ...

She had been standing there, not making any attempt to stop him, capture him again. Just looking at him.

Thoughtful. Wondering.

10 - Break

In retrospect, Hermione praised herself lucky that everything was happening so fast. She simply found no time to die of shame. She couldn't even find the time to register that this wasn't her style - dying of shame.

Something was shaking her, pretty roughly. When she didn't react instantly, someone shot a bucket of ice water right through her mind.

She came up with a gasp.

Harry was standing there, his face cold, his eyes almost black. Seeing his expression, Hermione was convinced he knew what had happened, was here to confront her, mad as hell. For a fleeting instant, she felt like a little girl, caught at something very naughty - a scene that had never happened. Except she was no little girl, was a big one, and the rush that went through her belly and deeper was more than anxiety and shame.

"Get dressed. Now. We're waiting in your laboratory."

For another terrible instant, Hermione expected him to wait there until she was out of the bed. Impossible that he'd miss ...

But he turned, was gone.

Once more feeling like a child wishing the impossible, knowing for sure it was beyond reach, Hermione wished there had been time to shower, getting rid of sleep and sweat and - most of all - smell. Only she remembered other occasions when she had heard Harry with this voice. Now, he'd said.

She reached the laboratory two minutes later, definitely her personal record - as if anyone cared about that. Harry was there, Viktor was there, Clemens was there, showing a sleepiness Hermione had lost moments before. She looked around. "You have a patient? Where is he?"

"Yes we have a patient." Harry's face hadn't changed.

"Where ..." Hermione's voice died, her glance flicked between Harry and Viktor, stopped at Harry. "No. Please, no."

He was at her, took her, hugged her, his mouth at her ear. "C'mon, steady - we're here, we're going to do this together, and that's all that matters now." Another wave flooded her mind - gentle this time, encouraging, commanding nonetheless.

Hermione nodded. "Okay. I'm okay." She looked at Viktor, her Viktor, suppressed any impulse of guilt, any thought of mean gods punishing sins so quickly, reached him, bent down. "How do you feel?"

"Bit dizzy."

He felt hot too - which seemed impossible, after such a short time. Hermione turned to Harry. "What happened?"

"We were looking for a patient. Couldn't find one - nobody was ready to give us someone. But the power found us."

"Oh my God."

"No - only the High Priestess."

"What?"

"Later." Harry came over. "Viktor - we have two alternatives. Sandy and I, we can help you through the fever, only then you have to quit your magic ... Or you take the new potion, developed today after Clemens and Hermione found the mistake that killed the other patient with the weak heart ... What do you say?"

Viktor grimaced. "I'm a wizard, I have no intention to change that now ... And my heart's as healthy as it can be - Bulgarians are tough."

"Can I take this Bulgarian bullshit as a yes?"

Viktor grinned wryly. "Gimme that stuff, that I feel better and can give you the answer you deserve for this remark."

Harry looked at Hermione. "You checked it through. No more hidden mistakes?"

Her mind, to some degree still at high gear, raced through the memory of this conversation between two geniuses under dope, found no flaw. She swallowed. "No more."

Harry turned to Clemens. "Sorry to put you under such a pressure. Do you recommend your cure?"

The young man looked pale. "I'm ready to try it first."

"Fine, but that's not the issue now. Are you ready to give it Viktor first?"

Clemens closed his eyes, opened them again. "Yes."

Harry smiled. "I'm going to fetch Sandy - just in case ..." He walked out.

Hermione took Viktor's face, felt the sweat, kissed him. "Come, let's get you ready." He was already so weak, he couldn't even reply with a whispered comment, or a naughty grin, his normal habit after such a remark. He lay down at the padded table, his eyes closed when Hermione attached the sensors from the monitor.

Harry returned with his daughter, placed himself behind Viktor, Sandy in his lap.

Clemens had the cup ready. Hermione took it, went to Viktor, held his neck when he came up to drink, gently levered him down again.

For a long, long minute, nothing happened. Hermione's glance switched around and around - monitor, Viktor, Harry plus daughter, and again. Then pulse and blood pressure rose, dramatically.

While not alarmingly, not after Hermione had learned getting used to see hundred and sixty for longer periods. And the amplitude was strong and regular, giving her a feeling of pride for her husband's strong heart.

How long would it take?

She decided to wait fifteen minutes before starting with infusions. Meanwhile, she busied herself wiping the sweat from Viktor's forehead and temples, always careful not to touch these hands at his throat - two strong ones and two others which seemed too small for the power underneath.

If she only could ask him ... The monitor was fine and well, but - she had left aside the EEG sensors on purpose, knowing from experience that the graphs were beyond any regular pattern, just good to scare her still more.

Clemens was sitting there, hands clenched, his breath not much different from Viktor's. It crossed Hermione's mind - she should be the one to help him through these minutes. At this moment, their eyes met. Clemens said, "The only question left is whether he's kept his magic."

"How ..."

"If - if there was still a risk, he'd be dead already. But he's doing fine."

Clemens was right. Hermione stood up to fix the first infusion, made a step toward the bench ...

The beep changed. She froze, staring at the monitor.

Hundred-and-twenty - hundred - ninety, eighty-nine, eighty-eight, the perfectly normal relaxing phase of a well-trained body.

Harry's eyes came open, an instant later Sandy's. Harry smiled. "We just watched - your wizard did all by himself."

Hermione exhaled, giggled, started crying.

Viktor's eyes opened. "Gimme my wand."

Harry was quicker, fetched Viktor's wand and put it between sweaty fingers.

"Lumos."

The tip of the wand was shining - dim in the harsh light of the laboratory, even so the most brilliant light Hermione had ever seen.

Viktor grinned. "Great ... See you later." With his next breathing, he was already asleep.

Hermione looked at Clemens. "Thank you."

The young man smiled, blushed, then his face distorted. Hermione, feeling sufficiently recovered, grabbed him, hugged him. "It's okay - you're a brave wizard."

Harry's voice came from behind. "There's someone waiting outside who can do that much better - Clemens, would you take Sandy with you?"

The brave wizard nodded, took the girl while carefully avoiding to look up, hurried out.

Harry touched Viktor's face. Apparently satisfied with what he sensed, he looked at Hermione, smiling, his head shaking slowly from side to side. "You're crazy."

She darkened, then - for concern as much as for changing the subject, she asked, "What about you? Didn't you catch the fever?"

Harry came over, took her face in his hands. "No. I'm fine - not infected, not doped, and sufficiently recovered from last night's - er, gymnastics."

"I'm sorry."

Harry chuckled. "Don't - I'm not blaming you, just wondering - and if I hadn't had my share last night, I might have a little problem just from the thought that you and Beatrice ..."

Hermione felt pleased, hearing this confession.

"... Did she confuse the dope?"

"No, but if all your senses are revved up - and for me, a sharp brain always has been something erotical ... When you took the dope, didn't you feel any effect in that direction?"

"Hmm ... I think there was no opportunity, and too much at stake - otherwise, who knows?" Harry grinned.

"Well, it wasn't the dope alone. True, it was me who ... Let's say I was provoked."

"Yeah, that sounds familiar." Harry's eyes were sparkling.

"Harry - please, don't tell Cho."

He stared at her. "The last time we had such an agreement, it failed miserably. Not that I have reason to complain - I was awfully glad to learn that Viktor knew ... Will you tell him?"

"Maybe not as the hottest news, but - yes, certainly."

"Will he be mad at you?"

Hermione smiled. "Definitely - but he will also have a little problem, or maybe a bigger one, and I'll help him with that."

* * *

Walking at Harry's side toward the Hogwarts Express platform, from where they would jump home, Cho was trying to find an unsuspecting question - for starters. Her husband felt too quiet for her taste. He hadn't even asked what she and Almyra had been talking about. More precisely, he hadn't mustered a single joke.

So they met the power - inevitably so, Cho had known from the beginning. Not quite inevitably, Harry came out unharmed, while Viktor, in his own style as indestructible as Harry, had got his infection, his cure, was healthy and magical as before, and young Clemens today's hero.

So what was wrong?

Cho asked, "This power - didn't Nagini warn you?"

"Yes she did, only it was too late - or maybe it was my mistake, because I didn't jump and run instantly."

"Oh, you didn't? That's quite unusual."

No grin. No reply. Something was terribly wrong. "Why don't you tell me in full detail what happened?"

"We were sitting in a café. Nagini said, the power's there. Then I looked around, saw just a woman. When I tried to check her, she looked at me, and from this moment on, I was unable to move ..."

"A woman??"

"Yes - the High Priestess, she called herself."

"And then?"

"Then we talked, and she put an Imperius on me, only it wasn't a normal Imperius ... But it didn't work, my immunity held - the moment I said no, the spell broke, and I could move. I jumped off - to that hospital, and then back to fetch Viktor, and off again ... Then we made sure she isn't following, came to Hogwarts and - well, then Viktor got his cure ... The fever rose incredibly fast in him - maybe because he was longer in contact, I don't know."

"This woman - how did she look?" As if it mattered how this damned bitch looked, but wasn't this the most natural question another woman would ask?

"Very - attractive. No - seductive."

"Sexy??"

"That's the wrong word. She didn't smile once. Solemn ... But you had the feeling she could do with you what she wanted ..."

Cho hated her more with every second passing. "Only she couldn't, could she? ... Was it because she was too young, or did she make the wrong suggestion?"

Shit!! She'd asked two questions.

"She wasn't young. She was - she must be incredibly old, but she doesn't need a beauty surgeon, trust my word ..."

Older women - to hell with them. Fury was boiling up in Cho. "What did she want from you? A good ..." With difficulty, she stopped herself.

Nonetheless, Harry showed the first grin. "No. But thanks for your faith - I mean, that she'd need an Imperius for that."

"Who knows - in full public, maybe ... Sorry, that was very bad taste - I could kill her with my bare hands ..."

"Most unlikely." Harry no longer smiled.

"Yeah, probably so. Am I glad Sandy wasn't with you ..."

"Me too."

Something in his voice made Cho stop in mid-step, grab him. "Harry, please, tell me what happened there."

"Wait a minute - I'll do it at home, after I've called two people to come over and listen too."

"Whom?"

"Ramon and Marie-Christine."

Walking the last steps to the platform, Cho had a moment to think about why Harry wanted to tell them the story too. It seemed natural enough, with Ramon as the project manager, and Marie-Christine as an expert for ... But why wouldn't he tell her first? Was it such a long story?

No, wasn't. She'd hear it first with Marie-Christine around ... She looked at him. "It's about Cass, right?"

He kissed her. "You're a clever girl, just a bit impatient."

Harry's voice was light, almost joyful - and flat, and he didn't smile. Her husband, father of her daughter, was in his most dangerous mood.

Not dangerous for herself. But he wouldn't tell her more now.

In Santa Monica it was early afternoon. Cho put the sleeping Cass to bed, not bothering to undress more than the shoes. Returning into the living room, she heard Harry say, "... please come over. Now."

He rose. "They'll be here any second. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Cho stared at the spot where the air filled the empty space with a soft pop. Before she had time to worry more, the doorbell rang.

Ramon and Marie-Christine were standing there, their faces expectantly, anxiously. "Hi, Cho - what's going on?"

"I wish I knew - I know a bit, come in then I'll tell you. Harry said he's back in a few minutes - and please don't ask me what he's doing, and where, otherwise I'll scream at you that I don't know because he didn't ..."

Marie-Christine had reached her, hugged her. "Now, now - you look terrific if you're so mad, but ..."

They were sitting in the living room, with Cho reporting the scarce facts about that bitch of a High Priestess, when suddenly Harry stood in the room. Into Ramon's gasp, he showed the shortest smile ever. "Thanks for your comin' ... Did Cho tell you the facts?"

Cho glared at him. "Yassuh, cap'n, suh - twice, because I had so much to tell."

His hand came up. "Here's the rest - a mind-recording, not the best quality, but it'll do."

A sceptor cassette.

Rising from the player, Harry smiled at her. "Open your eyes and watch, o my Fury Queen ..."

Ramon's and Marie-Christine's laughter was a bit hysterical, yet the tension was broken. Cho felt better herself. For a moment. Then she watched the shortest and scariest horror movie she had ever seen.

Harry was sitting on the armrest of her chair, an arm around her shoulder. He said, "Well, that's it ... What's your comment?"

Ramon was the quickest. "That's a mean old lady, that is ... But in good shape, for her age."

Marie-Christine turned to Harry. "What did you feel while you were talking with her?"

"Not much, aside from rage and ... She didn't show much emotion, not more than what you could see in her face - I wasn't able to sense anything, and I was busy preparing for my escape."

Cho grabbed his hand. "And you did it ... That's ..." She stopped before her voice was breaking, felt at the same moment his support - at her hand and in her mind.

Ramon's voice sounded awe-struck. "You can say that ... Harry, I just found out your secret - you're simply too fast to be scared."

"Be serious - tell me, did she make any attempt to stop me when I came back?"

"Serious? You're there for less than a second, then you're gone, and Viktor with you - this isn't a western movie, normal people need three thirds of a second to register an event, another half second to react, and ..."

"But she isn't normal." Harry shook his head. "No - she didn't try."

Marie-Christine asked, "And what does that mean?"

Harry looked at Ramon. "What's your answer, cop?"

"If you're right - if she wasn't just too baffled from seeing Speedy Gonzales in action, then because she figured out that there's new data unknown to her, and that she needs a fresh-up on the latest developments in fashion and table manners ... Which doesn't mean I'd object her dress, or her haircut ..."

Men! Even now, they hadn't anything better to do than admiring a good figure, and two - admittedly well-formed ...

Cho's husband asked, "Who's Speedy Gonzales?"

Ramon's hands came up as if holding two six-shooters. "Fastest mouse in town."

Still smiling, Marie-Christine asked, "Is she evil?"

"No ..." Harry hesitated. "Determined, merciless in a way - she can feel pity, but she's bound by her rule so much, she accepts that people are dying."

Cho snapped, "This woman wants Cass! What does she want from her?"

Marie-Christine glanced at her, looked away.

Ramon asked, "Harry, does she know that she wants to meet a two-year-old?"

"Beats me ... She was talking about a spirit - maybe she knows, maybe for her it doesn't matter."

Cho looked at Ramon. "Wants to meet? It's more than that - need her for a purpose, she said." Watching again Marie-Christine, she said, "You have an idea - c'mon, tell us, for God's sake."

Marie-Christine sighed. "She's not looking for a human sacrifice, so much is clear. She's been in touch with Cass, has sensed her power - since then, she's searching for her. Punishing unfaithful wizards is just a by-product, not her most important ..."

Cho lost patience. "Dammit, stop sugar-coating it - tell us!"

"I think she's tired of her job - she's looking for a new High Priestess."

* * *

Ron Weasley pressed the Off button and suppressed the impulse to throw his phony at the opposite wall - not because it would crash, only to avoid the need to walk over and fetch it again.

For the last four hours, he'd been calling around, in search for unicorn blood. He'd got results, oh yes. But no blood.

He was no vampire. He was no paederast. No necrophiliac. Least of all, he was a child molester - if there was a scaling possible, which Ron doubted while not being entirely sure after these conversations. Because they had treated him like all that, hearing his request.

There was no unicorn blood. Or if there was, they wouldn't tell him.

At the beginning, Ron had prepared himself to be ready for the first negotiation about the price, trying not to feel like a crack dealer at his first steps into the cocaine market. He shouldn't have worried - it never came that far.

Still - he felt convinced there *were* sources. Only they couldn't be reached by phone.

Maybe he should try jungle drums.

Or a good register of wizards and witches, living in isolation, dealing with animals, or potions, preferably both ... Such a register was a contradiction in itself - only hearsay would offer him a chance.

Then Ron smiled, because he knew whom to ask. Yes - free association, spiced with a good dash of anger and frustration, always brought him the best ideas. He pressed the Ask button of his phony, feeling grateful to find it still in his hand.

"Yes, sir?"

"Paul Sillitoe. He's a freelance journalist and investigator, works with the Daily Prophet."

"Very well sir ... Yes, sir, the number is recorded. May I connect you, sir?"

"Yes." It crossed Ron's mind that he should suggest a change in phony answer style to Cho - after the previous voices and the words they'd used, this one sounded like sneering sarcasm with its overarticulated politeness.

"Sillitoe."

"Hello, Paul, this is Ron Weasley, the ..."

"Ron - how are you? And what's more important, how's Janine? Everything going fine?"

Ron felt his belief in human communication return. "Yes, she's doing great - hey, you surprised me, I wasn't even sure whether you'd remember my name."

"Are you trying to insult me?" Laughter came over the phony. "And now you'd like to know from which society column I know when Janine's due, right?"

"Er, yes."

"Can you keep a secret?"

Ron didn't fall for this old trick, his thoughts racing - of course. "It's Deborah, who else?"

"I'm listening to you."

There had been a very short pause - as if Paul had dismissed a simple "Yes" at the last instant. Ron stored this information for later, answered, "Yeah, okay ... Paul, can I talk with you? Now?"

"What - oh, you mean coming over to me?"

"Yes."

"Not even over a phony - wow, that must be ... Yes, sure - I'm in my office."

"Great. See you in a moment - bye."

Ron jumped to the *Daily Prophet* building. Walking up the stairs, memories resurfaced - how Paul had delivered his masterpiece of journalistic investigation, which finally led to the uncovering of Voldemort, how ... Ron stopped in mid-step, started to grin, climbed the last stairs.

It wasn't a "Yes" what Paul had dismissed a split second too late.

They shook hands, looked at each other, Paul's glance a bit careful - as expected. Ron grinned. "How's Deborah?"

"Er - fine, why? You ..."

Ron started to laugh, still more when registering the self-conscious expression in the other face. "Paul," he said, "I had no idea. When we met the other day, she was laying false tracks quite expertly ..."

The journalist blushed. "Erm - it's nothing solid. Ginny and I, we see each other every now and then ... That's all."

Paul and Ginny had been together some years ago. It hadn't lasted, to Ron's - and Harry's - deep regret. To hear these two were seeing each other again, if only occasionally ... Then Ron knew why Paul was looking so uneasy - the two were running a fuck-and-breakfast relationship. He smiled. "If it's what I think it is, then I'm really glad to hear that - that's really good news."

Paul's face still showed a bit watchfulness.

"I mean it - I don't care with whom she's having a drink in a bar, while ... I wouldn't mind if it's more ..."

"Me neither."

Which didn't surprise Ron, or not much. It hadn't been Paul's initiative to break off the relationship, and for what Ron could sense, Ginny wasn't filling an accidental vacuum in Paul's life.

"I'd like to help, but - you know how touchy ..."

"Yeah, I know."

Calling Ginny touchy in this issue was an euphemism. To say she went ballistic would be a more accurate description. There was only one who could talk with her about that - unfortunately, he was also part of the problem, actually the major part.

"Paul, I've been doing phone calls all day long, trying to find something. I got answers - well, they gave me names ..."

"Dope? Slave girls? Maybe slave boys?"

"Worse."

"Really? Then I'm learning something new."

"Unicorn blood."

Paul whistled. "That's why." Then he looked expectantly. "Does it have to do with the wizard fever?"

"Hey - you haven't lost your style, really."

The journalist looked pleased. "Things happen in clusters."

"Huh?"

"By some accident, I'm investigating the wizard fever, and then you come to me in this regard ... Also, I haven't seen a Weasley in years, or heard, and then two of them - well, never mind."

Ron grinned. "Sounds promising - well, never mind."

"We talk too." Paul grinned back. "Ginny told me about Groucho's efforts, so it wasn't that difficult ... But there's something you don't know yet, and this might be the solution to your problem."

"What do you mean?"

"During the last two days, or maybe three, there was no new infection."

Ron stared at Paul, thunderstruck.

"I'm in touch with a bunch of regulars - I mean newspaper journalists doing a normal job for tomorrow's news. They provide me with news, and I provide them with analysis results in return ... We've been tracking this fever as closely as we could, or dared. And some days ago, this crazy pattern changed."

"Saturday?"

Paul's eyes widened, then a wolfish grin appeared on his face. "That's my lucky day - I get encouragement where I might have expected it last, and I get a story where ..."

"Hold it - I have no story for you."

"No? ... Then the story must be somewhere near you - either in one of the schools or ..." Paul smiled. "Weasley sounds so incomplete, if you know what I mean."

Yes, Ron knew. The Potter-Weasley gang, they'd called themselves, only Harry had called it the Weasley-Potter gang. "Paul," said Ron, "if I was in your place, I'd call an old friend who's happy about each favour he can do to you. Then I'd tell him what you just told me. He'll listen to you very, very attentively ... That's all I'm saying."

The journalist who hadn't made it to a brother-in-law beamed. "Thanks, Ron - you've just inserted yourself in my short list of ..."

"I know something better - even if the demand is dramatically less than expected, we need some unicorn blood. My great toe tells me you have some contacts."

"Your great toe is admirably well informed. I cannot guarantee anything, but ... Shall I call you?"

"Call Hermione, in Hogwarts, if you can come up with something."

Writing onto a notepad, Paul asked, "By the way, how did you get the first sample? ... You did some tests already, didn't you?" He looked up, showing polite interest.

Ron chuckled. "Find some unicorn blood, then call Hermione. Talk with her."

"Hogwarts, huh? There's this forest - aren't there unicorns in this forest too?"

"You're just too greedy, Paul."

"And this from a Weasley, after - well, never mind."

Laughing, Ron left the office.

* * *

The party was already running, although today's guest of honour hadn't arrived yet. This seemed particularly strange because Rahewa was here since a while - not showing any sign of disappointment, quite the opposite.

The guest of honour should of course be Clemens, and Fleur - after recovering from her surprise to see Rahewa coming without him - had simultaneously tried to figure out which plot they were playing and to stop the other guests from celebrating at full force, without being impolite.

After all, she had learned from her parents that a little formality was a proper means at such an opportunity - a toast for the hero, the one whose potion had brought Bill's magic back.

Only that a mix of guests and residents had showed little patience. True, the living room was almost empty - small wonder, after Héloïse and Sandra had made unmistakably clear that it was music time, and a crowd had followed them, since then listening to a sound never heard before in this old house.

A Goblin harp and a twelve-string guitar.

The girls had left Bill no choice. Not that he would resist much - the Weasleys didn't go well with ceremonies, and formalities - but Fleur felt little doubt that otherwise Sandra would have summoned him.

And little Michel rested on Harry's arm, where else, mostly sleeping while this big Michael had managed almost instantly to overcome the short moment of jealousy from Héloïse's side. Since then, Fleur was sitting with the three guests who seemed content to stay with her in the living room - Cho, Janine, and Ron.

With them, Fleur had made a last attempt to be prepared for the surprise. But Ron and Janine didn't know, and Cho didn't tell.

The doorbell chimed.

Fleur had pressed the button when a slim figure passed her, racing - no, flying downstairs. Rahewa, ignoring any etiquette.

Fleur smiled, waited the moment until the murmur was coming upstairs. Then she saw three people appearing in her view - a beaming Rahewa first, followed by a young man, obviously Clemens. The third person was a young woman ...

Fleur felt her eyes widen. This young woman looked like the female counterpart of Clemens!

"Fleur," said Rahewa, "this is Clemens ..."

"Good evening, Madame Weasley ..."

"Just Fleur - hello, Clemens ..."

"Er, Fleur - this is my sister Clara - please excuse this unplanned - er, the others persuaded me ..."

"But of course - what a wonderful idea ... Hello, Clara - it's truly amazing to see you and your brother side by side."

The young woman stared at Fleur, admiration in her look.

After a second, Fleur realized why. She laughed. "Come in, then we have more room to stare at each other. I'm a Veela - quarter-Veela, to be correct ... Didn't they tell you?"

"No. What ... What is a Veela?"

"I'll explain inside - come with me." Fleur turned to Rahewa. "May I have him just for a minute? No longer - I promise."

With one twin in each arm, Fleur reached the living room. Dropping the last etiquette, she called, "Hey folks, look at what I have here!"

A while later, Fleur had the first opportunity to talk with these two special guests. She said, "Clemens, what you have done for us - we're deeply in debt to you ... I really hope you give us a chance to balance out a bit."

The young man smiled. "That's simple, because - er, do you know how it started, I mean with Clara?"

"Yes, 'arry told us."

"Well - now that everything's ready, Clara is afraid to - er, to make the transit. We argued, and then Rahewa had the idea to bring her with us - here she can see all sorts of magical people ..."

Fleur smiled - Wynor the Whistler had been another spectacle for Clara, and by sheer numbering, if there had been a formal table, the Goblin would have been Clara's table partner.

"... so, er, I hoped you could convince her that it's worth trying."

"I feel flattered." Fleur looked at the Muggle girl. "Although I think 'arry might be better suited for that - he knows the Muggle world much better than I."

"No," replied Clemens, "that's certainly true, but - you know, he's just such a super wizard - even Rahewa thought it better to ... She said you were the right person for that."

Fleur nodded, turned toward Clemens' sister. "It's quite a change, in a way. Is this your concern, Clara?"

"Yes, but there's more. I'm used to my environment, have my circle - my friend is nor - is a Muggle, I mean ... Sorry." Clara blushed.

Fleur touched her arm. "No need to be embarrassed - we all think of our own appearance as normal ... By the way, why didn't you come with him?"

"Er ..."

Rahewa came to help. "It was difficult enough to convince Clara that she's welcome here. And he doesn't speak French."

"This is of course nonsense ... Anyway, what does he think of the idea?"

Clara smiled. "He's intrigued ... But everybody seems so convinced that I just have to drink Clemens' mixture and then I'll be a - er, ..."

"A witch - really, for us there's no derogatory meaning in this word ... And you? If you wouldn't believe it too, you could drink it, and nothing would happen. Isn't that so?"

"Yes - no ..."

"Are you ready for a little test?"

A moment's hesitation. "Yes."

"Follow me."

Reaching her own chamber, Fleur saw that Clara seemed a bit startled. She said, "It doesn't hurt - it's just not suited for a public audience."

The girl looked even more startled.

Fleur smiled. "I'm not going to check you for witch signs ... Here - put it around your neck, please."

"A shawl??"

"I know it's summer - I'll explain in a moment."

Clara took the shawl, draped it around her neck. With satisfaction, Fleur registered the change in the girl's look - almost instantly. She asked, "How does it feel?"

"Well - warm of course, soft ... Very - er, delicate ..." The words ended in a giggle.

Fleur took the shawl off. When Clara's eyes were clear again, she asked, "What did you feel?"

"Erm ..."

"An erotic feeling, right?"

Blushing, Clara nodded.

"That's a Veela shawl - and that's also the quickest method to explain what a Veela is." Registering that Clara couldn't follow that quickly, Fleur explained, "Veela have this power - and this special hair, yes ... Watch!"

She activated her own power for a few seconds, stopped. "It was the same, right?"

Another nod.

"I could make it much stronger, but this was just a demonstration. I've no intention to seduce you."

Clara's face turned dark red.

Fleur laughed. "Veela have a very relaxed style regarding sexuality, and the French Veela even more."

"I'm not - normally I don't behave like a nun in a sex-shop, only ... that's quite impressive." Clara's face normalized quickly.

"I used the shawl first to make it less personal - and I used my own power then not only to make clear what a Veela is but also to give you a demonstration of a spell - that's what wizards and witches do." Fleur smiled. "Except that most of the spells are less pleasurable."

Clara nodded. "Yes, that's clear ... But what about the test you mentioned?"

"Oh, I forgot ... Veela power only works toward magical people - Veela of both sexes, wizards, witches. But not toward Muggles."

An open-mouthed Clara stared at her.

* * *

Vanessa enjoyed the party very much, more than any other she could remember. No chaos. No shrill voices. Nobody drunk. Nobody doped - except Clara for this short moment.

Vanessa wished she had been tested too. She was a witch, no question about that - it was the test which intrigued her. Veela power ... That would be one way to answer her big question.

This question nested quite prominently in her mind, especially here with all these people who showed their mutual affection in a relaxed manner. Vanessa liked it a lot, while she wasn't used to it. Her own party experience was very different.

And Michael ... Playing tirelessly for the two girls, not even for the others, at least not in a conventional sense because he hadn't played a single song, carefully avoiding to diminish Héloïse. Chords, short picking sequences, adjusting his style to the girl's music.

Still - Vanessa felt his attention toward herself. Michael didn't look at her every few seconds, nothing of this stupid property game she had learned to hate, which had yielded only one good effect - that she joined with Rage.

Vanessa experienced the freedom to sit near Michael and listen, to enter another room for a while, without her stomach raising alarm only because she had talked too long with *someone else*. Her former partners ...

Something else was different too. She wasn't the beauty queen.

True, she looked as pretty as the day before. And she had - almost on reflex - classified Cho in a different league. But with Fleur in the same room ... It was quite instructive, while not painful.

Which didn't mean the men had no eyes for her. Only it was no longer a burden. Vanessa remembered well what other students in Hogwarts had called her and Rage - *The beauty and the beast*. When arriving here, Bill had inspected her, openly, smiling, had called, "Fleur, look, here's a new competition for you." Charming guy, that.

Fleur had inspected her too, had sighed theatrically, and said, "Alright, Bill - you get her and the children, I get the house and Michael." Next moment, Fleur had laughed out aloud, had greeted her, whispering, "He's right - in two years or so. And your Michael's proof that you have brains too."

This woman had class.

Vanessa left the room to wander around for a few minutes - examining the interior of this wonderful house, and thinking about *her Michael*. She passed Harry who still had the boy on his arm, stopped. "Rage told me about you and this young man here. I thought - well, I didn't quite believe her, but her every word was true. It's amazing."

Harry smiled - not quite his first smile this evening, but one of few. "There's Veela in him, that makes it simple."

"Veela? Male Veela?"

"Yes - not as prominent as the female, but it's there ... And you? Tired of waiting till Sandy's got enough?"

"Oh no - no, really."

"You found him."

Vanessa almost jumped, staring wide-eyed at Harry.

"You were the one who brought Michael's music into Sandy's life, and in Hély's too. I owe you for that."

Still shaken, from what seemed an involuntary misunderstanding between two perspectives toward the same person, Vanessa could only shake her head.

"I do," insisted Harry. "Would you allow me to deliver an instalment of this debt?"

"I - I don't know."

He just waited.

"Er - sorry, yes, sure."

"Please take my hand." Without removing an arm from Michel's support, Harry opened a palm.

Wondering, Vanessa took it, felt the hard calluses at the edge. Only after a second, she felt a gentle wave in her mind, comforting, reassuring. Despite herself, she smiled. "It was you, right?"

"Yes - that was my first instalment."

Still under the influence of this wonderfully peaceful emotion, Vanessa said, "That was beautiful. Now I know exactly what Rage meant when she told me how you helped her."

"My second instalment is a very short story. Some years ago, I was in a terrible state, had a problem I couldn't discuss with my friends. I went to Fleur because I knew that she could help me ... Took me an arm and a leg to tell her - fighting Voldemort was simple in comparison, I'm not joking ..."

Vanessa stared at him, frozen, fascinated.

"... and she helped me. Well - right now, she's upstairs. Why don't you go and ask her?"

Vanessa could barely suppress a trembling.

"She's not awaiting you. She doesn't know. It's your decision ... Sorry if I scared you - I didn't mean to spy." Harry turned and walked away.

Like hypnotized, Vanessa climbed the stairs, reaching a Fleur who looked up, a questioning smile on her face. Vanessa said, "I'm - I just spoke with Harry - he told me a story, how you helped him ..."

Fleur's eyes lighted up. "Did he? That's remarkable."

"He - he doped me a bit first."

Fleur made her sit down, placed an arm around her shoulder. "That tells me a lot ... It's about Michael, right?"

Vanessa nodded.

"The prettiest have the most trouble, although here ..." Fleur took Vanessa's face, moved it around toward herself. "You're the problem, aren't you?"

"How do you know?"

"He loves you. Everybody can see that. And he's not afraid, not shy - I saw how he took my joke at welcoming you."

Vanessa could smile. "No, he isn't. No longer."

"Yes, suddenly they find the words. And you - you find the words, and nothing else?"

"I don't love him."

"No?"

"I like him very much. It's great to be with him, but ... It's not love, and I don't want to hurt him."

Fleur sighed. "Sometimes I wonder why the British are not yet extinct ..."

Vanessa giggled.

"... How do you know it's not love? There wasn't a flash from the sky? You weren't shaken to your innermost?"

"Maybe that's the reason, but I know ... I don't have the feeling I cannot be without him."

"You wouldn't mind if I'd seduce him?"

Vanessa looked at the woman, perplexed. Next moment, her eyes started to burn.

After a moment, hands took her, pulled her toward a bosom, stroked her. Fleur's voice said, "Your hair is really wonderful."

Vanessa tensed.

The woman let go, only to take her face again. "Vanessa - have you been raped?"

"No."

"But you had sex?"

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

Feeling the nausea again, Vanessa clenched her teeth, unable to speak. She shook her head.

Had been a mistake. She felt a dizziness rush through her. After a moment, the dizziness faded, and she felt better than before.

"You've been date-raped, my dear - first he was tender, then he was stroking you, but when you said no, he didn't stop ... And now you met Michael, the best that happened to you in a long time, and you're scared as hell to hurt him - to disappoint him - to lose him."

Was she?

"But you're scared only because you know you're in trouble as soon as he touches you - your little sex problem ..."

"It's not little!"

"Do you stroke yourself?"

"Sometimes." Vanessa felt baffled hearing herself.

"Successfully so?"

"Yes - but not always."

"Let me guess - if it's a woman you fantasize about, it works. Then you try to imagine a man, and the lights go out. But the woman you fantasize is strong, narrow hips ..."

Even in her state, Vanessa felt the blood filling her face.

An arm hugged her. "Which only proves - your sexuality's alright, and that's why I said it's a little problem."

"But ... I'm not ..."

"Lesbian? Me neither. Even so, I'd reach an orgasm pretty quickly if you'd stroke me. Does this thought sound distasteful?"

"No. You're incredibly beautiful."

A soft laugh. "See - I could seduce you, because I'm a woman who doesn't hurt you. Besides, nobody is only heterosexual. But we both prefer men."

"What can I do, Fleur?"

"Do you trust him?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"That's a lot. Enough to sleep in the same bed with him, just holding each other?"

"I know he could do that, I'm sure, but either it would torture him, or I'd lay there, stiff of terror, and he'd realize." Vanessa started crying again.

Fleur waited, stroking her hair, until Vanessa calmed down. Then she said, "There's still another possibility, if you believe your love's still too weak ..."

Her love? Why didn't she protest?

"... Vanessa, do you trust 'arry?"

"Yes - but sometimes he scares me a bit."

"But he was the one who sent you to me, right? ... Don't worry, he can scare everyone ..."

"Except Rage."

"And his daughter and my daughter and my son, right. He could help you ..."

"No!"

"Wait, wait - I'm not talking about sex with him - you're too young for his taste anyway."

"Really?"

Fleur smiled. "Is this a first sign of ordinary female challenge? ... Whatever - if you can imagine a cure during which he wouldn't touch you once - well, maybe except for calming you down - then I'll tell you how."

Vanessa thought it over. Suddenly, she felt like waking from a trance, twisted.

Fleur said, "You've been doped a bit with Veela power during the last minutes - I just stopped it ... I want you to answer clear-minded."

"That's ... I wanted to know how it is all the time - thank you."

"It wasn't much - after we agreed we won't seduce each other."

Vanessa thought again. "I want to get rid of my problem more than anything else - since I ..."

"Met him - the one you don't love."

No she didn't, did she? "Yes, I'm ready."

"It works like that - 'arry will tell you a story. You go to him and say, I spoke with Fleur, and she thinks you should tell me the story of the boat cruise."

"And then?"

"Then he'll tell you."

"How do you know? And what makes you think it'll help?"

"It's a story about a similar case, only worse, and how it was cured. And 'arry knows already that he might be asked for this - he knew the moment he sent you up."

"He's the one who did the cure, right?"

"It's 'arry's story. He will tell. And he'll tell everything."

"I know - the man who wasn't told how to be scared."

"No, my dear, he knows. From others and from himself."

Vanessa thought again, swallowed. "I ... I think I want to do that, only ... I wish Michael and I, we could hear the story together."

"But of course!" Fleur beamed. "Vanessa, that's so much better - you're as clever as Rage said!"

"Would - would Harry do that?"

"You bet."

"Yes." Vanessa nodded. "He said he owes me - it's nonsense, but the more I think about it, the more it feels as if ..." She stiffened. "But then I have to tell Michael."

Fleur nodded. "You have to tell him that you're scared to hurt him, to lose him, that you cannot show your feelings, and that he has to come with you to hear a story of sex and crime ... We know both - he'll run as fast as he can, screaming in panic."

Vanessa smiled, too weak to giggle.

11 - Looking for Help

He came with short, seemingly awkward steps across the hall, incredibly fast, his *bokken* in the *lower*.

The *lower*??

Tony tried to detect the slightest hint what kind of strike Harry would choose. It seemed impossible. His friend was approaching him, would be within striking range in less than a second, and still Tony couldn't help thinking his *kenjutsu* partner was ignoring him completely.

While not so Harry's *bokken*.

Which blocked his own, having crossed the distance from the *lower* to the *middle* as if by accident. Tony's left leg stepped backward, body and *bokken* following, to parry the counter that would invariably follow.

It didn't come. Like a shadow, Harry passed him, presenting the uncovered back, except it was Tony's wrong side - so close and yet beyond range. In this fleeting instant, Tony knew he'd be too late.

And right - still in his turn, he felt the precise touch at the neck, all the force abruptly stopped when the end of Harry's weapon touched his skin.

Tony finished the turn, let his own *bokken* hang slack. "That doesn't make fun."

"No?"

"For the last three times we met, I didn't score once! We both know well - on a lucky day I score one out of ten ... What's going on?"

"These ain't no lucky days."

Harry didn't smile. Even so, his voice had told Tony that it wasn't meant as a joke. Then Harry added, "For your information - I'm training *jaho*, apparently with success, that's why you're chanceless recently."

Tony nodded. He was chanceless because he was clueless - against *jaho*, the art of hiding your intention in combat. It was never the visible part alone - when watching *kenjutsu* in video, an expert could only determine the list of possible strikes that might follow. Short as the list seemed, too different were the techniques to parry them.

It also explained why Tony felt as though he wasn't there when Harry came along, closing in on him. Knowing that it made no sense to continue the training, Tony said, "Let's go upstairs and have a tea."

Harry's eyes widened. He studied his friend for a second, then nodded.

Walking toward the door, Tony felt pleased. Offering tea had been a surprise, and significantly more than offering a drink, in particular because Harry knew that Tony couldn't warm up too much for the tasteless stuff, bitter as acid, that belonged to a tea ceremony.

And Harry accepting, nodding meant he was ready to talk.

Some minutes later, when they were sitting opposite each other at a low table, with Sandra at the side, and Harry as the only one bare of a comforting cushion - or snake - under his ass, the door opened. A geisha appeared, and Tony watched with pride and expectation how the young woman in the black-silver kimono performed the ceremonial movements. She would fill the tiny cups again, then she would leave. The time until then would be filled with the equivalent of small talk.

And Tony wanted to hear and see how Harry would react. And Sandy.

Unrestricted by the boundaries of tradition, the girl examined the woman, apparently waiting to be looked at.

But Ireen kept motionless.

The girl lost patience.

Ireen twisted, gasped, looked at the two men, then at Sandra, to find herself rewarded with an angelic smile.

Tony said, "Forget the rules for a moment, honey - you must talk with her, she won't rest otherwise."

The woman rose gracefully, went to the other side to kneel down again in front of the girl and the snake. "Hello, Sandra, my name is Ireen. I was look - it is nice to see you for the first time."

"I-reen."

"How quickly you learned my name! ... I know the name of your snake, this is Nagini. Shall I say hello to her too?"

The girl looked wondering.

From behind came Harry's voice. "You did already. Hello, Ireen, nice to meet you."

The woman shifted a bit, so she had Sandra and her father in the same view. "Hello, Harry. Your daughter's very convincing - " Ireen bent closer toward the girl, "and so charming."

Tony saw Ireen twist again, barely suppressing another gasp. At the same moment, he felt the stray-effect from Sandra's second smile, this time at mental level and with the delicacy of a freight truck. He grinned. "There's nothing as tender as the welcome of a two-year-old, what, Ireen?"

The woman tried to save the remnants of her geisha solemnity, without success. She pressed a wrist onto her mouth, managing to keep silent while her body was shaking.

After a few seconds, Sandra joined her, audibly, a silvery giggle.

Ireen gained some more composure. With a face flushed from suppressed laughter and embarrassment, she poured tea into the two cups, then rose to leave.

Harry said, "In case you'd like to talk with her a bit more, Ireen - that would be fine with me, and Sandy is that overwhelming only in the first moments. She adjusts pretty quickly."

The woman glanced at the girl, at Harry. "I'm not sure if I can handle ..."

"If she comes into your arms and doesn't mind leaving Nagini behind, you're qualified. Basically, she's just a two-year-old - you know, these fragile creatures ..."

Fighting another fit, Ireen went to Sandra, opened her arms, and left with the girl moments later.

Tony felt better than after scoring three times in a row against Harry. He grinned. "Somehow this ceremony went totally out of control, but I'm no traditionalist anyway. So, what do you think?"

"Did you ask her already?"

"Ask her? ... What?"

After a moment, in which Tony didn't get an answer, it dawned on him what his friend was talking about. He almost jumped. "For God's sake, Harry - I know that you and Cho ... But that's ridiculous! I've known her for two weeks!"

Harry kept silent.

Of course. For him, even a shattered tea ceremony was sacred, no place to exchange protests, confirmations, repetitions, the kind of remarks that contributed for ninety percent of all conversations here in California. Tony sighed. "We'll talk about you in a moment, but please, for once, allow a friend who's involved in this matter to follow your thoughts."

His friend seemed to relax. "Okay, although it's pretty simple, and a bit embarrassing. You let her perform the ceremony - for us, I mean. And for reasons you'll hear about in a moment, I'm on constant alert - please excuse my bad manners."

As predicted, it was Tony's turn to feel embarrassed. Letting Ireen perform the tea ceremony for Harry had told his friend enough to know - he trusted her, still more importantly, he respected her. And Harry on constant alert meant he was scanning with his *haragei* actively, and he had sensed something Tony himself felt still very reluctant to admit.

Then Tony realized - most likely, Harry had sensed also Ireen's mind. For a few seconds, he fought the temptation to ask - he would lose face, but he was burning to know, and wasn't a friend there to witness the burden of a lost ...

"Where did you meet her?"

"Through an agency. I was looking for someone experienced in the tea ceremony."

Harry's face turned into a wide grin. Next moment, it stopped. His friend looked at Tony, then bowed. When Harry came up, he smiled. "What an omen ... Ready to listen?"

So Harry had recognized that he, Tony, had been looking for a teacher, rather than an actor in a movie. Because a while ago, when he asked Harry whether he performed this ritual properly, the answer had been, "You're doing fine."

In other words, no.

Tony said, "There's really magic in this ritual, apparently - provided it's done by an expert ... Okay, I'm ready."

"I met a woman. She calls herself the High Priestess, and she's the one who caused the wizard fever. She wants Sandy." Then Harry told Tony what had happened since he'd been walking around in a castle yard, carrying the snake which now was lying near the table.

Tony asked, "The fever has stopped definitely, right?"

"Yes."

"What might she want from Sandy?"

"Marie-Christine thinks she's looking for a new High Priestess. The thought is absurd until you think it over, and nobody has a better explanation. Which tells me Marie-Christine's right."

Tony thought it over. A High Priestess was a joke, a figure from a B-movie, except there was such a person somewhere, and his friend with his admirable talent had met her ... Sandy was two - first thoughts about her profession might be due in fifteen years, a time period which for someone counting life in centuries was nothing.

He looked up. "She isn't the female version of Voldemort, is she?"

"No. Bit single-minded, though. A rule that's more important than lives? No thanks - that's not the teacher I had in mind for Sandy. And for the next ten years at the least, if not twenty, our daughter will be with us. Anyone who thinks differently should think again."

So this was the reason for Harry training *jaho*. Preparing for the next encounter ... Tony asked, "Harry - did I get that right, you brought her off track when you told her about Voldemort?"

His friend hesitated, then nodded. "You're right. That's why she didn't ... Ramon said the same, only with other words."

"High Priestess - sounds like a respectable job."

"Does it?" Harry snorted. "In your movies, Tony, a High Priestess would be something like a whore with incense on the bedstand and gold dust on her tits ... It's not what I'd have in mind for Sandy, but I could live with that - better than a religious killer."

"She has stopped killing."

"Yes. Besides - she didn't kill on purpose, truth to be told. But the simple fact is - she wants Sandy, I'm not going to allow that, and I don't know how to prevent it."

"You've been in this situation before, Harry. You can stand it - you can bear the thought, and still think about counter tactics."

"That's what I'm telling myself. Hearing it from you - thank you, Tony."

"And you have something I never could figure out exactly what it is. Excuse me if I'm as sneaky as a certain friend of mine ..."

Harry showed a weak smile.

"... but why don't you ask the Goblins for help?"

The smile faded. Harry looked at Tony with an expression everybody would have called frightening. Tony hurried to say, "Please forgive me if I said something wrong ..."

"No, it's no secret, just ... Anyway, the thought didn't cross my mind yet, which tells me I'm not as clear-thinking as you said. And this is a private matter - asking them for something like that ... Tony, you know I don't scare easily ..."

"No, but it's good you told me."

The joke didn't catch. "... this bond with the Goblins, that's really an excuse to wet your pants. But for Sandy ..."

Reconsidering Harry's words, Tony felt his heart jump. "No, Harry - you're wrong. It's not a private matter - it's global, Sandy's just a figure in a major play. And this High Priestess is another figure, because - what's the power behind? Whom does she serve?"

Seconds passed. Then Harry nodded slowly. "I was asking that myself, only I didn't care much, because ... But you're right. It justifies asking the Goblins." He bowed. "You have shown me a way. I'm in your debt."

Uh-oh.

Tony had another idea. "Can we do it right now?"

"What?"

"Paying the debt. Harry, please tell me - what's an Ambassador?"

* * *

"Not yet, maman. I want to say good-night to papa."

Fleur smiled at her daughter, realizing that, some days ago, her reaction would have been much sharper. But now, with all things settled in the family, not even the unruly Michel on her arm could upset her. She answered, "He'll be late, sweetie. Now that his magic's back, he's working to keep ..."

The doorbell chimed.

"That's him! That's him!"

Most unlikely so - Bill had his own key, but Héloïse stormed to the button, followed by her mother.

"Hély!"

The shout was piercing more in Fleur's mind than in her ears, telling her everything about the guests climbing up the stairs, and about the question of Héloïse's bedtime.

Harry's first greeting was just a smile. Only after placing snake and daughter near the harp, and after hugging Héloïse, he came back to deliver a proper greeting. And of course - when he took Michel, to say hello, somehow he forgot to give him back.

Fleur drew a face. "I thought you came because of me."

"Why - yes."

"Bill's in the office - I don't expect him back before midnight. And Cho's in the office, and we're here, and what's the avail? If the one Weasley's out of the way, you don't find anything better than grabbing the other."

Harry whispered, "Gimme a minute, then he's sound asleep."

"My dear 'arry, don't make such jokes with a Veela, at least not with such a voice - you're playing with fire."

"What makes you think it was a joke?"

Fleur sighed. "Your honesty. We should be glad for that - please remind me every now and then."

"And what about your own?"

"It's fine, but I'm a Veela - that's more than long hair and a certain power. We just have a different kind of ethics."

Harry looked thoughtful. "I don't think I ever understood completely what it means."

Reaching the living room, Fleur offered him an orangina, poured herself a glass of wine. "Let me try to explain ... At the time I taught you dancing, I would have liked to teach you a bit more - very much so, but the effect toward you would have been disastrous. You were busy to your limits to get along with your feelings toward Cho."

Harry nodded.

"When you came back from Japan - I saw it in your eyes when you looked at me for the first time in this particular way ..."

Harry smiled, apparently remembering himself.

"... it was out of the question for other reasons. If Cho was ready to kill Tamiko, I was ready to help her - which doesn't mean I don't appreciate what she did."

Harry grinned. "Makes two of us - no, three."

"Stop boasting ... Better - stop *not* boasting. Anyway, I'm trying to show you examples of how ethics forbid sex."

"And now? You're married, what about Bill?"

"Being faithful - if I'd sleep with you, my feelings for him would be the same afterwards, as well as those for you. No - they would have deepened, but toward Bill as well because he's your brother ... And I wouldn't feel guilty - only you, and that's why ... Hélas."

Harry kept silent.

Fleur smiled. "You're such a gentleman - for the question you didn't ask me, you may ask Bill. He'll answer you."

"Yes, I know. I think I have a rough idea what he'd say - after all, he's my brother, and no Veela ... I think it's a certain quality that's mandatory for partnerships between Veela and humans - I know two examples, your father and Bill ... It'll be fascinating to watch Michel grow up - his mind, I mean."

Fleur filled her glass again. "Before we get lost in chatting about our children - what brought you here today?"

"I expected to meet Bill too - but you'll tell him, which is good as well ... It's about Goblins." Harry explained what Tony had suggested. "I think it's okay to ask them, but it doesn't hurt to double-check. I thought it's a good idea to ask Wynor unofficially."

"Sure - I never figured out exactly what's his position, but I think it's good enough ..."

Harry smiled. "You bet."

Fleur looked at him. "Do you know more?"

"Not about him. But I got some background information about Goblin harps."

"Oh. You didn't bother to tell us."

Harry laughed. "Because the topic's embarrassing both of you so much. Actually, you already have the information, only you shy off thinking it through."

Fleur tried to do it now, failed. "Nobody called me shy before - please tell me."

"This is one of six harps, right?"

"Yes - and they're priceless, and when Hély's old and grey rather than silver, she has to specify the next - er, owner."

"Right. And we know it's not owning, just holding, using. But did you ever ask yourself who was the previous holder of that harp?"

"Well - it can't be Wynor, because he's too young to give it up."

"Exactly. That makes him a kind of solicitor, maybe the former holder didn't specify a wish, or whatever ... But I think you know that Goblins consider property differently - for them it's not individual but common ..."

Fleur's eyes widened. "You mean - assigning this harp was a decision of the Goblin community?"

"Yes, exactly. And Wynor had a saying, and his vote won. By the way, it tells you something about how the Goblins value your family, Fleur."

She shivered. "I'm grateful you told me, and I understand why you've been so reluctant before ... Say, did you know all that when you insisted so strongly about Hély's godfather?"

"No, not all these facts and details. It was a gut feeling."

Fleur raised her glass. "To your guts ... Are you going to call Wynor?"

"Er - no, that's why I'm here. I hoped you and Bill would ask him."

"Certainly - but why not you personally?"

"Because I'm the Ambassador," explained Harry. "I just cannot say, *Hi, Wynor, this is off the record, this conversation never took place, okay?* ... I mean I could, but he couldn't."

"Oh ... I wasn't aware. And he won't have trouble discussing it with us?"

"No. The only important thing is - you shouldn't say, Harry wants to ..."

"Of course not." Fleur glared at Harry. "I'm not stupid - even Veela use the brain for thinking."

"Sorry - I'm a bit concerned about this request." Then Harry grinned. "Although - imagine you'd use something else - what a charming thought."

Fleur laughed. "You might be right - sex takes place in the brain, so ..." She stopped - suddenly, the picture of worried girl had resurfaced in her memory, and the right conversation partner sat just in front of her. She said, "While on the subject - some days ago, I had an interesting conversation."

"Was it - instructive?"

So Harry knew what she was talking about. Well - small surprise, after he himself had sent the girl. "Up to some point," replied Fleur. "We know what's the problem - she had very bad luck with her first experience, and now she's afraid to be frigid. But she isn't."

Harry's glance was watchful. "So far we agree."

Smiling, Fleur patted his hand. "No need to worry, my dear 'arry. I told her she might ask you for a certain story."

"And?"

"She said she'd prefer to hear it together with him."

Harry sighed. "That's exactly ... I hoped you'd find another solution."

"So I was right!" Fleur beamed. "Of course she was terrified at the thought of asking you, so I said you'd expect it already - I was showing off a bit - I'm proud of you that you had the same idea."

"Proud, huh?" Harry grimaced. "Somehow, that doesn't make two of us."

* * *

The evening sun was almost blinding her. And she had no sunglasses with her, while the jeep had no protectors. Damn.

Somewhere farther north, it would have been reddish and romantic. At this lake, for example. While here in Israel, the sunlight was hard and cruel until the last moment, then gone.

Had to be the country style. The terrorists behaved the same way. The army too, come to think of it. Only she didn't want to think of it now.

Laila reached the castle gate, braked, killed the engine, quickly went through the gate before the clouds of dust, whirled up by the car, would reach her. Walking, she moved the sub-machine gun onto her back. Leaving it in the jeep was unthinkable. But she could keep it out of sight.

At the well, she peeked down into the darkness, her arms resting on the stones. What was the name of that fountain where you'd throw in a coin and then express a wish? ... Trevi? Anyway, it was in Rome.

She reached in her pocket, felt a coin. Just one ... She would know two wishes, but maybe this wasn't allowed, would destroy the spell.

Nonsense. This wasn't Trevi, there was no spell, not for her, not in Rome, nowhere ... And no fairytale prince either.

Next moment, defiance filling her mind, Laila threw the coin.

She hadn't expected to hear it hitting the water surface. But there was a faint noise coming up - only that it sounded strange for a ...

"Hello, Laila."

She heard her own gasp, felt her knees go jelly, unable to wheel around and to behave like an army sergeant, female or not.

Eventually, she managed. Seeing her face, Harry made a step toward her, stopped. "I'm sorry - I must have frightened you terribly, for a second I thought I'd have to hold you before you'd fall down ... You okay? You look very pale."

Laila sat down on the ground, shifted the gun aside to rest her back at the wall. "Hello, Harry ... Please tell nobody how you ..."

"No ... I'm really sorry, but I heard something hit the water, and thought ... Please forgive me. Can I offer you a drink for that?"

Laila looked around. "I missed the bar."

Harry smiled. "It's out of sight. A beer?"

Then she understood. "A stiff brandy, to tell my nerves the scary part's over ..."

Pop, he was gone. This time she was prepared.

Pop, he was back, holding two bottles and two glasses - a beer *and* something that looked dark golden and very expensive and very alcoholic. Staring at the bottle, Laila said, "I don't believe it - which bar serves that quickly here around?"

"Bar? ... I was at home."

She started to giggle, maybe a bit hysterically. After a few seconds, she felt a tumbler in her hand.

"Thanks." She took a deep gulp, sighed. "That tastes like an angel p ... Good stuff, I mean."

Harry grinned. "Samantha taught me to accept police slang from a woman ... Cheers, I mean."

Laila laughed. "Nicely said ... What you're doing here?"

"I check the place every evening, recently - to see whether the power returns. When I heard the stone, I thought ... Never mind."

"Without your snake, and your girl?"

"Yes. Nagini's with Sandy."

"I thought you did everything together with your daughter."

"Not everything ..."

Laila felt herself flush. Dear God, don't let him look now ...

"... And recently she met a young man with a guitar. She can't get enough listening to him - he can sing too, and he can't get enough playing for her, but maybe not for Sandy alone ... It gives me some free time."

What a romantic picture. Some students, probably near the lake, a young couple and a little girl ... Then Laila registered two startling facts in rapid succession.

That it would be only natural to ask her the same question, and she didn't know what to answer.

And that the question didn't come.

She dropped the gun to sit more comfortably, sipped at this stuff from Heaven. "And your wife's working in the office all the time?"

"Yes."

"That's emancipation, isn't it? Like here in Israel - women here can use bad language, or kill people, or make the first move ..." Laila realized that adrenaline and booze were a bad combination, felt quite content with that. "What about your own emancipation, Harry?"

"Bad language isn't my favourite, not a problem for me either, as long as Sandy doesn't catch it ... Otherwise - I know how to kill, how to make the first move ..."

Only he didn't.

"... Besides, an angel pissing on your tongue - that's not bad language for me. It's such a funny picture ..."

"So you like language that's right to the point?"

Harry glanced at her. "Sure, unless - what if the point's obvious, what if it's better left unsaid?"

"There's a saying here, Harry - if you throw a stone into the water, seven giants are not enough to calm down the waves ... That's what you mean?"

"Yes."

Laila nodded, suppressing a sigh. "I didn't throw a stone - it was a coin, like at this fountain in Rome. Had only one, although I could have used two, because I also wish I were a witch. But maybe I am, because it worked - that's why I was so scared for a moment. What do you think - can I put a spell?"

Harry hesitated a second. "Yes."

"Only it's not strong enough, huh? ... In contrast to yours, my little magician. Your spell's haunting me. I tried to break it, but the more I tried, the more ... Is this common with spells, or is this one of your specialties?"

"It's common - with this one."

"Is there a cure?"

"None that's within my reach."

"Then take it back - please."

"Seven giants ..." Harry's smile faltered. "Sorry, that wasn't funny. I wouldn't know how."

Laila bent over, stared into his face. "Tell me you're not interested in me, that I don't turn you on."

"I'm not going to lie."

She leaned back. "Shit ... I was serious, Harry - with this spell, I mean. I'm not lovesick - it's the combination that knocked me off. Magic, gentleness, a connection between us that felt more intimate than ..."

Out of nowhere, his fingers found her mouth, stopped her words. "Please - don't you realize that it's the same the other way around?"

She savoured the touch. "So it wasn't just from seeing me there, in panties and bra?"

The hand left her mouth. "No. Not that seeing you like that had a calming effect ..."

"But you're a faithful husband, right?"

"I'm not going to hurt Cho."

"Yeah, that's understandable." Although Laila could have done *without* this particular gentleness. She said, "Since I don't know her, I had no trouble leaving her out of the picture in my fantasy ..."

Harry's face came around. "Maybe that's the solution."

"What?"

"Breaking the spell - once you know her, you cannot leave her out of the picture ... What are your plans for next weekend?"

Laila felt grateful for sitting already - this way, jelly in place of knees didn't matter that much. Finding her voice again, she said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

Harry smiled. "Why not? She knows about you just enough to ask me whether we had sex ..."

"What?? ... Oh no, never, she's a witch and I just have the Uzi, and I know I couldn't pull the trigger ..."

Harry laughed. "Calm down - she's not narrow-minded, sex with other partners is not a taboo, only ... Banning a demon works both ways, believe me."

Laila looked at this figure she had undressed in her dreams. "Tell me about Cho."

* * *

Michael registered Harry's return - after Sandy, of course, and only thanks to his most faithful listener. Although the soft gust of air from Harry's appearance went unnoticed at the campfire, Michael knew long before the others.

Not that he saw Harry. Hearing him was impossible anyway, even without the guitar playing. No - it was this very short break in Michael's mind. It had taken him a while to register - when he played the guitar, Sandy was clinging to him like a child holding the hand of - well, an older brother. Except she didn't use the hand, she used her mind. An incredibly soft touch, and for an instant it had faltered.

Feeling extremely pleased to share a secret with her, if only for seconds, Michael played some improvisations to prolong his song, at the same time waiting for the moment when one of the others would gasp, or twist. The natural candidate would be Rage, although her tendency to frighten was pretty limited. Or maybe Vanessa - recently, as Michael had registered, Vanessa got some attention from Harry.

Just for the music connection?

Nobody gasped. Michael felt sure - Harry did something to stay unnoticed. Every wizard, every witch had a tiny amount of sixth sense for the presence of a powerful magic, maybe even Muggles, and Rage certainly had more than the rest of the group ... Of course, not counting Sandy ... But nothing. This could hardly be just the music from his guitar.

Michael finished his song. Before anyone could react, he said, "And now, in honour of a traveller, the only Hebrew song I know - Hava Nageela."

And suddenly the presence was there. Rage gasped, obviously from sensing Harry, Sandy turned and smiled, and Vanessa opposite squeaked. At the same moment, Michael saw Harry standing behind her.

This song hadn't much of lyrics, a few lines that were repeated again and again, slowly first, accelerating, finally slowing down to the initial pace. Originally a dance song, or a chorus, was it also suited to show off with some artistry on the strings.

Michael stopped, looked at Harry. "How was your journey?" Everybody in the round knew what Harry was doing - scanning around for a woman who called herself the High Priestess.

"Quite interesting," came the answer. "But not what I was looking for."

Michael saw Rage glancing at her godfather, smile. Then something like understanding was shining up in Clemens' face.

Some others had registered too. Aileen stood up, signaling Jeremy that it was time to leave.

Harry turned to them. "Hey, wait - I didn't mean to break the group, hinting dark secrets. Okay - I met Laila, this sergeant who got shot when we detected the power. I had a drink with her after I scared her like hell." Harry turned to Rahewa. "And if you'd wipe that grin off your face, we could sit and listen to Michael."

Maybe so. Except that Rahewa failed miserably, had trouble suppressing a giggle.

Aileen said, "It's okay, Harry. We - erm, wanted to - I mean, it wasn't you." She turned to Jeremy. "Let's go."

Harry turned to his goddaughter. "Would you please stop acting like a drunken sailor?"

The giggle stopped like cut. Rahewa stared into the fire for a moment, then started to rise.

Harry stopped her, his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I used the wrong picture ... Yes, she's developed a crush on me, and I didn't count the seconds until I could leave her company, but she's suffering mostly from being a Muggle, after she got in touch with the magical world, and that's not funny. By some accident, it's me who represents this world more than anyone else. Imagine it would have been Clemens who treated her, and I'd come back and sit here and grin and say, I met Laila, she asked me how a young potions wizard's doing."

The flames of the campfire were playing in Rahewa's face, illuminating the dark colour of embarrassment.

Harry touched her face. "Now c'mon, give it a rest - you've compromised me, I've compromised you. But we did it in public, so the others can laugh at us, huh? ... Why don't you have a walk with Clemens? He can cheer you up much better than I."

Clemens said, "Maybe not better, but she'll appreciate it more, I hope."

Into the laughter, Rahewa turned to Harry, hugged him, rose quickly, and disappeared in the darkness, followed by Clemens.

Harry turned to the fire, moved a bit closer to his daughter. "Oh man ... Please let's sit a few minutes here, before you're going to escape too."

"I hadn't ..."

"I didn't ..."

Michael and Vanessa looked at each other, stopped simultaneously, both falling silent.

Harry said, "Some years ago, I would have died in such a situation. Trying to keep it unsaid, and going through hell for days afterwards. Thank God, that's past."

Vanessa glanced at him. "How ... Was it - er, Fleur?"

Harry smiled. "She gave me a jump start. Without her ... She ordered the day and the hour when I invited Cho for the first ball. Then - there were others, Cho of course, and a Giant ... In a sense, I was lucky - the constant pressure of Voldemort was so high that the thought of saying something to your girl, or confessing something in public, was - it wasn't less terrifying, but there was less time."

Michael felt Harry's eyes looking at him, heard him say, "Just for good balance, Michael, and because I want to ask you something, you have a question free."

"I have ... What do you want to ask me?"

"How did you notice me?"

"Oh, that ..." Michael felt as pleased as before. "While playing, I can feel Sandy in my mind. It's so ... it took me some time to notice her, but since then - well, and when she twists for an instant - I didn't notice you, I only knew you were back."

Harry nodded. "I thought as much ... What I'm doing is called *jaho*, the art of hiding yourself, your intention. If it hadn't worked toward you ..." Harry smiled. "Uncovered by Sandy - that's okay."

Michael realized that two people were waiting for his question toward Harry. After a moment, he said, "I ... Yes, I have a question. It's nothing new ..." He glanced at Vanessa, seeing her relief. "If it's too personal ... Sorry, drop that, after you just - okay, here's what I wanted to know for years - when the Muggles had Hogwarts under siege, there was this guy who died. The soldiers said he tried to climb the tower and fell. Er - was it true?"

"Not quite." Then Harry told the story how this man had challenged him for a duel in the former Giants' camp, how he had shot at Rahewa and Harry, how he had shot down Samantha, and how Harry finally had brought him up to the tower. "He jumped by himself. He said, I'm free, you cannot command me, and jumped ... In a way I killed him."

"You ..." Michael stopped, then started again. "I think it was the right thing to do."

"Sure - he was incurably mad, the others said I should have done it before ... That's what I'm telling myself when ..." Harry looked up. "And that's been nagging you all these years?"

"Well ..." Michael felt himself blush. "I was a first-year, had heard all the stories about the Battle of Hogwarts, and most of the people who'd fought then were still there, in particular ... Well, and then nothing happened to fight the Muggles, just waiting ..."

Harry laughed. "You've been disappointed by your heroes, right?"

"Er - yes."

"I had problems with this strategy myself. But it was the right one - two of us wounded, that was all ... Except for Lousy."

Vanessa said, "Do you know that ... that Rage is still blaming herself for that?"

Harry turned to her. "Certainly. She, Samantha, and myself - we're all blaming ourselves, and rightfully so."

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Sure."

Michael waited expectantly. Harry probably too, only his face didn't reveal anything.

"Er - where did Lousy come from?"

After a second, Harry said, "I found him in London Linkport, before travelling to Santa Monica - to a party in the movie business ... Having found Lousy - that was the only good thing that day, because ..." He looked at Vanessa. "Around that time, Cho had a short and unhappy affair with someone else, and she called me for help, only I didn't realize at once - anyway, that's not what you've been asking for."

Harry stood up, and Michael had another opportunity to watch Sandy floating into her father's arms. Then Harry said, "It took us a while to get that settled, but then, this affair was the least of our worries ... Isn't a campfire a wonderful place to sit? See you." Pop, and he was gone.

Michael stared into the empty space. "Wow."

Silence.

"This sergeant, what's-her-name ..."

"Michael?"

"Yes?"

"Would ... Would you mind sitting here?"

After a second, he understood. "Actually, yes, quite so." He rose, sat down at Vanessa's side. "Here I am."

"Hold me, please."

He put an arm at her shoulder, his other hand seizing for hers. It felt like ice. He pressed her fingers at his chest, rubbed them. "Your heating's broken - in front of a campfire." He held her palm up, breathing into it. "Well, these cold nights in early September ..."

"I had another question in mind. I - and then I lost my courage, asking for Lousy was the next thing that crossed my mind."

Michael turned her hand, holding it in front of his lips. "Which only shows how fast you can think." Slowly, aware that any moment a sharp reaction might come, he placed his lips at the back of her hand.

Vanessa didn't pull it off. "The funny thing is - he knew what I've been trying to ask, that's why he ... He didn't answer both questions, but ..."

Michael claimed some brain cells in good shape for himself. Using them, he saw little risk to have taken the wrong conclusion. "I'll wait, Van ... For something that isn't short, isn't unhappy, and least of all an affair."

"Will you promise me something?"

"If I can."

A short smile. "Not everything?"

"No. If you'd ask me to stop ... Well, as I said ..."

"If I'm going to scream and kick at you, and shout to get lost, promise me to come back - I don't mean it, not you."

Michael felt a thrill of expectation, and deeply inside an unshaped fury against an unknown someone. "It's a deal. I'll go see Hermione to mend my broken nose, then I'll come right back."

Vanessa didn't smile. "Kiss me, please."

He did. Lightly, again, a bit harder, admonishing his hands to keep where they were.

"Touch me."

Studying her face, Michael saw anxiety and determination. "Do you know the campfire spoon?"

"No." According to Vanessa's voice, she could have lived without this knowledge.

"It goes like that." Michael moved a bit aside, spreading his legs. "You sit just in front of me, your back toward my chest. My arms are around you, my hands are in reach of everything important - well, except I cannot see your face, but you can't have everything at once."

"And I? What am I supposed to do?"

"To lean on me, to feel my reaction at the small of your back, and to signal with the position of your own legs how far to go."

Vanessa stared at him. "Little experience, huh?"

"I swear, I never did it myself before. It's all theory - but I remember the Muggle camp, that's how they did it."

Vanessa stood up, sat down between his legs, stiffly resting on his chest. "You must have been a remarkable first-year."

Michael took her shoulders, pulling them against himself. "Not really. With an older sister ... She taught me a few tricks of the trade."

He put his right arm over Vanessa's breasts, his hand coming to rest around a soft swelling which felt just great. Fighting against a thick mane, he brought his mouth near her ear. "Your hair's wonderful."

"Only my hair?"

He cupped his hand a bit tighter. "No, what I'm holding here's ... I didn't know that it feels so fantastic, just - just holding it."

"Michael - I still cannot promise you anything. Right now, I'm ... I'm using you to - for something like a cure. It feels so egoistic - no, don't answer now ... I talked with Fleur, and she said I shouldn't worry to appear egoistic, and otherwise I'd never find out. Is she right?"

"Definitely."

"I'm ... I'm no virgin anymore - but I had no - er, orgasm yet - erm, I mean, you know what I mean ..."

With some trouble breathing, Michael said, "Yes I know, and ... er, for me it's not quite the same but ..."

Her hand pressed his hand which pressed her breast. "I know what you mean. I want to have it with you, only it's not that simple because - well, er ..."

"I know. I think I know."

"Fleur said, I should ask Harry for a story, how he helped someone in a similar situation. Then - then I said I'd like to hear it together with you ... But her first suggestion was just to be with you, in the same bed, I mean, just ... Only I was so scared that I'd appear ... But now I can imagine us - if you won't forget it's not your touch but - the memory." Vanessa exhaled deeply. "So - what do you think?"

Michael felt his heartbeat, pulsing as hard as hers. "The idea to be together with you - er, in the same bed, and ... Could be - I know I won't lose my control against you, while - er ..."

He felt her smile. "Don't you worry - the idea that you come from my ... It has quite some appeal, actually."

"Has it?" He swallowed. "Well - that's something where my theory doesn't help ... But why not do both?"

"Both?"

"Yes - hearing Harry's story, and starting our - er, training. I'm sure I can learn from him."

"Do you really expect him to be that detailed?"

"That's no question." Michael bent closer, whispered, "The only problem is to find a spot where to look at while he's talking."

* * *

When the campfire was falling behind, when he felt sure they were out of earshot, Clemens turned his head. "Can I start cheering you up?"

"No."

From short but instructive experience, Clemens knew that this was no good time for a wisecrack.

Next moment, Rahewa said, "But you can start telling me how ridiculously I behaved ... Unbelievable, like a third-year in her first anatomy course. In front of the others!"

"As Harry said, that's ..."

"No, it's not!"

Against knowing better, Clemens said, "Okay, I stand corrected - I mean, I walk corrected ..."

To his slight surprise, he could walk further, without being rewarded by some *aikido* trick for the wrong remark at the wrong time. Instead, Rahewa stopped. "Kiss me, that will keep you from mumbling such nonsense."

She was right.

After a moment, walking further, she said, "You don't even know what's so shameful, do you?"

"Well - your grin was a bit suggestive, okay, and he said - by the way, it was the first time I heard him reprimand you. And then he told everybody, and it was as he said - no harm done."

Rahewa stopped again, turned to him. "You only got the public part." There was pride in her voice about her godfather's performance, still more shame about her own role.

Clemens hugged her. "Okay, then ... Tell me the rest."

Apparently, this was possible only while walking further. "I overheard some remarks from Almyra - she thinks it's a bit more than a crush what this Laila got ... And ... He - he finds her quite - er ..."

Clemens tried to help. "So he finds her attractive, sexually attractive - okay, what's the deal? She's not the only woman, and ..." Clemens stopped, registering too late that he'd hinted some knowledge he wasn't supposed to have.

"And what?"

She'd registered. Shit. Following a recent example, Clemens escaped forward. "By some accident, I came to know about - er, Beatrice and her potion ... erm."

Rahewa seemed relieved. A moment later, Clemens heard why. "Then you know what it means to step into a greasepot like that. It's not - I mean, he and Cho, they don't make a secret of their sex adventures, not after ... Anyway, that's not the point."

"Then what?" Which didn't mean Clemens would have minded hearing more, but ...

"When he came back, there at the campfire, his defense was a bit down. That Priestess, of course, and seeing Sandy again ... And that's why I could sense a bit more of his feelings than usual - my own *haragei* isn't that bad either - and I hadn't anything better to do than giggling like ..." Rahewa seemed close to tears.

Clemens hugged her again. "So he's very interested. Okay. I'm not blaming him - I saw her, there on the table ..."

"But can't you see it? Spilling in public what you found out with your *haragei* - that's unforgivable! And he realized that I know, and that's why he told the others, and that's why he said what he said to me."

Clemens held Rahewa still a moment, until her sobs faded, took her hand to walk again. "Allright, it's unforgivable. But, by pure luck, I know that he has already forgiven you."

"How can you know?"

"He punished you in full public."

Silence.

Clemens sensed - this was make or break. "Someone told me about your parents - about your father, in this case - because I should know and because you'd never tell me ..."

His bones were still intact. Good sign, that.

"... Well, and he called you a drunken sailor. You ain't going to tell me it really slipped his tongue, are you?"

"You think so?" A small girl's voice, miserable.

Clemens stopped again. "You know it. It's just your shame - and what's more, he sent us off, so you'd get time to settle. That means - it's okay, and the less is said about, the better." Then, with pride in his voice, he added, "And he trusted me to make it clear to you, in case you didn't notice."

Walking again, Rahewa said, "You're right. But again, you only got the public part." She was walking faster.

"And what's the hidden part here?"

"Wait a minute."

Her marching pace left little room for insisting. Clemens followed, until they reached a place which didn't look different from any other, here at the lake.

Rahewa sat down, looked at him.

Clemens sat down, looked at her.

Her head turned to the lake. "What he also meant was, it should never happen again."

"That's fairly obvious."

"Okay, then."

"Then what?"

Her voice was flat, expressionless. "One reason for my lapse was - I'm a stupid virgin, not knowing what I'm talking about. So he sent us off - is this clear enough?"

Clemens gasped, speechless.

"Maybe ... Maybe it's just my imagination, although ... At any rate, it's true, and ... Besides, he wants to invite us, and - er, at our first weekend together, I don't want to blush every five seconds, thinking of ..."

"Here??"

What a clever remark, in this situation. Oh, wonderful, Clemens Stein, Casanova would have been proud of you.

Rahewa looked at him. "It's here where Harry and Cho - er, where Cho got rid of ... Well, I thought it's a good omen."

Maybe so, only ...

As if sensing his thoughts, Rahewa said, "Cho told me. Harry never talks with me about sex - not voluntarily, that is. While Cho - I have all my knowledge from her, about them two, and about ... I think there's an agreement between her and Almyra, because between mother and daughter - I mean ..."

Clemens realized that Rahewa's suada could only be nervousness pure, which was sufficient to wake him of his trance, and to close her mouth.

* * *

Ramon Garcia finished his last phone call, feeling deep satisfaction with this answer as with the previous ones. Then he rose, headed for the door to reach another office down the floor.

Jesamine, since a few hours ex-CEO of *Groucho Biochemicals* - exactly since Raman had been officially nominated - looked up. "Day's work done?"

"Let's see ... Since lunch, I didn't do what I'm supposed to do in my new job. If my boss knew what I did, she'd be very upset, and now I'm leaving earlier than I should to keep another Groucho employee from working - and still there's little doubt that my boss would appreciate."

"That's why you need a secretary." Jesamine made a suggestive gesture toward her bosom. "Something well-shaped to do the paperwork in the meantime."

"Why not looking for a contrast? Slim, narrow hips, small - er, fingers ..."

"Boyish?" Jesamine grinned.

"I wouldn't go that far," replied Ramon. "A slight touch of androgyne's okay, but I appreciate this little difference, you know."

"I'll have a look. Is it okay if the fingers aren't quite that small?"

"Why not? If she can type with them - I'm ready to provide a touch-screen."

The laughter was following him outside.

Ramon jumped to the studio where the other Groucho employee would still be working. Contrary to his remark toward Jesamine, Ramon waited behind the circle of light and action until the director called, "Cut!"

Marie-Christine disappeared in her wardrobe.

Ramon waited long enough to give her time for stripping off her costume, without the time to dress again, then knocked.

"Just a minute!"

Scaling his voice carefully, and keeping close to the door, Ramon called, "This is the GBCEO! Madam, you have the right to open the door undressed. How you're looking can be used against you. You are entitled for a ..."

The door came open. Marie-Christine, in underwear, her face alarmed, pulled him inside. "Are you mad? You can be heard through the entire ..."

"Yes I am - which means I can be condemned only to ..."

She closed his mouth with a kiss - at this moment maybe more afraid of what he might have said, but Ramon had no objections.

Then she stepped back. "No."

"No what?"

"Is the communication broken between your head and some other parts? ... Not now, not here - and I'm hungry."

"Oh, that." Ramon watched her wiping off the make-up. "Just a welcome - less noisy than before."

Marie-Christine smiled. "Latin macho. Imagine it would squeak."

Ramon started to chuckle, imagining such a habit. At least, the picture was good to make him relax while Marie-Christine dressed.

Sitting in the car, with Ramon behind the wheel, she asked, "Where do we go to?"

"To Luiz. Luiz Pereira - the restaurant is still pretty new, but I know Luiz from before. I booked a table - I hope I wasn't too late."

"What do you mean? Did you get one or not?"

"Yes, I got one. But the crowd has detected him, it's probably full, only that Luiz would chase some other guests away to make room for us."

"An old friend?"

"I wouldn't use that term. But he's in debt to me."

"And you want to keep it that way?"

"Quite the opposite - today's my chance to balance out. But not because of the table."

Marie-Christine didn't ask more, knowing well that Ramon would reveal the rest only in the restaurant.

Which was indeed full. When the waitress heard Ramon's name, she said, "Just a second, sir," disappeared through a door. Seconds later, Luiz came out.

They shook hands. Then Ramon introduced, "Luiz, this is Marie-Christine Thérout - she's my good reason to give up some bad habits."

The host took Marie-Christine's hand, touched it lightly with his lips. "Enchanté, madam - I didn't recognize you instantly, because I didn't expect such a celebrity here - please forgive me. For compensation allow me ..."

Ramon interrupted him. "No way, Luiz - we're celebrating, I want to ask you a favour, and I've found the end of the rainbow, so please let me pay for your delicious food."

"Which colour has this rainbow, lieutenant?"

Ramon beamed. "No more lieutenant, Luiz - I quit, got a manager job, quite high, and they pay so much that you feel ashamed."

"Then - " Luiz smiled, "let me select the courses for you. I promise, I'll take only the most expensive ones."

"It's a deal."

When the waiter had served the lemonade for Ramon and the champagne for herself, Marie-Christine raised her glass. "To the new - what was it - GBCEO?"

Ramon followed, sipped. "It started here."

"Here?"

"When Cho invited me to lunch, to tell me I should quit the service and come to Groucho, that's been here, right this table where we sit." Ramon beamed again. "And today, I can pay back."

"You mean your work?"

"No - excuse me for a minute, then I'll tell you."

When he returned, Ramon saw Marie-Christine digging holes into a splendid salad with all kinds of seafood. He sat down. "How is it?"

"Delicious. Almost fat-free. And proteinous - just right for the celebrating I have in mind later."

He felt his pulse accelerate. "Then let me explain what I did, so we can - er, discuss the alternatives."

Marie-Christine looked at him. "No way, José. You selected the restaurant, Luiz the food, so it's my turn to ..."

"I just meant some - er, details."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about - the details." Marie-Christine took a shrimp, quite pointedly, to suck it in and crunch it between her teeth, smiling.

Ramon exhaled, for an instant unable to concentrate on the food. Then Marie-Christine asked, "So what were you doing to pay back?"

"Calling in old debts," he replied. "I spoke with two FBI agents, then with some buddies in the LAPD, and a moment ago with Luiz. They all got printouts with the picture of a remarkable lady, and the instruction to do nothing, just give notice if she appears somewhere."

"FBI - these two, er ..."

"Tracy Chipman and Wayne Ellis, yes." These two agents had been the contact persons when Harry and Remus Lupin had hunted Dementors some years ago, ending a series of attacks toward visitors in amusement parks.

"And Luiz?"

"He has contacts - to the other side of the table. Not quite up-to-date, but good enough. Pulling these strings - we agreed that as of now, we're on a par. And that's just fine with me - from now on, we can become friends."

"Are you going to tell them?"

"Harry and Cho? ... No, probably not - first because Cho's better off the less is said about the issue, then because I think Harry expects me to do something like that ..."

Marie-Christine nodded.

"... but most of all - I know what'll happen, now that people are looking for a face. They'll find lots of such women, and I don't want Harry to check all of them ... He has to run his own style - not that I know, but ..."

"Then who's going to check them?"

Seeing Marie-Christine's anxious face, Ramon touched her hand. "I also spoke with Francesco - with that spector cassette, he - or his ex-colleagues from Pinkerton - know as much as I do, only they're Muggles which take no risk. The fever has stopped, but ... If they come back saying, I think it's her, it's early enough to talk with Harry ... The hardest part was to convince Francesco that these observations should be billed."

Marie-Christine examined Ramon's face. "Erm - would you mind passing these bills over to me? I mean - er, a police lieutenant's salary can't have created much of ..."

"But only until ..." Ramon stopped, grinned. "No, I don't mind - thank you ... You know, a year ago, such a question would have been ... But with Harry as example - if he has no trouble spreading Cho's money, even a Latin macho like me ..."

Marie-Christine beamed. "Right you are!" More thoughtful, she asked, "Do you think she'll appear here?"

"Who knows? What I did is basically standard procedure." A thought crossed Ramon's mind. "For all we know, this lady originates from some ancient culture, right? ... Maybe she's never heard of America."

12 - Plots

Arriving home, Cho found herself in the kitchen - she had missed the bathing ritual. What a pity.

Her daughter's welcome told her that Cass' highlights of the day had to do with music. This was a small surprise, until Cho became aware that Cass had heard a guitar *and* a harp. She looked at Harry. "You were in Paris?"

"Yes - I wanted to talk with Bill and Fleur. Only Bill wasn't at home - he's working overtime to get rid of his backlog."

"A-hem ... So you had a nice little chat with Fleur?"

Harry grinned. "Yes. We discussed the social ethics of non-human races."

"Veela, for instance."

"Very good - but only five points out of ten."

Cho examined her husband, who had quite some fun, which was relieving, in a way, because the picture of him and Fleur alone, with the girls busy playing music ... Then she remembered. "How was Michel?"

"Guess what? We discussed the idea of putting him into bed, decided against it ..."

"A wise decision."

"... Yes, wasn't it? Maybe it wasn't quite unanimous, but that's nothing particularly new ... At any rate, the second half of our conversation was about the topic I came for."

Non-human races? ... There was just one possibility. "Goblins."

"Yep. I asked them to talk with Wynor - sub rosa - about the idea to call in the Request for help against the High Priestess."

"That's ..."

Harry looked at her questioningly, waiting for her to continue. Only this word had already been too much - Cho had sworn to herself not to drag Harry's feet, should the topic of the Request arise.

"Nothing," she said. "Go ahead."

"It was Tony who convinced me that it's not simply a private matter, that this is something global. Still - first I want to hear an unofficial comment from Wynor, and of course I cannot ask myself ... I hope they'll talk soon."

"C'mon, let's eat."

Cho saw the understanding lighten up in Harry's eyes. With a mouth full of food, it would be a bit simpler to suppress remarks. This - request - wasn't - her - business - period ... Only that her daughter was involved.

In the dinner room, Harry asked, "And you? How was your day?"

"Ramon had his first day as the new Bio boss. That reminded me of an idea which came up while we were looking for a new CEO. It was a bit early to discuss it with him, in particular since I wanted to hear your comment first." Cho explained what she had in mind, as a vague concept, without a clear picture of the specific details - bringing the twins and their business together with Biochemicals.

Harry smiled. "You're so Chinese."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? Business in China, so I'm told, is done in families, in clans - you're trying what you can to establish the same. First Ramon, now the twins."

"Sure - I take care of the men, and ..."

For an instant, Cho felt as though she would have done better biting her tongue, rather than hinting at old stories between Harry and some very successful and very female Groucho contractors. Then, to her surprise, she saw him almost rolling over from laughing.

More relieved than embarrassed, she said, "Hey - let me laugh too."

"... And the women take care of themselves, hehehe ..."

Cho felt her cheeks turning red. The only explanation she could think of - Harry had returned her favour with a hint at the affair between herself and Marie-Christine ... Not a Bio employee, but with Ramon as the linking element ...

Seeing her face, Harry stopped, shook his head. "Sorry - my mistake - I wasn't teasing you ... Forget it."

Which was impossible, of course - only that pride and embarrassment forbade Cho to dig into Harry what he'd been talking about - and he knew! ... The colour in her face kept a moment longer, from anger toward herself, for such a clumsy remark, and toward her husband, for such a clever parry.

There was no sense in pride at such a cost - she'd swallow the toad and ...

"I met some more people today."

Too late. No doubt - Harry had watched her, probably with more than his eyes, had struck exactly at the right moment. Cho glared at him. "Women who take care of themselves?"

"Well - that's only partly accurate. Anyway, I'd like to invite them, so you can make your own judgement."

"You mean - I'm invited too?"

Harry put the sleeping Cass into a chair, came over, sat down next to her, and kissed her.
"Yes, indeed."

Beaten, disarmed, and bare of any complaint. "Who is it?"

"I had tea with Tony. It was served by a charming young geisha - her name's Ireen."

"Really?"

"I scared him a bit, when I asked whether he proposed to her already ... She had a bit trouble with Sandy, but only for a moment - you know how our daughter welcomes people of her taste ... Then they left together."

Cho beamed. "That's a wonderful idea - but didn't you want to invite the young folks alone?"
Then she grinned. "Or is it the common factor you're aiming at?"

"Erm - no. True, an invitation for them's pending, only - I met them today, and I had the feeling we should wait still a few days - inviting them now, that would, er, force a breakthrough that's supposed to ..."

"Breakthrough, huh?" Cho grinned.

Harry kissed her again. "You're a bit single-minded today. As before - you're right, but only partially ... I'll tell you - in due time."

It told her enough - for now. Had to be something between this Michael and Rage's friend, Vanessa. Or with one of them, which could only mean Vanessa, for all Cho had witnessed.

Suddenly she realized that her husband's report still felt incomplete. "Then who's the other you want to invite?"

"Laila - the sergeant ..."

"I know whom you're talking about! ... Would it be much surprising to hear she'd come alone? Where did you meet her?"

Shit, shit shit - two questions, asked with a voice like a - er, drill sergeant.

"No, it wouldn't ... I met her in the Crusader castle."

"You what??"

"I check it every evening - local time. For that time, I leave Sandy with the young people."

Cho had trouble breathing, hearing this confession.

"It's the only way, Cho. I have to meet her again - alone. Whatever happens - she cannot break my will, and I need more information. Maybe it's the same with her - she wasn't there ... Only Laila."

He was probably right, except this thought ... But not her young Potter - not him - she'd known he wouldn't sit there, hadn't she? ... Hadn't she?

Then another thought struck her. "What she's been doing there?"

"Throwing coins in the water."

Every now and then, Cho wished her husband would be a bit less direct, a bit less truthful, would answer her questions a bit less literally - right now, for example ... But no, not him. After a second, she said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"These were exactly her own words too."

"So we have that much in common - great. Why don't you just accept this vote from both sides?"

"For several reasons."

Which Harry didn't bother to specify. Which was quite instructive ... Suddenly Cho realized that her husband could be less direct quite well, without abandoning truthfulness - right now, for example.

While she ... "What do you have in mind, Harry?"

"To ban a demon." He kissed her again. "This way or the other."

* * *

Sirius Black, head of the Law Enforcement Squad - a special branch of the state police since the union between Muggles and Magicals - pressed the button of his desk-o-mate. "Yes?"

The desk-o-mate represented Groucho's newest development - the must-have for everyone dealing with lots of people, like managers, sales reps, and cops, with the latter only for illustration purposes because normally for them these toys were too expensive. Unless you had connections.

Basically a phony, offered the desk-o-mate pictures and data of the calling person. Not a real-time picture - who wanted to know that the guy at the other side was currently poking between his teeth, or whatever? No, a recorded picture at the left and personal data at the right of the display - age, preferred drink, name of the wife, of the children, of the mistress - just what you needed during the small talk to ask for their doing, to appear like someone with an excellent memory and a personal touch although you couldn't care less.

The picture showed Jessica, Sirius' secretary. "It's Walter Godefroy. Are you here?"

The picture changed to the display of an overweight figure with a reddish complexion and pig's eyes. As ugly as he looked - Walter was a good cop in the Muggle branch, and not known for calling unnecessarily.

"Taking over," replied Sirius, pressed a button. "... Hello, Walter, how's your diet?"

"Doing fine, as far as I know - haven't seen it recently. The same goes for my wife." Walter laughed about his own joke, creating the perfect imitation of an unpleasant asshole.

Which he could be. After a rough start, Sirius and Walter Godefrey had found out that they shared some likes and dislikes in their profession, if not personal style.

"What can I do for you, Walter?"

"Come over. You're faster than the normal channels."

Walter's voice had changed completely. The fat cop with suggestive remarks was gone, replaced by a chief inspector bypassing standard procedure for a reason he considered good enough.

Sirius said, "Gimme a hint,"

"She's looking great." The fat chuckle was back.

"Dammit, Walter ..."

"Behaves like a case for the house with the wadded doors, only she was talking about Voldemort."

"Comin'."

Sirius was guided into a room with a table, some chairs, one of them occupied by a woman. On reflex, he checked the walls - no one-side mirrors, so this woman was no suspect, just someone who had caused attention. Or searched for.

Then he saw her face.

Recovering from the first impact, Sirius said, "Good morning, madam. You've been looking for information about Voldemort?"

The woman took her time to examine him, quite so, as it seemed, although it also seemed like just a second before she spoke. "People said he lived here in this province. So I came to learn about him."

Province? Was she talking about England? The UK? "Where did you come from?"

"From the south, I came across the water. You know about Voldemort. Tell me."

For an instant, Sirius felt tempted to reply something like, "Say please." Only it was too impolite, too - improper toward this woman. And this room here ... "Let's go into my office, madam. There we can talk."

The woman followed him without hesitation, not asking, not smiling, not showing any sign of self-consciousness.

In his office, Sirius pointed toward a chair. "Please sit down. Some drink? Juice?"

A slight bow. Very graciously.

He filled two glasses. "Yes, I know about Voldemort. Although, this is public knowledge - why didn't you just enter the next library? Or a newspaper office - if you want ..."

"I cannot read your language. Is it painful for you to tell me?"

By habit, Sirius had started scribbling on his notepad, a mix of meaningless lines together with keywords from the conversation. At her words, he finished *Illit*, looked up in surprise. "Painful? What makes you think so?"

"Voldemort was an evil wizard, so I heard. You - suffered. It is not my intention to make you suffer again."

Now wasn't that gentle? ... The cynical thought seemed to die in Sirius' mind before he could finish it. "No, I ... Besides, he's dead."

"I know. I need to know more about his origin and his rise. Also his fall. Such evil in a wizard is an unexpected event."

She had to be crazy, only it seemed unthinkable ... Was this a stunt? A performance, recorded through a hidden microphone? Sirius examined her again. This strange dress - Deborah would have known better if this was the last fashion ... Remarkable figure - and the face, most of all her eyes ... He felt a bit unreal. "Evil, yes - you can say that twice ..."

"Why? Is this an incantation?"

"Huh? ... No, just a figure of speech ..."

Had to be a stunt. Only Sirius wasn't ready to believe it. But if so - he felt a challenge to uncover it, still more he felt a desire to be of help, and service. He asked, "What do you know about Voldemort?"

"I met a wizard. He said Voldemort is responsible for the opening between the magical and the other world."

"Really? Who was it?"

"I don't know his name. He said he killed him ..."

"Harry??"

"So his name is Ha-ry? Other people spoke this name when I asked them about Voldemort. But they knew only how it began. You know more."

"Why ... why didn't you ask him personally?"

"He left before I could ask him more. You will tell me more."

Somewhere inside Sirius, deep suspicion tried to win a fight against this overwhelming longing to do whatever she asked. For a moment, suspicion succeeded. "Had he reason to leave?"

The woman looked sad. "What he knew made him come to this conclusion. I did what I thought right, but I failed to prepare myself for this time - life is more precious than I expected ..."

Sirius stared at her, cop's instincts losing a hopeless battle.

She rose, made a step toward his desk. "I spent time to learn about this world. It was difficult, much has changed, but some things do not change ... I will not punish you, as you did not wrong. You will tell me all you know, about Voldemort, about Ha-ry ... I will reward you - this reward will make you forget, and then you will forget the reward."

Sirius' vision and mind were filled by a sensual face, over high breasts under a thin fabric, and eyes that stared at him - expectantly, promising.

* * *

Almyra registered the change in her adopted daughter almost immediately. So Rahewa had done a memorizable step toward maturity. Hopefully memorizable.

Probably so, by the look of things.

It reminded her of her own method to get rid of this protective burden. She had been less lucky than her daughter, had been forced to find someone to do her the favour because otherwise, so Almyra's calculation, she would never manage to seduce her husband, him being a teacher and herself being a student then. At least it had paid off, this summer trip home to Jamaica.

Not that it had been complicated to find someone there. Just ... Anyway, summer was a good time for that.

The signs in Rahewa were unmistakable - well, if you'd been waiting for them. A bit more calmness, a bit more self-confidence, the soft glow in her eyes even stronger ... And meeting Clemens in the hall, seeing him blush at Almyra's smile, next second straightening, responding her smile.

Rahewa stormed in. "Ma - Clemens and I, we want to visit Clara. In Munich."

In the beginning, Rahewa had called her *Almyra* - naturally so, since terms like Mum, Mummy, or mother were set in her memory, and the last Almyra had in mind was challenging this memory. And Remus was *you*, or *sir*, and every now and then a self-conscious *Remus*.

Then, one day, Rahewa came storming in, very much like a moment before, called, "Daddy I ..." Next moment, she left the room, her face dark red.

Later that day, Almyra caught her. "Rahewa, it's okay if you call him Daddy - we were both so pleased ..."

"No, it's not - you know why."

Almyra hugged her. "That's gentle of you ... Harry calls his step-mother Ma Weasley - and if he's trying to soothe her, just Ma. What do you think? - Almyra for serious talk, and ..."

The hugging in return put Almyra's ribs at risk. "But not Ma Lupin - you're too young for that ... Thanks, Ma."

Rahewa had no trouble asking for permission. She had no trouble either confronting her self-selected parents with a decision, or with the result of one. This announcement here seemed neither of both. There was a statement in it, a question, and some nervousness.

There was some nervousness in Almyra herself. "A weekend trip?"

"Er, yes. We ... Yes."

Almyra looked at her daughter. "I ... I just don't know what to say - I always thought, when the day comes, I'd look very experienced and say something clever ..."

Rahewa reached her, whispered in her ear, "I love him, Ma. And now I love him still more."

"Of course you do, my dear." Almyra hugged her, gasped. "Ouch - you don't know how strong you are."

A giggle. "I heard that ..." Rahewa stopped.

Her daughter's embarrassment was enough to overcome Almyra's own. "Let's sit a moment ... I - hope you didn't take me for a coward because I left it to Cho - I mean, telling you all about - er, sex and so."

"You ain't no coward!"

"Thank you. It was just - it's so much simpler for her, and I thought it was simpler for you as well."

"Yes."

Listening to the sound of this answer, Almyra looked up. "Really?"

"Yes, sure - I could ask her things, and she told me even more ..."

Hearing the same sound in the longer answer, Almyra asked, "Is there a question you didn't dare asking and she didn't want to address?"

After a moment's silence, Rahewa glanced at her. "Ma, how come people ... I cannot imagine that I'd ever ..."

Suddenly Almyra understood. "It's about loving one and desiring another, right?"

"Yes."

"Of course." Almyra shook her head. "Stupid of me, not to think of that ... Although now, that you - Cho would tell you now, or maybe in a while, but I'm glad that you give me the chance to re-establish my self-esteem."

Rahewa listened unsmiling.

"The sexual attraction is the simple side of things - survival of the race is the strongest motivation that's built into us, stronger than survival of the self, that's why parents die saving their children - well, and if you cut all these long words down to one, it's spelled sex."

Rahewa nodded.

"But it's also the deepest, the most complete way to express your affection. We feel affection for more people - only we're bound by ethics and taboos. They hold ..."

Rahewa interrupted her. "That's clear - no sex in the family, because incest diminishes the gene pool. But love ..."

"I was coming to that - maybe I'm not quite as fluent in this topic as in Transfiguration." Almyra smiled to take the sharpness out of her remark. "Love is - it's the desire to care, never to hurt, to value the other more than anything else. And for our culture, that's equivalent to abandoning sex with someone else."

She inhaled, fully aware that now came the tricky part. "While for other cultures - did you know that a Japanese bride, who's supposed to keep a virgin until the wedding night, can express her love by bringing a geisha to her loved one?"

"No, I didn't." Rahewa's eyes were widening.

Almyra nodded. "Yes, my dear - you're right. We know someone who's taken over quite a lot of Japanese ethics, and he's married with a Chinese, for whom it's not the same but still different from our western ethics."

Rahewa glanced at her, opened her mouth, closed it.

Knowing which question hadn't come, would never come, Almyra swallowed. "The - the answer to your question is yes, from both sides. But it would hurt Remus, and Cho, and I'd feel guilty forever, that's why it'll never happen."

Silence.

"Don't worry, dear - all of us know, it's nothing to suffer from, I'm just telling you to illustrate what I mean. The only time - do you remember the story of this owl patrol, how I got hit by a harpy? ... Well, and Harry cured me sufficiently so I could move - that's a kind of intimacy - afterwards, I really had trouble for a while, but since then ..."

"Oh my God."

Her daughter no longer looked like a young woman, having mastered the task of a delicate conversation with her mother. When Rahewa didn't continue, Almyra asked, "What's wrong, honey?"

"I ... It's so embarrassing ..."

For once, Almyra felt capable of going ahead, felt master of the situation, and this was a great feeling. "Tell me, my dear - it can't be that bad that you won't feel better afterwards."

Hesitantly, Rahewa explained what she had done at a campfire, and how her godfather had reacted. Almost inaudibly, she finished, "That's why - er, I pushed a bit - to make sure ..."

"I can't help thinking it wasn't the only reason." Gently, Almyra shook a weak shoulder. "Nobody knows better than Harry how it is to - to grow up. Next time you see him you'll say, I'm sorry, and he'll say, it's okay ... And now let's talk about this weekend - is it just so or is there something about Clara's plans?"

Rahewa's face lighted up. "Both - Clemens thinks she's basically ready, and he wants to come with a suggestion how to do it. We'd like to do it here, and he thought - if Clara could stay in Hogwarts a bit longer ..."

"Sounds reasonable." Almyra became aware that such a plan implied some logistics. "Did he talk with Hermione?"

"Yes, but ..."

Of course - Clemens was no teacher, no student either, a guest of a somewhat unclear state, and probably very reluctant to ask for resources. After a second's thinking, Almyra said, "What if we'd invite her as our nominal guest? Remus and I, that is - look for a guest room, and talk with Albus, maybe with some teachers so she can join some classes?"

"That'd be great, Ma."

"Then we'll do that. Please tell her - she's welcome, we're looking forward to meet her, and still more to say hello to the youngest witch around ... The - when she's going to take it - maybe it'd be a good idea to have help ready, in case ..."

Rahewa nodded. "Of course - Harry and Sandy. That's no question." She looked up. "But don't talk with him - Clemens wants to ask him personally, he'd be very upset if someone else ... Only he didn't want to ask before he knows for sure Clara's going to do it."

"That's understood." Almyra felt quite satisfied with the prospect of this particular young man as the most likely candidate for the role of her step-son-in-law.

Then she remembered the last hidden message in Rahewa's announcement. "Do you need money, dear? Munich's quite expensive, I heard."

* * *

Harry had considered the pros and cons for some time. Finally, he had come to his decision - to appear alone, because he alone was the Ambassador, however to have his daughter within reach. As well as his snake.

So one was sitting on the other, in an ante-room, accompanied by Rahewa who seemed glad doing Harry this favour, glad also to miss some afternoon classes, and certainly full of hope it wouldn't take that long.

Harry shared this hope, sitting here in this room which bore little resemblance with a courtroom, little resemblance also with that large hall he had seen once when Dumbledore had taken him on a memory journey to the Wizard Council. Because the Goblins Council consisted of less than a dozen figures, like Harry himself seated at a ring-shaped table. There was no top, no bottom, none of the levels and hierarchies even the most unremarkable district judge could not live without.

Which meant - each member of the round had the same rights, and the same responsibility.

Harry had recognized Wynor instantly, feeling little surprise to see him here. And of course Modragh Morony, his old - well, friend would fit best. Altogether, it seemed as though Goblins formed rounds like this one here according to actual needs, rather than by assigned ranks.

The others - there were no name tags, Harry didn't know their names, they would have told him nothing anyway ... He was here to speak, and they were here to listen - for Goblins, this was all that mattered.

Mr. Morony was apparently designated as their spokesperson, no doubt a gesture of politeness. The Gringotts Goblin showed a short smile. "Ambassador, please speak."

Harry suppressed an impulse to stand up. Morony had told him in advance - what counted as a respectful gesture in a human meeting was considered pretentious here.

"High Council," he began, "the magical world recently suffered from a mysterious epidemic. A short while ago, it stopped, after having caused casualties among wizards and witches, while not Goblins. It stopped - without being over, as I will explain. I have reason to believe that these events were just the beginning, and that the entire world is at stake, in particular our relationships with the Muggle world."

The reaction so far was zero. Goblins didn't look expectant, and they certainly could listen without wasting useless remarks like, "Hear! Hear!"

Harry continued, "It started in my family - which was pure coincidence, for all I know ..." He quickly summarized the events until their trip to the Crusader castle, then said, "At this occasion, I asked Urion the Unflinching for company. So he's a witness. If this Council agrees, I'll call him to report the event by himself."

"Please do so, Ambassador."

What was no court had no ushers either. Harry walked to the door, found his Goblin friend busy exchanging nosebumps with Sandra. "Urion?"

Listening to the colonel's short report, once more Harry became aware that his knowledge of the Goblin language was embarrassingly limited. Sure - if there'd been a fairy course for this language too ... But no, hard work was the only method. Well, he still had some years before reaching the age at which Dumbledore had mastered it.

Urion finished. Nobody asked him a question - probably this would have been grossly impolite toward the Ambassador. Harry saw a figure giving a short sign toward Urion, who found an empty seat, sat down.

Had this been the big boss?

Harry continued, "In the course of the subsequent activities to find a cure for the wizard fever, I met the unknown power personally. It is a person who calls herself the High Priestess, a - a witch ..." He described his encounter, then said, "After considering all facts, I came to the conclusion that this power can affect all of us, that it has great importance for all races, whether magical or not. Therefore, I am here to claim the following request."

Harry inhaled. "The coexistence of the magical and the non-magical world is facing a situation of unknown consequences. I ask the Goblin community to help evaluating the pending threat, and to do what is possible, or required, to come to terms with this mysterious power."

Harry leaned back, waited.

"Ambassador, where do you see the Goblin community directly involved?

Yes, that had to be the big guy, short as he was.

"Nowhere, Honourable. Goblins might be directly involved after the wizards, only I doubt it. The involvement can be seen from a market perspective - assuming that the Goblins are interested in playing the leading role as merchants for, and between, the magical and the non-magical world. This is even more a prospect as it was this approach which has ended bloody wars between the Goblin and the wizarding world."

"What should be our initial strategy, Ambassador, if this approach is suitable?"

Harry wouldn't hear a yes today, not a no either. But this question - there was little doubt about the outcome.

"To find the High Priestess," he answered, "and to talk with her. I am scanning around myself to find her - without my daughter, that is. We just don't know enough, gathering information is the only way I can see."

Probably after another sign Harry hadn't registered, Mr. Morony spoke. "Your claim is understood, Ambassador. We thank you for your explanations."

Harry rose, bowed. "High Council, good evening."

Outside, Rahewa looked surprised. "Already done?"

"Yes. They don't make much fuss - and if there's some consultation, then of course without me. But it looks good."

Rahewa came up. "Super."

"Say - can a *Caribbean Crown* hold you still a few minutes off Hogwarts?"

"What's that?"

"A cup of ice-cream and more - although, for Sandy, we need something else, she's a bit young for liquor."

Yes, Rahewa had time for that, and a better idea for Sandy's treat. Inspecting the display at the card, she said, "Order the same for her - to the outside, I mean, otherwise you're in trouble."

The waitress' expression made clear what she thought about such a large cup for such a little girl. "We have a children's cup, sir - vanilla and ..."

"No thanks." Harry grinned, pointing at Sandra. "There's more to her than meets the eye - and if she really cannot manage, the snake will."

The woman snorted, left.

Rahewa giggled. "It's always the same - you say the truth, and people feel mucked around."

"Funny, isn't it?"

Rahewa's giggling stopped. She looked at the table. "Harry, I ..."

Before she could come further, Harry said, "You've changed from a cheeky little minx to a woman, and that's no reason to feel sorry. Unless I'm badly mistaken."

Rahewa glanced up, showing a flushed smile. "No, you're not. I ... I know that you're not mad at me, for ... But I broke the codex."

Harry nodded. "Do you remember how you broke it the last time - when Kenzo sent you off and ..."

"Are you ..." Rahewa stopped, registering that yes, Harry was serious, while not really expecting her having forgotten how he took an *aikido* detention together with her. "Yes."

"Now ..."

Harry was interrupted by the waitress, coming with three *Caribbean Crowns*, one of them marked by a tiny parasol.

Without glancing over, Harry knew that the woman was standing in some distance, watching in disbelief how Sandra's cup was emptying quickly, although the spoon wasn't moved once. He grinned. "Don't look now, but - the waitress can't trust her eyes."

Of course Rahewa had to peek, and to chuckle.

"Would you agree when I say that the result of your mistake then was the beginning of the real communication between the two of us?"

Rahewa stared at him. "I didn't ... Yes, that's true."

"Would you also agree that what happened some days ago is the basis for us discussing things we didn't discuss before?"

"Yes - although the one and the other ..." Rahewa stopped. "Yes."

"Well, then ... There's no need to hurry with these discussions, and maybe I'm not eager to discuss Laila with you - it's just that the male and the female perspective cannot be the same, and someone - er, positively neutral but from the other sex, like Fleur for me - that's sometimes helpful."

"Yes ... I had a talk with Almyra, and - some day, I'll come back to your offer."

"Okay."

"And what about my detention?"

Harry laughed. "You won't give it a rest, would you?"

"No - it's like an omen, and it's still a breach of the codex."

Harry thought for a moment. "Good - here's my verdict ... One of the next days, at an evening of your choice, you will tell Clemens that you have something else to do. Then you will grab Vanessa and go with her to a quiet place - talking."

"That's all?"

"Well - listening would be helpful too."

"You know what ..." Rahewa interrupted herself. "Yes I will." Then she bowed. "You've enlightened me, *sensei*."

Harry bowed back. "The teacher is a student himself." Less solemn, he added, "And if you don't hurry with your cup, Sandy's going to take care of it - that'd be a bit much."

* * *

She knew from the start - it wouldn't work. Only she didn't know any better, being a sergeant in an army famous for standing their point, and even such a visit offered a way of being close to him.

If nothing else.

The travel was hardly suited to improve Laila's self-esteem. Harry offered a summoning, which finally would tell them whether she'd be as seasick as this Tony afterwards. Alternatively he offered a summoning with stunning.

"I'm scared enough," said Laila. "I don't need the additional thrill of my own vomit. Please knock - er, stun me."

Awakening in front of the house, she looked around, not feeling much difference. California and Israel - the same merciless sun, only the buildings had obviously consumed a bit more money - like this one, for example.

Then ...

"Hello, Laila - I was so looking forward to meeting you. Harry didn't tell me much - but Almyra had a lot to say - of course, she saw you only in army dress ... Come in."

This woman ... Breathtaking, that was the only appropriate term, Chinese and breathtaking. And this dress - Laila had thought about her own dress not more than fifteen hours a day, finally decided for something simple, cream-coloured slacks, a white T-shirt, trying to keep in mind that here in California it would be afternoon when she arrived. While Cho wore one of these Chinese dresses, narrow and long, with slits, not bothering with a bra, which for Laila herself was no good idea.

When Harry was out of earshot, Cho turned, looked into her eyes. "You're as attractive as Almyra said - this face and this skin ... What combination is it?"

"Russian father, and Jemenite mother."

"I'm just Chinese. Let me introduce you to the other guests - we've got quite a few races together."

Other guests?

It came as a pleasant surprise, and a relief. There was Urion, that Goblin, and there was Tony - with a girlfriend, apparently Japanese, apparently new, and obviously quite in love with each other.

"Lai-la!"

She felt her frustration melt - it was impossible to keep a bad mood when being welcomed by this girl, still more overwhelming than her mother ... Her parents, to be precise.

After a while, Laila stopped waiting for harsh remarks from Cho. They didn't come. Yes, Cho examined her, only it was no test, no waiting for the first lapse either. And Sandy was a great help - playing with her, talking with her, truly relaxed under the eyes of her mother.

Once Laila said, "I met her as Sandy, while you call her Cass - it's a bit - well, not confusing, just ..."

"Disquieting because you don't know which party to take." Cho grinned. "Rahewa calls her Little Dragon - take your pick, Laila, that's only between you and her."

Laila held the eye-contact for a moment, reading the message - *It has nothing to do with me and Harry, and besides, what's the sense in pretending?* Then she bent down to the girl. "In this case, I'll call you Snaky-pie, because that's what you are, a little pie with a snake around."

The girl looked delighted, and her mother's grin turned to a warm smile. "How beautiful. It's a pleasure to watch you ... With the girl."

Laila tried to decipher this message, gave up.

In a sense, Harry had been right. Laila felt no intention to hurt this woman, who appeared as pleasant as her husband, who was Sandra's mother, who could so admirably fight a campfire with a firestorm. Only ...

It didn't help her much.

Then Urion said goodbye. Shortly afterwards, Tony and Ireen left.

Close to a panic, Laila looked around, trying to signal as clearly as she could that she wanted to leave, if only Harry would come to ship her home. Except that said Harry fetched his daughter with the words, "C'mon, my little devil, time for a bathing," and disappeared.

"You look like a leftover after missing the bus." Cho's hand seized for Laila's own. "But you're not ... Come, let's talk a bit." The hand, obviously stronger than it looked, pulled her to a sofa. "Sit down, please."

Cho filled two glasses. Laila recognized the bottle. Passing over a tumbler, Cho said, "Now calm down and take it like a woman. All I have in mind is eating you alive ... Cheers."

With some relief, Laila recognized that Cho didn't mind a large gulp, followed her example, relaxing under the soft glow in her throat.

"Harry isn't much of a drinker - he had a bad start with alcohol, and since then ..." Cho grinned. "Maybe he'll tell you some day."

Pretty unlikely. Laila knew already that this had to be the last time ...

"Do you know why Almyra was so impressed with you?"

"Huh?"

"Al's a fighter, only she's scared of her own courage, that's why she always pretends to be a scientist. While you ... You're a fighter who isn't scared, and all you have is a gun."

Laila protested, "Who said I'm not scared? Of course I am."

"Do I scare you?"

"Er - no. I thought I was, but it was just the situation."

Not hearing an answer, Laila added, "You're - I hoped I could dislike you, but I cannot. Then I hoped it would ..." Unable to continue, she shook her head, closed her eyes.

"Why do you desire him that much?"

Laila opened her eyes again, had to blink before she could see clearly. "Why? For many reasons. If it was just because he's handsome and gentle ... But he's the toughest - I never saw him actually fight, just ... And he has magic. It's stupid, I know, but if I cannot have magic for myself, then ... But the worst, the part I cannot handle - when he treated me, first with this

mind dope and then with the scar, together with Sandy - it opened a void that's burning to be filled. Toward Sandy - I can cuddle her, and cuddle her ... "

"And toward Harry, you cannot?"

"Cuddling maybe, but ..." Laila snorted.

"Who said so?"

"Wha ..."

"Remember what he said? He's not going to hurt me - that means not doing something against my will, or without my agreement. That's what he said ... And I say - let's give it a try ... Together."

Laila stared. "Now you've scared me."

"Only scared?"

Cho's fingers touched her forehead, trailed her eyes, cheeks, throat ... Laila had closed her eyes again, felt the soft touch at her breasts, resting for a moment at her nipples, while she had trouble breathing.

"Come with me." A hand grabbed her own.

Drained of all power, Laila followed her through the floors into a large bedroom.

Cho stopped, turned, went on tiptoe, kissed her lightly on the mouth. "Harry will need still a few minutes with Cass. We have time enough to use the bathroom and to undress - each other, I'd suggest. There - you'll find a new toothbrush at the left side."

Laila suppressed a tremble. "Does he ... will he ..."

"Know what to expect? ... Let me explain a bit more."

Cho motioned her to sit down at the bedside. "He didn't come and say, there's someone interesting for a threesome. It's not exactly a habit of ours, but we did it in the past, with someone close to both of us. It may last a night, a month, a year ... When he invited you, I already had a feeling - and when I saw you, I knew what he meant."

"But ... Are we close to each other?"

"I saw you with Cass, heard Al talking about you, I know what Harry thinks about you ... And the thought of being with you's arousing me - Harry knows my taste." Cho smiled. "And you?"

"I never did that before - I'm still ..."

"I promise you - we'll do nothing fancy, we'll take our time - if you say stop, the game's over. But for all I can see and feel, it's not disagreeable for you."

"No, just ..."

Cho's mouth went to her ear, whispered, "Just for your orientation - first it'll be you and Harry. From then on, we'll do it playing by ear ... I'm going to use the bathroom across - please wait for me before undressing."

In the bathroom, Laila looked into the mirror, checked her face. Her eyes - as if moving into a battle ... However, between her legs it felt different.

Cho awaited her outside. Seeing Laila's face, Cho said, "For me, undressing you - that's like unwrapping a present from Harry, and still more, it is *detecting* you - only you look as if I'm the nurse, and this is an OP." She smiled. "Maybe that's a bad example - I heard you have some pleasant memories of an operation ... Do you want to do it yourself?"

Laila exhaled. "No - just nervousness ... You know, I had sex with a woman - in the army, in ground training ..."

Cho worked at her slacks. "How was it for you?"

"It was forbidden, it was a kind of sport, it was sex - and we knew how to satisfy each other."

Cho laughed softly. "Sounds like the description of the food in the canteen. I think I'll score better - which doesn't mean I'm competing against Harry ... Now imagine this is China here. I'm a concubine, preparing you for him - that's pretty much what I'm doing ..."

Laila could imagine that easily, in particular since Cho suddenly seemed to disappear behind this mask, silent, bowing, looking under herself - only her hands weren't quite as obedient, stroking her more than necessary.

Laila had her eyes closed, opened them quickly, gasping, when she felt a finger probing her exactly where the tingling was growing and growing.

Cho rattled something - apparently Chinese.

"What was that?"

"Elder sister is quite aroused. I feel honoured." Cho's voice turned normal. "Would you open the zip in my back?"

Laila found it, pulled it down. When Cho didn't move, she started to pull the wonderful garment down. Feeling the soft breasts, smaller than her own, she lost her embarrassment, still more when she felt the nipples stiffening under her fingers.

Then she realized that they were standing in front of a large mirror, that Cho's eyes were closed. Stroking over breasts, belly, downward, Laila murmured, "You're the sweetest dessert I ever saw."

Losing the last hesitation, she moved Cho's legs apart, to explore her further, finding her ripe and juicy.

Cho gasped, responding with a thrust against her hand.

A thrill went through Laila's spine. Seeing this beautiful puppet twist and moan under her hands ...

A knocking at the door.

She froze.

Cho reacted instantly. "Come under the cover." A moment later, she called, "Come in."

Harry was still fully dressed, only barefoot. He smiled. "Sandy was delighted to hear that Laila will be with us at breakfast." Looking into two faces, he asked, "Do I get a little encouragement for my strip?"

Cho moved the cover downward, enough to expose four breasts, in pairs of different size and colour.

Laila watched him undress. Seeing Harry's muscular torso for the first time, his eyes resting on her, she felt calmness, her body too heavy to move, her mind filling with happy expectation.

He stripped down his pants, releasing a member that was growing visibly. Then he came around, climbed under the cover, only to move it further downward until her belly was exposed. Resting on an arm, he inspected her body. "You're magnificent, Laila. Beautiful. Strong. Inside and outside."

He kissed her.

For a while, she felt hands, mouths, eyes exploring her body, without haste, probing here and there, testing her reaction. When she tried to return some caressing, a voice at her ear said, "No - you'll get your turn ... Just enjoy it."

She did, feeling her arousal grow, until her body seemed to cry for fulfillment. "Please ... Please come."

Hands took her arms, legs, for a moment holding her spread-eagled. Then Harry moved between her legs, lifting them up while Cho held her arms.

She felt his touch, dipping, pausing, then filling her entirely. Next moment, his weight was on her, pressing her breasts, and her arms were free to embrace him.

Looking up, she saw Cho's face, flushed, full of expectation. Then she concentrated all her senses on him.

With his first hard thrust, she lost all orientation, all control. This was what she'd dreamed of, this state of ecstasy and completion.

She arched up, crying out in her orgasm, was pressed down instantly by his weight again, her fingers clawing into his back, felt them pulled off, caught by strong hands.

Helpless, buried under two inflamed bodies, she watched him nail her down again and again, getting faster, her own gasping and groaning accentuating his rhythm.

Then he stopped, tensed, only the part inside her twisting, Harry's mouth at her ear issuing choked moans. She closed her eyes, savouring this moment forever.

After some time, Laila felt his weight lifted from her. Opening her eyes, she saw his face come down for another kiss. "The afterplay's a bit short in this grouping."

Startled, she came up, looked at Cho. "I'm sorry - for a moment, I completely ..."

"Never mind - in particular since I'm going to change that now."

"No - please let me ... I was so egoistic."

"What makes you think it's only your pleasure I have in mind?"

"Nothing, but ..." Laila came up, caught her, fixing Cho's arms at her back, her own free arm between Cho's legs, lifting her. "It's a while since I played with a puppet, and I never had one that was so inviting to let her twist and say aah."

Cho's protest died, making room for a total abandonment to this new experience.

Playing with this puppet was an incredible game, with Harry partly watching, partly helping.

"And now let me find out how this puppet tastes." Laila knelt between these twisting legs, holding them in a tight grip, saw Harry block Cho's arms. Then she bent down to drive Cho into madness.

When she felt Cho tensing, Laila quickly released her grip around the thighs, brought her hands inside, one of them spreading the object of her caressing until moments ago, while the other hand kept alternating between a stroke and a gentle slap, until Cho's tortured groan told her to stop.

Laila looked at her puppet, feeling like never before.

Having found some breath, Cho said, "That was ... come here."

Laila bent down, felt Cho's arms taking her shoulders, Cho's legs crossing around her flanks. Next moment, hands were gripping her own thighs, spreading her own opening, to release as soon as a welcome guest had found its path.

Cho smiled. "Favour for favour." Then she took Laila's head, pressed it toward her beautiful breasts while Harry guided Laila uphill to another peak.

While not himself, obviously. Laila felt him withdraw moments later, caught the idea, moved up, lay down at Cho's side. Grabbing her, she moved the slender body onto her own, pressing the beautiful face into her own breasts, whispered, "Favour for favour." Then she looked at Harry. "Ready?"

Watching, feeling the rhythm of one body and the response from the other, Laila felt peace in her mind, happiness in her soul while the two were together reaching what they called the clouds and the rain, as she learned afterwards.

Curled under the cover, with Harry in the middle, Laila murmured, "And when I arrived here ..."

Sleep caught her before she could finish the sentence.

* * *

Cho watched the sleeping face. Then she put a finger at this delicately-shaped lips.

Laila came awake, slowly at first. Then her eyes widened, a gasp, and Cho felt her going tense. An instant later, she relaxed, although still looking uncertain.

Cho bent forward, placed a light kiss at these lips, grinned. "Did I scare you?"

"Er - it took me a second ..."

"Can only be the jet lag - I wouldn't know another reason." Cho laughed. "I should warn you right away - there are people saying I could cut paper with my tongue."

Laila, a bit more awake, said, "I'm a sergeant - I think I can balance out."

Cho smiled. "Of course it's not true what people say - I'm going to prove it to you ..."

Satisfied with the effect of her words in Laila's face, Cho added, "... but not now - I'm supposed to call you for breakfast."

"Er - can I shower first?"

"That might be a good idea, before two people confuse you with the food."

When Laila still hesitated, Cho stood up. "Okay then - maybe I'm pushing you too fast - we're downstairs."

Some minutes later, sitting at the breakfast table, Cho saw Laila entering the room, looking around. "Where ..."

"Cass couldn't wait - she wanted to swim. That means Tony's pool - it's up to us whether we follow or have a leisurely Sunday morning - what's left of it."

Obviously, both prospects appeared to Laila like the choice between a rock and a hard place. So Cho said, "Sit down, dug in, and let me explain a few things."

With satisfaction, she watched as simple hunger took command in the woman.

"Okay, then ... First of all - as far as we're concerned, this wasn't a one-night stand we're trying to forget quickly. Neither the one, nor the other."

For a second, Laila stopped chewing, then continued, slower than before.

"We're not offering a role in this household either. It's just - we see each other again, occasionally. As a special event - something like that."

"I'm ... Go ahead."

"Each of us can ask, and each of us can say no - that's the basis. We're not keeping dark secrets from our friends, and we're not boasting around either. Tony's pool, for example - I could understand if that comes a bit early for you."

"Well ..."

"What I'm trying to say - nobody here has reason to feel ashamed, or to pretend. Not that we have a knack for exhibitionism ..."

Laila grinned.

"... by the way, there are two more rules. No solo turns, and no fun while Cass is awake - she's taking part too much."

"Really?"

"Yes, unfortunately so. Sometimes it's a real nuisance ..."

More relaxed than before, Laila chuckled.

"... and I have to admit that I'm the one who worries - Harry thinks it wouldn't hurt, but I feel just too restricted."

"I can imagine."

"But Cass needs her afternoon sleep, if you can follow me."

Laila could, apparently breathless for a moment.

"Well, that's all - did I mention that I like to chat, just so - I mean, there's a limit for everything, after all."

"Sounds promising - very much so ... I'm trying to find the snag."

"You mean it's too good to be true?"

Laila seemed to select her words carefully. "In the army - and before too, I've learned that you pay dearly for any short period of happiness. I can live with that - I just want to know what to expect."

"Maybe you paid already."

"With what? - With that bullet? ... You're joking, a short moment of pain and then ... No, certainly not."

Cho poured more tea. "How's life in the army?"

What the woman was telling her made clear that Laila was close to her limits, on the brink of something drastic. The problem wasn't the army and its regulations, not the unpleasantnesses of stupid drill nor the risks of real combat. It was the situation.

"Look at the six-days war," explained Laila. "At that time, we knew what we did, fighting for our life and defending our territory. We - that's good, ha, I wasn't even born then. But today ... They bomb a schoolbus with twenty kids, and all you can think is get them, get them - and then we come with the choppers and kill three kids and an old woman here, five kids and an old man there ... We can only lose this war - when we've shot the last Palestinian, we'll look into a mirror, and then ..."

Cho didn't know what to say.

"I thought about joining some special squad, to have a chance fighting the real terrorists. But the way they use women - I wanted to kill them, not to ... Maybe I'm not idealistic enough."

"Maybe it's just the opposite."

"Yeah, could be. When I heard about your fights against these dark wizards - I was so envious! What's evil in a Palestinian? - They were there before we came. Maybe I should travel back in time and fight the Nazis, or the Romans, or the Egyptians ..." Laila looked at Cho. "You were involved too, right?"

"What did you hear?"

"Not much - " Laila grinned. "But maybe I just filtered out everything that wasn't related to Harry." She looked expectantly.

Cho said, "I fought in the Battle of Hogwarts - I was in the Flying Squad. I killed a man then, Voldemort's number two, you could say ..."

"Really? Great." Laila looked admiringly. "And in the final battle?"

"I was there, but not as part of the fighting troops."

Laila was waiting for more, then seemed to realize that there wouldn't be more, maybe also why. After a moment, Cho said, "That's a story for another day - if you want, I'll tell you how the Squad was formed, and how Harry spent a fortune to get us better equipped."

"A fortune? I thought ..."

"Not his own money." Cho grinned at the memory. "Or maybe yes, in a sense - do you know what a Goblin Request is?"

Cho was about to finish the story of Harry's exam patrol when a hot rush in her mind told her - husband and daughter were back from swimming.

Then she could watch Laila blush again, because first Harry kissed her and then Sandra occupied her full attention.

A while later, Sandra found the time right for some food - not necessarily lunch, since the name didn't matter much as long as it was rice pudding with turkey. This settled, the girl went sleepy, and Harry brought her to bed.

Cho said, "Normally that's my job at weekends. Today's an exception - although, at closer inspection, what's the difference?"

"Huh?"

"Rather than bringing a little girl to bed ..." Cho walked over. "You're sweet, looking that way ... Don't think that's our - er, standard quota, but what's the sense of guests if not for a break in the routine?"

Without the frenzy of the previous evening, this afternoon became a long, leisurely play, heating up only toward the end, with changing teams sticking to the same simple pattern - the one in the middle wasn't supposed to move while the other two were allowed everything, up to some level whose exact specification remained subject to discussions. Invariably, at some point, the one in the middle stopped arguing, maybe for sheer need of breath.

Laila wanted to leave early - for her, the night would be eight hours shorter. She was watching the plates and dishes for an afternoon meal appear, her eyes gleaming in pleasure, when Cho heard Harry's phony.

"Hello, Sirius, how are you? ... In the office? What are you ... And Deborah? ... Oh, I see ... Notes? What notes?"

Harry's smile faded - completely.

"I think I have an idea what it means - wait a second, Sirius, I'm comin' over."

Harry looked up. "There's something strange in Sirius' office. I'm going to have a look - you may start eating meanwhile."

Next instant, his seat was empty.

13 - *Ultimate Option*

Harry stared at the sheet from Sirius' notepad. Between lines and patterns someone would draw while listening to someone else, maybe on the phone, he saw a few words. *Mad? ... Illit ... Province ... Voldemort ... Harry!*

At first, they didn't tell him anything. And, although this seemed impossible, the second word told him even less. "What's *Illit*?"

"Illiterate - can't read."

"And *Province*?"

"Ask me something simpler. Quebec's a province - that's in Canada."

"Oh, really?" Harry examined his godfather. "What do you know about this scribble?"

"What I told you - it's my writing, no doubt - here, this pattern is my typical sign. I must have written it while talking with someone, only I can't remember."

"Do you make calls around the world for every scribble you find and cannot remember when you did it?"

Sirius' voice turned angry. "No, sir - only that I usually remember them, and even if not - but if I find the names Harry and Voldemort, then I get a weird feeling, and when I have this feeling, I call."

Harry felt his initial assumption confirmed. His sarcastic remark had been more a provocation than an expression of disbelief. He asked, "Would you say you wrote it here in this office?"

"Definitely. Otherwise it would have been my pocket notebook, or a tissue, or whatever."

"Assume you'd find it - at the desk of another cop, and you know he has this habit like you, only this cop disappeared - what would you make of it?"

Sirius grabbed the sheet. "A conversation that took longer than a few remarks - look at all the lines ... This someone behaves strange enough that the cop asks himself whether the person's mad. Then he realizes somehow that this someone can't read and write, or maybe not write only ... It's about Voldemort - your name pops up ... That exclamation mark - hmm ..."

"And what if it wasn't a he? If it was a woman?"

Sirius smiled. "Then it would have been more pleasant - hopefully."

"Would the patterns be different?"

"No." Sirius grinned. "Not on paper."

"No difference at all?"

Sirius' face steadied. "It depends. If she was good-looking, he would scribble only the minimum because it's nicer looking at her than at the desk - this sheet would be the result of a longer conversation, then."

"And she was so good-looking that he can't remember?"

Sirius laughed. "Sure - there was a bit more than a conversation, and he said, do me a favour, honey, gimme a memory charm so I don't have to lie to my wife."

Harry couldn't laugh.

Registering that he was left alone with his fun, Sirius asked, "What's up, Harry? You look as if you knew it was a woman."

"That's what I think, yes."

His godfather looked in disbelief. "Thanks for your faith in me, but forget the idea - it was a joke, not even a good one."

"I would know more reasons for a memory charm than a little journey through the wetlands. Destroying traces, for instance."

"Are you talking about a particular woman?"

"Yes - the High Priestess." As short as possible, Harry summarized the events for Sirius.

His godfather snorted. "You didn't mind telling me in advance, huh?"

"In advance of what? ... Should I have called and said, hi Sirius, we have a little problem, Cho is scared like hell, but you cannot do anything, we just wanted you to know? ... If I'm right - how did she come to you?"

"Good question - if you're right."

Harry tried to remember something he had learned in Hogwarts, looked up. "Mind if I scan a bit through your mind?"

"Actually, yes ... But okay, go ahead."

Memory charms, so much Harry knew, were difficult to detect - the only chance was to know what to look for. But how to look? He was no mind reader ... If you cannot see, switch on the light ... "Imperio!"

Sirius eyes turned glassy.

Rather than asking questions, Harry sent a mind wave - his own impression from the High Priestess, filtering out his own rage as good as he could, emphasizing her appearance, her flair. This done, he pointed his wand, said, "Recorrigo!"

Sirius' eyes became clear again. "What was this?"

"What do you remember?"

"I wanted to know what I should do - except nobody told me. Then I ..." The Law Enforcement chief fell silent.

"C'mon, Sirius - it's important."

His godfather looked at the table. "It was like a déjà-vu - of something pleasurable ... Like a dream - er, wetter than usual."

Harry swallowed a remark about the frequency of wet dreams for a married man, for several reasons ... And Sirius had been twelve years in prison, he would remember them. At this moment, his godfather said, "Harry - please tell me you don't think what you think, so I can stop thinking what you think - even if I'd ... What's the sense in ..."

Harry shook his head. "What I think is that you had a visitor. What she actually did to make you forget, and how - for someone unprejudiced, even watching her's quite impressive ..."

"Unprejudiced, huh? That's cute, really, that is. I want to know what happened here ..."

"Why?" interrupted Harry his godfather's outburst, partly to save Sirius from unnecessary embarrassment, still more because Harry felt other concerns. "Does it matter whether she sent you a dream or was a bit more to the point? I'm sure she can do both - she was here, and she spoke with you, there's no question for me about that."

"Oh, man - shit!" Sirius slammed his fist on the desk. "And I don't even know - what did she want from me?"

"Information, I'd say."

"And I couldn't spill it fast enough, and then I couldn't ..." Sirius exhaled deeply. "And now?"

"She's learned about Voldemort. She's got our address. We can take that as a given ... But she wasn't there yet."

"What does that mean?"

"Maybe she needs time to think it over. Or maybe she cannot travel that fast ..." Suddenly Harry became aware that he was here in this office while his family ... "Sirius - I have to go - she might knock at our door right as we speak ... Don't blame yourself, that's all I ..."

"And what if I do?"

"Then you're wasting time, which I haven't ... Bye."

When Harry appeared in the dinner room at home, three women looked at him, only the youngest of them with a smile in her face. Cho asked, "What is it, Harry?"

"Sirius had a visit from the High Priestess. She interviewed him - spelled, of course ... What do you think about a week's vacation from home? Your parent's house would be best - it's unlikely that Sirius ..."

"No! I'm not leaving my home! Let her come - she might be in for a surprise!"

Harry could smile. "It's not even unlikely - mothers protecting their children, we know what a power that is, don't we? Except that I'd feel better if I knew Sandy in good care at a place unknown to her."

Cho stared at him, her eyes wide open.

"Need a bodyguard? I'm ready - only I haven't my Uzi with me."

Both Harry and Cho turned to Laila.

"So she's a big witch?" The sergeant in civvies had a fierce expression in her face. "What makes you think a bullet doesn't dig holes into her like into anyone else?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Laila, that's very kind of you. But even assuming she doesn't spell you - I wasn't planning to shoot her, or to kill her by some other method. Not ..."

"I was."

Both Harry and Laila turned to Cho.

"Yes, it's true - she wants Cass, and for that she has to pass me, and that will be the moment when one of us two will change their mind."

Harry came to her. "Cho, please - if not your parents, then Fleur and Bill, or Marie-Christine, or a Hogwarts suite - anywhere but here. Let me take Laila back to ..."

"No. She's a guest of mine who's ready to help me against that woman, isn't that so, Laila?" When Laila nodded with some hesitation, Cho said encouragingly, "This is California - a single call and you have everything, from a pistol to - do you think a tank will help?"

Harry stared at his wife, desperately trying to find an argument which might convince her that in would be ...

His phony buzzed.

Hearing the sound, Cho glared at him. "Did you give her a phony? Just in case?"

Harry suppressed his reply, probably one of his best decisions ever, fetched the piece, checked the display. "No - it's Michael."

* * *

It was a good place to exercise. It was also a good place to sit and think, to dream, to imagine she'd be sitting at his side. He could perform short conversations in his mind. He could say things he wouldn't say in reality ... Not yet, that was, although he knew he would be able to speak out the words - only that they weren't due ... Not yet. Maybe never.

Michael was sitting near the borders of the Forbidden Forest, not too far away the small graveyard, Rage's sacred place. Alone in the darkness, no campfire because he didn't want to

cause attention. So close to the forest, a fire wasn't a good idea anyway ... Michael could look at the graveyard, he would register when some figures would appear there - then he could play more audibly or just walk away, should the need arise.

But it was fine as it was - sitting alone, with no more company than his guitar and his thoughts. He used these times to exercise new pickings, new sequences. And sometimes, he played a song, just humming under his breath, only the guitar at normal volume - a song he wouldn't play in public, not with an audience of more than a certain ... And not for her either, given the state of things.

Maybe some day ...

Although - there had been an audience, one evening. Having finished this particular song, which started *The first time I ever saw your face*, Michael couldn't help feeling that someone was watching him. Looking around, he saw nobody.

Then he turned, and there it was ... A light figure, half man, half horse, standing motionlessly. Firenze, as Michael knew.

For a moment, his breath stopped.

Recovering, he started another song, louder this time, very special in its own way. *Poliushka pole* - without even knowing what the words meant, in this song from the endless Russian steppes, was the music alone sufficient to raise a picture - a horde of men on horses, galloping along, disappearing at the horizon in a cloud of dust ... And Michael's fingers knocked a quick beat against the guitar wood, like the hooves of a horse passing the wooden planks of a bridge.

He didn't turn again. When the song was over, there came a short moment, something like an optical illusion, or maybe that was just how his mind tried to cope with the sensation - like someone applauding, pleased, politely, and a bit teasing ... And then Michael felt alone again.

He hadn't told anyone. Some conversations were too private. Maybe ...

He could feel it - he had company again. Didn't feel like this centaur. Then who ... At this moment, he saw her. A woman, stepping into his view. "Your music is touching, wizard. Who is the one you want to touch?"

Michael had to look against the moonlight, unable to register more than an outline. Still, female she was, no doubt about that. "I don't think this's any of your business, madam."

"True. My business is not as romantic as your feelings. Forgive me if my question lacked decency. I noticed you calling for her."

Had he called?? ... "Who are you?"

"I am the High Priestess."

Michael gasped. The High Priestess! What could he do? All he had was a guitar - yes, if he'd been Orpheus, who was able to silence deer and ...

"You heard about me, wizard, this is quite obvious. Who told you about me?"

Damned if he'd tell.

"Was this a wizard who is called Ha-ry?"

Michael couldn't suppress a twist. How ...

"So you know him. I believe you shared this place of wizardry and wisdom with him, through many seasons. Is this true?"

Michael found his speech. "What ... What do you want from him?"

A fleeting instant of something like amusement. "This is *my* business, wizard. I believe you know how to call him. Would you do that for me?"

"I'm not ... What I heard ..." Michael stopped - wasn't Harry searching for her? In this case ...

"My business is honourable, young wizard. I could order you, only I learned that I have already built barriers which are unnecessary and threatening to corrupt the honesty. So I beg you - call him for me."

"And then?"

"Then I will wait for him."

If only ... With fingers that seemed astonishingly clumsy, considering their fluency and ease on guitar only seconds earlier, Michael seized for the phony he had won about a year ago, in a school contest. "Ha - Harry Potter, please."

"This connection is not open for public calls, sir."

What now? "Er - I'm calling in the name of Rahewa Lightfoot ..." Was it correct? "Might also be Rahewa Lupin."

A short pause. "If this is an unjustified claim, sir, you'll be cancelled from the register. Do you stand to your request, sir?"

He exhaled. "Yes."

Harry's voice. "Michael? ... You're ... What's up?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Harry - I hope I ... Here's someone who wants to talk with you - it's the High Priestess."

No gasp. No hesitation, only Harry's voice suddenly flat, smooth. "Where are you?"

"At - at the forest. I can see the graves from here."

"Comin'." The connection was dead.

Michael couldn't even muster the energy to store the piece in his pocket.

* * *

Harry would have liked jumping right to the place, only that it was within the boundaries of Hogwarts' protecting zone - which also meant he would be unable to escape, at least not by jumping.

Tricky lady, that ... Or maybe she wasn't aware.

He was breathing not much quicker, arriving at the graveyard, not after a short walk, no matter how fast, not after all these training sessions with Tony.

Then he saw them.

Harry walked over, unaware that his movements had changed to the balanced gait of an *aikido* adept. "Good evening, High Priestess ... Hi, Michael."

"Harry - I hope I didn't - er, she said ..."

"It's okay, Michael - I was looking for her, and she couldn't have found a better time. I'm glad you came through - normally there's no way to reach me unless I've opened the link."

"I mentioned Rage."

"That was clever of you." Harry looked at the woman. "Was Hogwarts your next step on your journey?"

"I was afraid a direct visit might cause undesired trouble."

"You can say that twice! There are ..." Harry stopped, registering with surprise something like pleased attention in the woman's face. "It's not funny - there are two women, they'd shoot you at first sight!"

"They might not succeed, still this would be a severe breach of harmony. It is a good sign that we found a better place."

"Harmony, huh?" Harry examined her again. "Recently I've been a bit out of harmony."

"I am to blame for that. You may forgive me, if you can."

Had to be seen, that.

The woman looked at Michael. "This young wizard has clear opinions about his own business, and someone else's business." She turned back to Harry "I have nothing to hide."

Michael rose. "I think I should leave you alone - unless ..." He glanced at Harry.

"I'll be wiser afterwards - but I think I'll feel more at ease without you ... Please keep this to yourself - until I come and tell you."

Michael nodded, shot a last glance at the woman, looked at Harry again. "I'll wait till day after tomorrow, okay?"

Harry nodded.

The woman watched the young man leave, turned to Harry "You will live to tell."

If not for his past experience, Harry would have sworn she was teasing him. He said, "That's good to know ... Mind if we sit down?"

The woman sank down graciously. Then Harry registered that her stance was pretty much the lotus position, like his own. He said, "You had a talk with Sirius Black, my godfather. What did you do to him?"

"He was the first wizard who could give me reliable report of Voldemort and his doing. Until then, I heard many kinds of myths, rumours. It was impossible for me to distinguish them from true facts ... I thought it better not to raise any alarm while I was pondering my next steps - it is more difficult to adjust to a foreign culture than I expected. I had done wrong already, it was my concern not to do more harm."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Language is as clumsy as fascinating, Ha-ry. Your godfather taught me an illustrative example - you can say that twice. This young wizard taught me another one - is this any of your business, Ha-ry? I did no harm."

"Then it's quite a change of style, isn't it?"

"It may so appear to you. From your own perspective, you may be right. I regret what effects I caused."

"Always the best intentions, huh? Only that there are some wizards less around than before."

"I have no good intentions, no bad intentions either. I am the High Priestess, a mere tool."

And a very efficient one, by all means. Then Harry remembered the most urgent issue. "I got the feeling you were looking for retirement."

"This is an inaccurate description. You may call it release - and improvement ... It is a good sign that you could determine my request from our short encounter - it confirms what I have ..."

"Save your compliments!" Harry became aware of his own voice. "Sorry - that was impolite of me. But do you know what we're talking about?"

"Yes. I learned that it is your daughter I want to meet."

"Meet? That's good - she's two years old."

"She will grow. It did not slip my attention that you considered her old enough to be with you on a journey which was extraordinarily dangerous, for all your knowledge then."

Harry almost gasped. They were discussing Sandy, and this woman had him in defense! "It wasn't on ..."

Purpose, he'd planned to explain. Only it wasn't entirely true.

After a moment, he said, "It was the only way - okay, I admit that I wasn't worried. It had to do with music - but what's more important, she'll grow at home. The sooner you come to terms with this fact, the better."

"Your daughter's mother must know that there is more to this union than coincidence, and affection. It is impossible to miss the signs."

"She's extremely narrow-minded about Sandy, and she's determined not to miss if - sorry, let me explain it without slang ... Before she will be ready for as much as listening to you, not to mention agreeing, you'll need some better arguments - and time."

"You are listening to me, Ha-ry."

Yes he was, wasn't he? "Maybe I'm used to deal with - er, people that seem supernatural, or something in that direction."

"I am not supernatural. Not more than your daughter. I am tempted to say less, although this would indicate a scaling that might be seriously misleading. How did you convince your daughter's mother that she can join you on your journey?"

"It wasn't me - it was Sandy." Thinking it over, Harry added, "And I'm not sure that you need to know - to be honest, I think you're the last I'm going to tell."

"I blame myself for your mistrust. My request is honourable, it is my first duty to show you that this is true. I pray to the gods for help, to guide me so I will not endanger the harmony more than I did already."

Harry stared into this wonderful face. Was she tricking him? Was he fully master of his decisions? ... A test would be to leave ... Only then he'd be back to square one.

Tentatively, he touched her mind with his *haragei*.

Honesty. Determination. Loneliness. Wondering. And something like a smile, saying, *Do you want to see more?*

Harry exhaled. "Allright then, let's talk - er, High Priestess ... Is this your correct title?"

"It is my duty. My name is Aram'chee."

"Okay, er, Aram'chee. I want to offer you a deal - you ask me a question, and I ask you a question, taking turns ... It's your turn - ladies first."

"You call your daughter San-dy. Is this her name?"

"She has many names. Her official one is Sandra Catherine." On impulse, Harry added, "I wanted to call her Cassandra, but I didn't come through with that."

The expression in the woman's face was undeniably pleasure. Harry would have liked to ask her if the real Cassandra had been a contemporary of Aram'chee, except there were more important questions. "Whom do you represent?"

Aram'chee prepared her words carefully. "I am a servant of a power of which I know only one thing - this power brought the gift of magic into our world. I have no picture, no memory of figures, or voices. Besides, I am not the first High Priestess."

Harry felt disappointed, but then, what had he expected? A godlike being, or some aliens?

"Who is the mother of your daughter?"

"Her name is Cho Chang - Chang-Potter, since we're married. She's Chinese, a first-generation witch. She's responsible for Sandy's temper - well, most of it ... We met here in Hogwarts - but I think you know already, after you've interviewed Sirius."

"The same truth is different from one person to the next. I also expect more questions from your side than from mine, so I use the opportunity to make my knowledge righteous."

"And what did Sirius ... Sorry, drop that."

"He said it was fate that brought you together." Something like a smile. "He also made a remark about your wife's temper, and your own, from his own view."

"Fate, huh? ... Yes, probably ..." Concentrating again on the priority of topics, Harry asked, "What exactly is the task of a High Priestess?"

"To serve as a controlling element in the wizarding world. Quite obviously, magic is a privilege - the people you call Muggles have nothing for compensation. This bears the risk of hybris at one side, and avarice at the other. This is the reason for the rule ... Earlier times knew about this position - it seems this knowledge was lost."

Someone like Professor Binns, the ghost and history teacher, might know more - for Harry, a Tarot card was the only hint.

Aram'chee's next question surprised him. "How did music come into your daughter's life?"

"It started with a Goblin harp ..." Harry explained how the woman's own doing had triggered the events between Sandy and Héloïse, and lastly was responsible also for Sandy meeting Michael.

The High Priestess seemed truly happy. "I praise the gods - there is no shadow without light! This is a hint that I will find forgiving for what I did."

Maybe so, only her remark did nothing to make her idea look any better. Harry asked, "Why do you want Sandy as the next High Priestess?"

"It seems to me these are two questions, Ha-ry. But I will answer both of them, as one of the answers is very short. Your daughter's qualification is beyond any doubt - I would grossly violate my duty if I would ignore that ... For the other part of your question, I have two answers, one of them honourable, the other selfish. But they are both honest."

"Okay, the good news first, please."

"You mean the honourable? I don't know whether it is better than the other - you may judge yourself. Every High Priestess has to pass over the duty to a successor, at a time when she feels it right. There is no rule when, or how long - in some sense it is the most difficult part of this task ..."

Harry felt reminded of his own duty as the Goblins' Ambassador.

"... The old Priestess can pass over not only knowledge but also experience, to some degree. And of course the new Priestess adds her own qualities, as well as her knowledge of the time and culture. This regulation should ensure that every new Priestess is an improvement, less prone to mistakes than the previous one. What I did recently, after a long time of hiding, shows that my judgement is not in harmony with these times as it should be - which only tells me that it is high time to establish my successor. My only apology is that never before culture and ethics have changed so dramatically in such a short time."

Short??

"My selfish reason is meaningless in front of these concerns, however I promised to show you the truth. I want to be free of this burden - live my own life to its end."

Did she want to marry and have children? How old was she? Would she age and dry out like an apple within weeks, maybe months? Harry had trouble not to burst out with all his questions.

"After passing over the duty, I will be an ordinary witch. Only my memory will be a reminder - otherwise, I will be just a woman with normal hopes and desires."

"You'd be the most extraordinary history teacher ever - actually, you'd be extraordinary in any profession, I'm sure of that."

Almost a smile. "I take this as a sign that you trust my honesty. Is it appropriate then to ask you now how your daughter came to join you on your journey?"

Harry couldn't see the relevance, but who said a High Priestess was free of simple female curiosity? ... And he couldn't see much risk in the answer either. "When she realized that I was going to do something for Bill's curing - without her, I mean, she thought it would jeopardize her music - Hély playing for her. Next second, she had an Imperius on Rahewa - that's her godmother - on Cho and myself. Only that I'm immune - but we decided to take what looked like the smaller risk of a disaster."

Aram'chee looked satisfied - apparently taking this story as proof for her own judgement, having found the right person.

Harry said, "My immunity - to save you that question - is something I cannot really explain. There are quite some theories, in some way or other, they all say it was mandatory to fight Voldemort. It's everybody's guess what that means."

The High Priestess looked very pleased. Harry realized that - on an objective scale - her arguments were gaining weight with every answer he gave. Except there was no objective scale.

Checking his questions, Harry became aware - either they felt too personal while not really important, like asking for her age, or they implied the possibility of an agreement, like how she planned to introduce Sandy. Then he saw what he'd almost forgotten. "How can you think the two worlds would separate again - the wizarding and the Muggle world?"

"I have to confess that I don't know yet how it can be done. I am not blinded by rules - in the ultimate sense, the High Priestess could abandon this rule in favour of something better. But this coexistence is bound to collapse. I don't know when, how long it can hold, only that sooner or later one side will start to destroy the other."

"Why?"

"Because the others - the Muggles - have nothing for compensation. Until some years ago, they were restricted to non-magic, and you were restricted to magic. While now - the wizarding world has everything. Maybe a solution would be that every wizard, every witch has to serve for a period of time to pay their debt for this privilege. This is the only idea I found, without knowing how to perform such a task."

Harry remembered how Ron had complained that something as simple as a copier was beyond reach for a normal wizard, unless he was a millionaire.

The High Priestess said, "I have just one question of importance left, Ha-ry. I will wait with this one until you are finished with yours."

"I think I know which one."

"Naturally so. I can assure you that I will do whatever is in my reach to find a solution in harmony and mutual agreement. I am bound by an obligation, this is the only limit to my doing and not doing."

So she wasn't threatening, except she was the threat herself. Harry asked, "Are you trying to impose this obligation on me? I can do without that - I've got enough to do with my role as the Ambassador."

"Despite what I said before - would you explain to me what that means?"

Harry told her.

Aram'chee sighed. "We both know that each of your words only proves - your daughter's destiny is to become the next High Priestess."

"Don't let Cho hear you. Fifteen years from now, or twenty, you could ask Sandy by yourself. But now - the essential point is that you don't leave her a choice."

"What choice did you have when fighting this evil wizard Voldemort? I learned that the right of the individual is valued incredibly high in this society, at the cost of many other values,

further causing severe misuse and a grotesque state of unbalanced ethics ... Forgive me these words, Ha-ry - I'm not without temper myself."

Harry looked at the woman, a weak grin on his face.

"It may ease your mind to hear that I cannot work against the will of the mother. It would destroy everything. But your daughter must become the next High Priestess."

"You don't know what you're talking about. That's a contradiction in itself."

"No, Ha-ry, it is not. Only regarding Sandra Catherine."

Harry stared at her.

"And only regarding Cho, if your judgement is right."

Harry gawked at her.

"I do not value myself higher than your daughter's mother. Undeniably, this Cho has contributed her share to your daughter, and Sandra Catherine is the true heir. So my efforts will be aimed at the goal of convincing Cho that her daughter is bound by destiny - as she herself has been, and you. But time is running."

"And ... And what if it'd be a son?"

"It won't be, I can assure you. The High Priestess must be, and will be, a woman."

Harry nodded, sighed. "You won't volunteer to tell Cho by yourself, huh? ... Okay, was a joke."

"I will leave you alone, so you have time to think, and Cho also. If you want to invite me, to talk with her, come to the castle. If you didn't come until the moon has the same size as today, I will come and ask both of you what is your choice ... Considering what is at stake, I demand a small sacrifice."

Harry wondered if it was by accident that Aram'chee's last remark would qualify any time as a very special joke.

* * *

Laila stared into the bag, whistled. Then she looked up. "Where do they come from?"

The man - Ramon was his name - showed a dry grin. "We have a deal, remember? I'm not going to ask what you need them for, and you're not going to ask where they come from." Then he smiled. "Although I have an idea - in contrast to you."

Cho said, "It's okay, Laila - he's been a cop until some days ago."

Laila took the first weapon - a nine-millimeter parabellum, nodded in appreciation. Ramon had shown the presence of mind to come with an assortment that needed just one type of

ammunition - not counting the pump-action gun, of course. And that ... Twelve-gauge, what else.

She inspected the sub-machine gun, tested the lock, balanced it. Not an Uzi - however, only the Israeli Army believed these little toys were first-rate.

Looking up, Laila saw admiration in the man's face. He said, "You could do that blind-folded, couldn't you?"

She seized for the sub-machine gun, held it behind her back, closed her eyes. Opening them again a moment later, her hands came forward - one holding the barrel, the other shaft and lock. She started instantly to assemble the pieces together - after all, one weapon should be ready.

Ramon said, "I'm impressed."

Cho had watched them both. "Ramon, what do I get for not telling Marie-Christine where you looked at when Laila couldn't see? It wasn't the gun."

Ramon grinned, lacking any embarrassment. "I'll swear any oath that I was admiring weapons, and that's the truth." Then he grew serious. "Cho - want me to stay? Two guns ..."

"Thanks, but ... I don't really think we need them, it's more the psychological effect. And if not ..."

Laila looked into the Ramon's face. "Men have trouble shooting a woman on purpose."

Ramon bowed. "It was fascinating to meet you, Laila." Toward Cho, he said, "Call me any time."

"Thank you, Ramon. And tell Marie-Christine - if we don't call, it's a good sign."

Ramon nodded, disappeared. When he was gone, Laila asked, "What's he doing now? Freelance work?"

"No, I hired him for Groucho. Pretty high, actually."

Laila wondered a bit, felt restricted to squeeze Cho in her worried state. Next moment, Cho herself explained, "I had other reasons too. But a diploma in economics doesn't impress me as much as other qualities."

"From cop to business manager - not bad."

Cho glanced at the weapon in Laila's hands. "Er - you wouldn't twist if Harry returns, would you?"

Laila smiled. "No, Cho. I know what I'm doing, and I'm not Chaim." Seeing the question in Cho's face, she added, "The one who shot me."

"Do you need something else?"

"No. I'm not an army patrol - I'm a bodyguard. A bodyguard keeps with the body, that's all."

After a while, Cho asked, "Would this be an option? ... Bodyguard, I mean?"

"Not really. There's little demand in Israel, and a lot of competition - provided I could think of myself as a hired gun." Then Laila snorted. "Although - what's so different to what I'm doing?"

"Maybe I wasn't talking about Israel."

"Here? ... I would need quite a while to qualify - you have to know the environment, the habits, locations. Catching a bullet is only the last part."

"Maybe I didn't mean bodyguard."

Laila looked at Cho. "Is this an offer?"

"I just want you to know - we Chinese don't forget. What you're doing here for us ... Regardless of what'll be otherwise."

"Let me think about it - it's certainly intriguing enough to test my loyalty ... What's an army sergeant good for?"

"What she thinks she can handle. Ramon's running Biochemicals now."

Laila swallowed. "Can nobody say you don't mean it."

They fell silent again. After a while, suddenly a voice from the floor said, "It's me. I'm alone."

Harry came in, looked around. "Very much what I thought." He walked to Cho, kissed her. "I spoke with her."

"And?"

"The good news first - she's not going to act against your will, she said it would destroy all harmony. But she said our daughter is the only qualified candidate."

"Then she may as well forget it - I'm not going to agree. If she needs a daughter, as her heir, she may look for her own."

"Actually, that was her second idea."

"So she ..." Cho stopped, staring at Harry. "Did she have any opinion about the father?"

Harry sat down. "Yes, indeed."

After a second, Laila understood. She stared at Harry, at Cho - a furious Cho, her eyes spitting fire, her voice hissing, "Never." Wheeling around to Laila. "Would you shoot him too? Or would you have trouble with that?"

Laila found it wise not to answer.

Harry said, "She went back to the castle. We have four week's time to think it over. She wants to talk with you. And her own daughter would be second choice."

"Ha! That's ... ha!" After her outburst, Cho seemed speechless.

Harry stood up. "That's it - in short. Her name's Aram'chee. And now, I think I'll take Laila home - it's been a long ..."

Cho lost her trance. "Don't dare to come close to that castle! She might change her mind - if four weeks from now's the right time, then ..."

"Please, Cho - isn't this a bit overreacting? I won't come near the castle, it's two miles outside ..."

"Two miles? No, that's much too close for my taste. And overreacting? I can't remember hearing you saying something like, I told her to forget it ... But of course not, I guess the idea had quite some appeal for you ..."

Laila saw how Harry's face hardened.

"... only that I'm going to work a bit at your qualification for this job, and Laila's going to help me with that. When we're finished with you, young Potter, you won't even remember how she looks, not to mention her name ... Aram'chee, really."

For a moment, Laila had felt like grinning, thought better of it just in time. Cho seemed hardly in the mood to see the funny side of things. And Laila had learnt something this weekend - Cho meant it.

Suddenly, the Tiberias Barracks seemed far, far away.

* * *

The task lying ahead was certainly enough to keep her mind occupied. Even so, Hogwarts - in all innocence - did its best to startle her more. Hordes of students, seemingly normal, until suddenly a wand came out somewhere and a flash or a rain of sparkles blinded the eye.

And nobody even looked.

Except herself, of course. Then the building - staircases no end, talking pictures, asking for crazy passwords. Peeves the Poltergeist was a relief, in some sense - he was up to his reputation while the other ghost she'd seen this day, Nearly Headless Nick, looked very much like an animation in a bad horror movie.

Needless to say - Clara hadn't told him. In particular since Nick's manners were definitely better than those of any ghost the movie director would have thought realistic.

Clara had arrived around noon. Munich Linkport - London Linkport - Hogsmeade Linkport - this kind of travelling was something to get used to, with ninety-nine percent of the time spent standing in line, or sitting on a bench waiting for the next connection. Somehow funny - all these years, she had thought linkports wouldn't work for herself, being a Muggle ...

Only after having been in Hogwarts for a while, Clara had realized what was wrong - linkports stole the time to adjust. Sitting in a train for three hours was a wonderful opportunity to relax, to prepare for the things to come.

Of course, with conventional vehicles, the journey from Munich to Hogwarts would have taken a day and probably most of the night too.

The linkports had also ended a discussion. Joachim wanted to come with her, she didn't. He was a Muggle, and linkports did not work for them.

It would have been the easiest thing of the world to ask Harry for a portkey that would carry both of them, nonstop Buelow Street, third floor, to Hogwarts. Rahewa had assured Clara that this was no more trouble than, say, driving someone to the tram station because it rained.

Then why hadn't she told Joachim?

Somewhere inside, Clara knew why. He would have urged her until she had agreed. Only she wanted to make her first steps alone. Not alone - without him. Joachim was intrigued by the idea, yes - he'd been intrigued also if she would return from the body dresser with a new skin colour.

Maybe a sex transformation would have failed to get his enthusiastic approval. Yet Clara wasn't sure.

Her hosts were great. Just great. Rahewa's mother - what a funny thought, a mother six years older than her daughter. While otherwise - Almyra behaved very much like any other mother of a seventeen-year-old who went through the process of spreading her wings ... Erm - unfolding sounded better.

Of course, Clara found the first grease-pot with great accuracy. Remus, who looked more like a father, was introduced with the remark, "He's a werewolf, but it's under control." Hearing that, Clara started to laugh. "That's good, really, that ..."

Only when the others stared at her, she realized. Then she stood there, dark red, while first Remus and then Almyra took their turns in rolling over, unable to stop.

Clara swore to herself - this should be the last time.

Returning from her visit in a first-year lesson about Charms, she confessed to Almyra that her untrained English was a bit short to cover all these terms.

"There's no sense in making it more difficult than necessary," replied Almyra. "You should do a crash course in Wizarding English - it's not cheap, but highly recommended."

"Who offers them? And where is it?"

"Where? ... Wherever you are - you get two fairies for a week, with deep-sleep teaching, subliminal training, very advanced."

Seeing Clara's glance. Almyra started to laugh. When Clara felt convinced this was the return for her faux-pas, Almyra patted her. "Every single word's true, Clara. Harry did it for learning French."

Altogether, the afternoon had managed to send Clara completely off balance. And now she was sitting in this room which might have been in any hospital of the western hemisphere. Hermione wore a white coat, Clemens too, while Rahewa - deeply disappointed about that - had been locked out. "This isn't a monster show in the autumn fair," so Hermione's remark. "Please wait outside."

Maybe it wasn't. Only Clara felt like that.

The door opened. In came Harry, with daughter and snake. The girl saw her, beamed. "Clara - witch!"

Clara swayed, grateful to be sitting.

"That's her," said Harry. "I think Sandy's more excited than yourself. But don't worry - she'll calm down in a moment. At least you know how it feels when she says hello."

Clara went to the padded table, lay down. Hermione attached the sensors for the monitor. Ordinary medical equipment, strangely reassuring at this moment.

Clemens came with the cup. His eyes were filled with concern, expectation, tenderness - and something Clara remembered well, something she had seen about eight years ago, when she had told him to go and become a wizard.

Today it was her brother's turn to be convincing, and Clara's own to go.

Clemens offered the cup. "Ready?"

"Yes." Clara took the cup, drank.

Liquid chalk. Chocolate. Brandy. Pure alcohol. Hellfire, fading. Clara gasped, sank back again. Hands at her throat. A joyful presence in her mind, and another one, nodding politely, retreating into some background.

Her heartbeat calmed down. The initial anxiousness was gone.

As if returning from a short inspection through all rooms inside her, the heat came back. Having found the location equally inviting everywhere, it settled to a burning sensation.

Then it went to work seriously.

She was under fire. Felt sweat trickling through her pores. Felt pain. Arousal. Thrill. Itching, everything at once. Clara wanted to cry, something was wrong, she wasn't a witch, burning her at the stake was a terrible mistake ...

Something in her mind called through her panic. After a moment, she understood - the flames weren't devouring her flesh, her skin wasn't smoking, not turning to coal first and ashes then. Just the strongest cocktail served ever.

She relaxed a bit. Somewhere, a pulse was racing, a heart hammering, a throat vibrating under the efforts to transport all this oxygen in and wasted air out.

Then - clearly, unmistakably, she felt the girl in her mind. Playing music for her, incredibly powerful, amazingly gentle. At ease now, Clara listened to the roaring of the flames, to the spheric waves and chords, none of them registered by a human ear, including her own.

After a time she couldn't measure, the flames faded, died. Her body, recovering quickly, was settling back to normal.

Clara opened her eyes. Hermione near the monitor, looking satisfied. Clemens' head over her own, his face as flushed and sweaty as hers probably was. Still somewhat choky, Clara said, "Hi, wizard."

"Hi ..." Clemens stopped. Next moment, a wand was in her vision. "Try it."

"Lemme ..." Clara came up, still a bit dizzy, took the wand. "And now?"

"Move it - swiftly, sharply."

Feeling self-conscious, Clara imitated an orchestra conductor - and watched as a soft-glowing ribbon of colours appeared out of nowhere, faded an instant later.

She felt hugged by her brother, felt his composure break for a second, hugged him back. "I'm a witch, huh?"

Clemens nodded, unable to speak. Then he let go, turning quickly, busying himself at the workbench.

Hermione came over. "Congratulations, Clara - how do you feel?"

"Bit swaggy - like after donating blood. It's more the expectation than a real weakness."

Harry's voice behind her. "Can you walk?"

Clara moved her legs to the floor. "Yes, I think so." Then she turned. "Thanks for your support." Toward the girl, "Your music was wonderful."

The girl nodded. "Sandy music."

Harry asked, "In the mood for a little shopping trip?"

"Shopping??"

"Yes, sure - you need a wand, as quickly as possible. There's only one shop that's appropriate, it's in London."

"London ..." Then Clara realized that this wasn't much different from a trip to the store around the corner, not with the help from someone who could summon her - and probably Clemens and Rahewa a second later.

She felt her own beaming. "Suddenly, I can't await holding it in my hand ... But something else is still more urgent." She pulled at her soaked shirt. "I need a shower."

* * *

Harry held the door open for the others. Clemens and Rahewa entered quickly, while it took Clara another second before she could take her eyes off the reading - *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC*.

Even so - they had to wait some more seconds inside, quickly realizing that four people, five when also counting Sandra, were almost too much for this tiny shop. It didn't matter, nobody was ready to wait outside.

"Good evening." Mr. Ollivander was suddenly standing there, his pale eyes registering the scene, then fixing at Harry. "Mr. Potter, this visit is a real surprise, normally I know whom to expect. Your wand is doing well, I hope?"

"Excellently, Mr. Ollivander, thanks for asking - no, we're here for a young lady who needs her first equipment."

The shop owner fixed the other visitors. "Miss Lightfoot! How are you? Maple, was it, ten inches straight and surprisingly firm for such a little girl, yes." He looked at Sandra. "It wouldn't be this young lady, Mr. Potter, would it? Although - I won't go as far as dismissing the idea completely."

"No - she's doing fine even without a wand. It's ..."

"Yes, quite remarkable, indeed. With these parents - cedarwood, eight inches and a quarter, with a dragon heartstring, yes. And then of course your own - " Mr. Ollivander looked awkward. "May - may I have a look at it, Mr. Potter? Its new shape, something like that isn't seen very often."

"Er, yes of course ... Here." Harry offered his wand.

"Remarkable, truly extraordinary ... Holly the one, blackthorn the other, yes, thirteen and a half inches together." Mr. Ollivander's hand felt the tip - next moment, he held the black tip in one hand and Harry's original wand in the other.

Harry stared. Nobody but himself had been able so far to separate the two parts from each other.

Mr. Ollivander's next movement brought them together again. "Astounding, Mr. Potter, and another example how it's the wand who ..." The wandmaker came out of his trance, handing back the wand to Harry, turning to the others. "Please excuse my digression. A first wand, so it must be for you." He looked at Clara, some surprise in his face.

"Miss Clara Stein," explained Harry. "The youngest witch around, Mr. Ollivander. She comes from Germany."

"Ah yes, maybe that's why ..." With some effort, the wandmaker found his routine. "Well then, Miss Stein, would you please hold up your arm for measuring?"

Harry watched the familiar ceremony - Mr. Ollivander coming with one piece after the other, taking them off again before Clara had an opportunity to give her own comment. Harry's mind wandered back to his first visit in this shop, still more so when the pile besides Clara was growing and Mr. Ollivander, almost feverishly, was climbing up and down like a long, thin spider, drawing a network in a frenzy.

And there it was - the rainbow of brilliant colours, bursting into golden sparks.

"Magnificent! Oh, very good, here we go, this wand has found its owner, after all these years."

It was hazel, nine inches, with unicorn hair as the magical core. Clara's eyes were gleaming, she held the wand as though never again letting go.

Rahewa fought her way to the small desk. She had won the competition whose privilege it should be to give this present to Clara. "You've made the drink," with these words Clemens had been kicked out of the race. "And you - why don't you treat her with a *Carribean Crown* afterwards?" Harry had resigned with a smile and a nod.

Outside, he looked at Rahewa. "What are you going to do in the meantime - you and Clemens, that is?"

"But ..."

Laughing, Harry grabbed Clara's arm. For a split second, Rahewa had taken him seriously.

The waitress saw them, smiled. "Five Carribean Crowns? One of them without - I mean, with a parasol?"

"Yes, please."

Harry listened to the young people chatting animatedly, with Clemens and Rahewa presenting the stories of their own first wands. Then came the cups, and Clara followed the waitress' example, only from a closer distance - watching in admiration how ice and cream disappeared in a small mouth. She said, "I think I've got some way to go until I'm at that level."

Rahewa and Clemens started to laugh.

Clara felt challenged. "Well, you never know - wait and see." She took her wand, rushed it through the air. As though a string of Chinese firecrackers was set off, sparkles flew through the air - right toward the neighbour table.

"Hey - watch your damned piece!" The young man who had shouted turned back, muttered audibly, "Some magicals think they own the world."

Rahewa was up, her chair crashing to the ground. She had made a step toward the other table when she stopped like hitting a wall.

The young man glared at her. "What's up? Gonna beat me or curse me?"

Rahewa turned, fetched her chair, sat down - face red, an angry stare toward her cup.

Clemens turned to the neighbour table. "Please excuse our clumsiness - and thanks a lot for your excellent example in good manners."

"Oh, fuck!" Moments later, the people from the neighbour table left.

Sandra watched them leave. "Fuck!"

"Great." Harry glared at Rahewa, furiously, while his goddaughter had trouble suppressing signs that would be interpreted as approval by her own goddaughter.

Rahewa steadied. "I'm sorry ... But honestly - I had myself under control, I wouldn't have ..."

"Can you imagine what Sandy would have done next second? Damn, Rahewa, you know that she's all too happy to join every fight with you."

"Oh - yes, of course. Sh ... I mean, sorry."

Clemens looked challenging. "She's been provoked, Harry."

"Certainly. So?" Calmer, Harry added, "I'm not mad at her, but maybe only because that's very difficult."

Which wasn't exactly what Clemens had hoped for, while Rahewa looked better - quite in contrast to Clara who seemed close to tears. "It was my mistake - it was so stupid what I did."

Next moment, two people tried to cheer her up and to assure her she shouldn't blame herself, everyone went a bit crazy with the first wand in his own hands, and besides, wasn't this a terrible example of prejudice?

Clara looked at Harry. "I spoiled your invitation. I'm truly sorry."

"I know what to do," answered Harry after a second. "We visit the twins - then we tell them what happened, and each of us will get his share of teasing remarks. Nobody can feel so bad after Fred and George have delivered their comments."

Relief in her face, Rahewa assured Clemens and Clara that Harry was right. With this new spirit, they found the time and the mood to empty their cups.

Clara said thoughtfully, "A drink and a wand - and suddenly I'm on the other side of the fence, and I think, what a bloody Muggle, making such a fuss about a bit fireworks."

It cheered Clemens and Rahewa up considerably.

While not Harry himself. He was thinking of what the High Priestess had said, about the two worlds bound to crash against each other. He was thinking of her task, which seemed impossible, and of her request, which seemed equally impossible ... Well, today the balance of powers had shifted by one young woman, who had taken a drink. And then a wand. And then an ice cup. And in a few minutes, probably some sweets.

The twins were selling to both worlds. What would ...

The first dim contours of an idea started to form in Harry's mind. Something Cho had said ... Something he had said to the High Priestess, about obligations. And if he was right, didn't recoil from this breathtaking plan ...

Harry looked up. "Ready? Then let's go to hear what bloody wizards and witches we are."

14 - Conspiracy

Cho reached the door of her office, went inside. Coming toward her desk, she heard laughter through the other door leading to Chrissy's office. At the same moment, something chirped in her mind.

With a few steps, she was at the door, opened.

Three smiling faces looked at her - Chrissy, Harry, and Cass. And who knew - maybe Nagini was grinning, too. Cho asked, "How come I cannot help thinking you're exchanging jokes at my cost?"

"Never, boss." Chrissy's lips were twisting.

"Your bad conscience." Harry's eyes were sparkling.

"My bad conscience??"

For a few seconds, Cho let it hang, seeing Harry's eyes becoming watchful, and a bit anxious. She grinned inwardly - even her husband could be scared. Not very often, true, and not with monsters or deadly risks - only with things as ordinary as answering him to such a remark in front of her assistant.

Then she said, "Come in, young man, that I can tell you about my bad conscience without Chrissy's ears turning red."

"Why - they'd suit me well."

Cho laughed. "Maybe next time." Inside, she grinned at Harry. "For a second, I had you by the privates, right? You weren't sure whether I'd spill your little secret, isn't that so?"

"I grossly disagree with the definition of *my little secret*, and your choice of words is pretty weird, considering the situation ..."

Cho smiled triumphantly.

"... but otherwise you're right. I can live without Chrissy knowing."

Beaten by his own weapons. What a feeling. Cho came over, sat down at Harry's side. "My poor little wizard, is the stress too much for you? You must be tired. Come here, relax, here in this office you're safe."

Harry grinned, shook his head. "You're incredible."

Cho nodded. "We agree on that, all three of us - four, counting Cass too."

All three of them ... For the last three days, Cho had made sure that her husband wouldn't even dream of going to that castle and create a fait accompli - or if so, then as a nightmare. He was honest, yes, and faithful in his own way - only he had this knack for feeling responsible

to come up with the solution for the impossible. And if Harry considered it important enough, for the welfare of the entire damned world, and justified by some higher ethics ...

Her strategy took quite some efforts, no denying that, hehe. But it had its benefits, its moments. And Cho had help ... Laila.

Changing the subject in her mind, remembering the reason for Harry's and Cass' tour, Cho asked, "How was it?"

"Pretty much as planned. She got the drink - it worked - then we went to Ollivander for her first wand ... Rahewa's present - she talked all competitors out of the game. Then I treated them with some ice-cream, and finally we visited the twins."

"I'm a bit surprised to see you here."

Harry looked at her with eyes half-closed. "It's as you said - here I'm safe."

"Nah ..." Cho leered at him mockingly. "It might cross Laila's mind, although I doubt it, and I'm pretty sure that *you* won't manage ... You're just trying to spread mistrust among the allied forces."

"You sure?"

Cho bent forward. "Now you're trying to make me feel uncertain ... Okay, my little mustang, I take it back - you *would* manage. But she wouldn't do it."

"Why not?"

"She's not biting the hand that feeds her."

Harry started to laugh. "I feel it wiser not to comment on that."

Cho had to chuckle by herself, realizing which remark this would have been. "Okay," she said, "then what's the real reason?"

"I wanted to talk with you. Alone."

Cho's suspicion boiled up instantly. "About what?"

"About your idea, with the twins and Biochemicals."

She examined her husband's face. Had it been just that - Fred and George and business plans - Harry would have started the discussion at the supper table, filling in any gap that might have turned up in Laila's knowledge. So what else did he have in mind?

She asked, "Did you talk with them about the idea?"

"No. Not with the others around. Not before talking with you."

"Why so complicated? The basic idea is simple enough - two businesses, some people, and the idea to work together. Why can't you address the issue between tea and biscuit?"

"Because it's a bit more specific what I have in mind - which doesn't mean it's worked out to the last detail. Just the outline."

Could only have to do with their little problem. Only that it was impossible - the High Priestess and her bloody request had nothing to do with Biochemicals. Feeling at a loss to guess better, Cho said, "Spit it out."

Harry looked at her. "It's something serious. Quite so. If you say no, the idea's going to die on this magnificent rug."

So Cho had a veto. It should relieve her, only it made her still more suspicious. "Let's hear it."

Harry told her.

She stared at him. "You're mad. You're insane. I always knew that, I just didn't know how big-style mad you are. That's megalomania."

"Definitely not. Don't forget who'd be involved."

"It will never work. It cannot."

"Why not?"

Yes, why not? Because ... Wrong. If it was possible, if that bitch was able to do her share ... Then Cho became aware that Harry's idea put an entirely new light at their basic problem.

Then she realized something else. "If they find out, we can only run for our lives."

Harry nodded. "True. At least in the first time."

Cho exhaled, trembling. "Oh my God. You're serious. You're really, really serious."

"Yes I am. She's right, you know? There was a scene today in the ice-cream parlour ..." Harry described the unpleasant encounter. "And if we can go this direction, then the question of her successor has to be asked anew."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Twenty years from now ... I can imagine myself asking Sandy whether she's ready then. At any rate - it wouldn't look as horrible as now."

"Who else would need to know?"

"Ramon. Marie-Christine, first to give him support and second to tell us that we're on the right track ..."

We? Had Cho already said yes?

"... The twins. Hermione, Beatrice - Clemens of course. Dumbledore, to give us moralic support. Ron, for the organizational side. And of course ..."

"You thought it through, didn't you?"

"This list of people is pretty intuitive - I might have forgotten one or the other. Maybe we should think seriously about a bodyguard for you, then."

Which could only mean Laila, and confiding in her. Cho grinned wryly. "It's so breathtaking - I wonder if I can continue my strategy this evening."

"I hope this idea puts an end to it." Harry bent closer. "Please tell nobody, but - I really could do with a break."

* * *

Laila felt grateful for the portkey - being summoned unconsciously or throwing up right afterwards was so undignified, so disgraceful. For a short moment, it crossed her mind that this piece she was going to touch in a second would be worth a small fortune on the free market, according to what Cho had told her about Groucho business and the various branches. But this was hardly relevant now.

She came out not far from the Tiberias Linkport. Harry stood there, with his usual living luggage. "Still time for a drink?"

"Shouldn't you return instantly?"

Harry smiled. "No, I shouldn't. I have business here."

Laila tried to read in his face. "What business?"

"I have to talk with some people. Women. Two, actually."

"Harry!" Laila looked alarmed. "You're not going ..."

He interrupted her. "Relax - I do it with Cho's permission."

"But ..."

"Something new came up. I cannot tell you - not now, for some reason. But I'm going to meet her, and to introduce her to Sandy, and Cho agreed to that." Harry grinned. "Not easily - first she had the idea you should come with me, the gun at the ready. But then we decided against it."

"And the other business?"

"I'm ready to discuss it standing here, but I thought a nice café, out of earshot ..."

Some minutes later, they were sitting opposite each other at a small table, on the sidewalk - not Laila's first choice, considering the risk to be spotted here after some days of leave without permission, but the only way of talking without unwelcome listeners.

"First let me tell you - it wasn't my intention to appear so mysteriously toward you. It's just ..."

Laila interrupted him, feeling pleased. "That's okay, Harry - believe me, I don't feel excluded - or if so, I know there's a damn good reason."

"What are you going to do now?"

Laila played with the spoon. "Think a bit ... Well, er - I figure I'm done with the army. What comes next - I don't know yet."

"How important is your country for you?"

"That's one of the questions I have to find an answer for ... Cho offered me a job - nothing specific, but ..."

Harry hesitated. "If ... I have to find out something - could be things develop differently from what I expect, so this is a bit premature, only I didn't want to leave you without - er, adding a prospect to your thinking."

It was very unusual to hear him talking like that - vague, unclear, outlining some dubious pie in the sky. For a second, Laila felt startled - was it something with Cho?

"Very likely, and pretty soon, we'll need some people we can trust absolutely, Cho and I. What's more - these people need courage, quite a lot. And it would be a longer job ... I just wanted to tell you - you'd qualify, in all regards."

A wave of pleasure rushed through Laila. "Sounds too good to be true - when do you know more?"

Harry didn't smile. "Laila, that's not an easy job. And this is aside from anything that's been - or will be - between us."

"How can you know that I'm so trustworthy? After these few days - regardless of ..." Laila smiled at the thought of this *of*.

"You forget that I can look a bit deeper than most people."

She twisted. "A girl should have a chance to keep a secret or two."

"That's funny - " Harry grinned. "... it's exactly this quality I'm looking for."

"There goes my beauty sleep - you know that I'll be unable to fall asleep, don't you, after all this hinting?" Laila swallowed. "And you know what I was talking about."

Harry looked wondering. "You really think my *haragei* told me something that wasn't obvious?"

"I don't know. It's almost impossible for me to judge how much ... And I don't know ..." Laila realized that she was beating around the bush as vaguely as Harry a moment ago, except that she had all information she needed. "Okay - for the record ... Yes, it's more than sex - don't ask me how much more, but before you get the wrong impression - what I'm feeling goes to both of you." She exhaled. "And to Sandy, but I think that's unavoidable."

Harry's smile looked warm, and a bit teasing. "Of course you do, and that's fundamental for our trust - anything off-balance in this regard would have been a problem ... And for the same record - yes, it's more for both of us, and I think it'll hold longer than our ménage à trois."

"You mean it's not over yet?"

"Would you prefer it to be platonic from now on?"

"Since when do you answer by asking a counter question?"

"Since the answer can be given only from all three of us. We need a rest, I'd say, we need time to get something settled - you, us - and then ... When we feel like it, that's the best answer I can give."

Laila tried to imagine a state in which she wouldn't feel like it. What she said was, "I guess I might."

Harry nodded. "I guess you mightn't be the only one ... But not for the next days." And a moment later, he was gone - his picture in Laila's eyes fading quicker than the touch of his lips.

* * *

Harry sat down in the grass, his back resting at the stones around the well. Sandra's voice sounded questioning, a bit timid. "Fever?"

"It's no longer a fever, sweetie. Bill is okay. We'll meet a woman. Her name is ..."

"Good evening, Ha-ry. Good evening, Sandra Catherine." The High Priestess stood there, looking at them.

"Good evening, Aram'chee," replied Harry. "Please call her something shorter - otherwise she thinks it's serious ..."

As if this wasn't the most serious thing he could think of.

"... Sandy, this is Aram'chee."

The woman came closer, sat down opposite, examining the girl. Harry became aware that some exchange might take place between them - right now, without him registering. It was an awkward feeling, sizing him down to an ordinary wizard like all the others.

"Aram ... she."

"This is my name. I will call you Little Witch. You are little, while not small."

"Fever!" The girl stared accusingly at the High Priestess.

Aram'chee tilted her head. "You are right. It was me who did the fever. I was misguided, Little Witch."

Sandra nodded. After some seconds, she seemed satisfied with the amount of reproach she had expressed - Harry felt curiosity growing in her. After some more seconds, when the woman still didn't look up, the girl sent an encouraging push.

Aram'chee's head came up, showing the first little smile Harry had seen in this face. He said, "She wants to learn you know better. That means, you should hold her in your arms."

Was it his effort? Hers? Or Sandy's - the girl floated through the air, came to rest in the woman's arm. Next moment, a small hand touched a solemn face.

Harry waited, feeling his last doubts fading. It had been the right thing to do.

Aram'chee looked at him. "I thank you for your trust, Ha-ry, and I thank the mother of your daughter."

"I'll tell her. But you must know - she didn't change her mind. And the other idea - I'm lucky that she didn't scratch my eyes out."

"It was an offer to circumvent a major dilemma. After this meeting, it feels impossible for me to accept this second choice any longer. Was this your intention, or hers?"

Was it? ... Cho's, maybe. "I don't know," answered Harry. "I'm not master of my unconscious, not to mention Cho's. I felt it appropriate to bring you two together."

"I am richly honoured. What a marvellous spirit!" Her glance at the girl, Aram'chee asked, "Do you want to have her back now?"

"No - she'll tell you when it's time, she has her way to make it clear."

A broader smile. "She certainly has." Then the High Priestess grew serious again. "Was she the reason for your coming, Ha-ry?"

"Indirectly, yes. But I have another reason - an idea, and a question." Harry explained what he had in mind.

The High Priestess kept silent still a moment after he had finished. Then she said, "I just tried to consider your suggestion according to the rules and ethics to which I am bound. This is beyond all experience. It is within my power to do what you want - this is certainly the answer to your question. Never before has a High Priestess been confronted with such a situation ..." The woman fell silent.

Harry waited.

"In a literal sense, it seems absurd - the opposite of the original intention. But it would be hybris to claim true knowledge of the original intention, or the intention behind the apparent intention. As I find myself unable to interpret the rules properly against your idea, I am forced to interpret what I have - the High Priestess is not allowed to refuse a decision in this regard ... There is an unprecedented situation in which the old methods appear inappropriate, at the same time there are you, with your idea, with the services you offer ... It puts a new light at my being late for years - as though preventing me from acting by conventional standards ... I feel awe in the face of destiny."

So this was the long version - hopefully. Then what was the short one? When in doubt, ask. "Will you do it?"

"Yes."

"That's ..." Finding his speech again, Harry continued, "I don't know how - I don't know whether I did us a favour, but anyway - thank you, Aram'chee."

After a few seconds of silence, he found the courage. "I still have another question, Aram'chee. It is - my reason for asking might be selfish."

"Like my request, which links together honesty and selfishness in an inseparable way?"

"I don't know - you may judge yourself." Harry asked his question.

"It is possible. It is not forbidden to grant such a privilege if the situation deserves it, still more so at the prospect of our new strategy." Aram'chee smiled. "I will simply trust your judgement, Ha-ry, that the situation deserves it."

Quite some words for what seemed to be a yes. Harry said, "Thank you ... This time I'm sure this is the right answer, and I'm ready to accept the obligation that comes from it."

"Such an obligation is only in yourself, Ha-ry. Facing my request, this must not be more than a minor detail. But all that happens changes our perspective - as our new strategy gives all of us more time, you may rightfully claim to have contributed enough so that your debt is balanced in advance."

"I'll think about it."

"Time has many shapes. As we sit here, I enjoy being together with your daughter. Can I offer you some more answers, in return for this privilege? Perhaps you would like to ask besides the duty of the High Priestess, for sheer curiosity?"

Questions he had, no shortage of them, only ... "Your place here - what's so special about it? Why don't you wander around, to learn about this world?"

"My place saves lifetime. Every month, with the burden of my duty, is a sacrifice. Exploring this world I will do, eventually, once I'm free to be just Aram'chee."

"How ... Er, how old are you, Aram'chee?"

"In lifetime or otherwise?" The woman smiled. "Look at what you see - a woman will not answer your question regarding her lifetime, and the High Priestess will not answer your question regarding her period of duty."

Well - pretty much what Harry had expected to hear. At least he could stop fighting with himself whether to ask or not. It was the common pattern - women said, ask away, only to deny the answer. The older, the more.

* * *

Ramon felt surprise, seeing Harry alone - well, not quite alone, the girl and the snake were almost natural parts of him. "Come in - you make me curious, coming without Cho."

Harry nodded, not bothering to offer an explanation. "Is Marie-Christine here?"

"I'm here!" came a voice from the living room.

Some minutes later, sitting around a table, Ramon could no longer resist. "Before I die, Harry - is it about you three, us two, Biochemicals, the police ..."

"All of them."

"Ah - yes, of course." Ramon glared at Harry. "How stupid of me, not realizing that instantly, after you didn't specify it any further ..."

Marie-Christine laughed. "He's perfectly serious, Ramon - which makes me wonder ..."

"I just had a talk with the High Priestess," explained Harry.

"With Sandy?" That was Marie-Christine.

"Does Cho know?" That was Ramon himself.

"Yes to both. They go along well, Sandy and her ... By the way, her name's Aram'chee." Harry looked at Marie-Christine. "Before I forget - you were right with your guess. She wants to resign."

Ramon said, "Yeah, sure, that's quite easy to forget - among all the other issues, I mean."

Harry's grin was short. "You want to know what it's about? Why I'm here?"

Ramon raised his eyebrows. "How did you know?"

"I'm not teasing you - when I'm finished, you'll say, I wish you'd never told me. But then it's too late."

"I wish you'd ever tell me, before it's too late because I strangled you."

Harry told him. And Marie-Christine.

Ramon swallowed. "I'm just trying to figure out what would happen if I'd say no. It's a very unpleasant feeling."

Harry looked bewildered. "Is the feeling any better if you'd say yes?"

"Well, it'll make me a member of the gang. Outsiders knowing too much - that's a tricky position."

Harry snorted. "Some day, we might find out if I should feel flattered now or insulted. But for the record - if you say no, still more if Marie-Christine says no, then we can bury the idea right here."

"Why hers more?" Ramon's own question.

"How could we say no then?" Marie-Christine's question.

"How? ... Just so - listen, I want to hear from you whether we're on the right track, or if this is a grandiose mistake. You can bear that only together, and Marie-Christine's opinion counts more because I have trouble accepting good advice from men."

Ramon said, "Some day, I might find out if I should feel flattered or insulted."

Marie-Christine said, "I cannot see anything wrong in the goal ... I think you're on the right track - it's just ... Thinking about what's lying ahead is a bit frightening."

Harry looked pleased. "If that's all - we'll manage, and cheer up each other."

Ramon growled. "Definitely. What about a sample right now? I mean - you tell me it'll work, and everything'll be fine, you know?"

"Why not?" Harry smiled at him - next second, Ramon felt a wave in his mind.

"Okay, okay - enough ..." But he really felt better.

Harry said, "You'll be in the center of the background operation, Ramon. One of the open issues is - how many people need to know?"

"One more's the minimum. This is undercover work, Harry - you're talking with an expert. One more might also be the maximum."

"You need an assistant, or deputy, or whatever's the term."

Ramon looked at Marie-Christine while speaking. "I discussed it with Jesamine the other day. My idea was slim, gentle, almond eyes ..."

Marie-Christine showed him a fist.

"... while Jesamine's idea was focussing on bigger - er, perspectives."

Marie-Christine showed him the other fist.

Harry smiled. "I might know a compromise."

* * *

George said, "That's madness. If they ever find out ..."

Fred said, "We're not prepared for that. It exceeds ..."

George interrupted him. "... our worst fears. We knew, some day you'd come and present the bill. This is the day."

Fred said, "Don't listen to him. We're absolutely thrilled ..."

George interrupted him. "... by the prospect of some people coming one day, saying, good afternoon, we're from the Health Authority, would you please show us your production process. Commonly, this excitement is known as being scared shitless."

Fred said, "He's lying. All that scares him is the idea of a woman having a saying, in particular if her name's Cho Chang-Potter."

George said. "That's true. I swore to myself - Mum'll be the last one who's been telling me what to do."

Harry waited still a second whether the ping-pong would continue. When both twins looked expectantly, he said, "Is this your only concern?"

"Sure," said Fred. "It's pretty much what we did in Hogwarts, isn't it? Only now - big style is yet too small for that."

"Yeah," replied George, "the same's true if we get caught. The detention will be worse than anything Argus Filch could dream of."

"Don't listen to him, Harry." Fred shot a look at his brother. "That's nothing we cannot handle with a few emergency linkports - in the office, in the bathroom ..."

"Why don't you shut up?" George shook his head in desperation. "A few seconds more, and Harry would have bought it. I was just pushing the price - you know Cho, don't you? If he tells her about this conversation, she'll come and say, okay guys, how much are you ready to pay for the fun?" He looked at Harry. "Fred and business - if he hadn't me ..."

"... and the small potatoes, I'd eat the big ones." Fred looked at Harry. "Don't believe him, the only difference between us - he's still less scrupulous than I am. Bargaining at such a moment, after it's been you who came with this bag of galleons."

"Right, we shouldn't forget that." Fred smiled roguishly. "Okay - you'll get that back from the five million or so - thousand, wasn't it?"

Harry felt great. With these two, the worst nightmare seemed bearable. Then a thought crossed his mind. "It's strange, because - Aram'chee is talking quite a lot about destiny - I'm sure, she'd even count the price from the Three-Wizard Tournament as some kind of - er, premonition."

"Never mind that Divination babble, Harry." George grinned. "If women have been too long out of the fun, they look deeply into your eyes and say, it's been destiny which brought us together ... That's nothing which couldn't be cured with a good - er, I mean she's been too long in her job, that's all."

"That's what she said herself." Harry chuckled. "Although not with these words."

* * *

Michael stared into the fire, wondering for the umpteenth time what was better - these pieces of magic wood, burning forever, with quiet, steady flames, not sparkling much, not smoking much, or real wood that was devoured quickly, had to be replaced quite often.

Because then, you had a reason to move here and there, coming a bit closer, sitting down again. It was a matter of opportunity without this incredibly purposeful intention of getting up and finding a new place at her side.

Except then she wouldn't look at him as she did now.

At this moment, something like a heavy blow hit the back of his head, faded instantly.
"Michael!"

Still gasping from the shout in his mind, Michael felt a grin spreading his face. Who could be mad at her? Next second, Harry appeared in the light from the fire. "Good evening. Please excuse our intruding ..."

"Arrgh!" Vanessa nearly collapsed.

Michael stared at her in astonishment. When Vanessa looked sufficiently recovered, after Harry had apologized again, Michael asked, "Didn't you feel her? Hear her?"

"Whom? Sandy? ... No, nothing."

"But ..." Michael stared at Harry. "I felt like kicked by a mule, and then I heard her shouting my name."

Harry looked uneasy for a moment. "Erm ... Maybe she had a crash course recently - at least we can assume that she can direct her attention without the stray effects from before."

"Whatever ..." Michael brought his guitar in position. "Lemme play a song after this - er, surprise."

He played two - one only would be an invitation for another mule-kick. Then he asked, "Were you looking for Rahewa?"

"No." Harry smiled.

Michael felt relieved. To answer the question where Rahewa was might have been a bit embarrassing. Not that he knew exactly ... The thought didn't make him envious - well, maybe ... No - not envious, just a bit yearning, which didn't feel wrong at all.

At this moment, Harry asked, "Will you make a profession of your music, Michael?"

"Definitely not. Do you know how - yes of course, you know enough about movie business, don't you?" Michael twisted. "Er - sorry, I didn't mean to be offensive against Groucho."

Harry grinned. "I know what you mean - I remember a party, not Groucho - its movie branch didn't exist yet then ... Oh boy, totally strangers, offering you ..." He stopped. "So it's supposed to remain private entertainment ... Then what else?"

"Dunno yet. I know I should be a bit more determined, having gotten that far, but somehow I couldn't muster the energy to think about that."

Of course not. Not as long as something else was occupying his mind, day and night.

As if agreeing to that, two heads nodded almost in unison. Then Harry turned to Vanessa.
"And you?"

"For a while, I thought I'd go for a career as a model, or an actor, or whatever - something where you trade with your looks. I don't think that's an option for me any longer - not that, er ..." Vanessa blushed.

"No," said Harry smiling, "not that - but you thought better of it."

Vanessa glanced up, smiled back self-consciously. "Yes."

Michael had a feeling. "Do you have suggestions, Harry?"

"I might."

"Such as?"

"Not today. Maybe not even before the end of the year ... Although - a loose discussion won't hurt. And I know when, and where ... I had the idea to invite some people - you, for instance."

Vanessa twisted.

Michael was more eager to help than to be polite. "And whom else?"

"Rahewa and Clemens. And for Saturday evening, I thought of Tony and Ireen - they're much older, at least Tony, but - they met just recently." Harry smiled. "And since we want to use his pool for sure - it's more of a little lake, actually - inviting them as well is only appropriate."

"Saturday evening? ... When ..."

"I was thinking of a weekend ... The next one, by the way."

Vanessa was biting her lips. Registering that, Michael turned toward Harry. "Sounds great. Er - I mean, thank you ... Is it okay if we tell you, er, tomorrow?"

"Wait."

Michael's head snapped around toward Vanessa. Harry's movement was calmer, he seemed less surprised.

"Er ... I - we'd like to come, of course. It's just - there's something I wanted to ask you. It's ..."

"Music!"

Harry smiled. "A suggestion that's hard to reject. Maybe a shanty?"

Vanessa looked sharply at him, then nodded. "Yes, a shanty."

Not Michael's first choice, then. Shanties ... However he knew some, and after two - a vivid one and a slow, rhythmic one, Sandy was satisfied.

Vanessa said, "You're right. That's the keyword - boat cruise."

"This boat," started Harry without hesitation, "belonged to someone who liked to play games - that's how he called it. Games with girls. Problem was, the fun was pretty unbalanced. But he had a way to - they wouldn't tell, afterwards. They came out without a scratch, to the outside. Until one day, by accident, he played the game with someone he wished afterwards he'd never seen. I think he still wishes, after waking up from a nightmare."

Harry's face looked cold, hard, frightening. Now it softened. "They weren't raped - not in the - er, traditional sense of the word. He made them helpless - in his boat somewhere far out - and then he started to humiliate them. Sexual humiliation - that's the worst. Much worse than ..." He looked up. "Have you ever been tortured in training?"

Michael nodded. Vanessa shook her head.

"Torture's something totally from the outside. It can break you inside, but - you know it's a hostile attack, no denying that. And it's not really humiliating, just painful. Okay, you may lose control of your bladder and so ... By the way, watching how the girl couldn't hold her water was one of his methods."

Michael realized why Harry wasn't telling the story in sequential order. To know that something had happened to this subject, something that made him come up screaming in the night, rendered the story bearable.

"Humiliation alone is one thing - even sexual humiliation. But the most despicable part is that your own body tricks you, undermining your defense. You cannot avoid sexual arousal, and the worst that can happen then is an orgasm. Because in your memory, the humiliation and the arousal are linked together. This is the nastiest part of it."

Michael could see as much as feel that Vanessa had calmed down a bit, listening with fascination.

"And that's exactly what the cure has to do. Separating them from each other, making clear that the arousal was a side-effect like wetting yourself, in spite of the fact that the guy did it by himself, or by not letting her reach the toilet in time. The memory of the humiliation - it leaves a scar, only we get quite some scars - " Harry smiled humourlessly, "and the girl I'm talking about recovered quite well when she heard about the stunt that got him his reward. That's quite helpful, mark my words."

"And ... and the cure?" Vanessa had difficulties with her voice.

"The cure is to learn again that sex itself is - let's say, innocent. It's the intention that matters. Giving and receiving arousal, experiencing an orgasm, is the most profound method of expressing love, affection, tenderness. And the only way how to learn this - is sex, what else. Sex plays in our brain - the same mechanism which established the unhappy link will help to break it apart ... Of course, at the beginning, it's a question of softness and patience ... I mean, basically, sex is an exciting game of conquest and surrender - but only after there's a basis of trust and understanding and knowledge. We know that some people are getting a kick from playing with the unknown risk, from playing with real bondages and whatnot - for the average person, the imagination is strong enough. What I'm saying is, all this comes much later, the first lessons are to experience an - er, a peaceful orgasm, if you know what I mean."

Micheal had an idea, only ... His mouth was dry. "Can ... can you be a bit more specific, Harry?"

"Okay. The - the normal way of sex, I mean the penetration, is somewhat aggressive, and the same goes for what the catholic church thinks of as standard - the missionary's position. According to the pope, the steps I'd recommend first count as unnatural and pervert. Except that the only perversion in this regard is to do something against the will of the partner - provided they both are old enough to know what it's about. What we use to articulate ourselves is well suited to express more than words ...

"Okay, yes ..." Michael felt his hot cheeks. "Got it, Harry."

Vanessa's voice was thoughtful. "I wonder ... Would it be a good idea to talk with her?"

"Hmm ..." After a moment's thinking, Harry's face lighted up. "I have an idea - but first, just for completion - it's helpful to talk about it with those people you like and trust. That's my concern here - two strangers ... But I can give you a phony with a blind connection - do you know what this is?"

"No."

"You press the button, and the display only says 'Blind connection'. You don't know whom you're talking with, the same's for the other side. It's like this Internet chat - it's your decision if and when to reveal your identity."

"That sound's good. If you could lend me that ..."

Harry laughed. "You ain't serious, are you? ... But the other thing - how's your way with Samantha?"

"She's okay." Vanessa's face showed reluctance, to say the least.

"She's more than that," replied Harry. "Sam did the talking in this case, and she did it quite well."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. She knows what she's talking about, that's all I'm saying."

Michael felt how someone was pulling in his mind. "Time for a break - music time, I mean." He played three songs. Then he said, "I'd like to know what happened to that guy."

Harry looked at Vanessa. "And you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well - for that, you have to ask Rahewa, after telling her it's okay with me. She played a major role in that stunt."

Suddenly, Vanessa looked very interested.

* * *

Harry tried to remember whether the round was the same as the last time. Morony - Wynor - the old guy who had asked him questions ... Harry recognized two others, then he was at a loss. On the other side, he felt confident a new face would have stood out in his vision.

Urien wasn't there. So letting him sit down and listen, after his report at the previous time, had been an act of politeness.

The same room, the same round - still no trace of getting used to it. Too different were the premises, aside from the importance of the issue - for the Goblins and their Request, given into Harry's hands five years ago, and for himself, knowing what he was going to ask. The last time, he had mastered the barrier of reluctance in himself, while his request was little more than something like, "Help me, but don't ask me how."

Today, he knew exactly what he wanted from them.

He remembered his first request, the Privileged one - how he had searched for literature, read case studies, only to learn that aiming too high was a deadly mistake while aiming too low meant asking for a cruel lesson in decency.

He had aimed right, at that time. Twenty-nine Steel Wings for the Flying Squad had been the result, the technological basis for the victory in the Battle of Hogwarts. It had earned him also the one and only Goblin Request - not his right choice alone, of course ...

While today Harry felt sure - nobody would accuse him of aiming too low. No, sir, definitely not ... Was it too much?

There was no recorded case of a failed Goblin Request. Which was hardly suited to feel better, because there wasn't any case recorded at all. Maybe in some Goblin journal, deep below some capital, in a vault known by just a few Goblins.

Or just in some memories, passed further from father to son ... How emancipated were Goblin women?

"Ambassador, please speak."

Harry bowed to Mr. Morony, then into the round. "High Council - when we met here some days ago, I claimed your support in dealing with the power that appears in the shape of a woman who calls herself the High Priestess. Then, all I could suggest was to find her, to find a way how to talk with her, in order to find out what kind of power this is."

Harry hadn't received a formal answer. Still, he had decided against speculating aloud - here - what the answer could be.

"Today, I am here to claim the same. Only today I know exactly what to demand from the Goblin community - which goal to aim at, which measure to take in pursuit of this goal. I met the High Priestess, I spoke with her. I offered a plan, a strategy, and she agreed. I wouldn't go so far as to say we have the same opinion of things, however we share the belief that this strategy is the only one possible. You might also say we simply don't know any other, taking into account all factors involved."

They didn't. Of course not.

"The High Priestess says she is a controlling authority of the magical world. The only of its kind. The power she received goes with the position, not with the person. All she knows about the power behind the power is that it brought magic into our world ..."

Harry stopped, corrected himself. "At least that's all she told me."

"Anyway," he continued, "there's a rule saying the two worlds have to keep apart, the magical one and the non-magical one. Magic is a privilege. It needs to be balanced out by the absence of non-magical privileges. For all I know, that means useful technology. But the two worlds came together, which she says is a violation of the rule. She accepted that it is mainly the work of Voldemort, so the other wizards are not to blame, and this is why she stopped punishing them by taking away their magic."

Already days ago, it had occurred to Harry that Japanese wizards had mixed magic and useful technology for years, had built devices that would have driven some guys in the Ministry of Defense into heartstrokes, seeing such a misuse of Muggle artefacts. Eventually, he had stopped thinking about it. Weren't the Japanese notorious for bypassing everybody's patent rights?

"However - the High Priestess didn't give up feeling responsible for a solution. While I didn't agree with her about the importance of this rule as such, her argument was quite convincing, in particular after some scenes I witnessed recently. She said, sooner or later, the other side cannot bear the thought any longer that they are *not* privileged. This would be the begin of a mass murder. The magical world would become extinct within a period of time, maybe leaving some of them in reservations."

The native Americans hadn't been privileged. Not at all. To change that, they had been made extinct, with a few remnants who could show visitors how underprivileged they were now.

"So if the two worlds cannot coexist, and if it's too late to put them apart again, the only solution left is to unite them. The Muggles must become Magicals."

Did this count as Muggle genocide?

"This cannot be done in the literal sense. What can be done is to take measures that the newborn children all come into our world with magical power ... Well, maybe not all of them immediately, but this is the goal."

There was an old myth about a town in which people had killed the younger generation because they could muster significantly more human feelings, about justice in particular ... The Pied Piper ... But a magical child had a good chance, especially when it learned to share the parents' prejudices.

Of course, with the exception of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. But they were both beyond the age of getting children ... Hopefully.

"The strategy is to take all efforts that a newborn child has magic - and the method is to poison the parents with an elixir that achieves the desired result, to dope them, to drug them ... Unnoticed, of course - that's the crucial part ... This is a crusade to implant a spell in the

ovaries of the mothers-to-be, in the sperm of the fathers-to-be, in the embryonic state of the new life, with the fetus as the finished product, ready to unfold its magic in due time."

Could silence be excited? If so, the Goblins staring at Harry did their best to hide.

"The elixir is a new development. It will be a variation of what has been used recently to cure some wizards and witches from their loss of magic. It will be produced by Groucho Biochemicals, of course with very few people knowing the secret. The tricky part is to make the young couples drink it. For this, we need distribution channels with a wide market range. Still more, we need channels to penetrate regions in which a market in the western sense does not exist at all - third world countries in general ... Obviously, in these regions it will take a bit longer. But on the other side, these are the same countries in which tolerance toward different levels of magic and privilege is better developed than in the industrial nations of the western hemisphere, so we have more time there."

Well - often enough, the tolerance was zero. But at least the intolerance wasn't much different against Muggles and Magicals.

"We can manage three distribution channels by our own resources. One is the pharmaceutical market, at least that part which is dominated by Groucho Biochemicals. In favour of this goal, Groucho will set foot into the soft-drink market - the idea is to offer something fancy, with a strong taste in which you can hide more of the elixir."

For this, they had to wait until Groucho Communications had fully recovered from its initial lawsuits shock, and the profits were pouring in. Unless the Goblins helped a bit ...

"The third channel is the sweets market, more exactly, the magical sweets market. Like the pharmaceuticals market, it has the big advantage that the customers won't be surprised about an unexpected taste, while it benefits from a much wider acceptance. Everybody likes sweets."

Really? Had he ever seen Wynor with a candy bar?

"We might find more. But all these channels are based on the concept of a customer - someone ready to pay money, which means this someone must have money he can spend. We need a channel that works independently from this basic assumption. And this is where the Goblin community comes into play - in case you accept my request."

For an instant, it looked as though the old guy would speak, would ask a question. But he still kept silent.

So Harry continued, "My request is that the Goblin community uses and extends its market position and its resources to come in touch with young couples all over the world. An example - Gringotts offer loans with excellent conditions - for young couples awaiting a baby. While discussing the details in a Gringotts residence, they are offered a drink ... Another example - Goblins develop programs for medical care in third world countries, again aiming primarily toward pre-natal support. All this can be presented with a natural interest in the next-generation customers - if it would sail under the flag of welfare only, people would start getting suspicious."

Greed was better business than loving care. Harry felt sure the Goblins knew better than anyone else.

"There are certainly more ways, we don't need to list all of them now, and I don't want to tell you what to do in detail ... So this is my demand - to be the major force, and to provide the resources, for turning the Muggle world into next generations's wizards and witches. It were the Goblins who united the fractions of the magical world sufficiently to set an end to centuries of fights and wars. And again, for all I can see, it is the Goblin community as the only one able to unite the magical and the non-magical world in humankind. It might be the largest-scale deception ever. Still, it is for a honourable purpose."

Harry bowed, leaned back.

Silence.

"Ambassador," said the old guy, "how long, would you think, can such a global deception be kept a secret?"

"I have no idea, Honourable. If it's possible to keep the secret for ten years, before everyone realizes that suddenly a thousandfold of the wizarding schools is required, we have won. Then it'll be too late, even if they're going to make Groucho a dark spot in history."

"Does your claim extend to military support also?"

Now that was a nice formulation. A trap, wrapped in an offer, wrapped in a question. "The risk is high," answered Harry, "I'm aware of that. My only excuse is that the risk of not uniting the worlds is still higher, although not immediately ... And all wizards and witches participating in this conspiracy take the same risk ... Should the day come that hordes of screaming Muggles appear at our gates - I have no intention to tell the Goblins how to defend themselves ... While on the other side - the more Goblins make themselves an indispensable part of the business world, the smaller is the risk. And for third world countries - everybody is poisoning them in the name of civilization and profit, it's only important not to appear altruistic ... Nobody kills his banker because he might need another loan the next day. Only missionaries get skinned."

Another Goblin said, "Considering your goal, Ambassador, your argumentation seems remarkably cynical."

"Maybe so, Honourable. But you cannot cure the world, except perhaps with its own medicine - sorry, that wasn't meant as a joke ... I don't believe one can make the world better - unless on a very small, personal scale. That's not my goal. I just want to make it magical."

Another moment of silence.

Again, Harry didn't see any signal pass between the old guy and his friend, Modragh Morony, when the Managing Director suddenly said, "Ambassador, your request is understood. It is no doubt the most challenging claim ever heard from a holder of this title, and this duty. This Council will honour it with the most careful consideration. The Council also wants to express its deep satisfaction with the present assignment - whatever could be expected, has been fulfilled, if not more."

So he'd done an excellent job - in what? Scaring them?

Harry rose, bowed. "High Council - good evening."

15 - The Last Generation

Beatrice listened to Cho's explanations about the next steps to do. These steps applied to an early stage of a project which hadn't even started yet, had nonetheless all ingredients of a thrilling adventure.

"... see here are those who know. Their number will grow still a bit - for example, this project will take all of Groucho's resources, and that's possible only with the approval of the major shareholders, so Sylvie and Jesamine have to be informed sooner or later. But we haven't even begun - once the operation is running, it's a bit easier for the newcomers to settle to this idea."

Settle to the idea - that was good. Beatrice had never heard anything as unsettling as Harry's explanations, when he visited her in Port au Prince to tell her about his plan, and to ask whether she would join the party.

At this moment, Cho grinned maliciously. "Well, I wasn't quite correct, of course. There's someone else who knows - except we didn't want to disturb her in her beauty sleep, as long as there's no work for her to do ..."

The High Priestess ... Beatrice was looking forward to seeing her. And she was looking forward to talking with someone who knew why Cho always seemed to grow claws and fangs when speaking about this woman.

"... And I left out the Goblins - first because I don't know who's member of their task force - assuming they'll agree, and second because we don't have answer from them yet." Cho turned to her husband. "Harry, what's your guess about that?"

"I'd say - the answer will be positive, that's pretty sure. Not because the Goblins necessarily share our concerns, at least not from our point of view - it's a challenge, and that's what's intriguing them still more ... They're bankers only with one part of their soul, the other - for them, this isn't much different from a military operation, in some way."

"How long will it take them to answer?"

Harry thought for a moment. "They got some suggestions what to do, and how to do it. My guess is - right now they're busy to find out additional methods, to check them, and to prepare for them, just to make clear that it's their own decision how to do it."

Ramon asked, "What's that in weeks? ... Two? ... Four? ... Fourteen?"

Harry pursed his lips, nodded. "Yes."

"Yes to wha ..." Seeing Cho's grin, Ramon stopped.

Cho said, "For a change, it's nice to see someone else caught by that old trick ... Okay, Ramon - you're the cop here - I think you should spend a moment at giving us some advice how to handle security, then we're done with the official part."

Ramon glanced at her, looked into the round. "Alright, folks - I'd say, you wait for a while, until you hear the alarm clock. Then you get up quickly, put yourself under a long, hot shower, and swear to yourself you won't tell anyone ever about this dream."

George turned to his twin brother. "Fred, this guy's challenging our reputation - do something!"

Fred smiled at the Biochemicals CEO. "Ramon, you better get serious quickly - otherwise I'm going to tell my little brother, then he'll come and order us all to *his* version of security - and then you'll regret bitterly ..."

The little brother, called Harry, looked solemnly at Ramon. "Yes I will."

"No, please." Ramon shuddered. "I won't do it again, I promise!"

Cho looked at Marie-Christine, rolled her eyes. "Men!"

"Okay, okay! ... Alright, then ..." Serious again, Ramon said, "Basically, what we're doing is undercover work. Be aware of that, and don't ever think there's someone you can trust, and tell. If you think there's someone, come and tell us, and have a good argument ready why this person needs to know ... Otherwise - use common sense. Behave as always, don't start tiptoeing around. If it's your habit to discuss your work in the canteen, don't stop now - just prepare yourself with a few unsuspecting terms. Those who listen and nod in approval don't get half of what you're saying anyway, so don't disappoint them by starting to be reasonable ..."

Cho was eyeing him suspiciously, but Harry nodded.

"... That's the bottom line. We'll work out the details when it's time - like what to keep in documents, and where. And please - if you did a mistake, tell us. We *will* make mistakes, it's unavoidable. Keep that in mind - you won't be the first to come and confess, we just don't publish lists, that's all."

Hermione asked, "And what if someone has heard too much, or seen too much?"

Ramon said, "If we can afford it, we'll tell him. If not, we'll use a memory charm - like in the good old times with the Muggles."

"A memory charm can be broken," said George.

Harry looked at him. "Not those of Aram'chee ... At any rate, these are the two only options."

It felt strange, hearing him address the High Priestess by her own name, as though she was someone he had met the other day and now was trying to put on the next party's guest list. Beatrice registered Cho's expression - it would be hard work to put that woman on *her* guest list.

Now Cho looked friendlier. "That's it for today, I guess ... Thank you for your attention."

Beatrice saw Fred passing a remark to his twin while looking toward herself. No doubt, next moment she would have the chance to see an unmarried Weasley in action ...

Nope. Cho caught him and his twin brother, probably to discuss the merger between Groucho and Swashbuckle.

"Can I treat you with a lunch? - Except for me it's a dinner."

Beatrice looked up. Before her stood Hermione, smiling, saying, "In full public, just what the doctor said."

They hadn't seen each other since the brainstorming. Some brain that, really ... Beatrice became aware that Hermione, although some years younger than herself, seemed more self-confident, showing no trace of embarrassment.

"Yes, thanks ... I'm starving."

They went downstairs. The wall in the entrance hall showed half a dozen plates, stainless steel, each of them in the shape of a hand, with engravings that read *Airport*, *Linkport*, and the names of some restaurants. Portkeys - Harry's work. Beatrice knew from Chrissy about a running gag in the maintenance crew - sending a new teammate to polish these plates.

To come back, they would have to use a cab. Hermione could apparate, while Beatrice herself couldn't. And calling Harry over the phony to get summoned was too - whatever.

Without even asking her, Hermione grabbed Beatrice's hand, pressed a plate. Next instant, they stood in front of a restaurant unknown to Beatrice - something Spanish, Luiz Pereira. Just from the smell, Beatrice's mouth started watering. Small wonder, according to her stomach it was already two hours later.

Inside, people were waiting in line. Beatrice turned to Hermione. "I'll be starved until we get a table - Spanish, that means it'll take forever."

"You won't." Hermione grinned deviously. "Wait and see."

The waitress arrived. "Two seats, ladies?"

"Yes, please. Ramon Garcia - he's our boss - said we'd find here an excellent service."

The waitress smiled knowingly. "Then we'll make sure he won't be disappointed."

Five minutes later, they were guided through the kitchen, and out again into the public area, to a table in a corner. Hermione tried to order an aperitif, with little success. Before she had found time to complain, a man stood at their table, depositing two large glasses with what seemed to be daiquiris. "A welcome from the house, Miss Chagrin, Mrs. Krum ... Would you allow me to select your courses?"

"Er - yes." Hermione looked baffled.

Using Spanish, Beatrice asked, "Do we have the pleasure with Senor Pereira?"

"Himself, Miss Chagrin - at your service."

"Nice to meet your, Senor ... How did you know our names?"

"From Ramon, of course." Smiling, the man disappeared.

"What did you say?" Hermione's tolerance toward foreign languages seemed limited.

Beatrice told her. "Do you think they have a list of names here?"

"No." Hermione looked guilty. "He must have called Ramon a minute ago."

"Uh-oh." After a moment, Beatrice shrugged. "So what - you told the truth, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." Hermione recovered quickly. "What's more - I did exactly what he said, behaving as usual. Imagine I'd suddenly stop being pushy ..."

They looked at each other. After a second, Beatrice raised her glass. "Cheers."

Hermione studied her nails. "How are you?"

"Fine, and you?"

"I'm fine ... I had a few bad moments, when they came back. But after it worked out okay with Viktor - the cure, I mean ..."

"I can imagine."

A quick glance. "Harry had to wake me ... I had just a minute to reach the laboratory."

"Ew ..."

"Yeah ..." Now Hermione grinned. "But he wasn't mad at me."

"Who? - Viktor?"

"Not him - he doesn't know yet ... Harry."

"Ew ... Wonderful."

A large salad appeared. Seeing it, Beatrice forgot her concern, as her stomach saw more urgent business to deal with.

Between bites, Hermione said, "But that's not the reason why I wanted to talk alone with you - well, not the only one. It's about our new project - what we have to do, getting the stuff down in taste and striking, is difficult enough, so ... I think we have to work together on that."

"Yes, I think so, too."

"And?"

Hermione's voice was casual - too casual, as Beatrice registered next second. So there was someone who wasn't all self-confidence ... Suddenly the few years difference became more prominent. Beatrice said, "You know - for me, our competition's always been more of a game, with Cho never getting tired of heating it up ... I think we'll do fine together."

"You think you're going to get along with me?"

Beatrice laughed. "I'm not all soft and pliable, 'ermione - I can show claws too, just less often than Cho ... We'll do great, I'm sure of that."

Hermione looked pleased. "Yes - I'm looking forward to that."

Whatever that meant. Then another thought struck Beatrice. "And Clemens? ... What about him?"

Hermione had more information. "He doesn't know yet, but Harry will talk with him within the next days ... I expect him to work at the other part - getting the recipe to the point where it's weakest without losing the effect ... And with the smallest amount of - er, horse blood we can afford."

"Yes, that ... Does anyone know how we get the quantities we'll need?"

"That's Harry's job." Hermione grinned. "Fred had an idea, except I don't know if it's realistic ... He suggested to let Harry and Almyra manage another transfiguration."

"What? Uni - er, the real thing?"

"No." Hermione giggled. "Vampire bat - then we could send them and milk them afterwards."

For Beatrice herself, embedded in the superstitions of Haiti, the joke wasn't quite as funny. Then Hermione said, "We'll need your booster."

"Yes, probably."

For a moment, they were both busy with their food. Then Beatrice said, "Maybe we should have someone with us, when running under dope."

Hermione glanced at her. "Whom?"

"Yeah, that's the question, isn't it?"

"Then maybe we shouldn't."

Beatrice examined the face opposite, which looked as innocent as the next-best professional gambler with a Full House face-down on the desk. After a moment, she said, "I've got no problems with either approach. This kind of - er, teamwork's somewhat new to me. But maybe I'm less limited than you."

Hermione's face showed appreciation for this particular choice of words. Then she said, "Could be I'm playing with ideas ... For instance, I thought - after you came to Hogwarts all the time, why not trying the other way? The autumn break isn't too far away - a week in Haiti, that might have quite some appeal - if that's convenient for you."

"Certainly ... You alone?"

"I'm not sure yet ... What if I came with Viktor?"

Beatrice stared at her. "To - er, keep us at work? ... To work with us? Right now I'm not sure whether I can follow."

"Well, I ... I'm still testing the ground, in case I have to step back ... But I wasn't thinking of him working under brain booster."

Beatrice nodded slowly. "I see ... An entirely new idea - takes me a bit by surprise, while it certainly has some appeal ..."

Hermione showed a secretive smile.

"... Yes, that sounds interesting. Maybe you should ask him."

"Maybe not." Hermione's smile broadened. "Maybe we should surprise him."

* * *

The spectacle did not reach Clemens' attention entirely. It got lost somewhere between his eyes, staring at the magnificent pool and the figures inside or around, and his conscious thinking. His mind seemed still fixed to a mind-numbing announcement from a while ago, heard in a room as profane as the Potter-Chang kitchen, dressed for breakfast.

Sandy was scooting through the water, clutching Nagini's tail.

The audience for Harry's explanations had consisted of Clemens himself and Rahewa - after the breakfast, after Sandy had ordered Michael to follow her, to fetch his guitar quickly and to play. In her room. Sandra's own room, through this event changing from a second-rated sleeping place to something comparable with Hély's room, where a Goblin harp could be found.

Vanessa had followed Michael. And then - as if announcing the plans for the rest of this weekend, which had started the afternoon before - Harry had told them about a conspiracy.

Ireen was asking Tony why he still didn't worry, after Harry had disappeared under the water surface two minutes ago.

Ireen was a Muggle. Tony too. By the look of things, soon they'd be busy starting their own child. Probably training hard in the meantime. And this child ... They didn't know what was expecting them, as Harry had explained ... Chrissy was a Muggle too - who knew though, who wasn't likely to be affected, as the Vanzandts had completed their family program, coming up with a daughter that had magic of her own. And millions of others ...

Rahewa was treading water. At this moment, a deep-sea monster pulled her underwater, recognizable only by the squeak for which Rahewa found the time before drowning - the monster had shown the grace to leave a second between grabbing Rahewa's feet and pulling, a clear sign that the monster knew about the hazardous effects of such an attack without warning, in particular from a monster hiding behind its *jaho*.

In a corner of his mind, Clemens registered him registering the scene. Probably to store it away, for savouring the memory later, when he'd come to terms with the sheer audacity of this deception ... Rahewa had been quicker. Or was it slower? Clemens had spent seven years to

think about this transit for a single person. Maybe this was the reason - what had been planned, and performed, as the exclusive privilege of his sister Clara suddenly should become a routine event in hospitals and childbeds around the world. Only it would take them quite some time to realize.

The monster broke through the surface, instantly seeing itself confronted by an attack from Tony, Cho, and Rahewa. When the united forces failed to grip the monster firmly enough for a baptizing, Cho called Vanessa and Ireen for help, expressing the hope this particular monster might defend itself less fiercely against their untrained support.

The monster dived voluntarily, re-emerged at the other side, then stepped out of the water and caught Romeo and Juliet. With one poodle on each arm, it sat down to await the land attack from its goddaughter.

Theoretically, Clemens could say no. The recipe was his copyright - nobody denied that, least of all Harry. Biochemicals would pay him royalties, whether or not Clemens joined them. He'd earn more royalties than anyone else in the history of wizard pharmaceuticals - some years from now, that was, when Groucho could breathe again, maybe earlier if the Goblins helped a bit. Even so, he wouldn't be poor in the meantime.

Cho climbed the ladder at this side, seized for a towel and came in his direction. For a moment, Clemens saw just a birth machine, carefully selected for this presentation - well-formed legs, prominent mons, breasts that would grow until finally sizing down again ... The swimsuit seemed a bit thin for such a public demo, and ... Suddenly, Clemens realized that this was Cho and that he was staring anywhere but into her face.

Cho sat down near him. "Did I pass the exam?"

"What? ... Er, sorry - I was somewhere else with my thoughts."

"Well, then - shall I walk back and arrive again?"

Clemens smiled, feeling grateful for this - still unfamiliar - lack of embarrassment. "I'd say you passed it even so - and maybe I wouldn't watch as uninhibited as before."

"You still could look at my face." Seeing his expression, Cho laughed. "Never believe a woman who says she'd feel insulted from that, Clemens - it's a lie. What's important - you should finish the examination at her face, and look at her and your eyes telling her, Great ... Tony could do that marvellously, only now he's so preoccupied."

Clemens felt prompted to explain. "I'm not yet in that league ... I was thinking of women getting children - er, that's why."

Cho shot him a sharp glance. After a moment, she asked, "Are you jealous?"

Clemens twisted. "Huh?"

Cho quickly scanned around whether some other people were out of earshot. "I just played Harry's game - skipping the three remarks in-between. It works fine - you got me, didn't you?"

"Er, yes ... I was asking that myself a moment ago. Yes, maybe a bit ... Although it's nonsense, but ... Clara got it for free, only it didn't work by itself. I think it's just the shock, hearing that."

"I don't think so. I'd be - jealous, I mean. Then Harry would come and say, she was the trigger - she was the reason for you working so long, and that's a privilege nobody else can claim ... It's a thousandfold greater than being the only one who benefits."

"Yes, you're right." Clemens looked surprised. "I didn't see it that way."

"Because you hadn't time." Cho wrinkled her nose. "But still, I for myself would feel a bit jealousy - so if it's the same with you, at least you know that you're in some company."

"Clara wouldn't - I'm sure of that. Well, we're not totally alike."

Looking over his shoulder, Cho said, "It's good to know ... By the way, here comes someone who appreciates that a lot ..."

At this moment, two dripping arms fell over Clemens shoulders at his chest, making him gasp. A head next to his own looked at Cho, asked. "What were you telling him? I saw his ears glowing from behind."

"Oh, just ordinary stuff." Cho's eyebrows were raised in utter astonishment.

"Ordinary stuff, I bet ... You're just lucky Nagini's still in the water, otherwise you wouldn't dare ..."

"No, really - we were talking about the birds - er, weren't we, Clemens? ... Yes, and about the bees ..."

"Pretty much what I thought." Clemens felt pulled up. "Come with me - a little swimming will cool your mind."

After her first step, Rahewa stopped, whispered importantly, "You should know, this woman's not the proper company for you" - making sure her words were heard where Cho was sitting. Then she ran toward the water, while from behind Clemens heard Cho calling, "Now wait - where's my wand? ... Where's my wand?"

Clemens hadn't really planned to join the others, laughing and splashing through the pool. But woe him he wouldn't follow now - that much was clear. And besides - he still felt a bit young for conversations with Cho ... Although - seeing Rahewa in her swimsuit wasn't exactly cooling him down.

* * *

Tony turned to her. "Rumour has it you'd like to have a look into the movie business, behind the scenes. If you're interested - there's a casting some days from now, it's a good opportunity to see the light and the shadow."

By now, Vanessa felt quite at ease in this environment. Glancing at the other end of the dinner table, she asked, "Rumour? ... Does this rumour have a name?"

"Rumour has many names." Tony grinned. "Not quite as many as its daughter, which is called chit-chat, yet enough."

The movie director waited through the laughter. "You could even do an extra - it's one of these teenie horror movies, you'd appear in one scene, maybe two. No text - just a scream, but we could synchronize that."

Vanessa felt intrigued. "And what would I be?"

"Monster food," answered Tony, while serenely loading his dish. "Blond, pretty, and stupid enough to look for this strange noise."

"That she can do blindfolded," called Rahewa.

Vanessa felt thrilled by the thought, looked at Michael. "What do you think?"

He smiled. "Just do it - we know you can act, don't we?"

"Yes she can!" Rahewa looked at her friend. "C'mon, Van, give us a mudbrain!"

Vanessa felt herself blush.

Tony looked interested. "It's a good test, actually - acting in front of friends ... They behave less professionally than a casting crew."

Vanessa swallowed. For a second, she concentrated, memorizing this particular style she had honed through years. Then she bent forward. "Ooh, Mr. Chee, you're doing movies? ... Real movies? - I mean, those in TV? ... Wow!" Her lower lip hung slack, her eyes showing admiration and awe. Then she turned to the table. "Hey, folks, did you hear that - he's doing real movies, him." She beamed at Tony, suddenly losing her imbecile grace in favour of a clumsy giddiness.

Next moment, she sat back again. "That's it."

The others applauded. Not so Tony - he stared at her. "That was ..." He turned to Cho. "Get her an agent - shall nobody say I'd steal a promising newcomer from under your sweet - er, face."

Not waiting for the response to his remark, Tony turned back to Vanessa, serious again. "You've trained it, that's obvious. But it's all there - face, body, language ... It's the real thing."

Vanessa laughed, a bit self-conscious. "Nonsense. First I'm going to finish Hogwarts."

Tony nodded. "Sounds reasonable ... And then give me a call." Toward Michael, he said, "I had something for you too - it's not really acting, no text at all, just playing."

Michael's face, showing rejection at the first words, revealed slight interest. "Playing?"

"Yes - you're sitting in a bar or something like that, never looking into the camera, just sitting and picking - always the same half-total."

"What should that be good for?"

"That's the scene which is shown after each massacre of the monster - except for the big final, then this scene comes first ... It's one of these details which make ..."

"Gaah ... No, thanks."

Tony shrugged. "Well, I'm in movies, not in music."

The others discussed the idea. Rahewa turned to Harry. "Tell him it's stupid not to do it. You did movies, maybe he's listening to you."

"Why should he? It's his decision." Harry looked at Michael. "But it's easy money, for a few day's work in the autumn break ... Tony might be too tight-fisted for hiring Eric Clapton, but he certainly pays better than Sandy." Harry turned to his daughter. "Who's paying no more today." Then he went to take his daughter to bed.

Vanessa's eyes met Michael's. Looking at each other, they started to grin, at the prospect of an unexpected adventure they could face together.

When Harry came back, Ireen said, "Someone told me I'd find people here with a knack for games. So how about that?"

Cho peered at her. "Games? ... What kind?"

Tony grinned. "Not what you have in mind, Cho - she's talking about the kind that's played more with paper and pencil, not with some other items that start with p."

Cho turned to her husband. "Harry, please do me a favour - fetch Nagini and tell her to strangle him a bit, just so he shuts up."

Ireen still was glaring at Tony. "That sounds like a good idea, really!"

"Okay, okay ..." Tony held his palms up. "I promise to keep silent, orderly, decent, chaste - oh yes, and all the things with p - presentable, proper, pure ..."

At this moment, Ireen's hand covered his mouth. She said, "The game's called *Know your mate*. One couple's a team. We get questions, how we'd react in certain situations - that is, one of each team is asked, and the other has to bet money on the answer he or she thinks the partner will choose ... Well, and the team with the most money is the winner."

Harry said, "Sounds interesting - only that all of you are chanceless against Cho and myself. We know each other so much longer than you ..."

Tony lifted the hand from his mouth. "Right, and that's why we have to mix up a bit. I, for example, have to play with Vanessa - she's the only one I don't know to some degree or other."

Into the reproachful glances that hit Tony from several sides, Vanessa heard herself saying, "But he's right, you know - and Ireen's the only possible partner left for Harry."

Michael proved himself fastest in party math. He looked at Rahewa. "Rage, that makes us a team - we kept strangers to each other through all these years, right?"

Cho smiled at Clemens. "We're the leftovers ... But the last will be the first, mark my words!"

Ireen came with some cards, some notepads, and a box that looked like a quattro cash register. "Here look - the account of each team is public knowledge, so you know where you are, and feel challenged to place higher bids."

The money, which existed only in some display numbers, was called *Luckies*. Each question, as Ireen explained, had four possible answers. The team partner could bet on the right answer - this would pay five times the stake. Or he could bet on one or two answers he expected to be dismissed, which paid only double.

The teams had to split, so they couldn't peek at their partner's writing. In one round, the same question would be asked to all women, in the next round, another question to all men. There were two card piles, one for the male and one for the female questions.

"No cheating," admonished Ireen. "You have to answer honestly, to the best of your knowledge."

Harry asked, "Shall I get Nagini?"

A vast majority declined this offer of a living lie-detector.

Cho turned to her husband. "And you stop spying - you have to guess and bet like all the others." Her next glance hit Rahewa's grin squarely. "The same goes for you, young lady."

"Okay - ladies first," said Harry and drew the topmost card from the pink pile. After studying it for a few seconds, he started to grin, then read aloud:

- You are invited to a party, by people you cannot stand. The man is AA, so alcohol as a present is not suitable. The woman is too fat, so sweets are no better. And the daughter is allergic to all kinds of flowers. What is your present?

(A) The latest Heavy Metal album. Either the daughter drives her parents crazy by playing it all the time, or they cannot use it at all, which is just as fine.

(B) A large box of sweets. After all, the woman is not fat from nothing, is she?

(C) This horrible piece of glassware you got from them - three years ago.

(D) A very fine miniature in a beautiful frame, you paid quite some money for it. It shows Leda with the swan in full action.

When Harry placed the card in the middle, Tony looked into the round with a blank expression. "Who's Leda?"

Still searching for the right words, Vanessa heard Harry saying, "Don't answer - he knows the story well."

Tony grinned. "Well - it was worth a try."

Vanessa examined the alternatives, one worse than the other. How could she answer honestly if none of them ... Glancing up, she saw that Tony had already signed his bid, had placed it face-down in the middle. Oh no - they'd lose money, she knew it!

What would she choose? What would Tony think she would ... Feeling desperate, Vanessa marked (A), folded her sheet.

Tony smiled at her. "We're getting rich, trust me."

Ireen demanded that the women should explain their choice, as proof that they hadn't cheated, and of course as part of the fun. When it was her turn, Vanessa said, "It was the one where I thought I'd find something to say if they'd ask me."

Ireen turned to Tony. "And? What's your bid?"

Triumph in his face, Tony presented his sheet.

Vanessa gasped. He had put their complete account on (D) - as non-choice. They were leading.

Ireen drew the first card from the blue pile for the men. For Vanessa, this question seemed easy to bet on, after she had listened to Tony's jokes.

- You have a business lunch with a woman. She is nice and good-looking, you want to make the best impression. At this moment, the waiter drops the sauce bearnaise into your lap. How do you react?

(A) You say to the waiter, 'It's an interesting idea, only that the details still need some working-over. But thanks anyway.'

(B) You say to the waiter, 'I'm sure there's an express cleaner's around the corner.' After dropping the trousers and passing them to him, you say to the woman, 'Sorry, would you repeat your last sentence?'

(C) You say to the waiter, 'Please call Brook's for a new pair, size so-and-so, black.' Then you start eating your meat raw.

(D) You say to the woman, 'It's my lucky day - I almost had ordered the boeuf flambé.'

Vanessa couldn't make up her mind whether Tony's choice would be (A) or (D), and betting on two different options was only allowed as non-choices. However, Tony had shown her a way - she put their complete account on (C) as something he wouldn't choose.

He hadn't. Even so, they were no longer leading - in a hazardous gamble, Cho had put almost everything on (B), and she was right.

Rahewa gaped at Clemens. "You really would?"

"I had to take a choice, hadn't I?" Clemens seemed somewhat uneasy. "D - no thanks. C is just too pretentious - maybe once I'm rich, but ... And A - can somebody tell me what's so interesting on a saucepan in the lap?"

Cho giggled. "It wasn't the pan, but never mind."

For an instant, Vanessa's eyes met Tony's, which showed silent amusement. Tony had selected (A).

During the next rounds, Vanessa and Tony could increase the distance to the other two teams, while Cho and Clemens seemed to storm off and away, mostly from Cho's daring investments. Then came the card which changed things - a question for the men:

- You meet the good fairy, and she offers you a free wish. Just at this moment, the bad fairy comes along to spoil the fun. These are your choices:
 - (A) A weekend on Hawaii, with a local beauty as your companion. Unfortunately, exactly at sunset, the Maunaloa (local volcano) will erupt, causing all people to flee for shelter.
 - (B) A weekend in Las Vegas, during which you will win spectacularly. Just after leaving the casino, some gunmen will hit you over the head and leave with your money.
 - (C) A weekend in the Ashram Temple of Free Love. It will be great. Only the antibiotics you will need afterwards raise a slight allergy, in addition to the normal symptoms.
 - (D) A weekend in the Canadian forests, with a team of three others, for bear-hunting. Unfortunately, the bad fairy has organized another event in the same region and at the same time with the animals - hunter-bearing.

Vanessa had quite some fun reading the card again. She put a considerable amount on (B), and right she was - Tony had chosen this option, explaining he didn't care much for Hawaii shirts and running from hot liquids and burning ashes.

Two other women had betted for the same, failing spectacularly. The first was Ireen. When Harry showed his choice, which was (D), Ireen stared at him thunderstruck. "You'd hunt bears?? ... I can't believe it."

"Of course not!" Harry smiled apologetically. "What I had in mind was reaching the place with them - and then to team up with the bears, hunting the hunters, probably as a dragon." He grinned. "They'd never go hunting again." Then he looked at their account, nearly broke. "Never mind, Ireen - you were on the right track, except you weren't fully aware of my extended capabilities."

The other was Cho. She stared at Clemens. "A? You took A? ... What's wrong with you?"

Clemens stood her glare calmly. "Nothing's wrong - I just give a damn for gambling, and what's so bad about a nice afternoon with a young woman, and then watching a spectacle of nature?"

Examining the four accounts, Cho muttered something under her breath. Had to be Chinese, because Vanessa didn't get a word.

"Last round," announced Ireen. "A final question for both sides." She took the pink card.

- Which of the following men would you marry?

(A) He is rich and charming, never complains, lets you do what you want. Only he does the same, with other women.

(B) He is rich, caring, faithful, just a bit dull. Some people would go as far as calling him plainright dumb.

(C) He thinks cab-driving is an intellectual challenge - not the driving itself but the conversations with his customers. In the evenings, he spends most of his money in gambling. When he comes home, he is full of jokes he wants to share with you. When he goes to bed, he is full of energy he wants to share with you.

(D) He is a hopeless romantic. He loves arts and the easier side of life, hard work is less his style. His foreplay takes forever because he needs decoration as much as encouragement. When you lose patience, he is close to tears, so you better don't.

Listening, seeing Tony's determined face, Vanessa felt the sweat in her palms. It was now or never, and then these choices!

She thought it over, trying to imagine herself marrying any of these characters. At this moment, Cho said to Clemens, "It's make or break - don't forget. And think deviously."

Harry looked at his wife. "Why don't you just tell him what you're going for?"

Cho smiled sweetly. "Because it's not allowed, that's why."

Vanessa realized that there was just one choice. She marked (C) and folded her sheet. When she announced her choice moments later, Tony moaned.

Vanessa twisted. "Don't tell me you took the wrong choice!"

"I was so sure you'd go for the romantic." Then Tony grinned. "Except I wasn't entirely sure - look here."

He had put the full account on (A), as non-choice.

Cho opened her sheet. "My choice is A, quite obviously so ..."

"What??" Clemens looked flabbergasted.

"Dammit - didn't I tell you to think deviously? ... Yes, A - I'd marry him, hire a private eye, divorce him by taking most of his fortune with me, and then marry the cab-driver."

"Shit," said Clemens - to everybody's surprise but his own. "And I thought you'd marry him instantly because you're rich anyway."

The last question toward the men was meaningless. Vanessa and Tony had scored close to the stratosphere. Cho and Clemens were totally broke, Harry and Ireen poor but living, and Michael and Rahewa had placed themselves almost in the middle between these extremes.

For the rest of the evening, Vanessa listened to a heated discussion about unrealistic scenarios and the bad luck of having a Mr. Nice Guy as partner when it was all about business.

This discussion was performed mostly between Cho and Tony. Smiling like a buddha, Tony said, "Save it, Cho. You're just the worst loser I ever saw."

"Sure I am. So what?" Cho turned to Ireen. "Isn't this the idea? Letting it all out? ... If I'd won, I'd be content myself to sit there and grin stupidly." With a sideward glance to Clemens, she added menacingly, "But I didn't."

"Poor Cho." Rahewa's face was mocking. "Remind me to pity you ... Gimme a call - say, Monday?"

Cho hissed something in Chinese.

Tony lost his benign smile. He started to laugh, his body twisting and shaking.

"What did she say? What did she say?"

Tony shook his head. "Sorry, Rahewa, I better not." He turned to Ireen. "Let's go, honey, this is the right time."

Cho, looking much relieved, beamed at Rahewa. "I'm not going to tell you, but you have an insult free." Then she hugged Ireen. "This was a marvellous idea, this game. I feel wonderfully refreshed, after ... I hope I didn't scare you."

Then it was time to go to bed.

Vanessa felt some anxiousness in herself, still more expectation. The previous night - they had slept front to back, she and Michael, after a long day with the time difference. She had felt his erection, and because he fell asleep first, she had felt it fade.

Coming out of the bathroom, she found him sitting on the bedside. He glanced up, slight surprise in his eyes - to find her still fully dressed, no doubt. The previous evening, she had used the bathroom to change into her pyjama.

She said, "I thought - er, we'd do it for each other ... Undressing, I mean."

"That's ... I'm back in a minute." Michael went into the bathroom.

Vanessa thought about her conversation with Samantha, who had told her that this other girl had waited until the last possible opportunity, using the time pressure as another incentive. She did the same - tomorrow evening, they would be back in Hogwarts.

Then she thought about this guest room, and whether it was by accident that they had been assigned the one that was farthest apart from the other bedrooms.

Michael came out, closed the door, stopped, stood there.

Feeling her heartbeat, almost painfully, Vanessa rose. "Keep still."

She unbuttoned his shirt, took it off. He didn't wear an undershirt. She trailed his chest, his stomach with her fingers. "Now you."

His fingers took her T-shirt, pulled it over her head. When her hair came free, a slight crackling sound could be heard. His hands moved over her hair, calming down the streaks. His head bent closer, to kiss her.

"Not yet," she said. "This is about undressing."

"Strict rules, huh?"

His voice sounded unsteady, while his fingers were firm when unhooking her bra. A guitar player's fingers, swift with such small items. Her own voice not scoring much better, maybe except for the determination, Vanessa said, "Touching's part of it."

He adjusted quickly, his palms stroking her breasts, holding them an instant, his thumbs gliding over her nipples, almost reluctantly leaving, to follow the rest of his hands striding over her belly. Then he stood again.

Her fingers reached his jeans, about to open the button, the zip. At this moment, Michael said, "Socks first."

"What?"

"I - I always thought, I'll take out the socks first, because - someone in underwear, with the socks still on, that looks so ..."

She stripped off his socks, then resumed her former task. Taking off jeans was a clumsy task at best, but she didn't care, cared more not to hurt him. When she touched it, she heard him gasp, felt his stiffening.

Then it was his turn, until she stood before him in her panties. After a second's hesitation, she felt his fingers at the inside of her thighs.

"Take it off."

He did, was kneeling there, staring transfixed at her mound.

She pulled him up, knelt down to strip him completely, careful to release his member without hurting him. When she touched it, she heard him moan.

"Let's lie down."

Lying face to face, they looked at each other for a while. He asked, "How do you feel?"

"Making progress." She rose on her elbow. "Like an explorer." She took his cock in her hand, moving it, probing it.

"Van - please, that won't go for long ..."

"That's just fine - I want to see it ... Does this sound too scientific?"

"Dunno ... Ask me later."

Like in trance, while still registering the growing warmth in her lower belly, the growing stickiness between her legs, she watched his cock twist and jerk under her caressing, his balls going tight, his hips move, his body going rigid, heard his groan, felt the contractions when he came.

She bent to his face, kissed him, smiled. "Lie still - I'll get a towel."

Coming back with the moistened towel, cleaning him carefully, she said, "I just don't know how sensitive it is."

"The balls are really touchy - the rest can take quite a push."

She rubbed said rest a bit stronger. "Like that?" When he gasped, she stopped quickly. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all. When I said it can take a push, I didn't mean it's insensitive, not the least, actually."

She beamed. "No, it's not."

Michael propped himself up, took the towel out of her hands, dropped it to the floor, and pushed her gently down. His hand moved over her breasts, her belly, to her thighs, pulling them slightly more apart. She felt his fingers gliding over her tuft, reaching her lips, touching them, probing them, raising her pulse and her breathing. Then he said, "I'm glad to find you didn't stay untouched from this scientific excursion."

"No. It was fantastic."

"Okay, then - today's lesson is about excursions, with intercourses some time afterwards, right?"

She could only nod, busy to breathe while his hand played over her body, to savour his touch, to savour the absence of panic, registering how he kept his other hand off, how he was carefully avoiding to probe deeper, a guitar player slowly getting in tune with a new instrument.

And her strings could vibrate, oh yes they could, not issuing the slightest dischord.

She heard him move. Opening her eyes, she saw him shift down, placing himself between her legs. For a short instant, she stiffened, then she realized what he had in mind, hardly suited to calm her down.

He saw her glance. "You could watch in close-up. It's all new to me too."

Feeling his fingers at her thighs, at her core, at her most sensitive spot, any protest inside her was dying, replaced by warmth, heat, the urge for more.

His lips touched her. The thought felt unpleasant for an instant, then the sensations washed off her doubts.

When she felt his mouth resting on herself, his tongue playing around and along and a bit deeper, she had no room left for anything but desire, no thought other than it was him who gave this to her. She felt her own tremble, his hands holding her firmly, his tongue stroking her, felt a wave build up in her, build and build ... When it broke, she was unaware of her arching up, of her hands clutching his hair, pressing his head toward her body.

Coming awake, seeing his shining eyes, feeling his new erection, she pulled at him. "Come. Come into me - now."

"You sure?"

"No I'm not. But come! ... Slowly."

Hearing her moan, he stopped. She shook her head. "It's ... go on."

When she felt his stomach muscles on her own belly, she pulled his torso down onto her body, feeling his lips at her shoulder. "Okay. Now say it."

"Vanessa, I love you."

She held him tight. "I - I'll answer you in a few days, when I'm sure what I feel."

"I can wait."

"But you shouldn't wait with something else, and don't worry if I can't follow - that'll come in due time, like the rest."

Feeling his careful movements, Vanessa's mind and soul were jubilating - about the tensing which didn't come, about the confidence which grew with his every push, about the prospect of him coming inside her.

* * *

The room looked familiar meanwhile. The faces - Harry would remember them as of now like those of Morony and Wynor ... Most of all that of the old guy.

Who said, "Ambassador, this Council has taken your request into careful consideration. It has weighed the arguments. It has judged the motivations and obligations. It has also used the time to reconsider the role of Goblins in the world. At the end, it has come to a decision."

So far, so good.

"The Goblin community accepts your request. The Goblins will be a driving force in the efforts required to spread magic all over this world, until humankind has magic power in common like language today."

They did it. They really did it.

"We express our devotion to this goal. We consider ourselves honoured beyond measure. We stand in awe and respect, facing destiny and the touch of a superior being."

Harry knew that feeling.

"Your first task is performed, Ambassador. For your second task, this Council and the Goblin community wish you the longest time of preparation that is within reach of your race. When the time comes to assign this duty further, as well as in the years before, this Council will gladly assist you in this decision."

In other words, the discussions about his successor would be less formal, and Harry's saying, although it couldn't be overruled, was not the only one. Still more important - nobody was in a hurry with that.

Which was a great feeling.

"According to this state, the title Ambassador is no longer suitable. After so many years, the Goblin community has a new Excellence ... Harry Potter, our new Excellence, this is a memorable day."

Harry bowed.

"There are many details. You should know about all of them, and we are interested to hear your opinion about some of them. Wynor the Whistler has accepted the task of informing you and other people involved."

Which was very convenient and effective. The Goblins had a nice habit - they cut formalities to the bare minimum - except for these crazy ... Coming to his decision at once, Harry said, "High Council, I have a last question."

After a second's waiting, when nobody spoke, he continued, "I accept the new title as I accepted the duty altogether. As it is present in our minds anyway when talking with each other - is it possible to call me just Harry Potter?"

The old guy's face wasn't moving. "This is possible, Harry Potter, and we will do so. Of course, for every Goblin, the inevitable effect is that your name and your title will become almost synonymous."

He'd been wrong. There was a movement in this leathery face, at least now. And if Harry wasn't completely mistaken, at this moment he could watch a deep grin.

16 - The Next Generation

Clara Stein looked at her brother. "No. I don't regret that I did it. It's just - I face some problems."

"You mean it's a *Danaergeschenk*?"

Clara thought it over, then smiled. "No - that would be something totally unpleasant, wouldn't it? ... It's deeply fascinating, but so far it's more of a prospect than anything else. I'm looking for ways to fit my new capabilities into my own framework - and somehow, it doesn't work."

They were sitting in a *Biergarten* in Munich, one of these locations where all kinds of people could be found sitting close to each other - students and streetworkers, businessmen and beggars. It seemed a good place to discuss her own feeling of being stuck between two worlds.

"How's Joachim?"

"Well ..."

Her brother looked sympathetically. "Trouble?"

"I'm not sure. He thinks it's great - he always wants me to do spells, at home and what's worse, at some party. As though I'm suddenly a celebrity, and he's telling everybody about that, only nobody's interested much ... They ask me whether I can read their hands, predict the future. I say no, and that's it." Clara gave a short laugh. "Imagine you'd meet someone who can - I don't know, remember numbers with fifty digits. Great, yeah, but so what? You watch it once, and then ..."

"Eidetics. You're talking about eidetics."

"Yes, right - the absolute memory, isn't it? I wonder if they feel the same. Except - I cannot even do it, my most fundamental problem is that I'm a pretty stupid witch. I have to learn!"

Clemens smiled. "Yes, that's true. So why don't you learn?"

"It's not quite that simple. How can I do it? ... Clemens, I have a job, and unless for a very good reason, I'm not going to give it up. Show me a night school for stupid little witches - that'd be a step in the right direction."

Her brother nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah - I see what you mean ... It would ... But maybe ..." He stood up. "Let me check something - I'm back in a minute."

Clara watched him leaving, saw how he was seizing in his pockets for something, then he disappeared from her view. A moment later, she realized what it had been - he was performing a phone call - no, phony call - without her listening.

Which was strange. She and Clemens - yes, they could live well without exchanging every thought and every emotion at once, but when together, and nobody listening ... She felt a tiny

bit hurt, which was certainly overreacting, understandably so in her current situation. Still, it wasn't helpful to see the closest companion walk away to make a phone call.

Clemens came back, sat down, looking a bit uneasy.

"Something wrong?"

"No, why?"

Clara could feel it. They knew each other in every minute reaction. Trying to find a clue, she asked, "How's Rahewa?"

Clemens smiled. "Fine - as good as can be, with these few months left to pass until she's finished with Hogwarts. There's only one thing worse than being together at the same school, and that's being apart."

So whatever it was, it had nothing to do with their young love.

Her brother glanced up. "You know me too well - no, we know each other too well, that makes it difficult if you're suddenly in a situation in which you cannot talk about everything. And I'm not used to it ..."

"Business secrets?"

"Er - something like that, yes."

"With Groucho Biochemicals?"

"Clara!"

She gasped, hearing this piercing shout. Next instant, her eyes widened - nobody around her had startled, no head turning ... Then Clara realized what it had been - when Harry with daughter and snake appeared around the corner.

He sat down. "Hello, Clara - am I glad that Sandy has learned to aim her welcome more precisely. Some weeks ago, a few people here would have called the ambulance."

"Hello, Harry - yes, probably. How did she learn it?"

Harry grinned. "She had a skillful teacher - and you know how easy it is to learn if you're that young."

"Did Clemens call you?"

Which was a stupid question, in a way, only Clara couldn't find any better formulation, while still recovering from this mind-numbing beam issued by a two-year-old.

Harry shook his head. "No, he didn't. He only wanted to ask me something, but I thought it'd be nice to come over - it's better to talk face to face than over a phony, especially with people who are so reluctant to accept a little favour." He looked at Clemens. "At the risk of being as pushy as Hermione - I like it to return a favour, and Sandy likes crowded places like this one."

"I'll get used to it, in time." Clemens turned to his sister. "I had the idea to try some private teachers - you know, an hour here, an hour there, and I called Harry because of the travelling problem." Clemens blushed a bit. "I - I wanted to know about portkeys, and how to ..."

Harry interrupted him, which seemed more of a help than an impoliteness. "He almost asked me for a price - now that really would have been an insult."

Clara couldn't follow that quickly. "Why? What is their price?"

"For charming young witches which happen to be a sister of Clemens, a drink in a beer garden. One for me and one for Sandy - that's already good for two portkeys."

Clemens, after looking around for a waitress without success, rose to do it personally. Using the time, Clara asked, "And for other people?"

"An awful lot of money - that's the business of Groucho Triple-P, selling personal portkeys like pieces of art ... But I'm entitled to give them for free, as long as I don't make a habit of it." Harry had quite some fun.

"Well, I could do with some help - I asked Clemens for a night school where I could learn to use my wand."

Clemens was back with two lemonades.

After drinking, Harry said, "Clemens had the right idea. Find people who are willing to spend some time teaching you spells. Something like one person, one hour per week - and every now and then, an hour will be cancelled for some reason. It's up to you how many hours to invest, and how long."

"But whom? I don't know that many - er, Magicals, and how could I ask them? Why should they do it?"

"For most people who ain't no teachers, teaching something they know well is fun - okay, up to a limit. That's why I said, you have to find *some* people. And because people like to chat too, only part of the time will be teaching." Harry counted with his fingers. "I can tell you four people at once who'd appreciate - no, five, not counting ourselves, not counting anyone in Hogwarts - for teachers, it's probably less entertaining."

"Which are those five?"

Harry beamed. "Remember Fleur? She'll be delighted. ... Remember Janine? She'll have lots of time pretty soon, except that it'll be interrupted by a very young wizard ... Fleur's parents - that's Elienne and Jean-Baptiste, they'll be happy, they'll feed you with cake and champagne and everything ..."

Clara giggled.

"And then - Ma Weasley, that's my step-mother, her children are out of the house, Arthur, her husband, is very active in his job - having someone for company ..."

Clemens said, "And the people I know - and others you'll meet, it's certainly enough to get a two-week's schedule together ... If it's no problem with the portkeys, that is."

Harry glanced at him, then turned back to Clara. "We'll put a board with a number of small plates in your apartment, like a large keyboard. When you know someone new, you call me, and we'll activate the next one, after engraving the name, and we'll establish the inverse portkey where you travel to ... Can you promise me to call and not feel embarrassed just because of ten seconds' work?"

"Er, yes ... Thank you." Thinking it over, Clara asked, "And they work only for me?"

"Yes - that's the specialty of Triple-P. So it's secure both ways - I'd say, those in your apartment carry you right in front of the other house, and those in the other houses carry you back into your apartment."

"Hm."

Clemens looked at her. "You think it won't work?"

"No - I'm sure it'll work, and the prospect of meeting people, talking with them, and learning ... But I know what'll happen."

"Joachim?"

"Exactly. Seeing this - er, keyboard, the names, and me disappearing, and he can't follow ... I can see it already - soon there'll be a very unpleasant scene, and that's it."

Yes, she felt sure of that. Joachim didn't take well being excluded on purpose, no matter what. He could get angry finding the bathroom door locked.

After another moment's thinking, Clara sighed, looked up. "I'm going to do it."

Harry asked, "Are you sure - about both?"

"Yes." Clara sighed again. "I figure I knew it all the time. I figure that's what took me some time to think it over - not whether I'm ready to become a witch. Just ..." She smiled at her brother, somewhat sadly. "It was never a question whether I'd follow you as soon as possible."

Clemens said, "I'm sorry for you."

"Don't - " Clara took his hand. "Even if we're somewhat unbalanced again, it's not ... Really, now that I know what's comin', I feel easier every second."

Clemens still looked depressed.

"Hey, c'mon - there's a new exciting world, waiting for me to be detected. And I'll find my big love some day ... I'm sure of that."

Harry watched Clemens, then turned to the twin sister. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, I am. I'm going to be a witch."

"About your friend, I mean."

"Yes, definitely."

"Would you be interested in organizing night schools?"

"Huh?"

"That's what you're going to do for yourself, only on a broader base, and semi-professional and fulltime job mixed in?"

Astonished, Clara glanced at Harry. "I don't know ... I never thought of it, and - why? Who besides me would need that?"

"Nobody, at the moment. But this might change ..."

She saw Clemens' head jerk up, saw him staring at Harry.

"... Clara, there's something Clemens knows, and you don't. It was bothering him, and it was bothering me too, because - well, it's obvious, with you two that close ... Sorry if this sounds cruel, but - as you're going to break with your friend, we can afford to tell you."

"I knew that ... It has to do with other Muggles becoming Magicals, right?"

For an instant, Harry's eyes were flat and hard, his face expressionless. Then he smiled.

"We're just in time, it seems - except that this is *not* a topic for a beer garden ... Can I invite you both to a quiet place?"

Clemens looked extremely unhappy. "Harry, I didn't ..."

He was interrupted at once. "I know," said Harry, "what do you think I just did? Only she can think for herself, right? And very quickly so."

"Is it that ..." Seeing Harry's gesture, Clara stopped. "Okay, then - now?"

"Yes - the sooner, the better."

She hesitated. "Wouldn't it be better to wait until - I mean, what if I change my mind? How can you be sure?"

Harry grinned. "I couldn't, but - did someone tell you already about Nagini's special trick?"

* * *

Ron stared at his brother, then at his wife. "He's mad - tell me he's mad, because otherwise it's me who is ... One of us must be mad."

Janine said, "I always had my doubts ..."

Ron looked relieved, next instant suspicious.

"... while I'm sure that 'arry knows what he does."

"Of course." Ron stared at his wife and her monstrous bulge. "That'd be the first woman comin' cross with him ... Yeah, okay, not counting Cho." He turned back to Harry. "Why are you telling me? What was so bad with sleeping well?"

Janine said, "Isn't that obvious? ... You'd be the only brother not knowing. Imagine you'd find out in a few month, or years - I don't dare to think of the complaints and shouts, the rage at that time ... Your complaints now are certainly the shortest version 'arry could figure."

Ron looked at his brother, raising his arms in a very French gesture. "Doesn't it always give you a warm feeling? This trust and unvarying support from your own ..."

"Sister-in-law? Yes, you're right - I was a bit reluctant to point that out so clearly in this particular situation."

Ron fell back in his chair, grinning warily. "You should say thanks when I'm prompting you so skillfully."

"Thanks ... But there's another reason - you're involved. There's a task for you."

"Me?? ... No, no thanks, no way. In case you didn't notice - I *have* a job already."

"Sure - that's why I'm here."

Ron dropped the theatrical part of his displeasure, which was clearly the smaller one, and started to think. He didn't need long. "Wizard schools, huh?"

"Exactly."

After some more seconds, Ron became aware of the full extent, closed his eyes. "Oh God - ten years from now, there's ... I can see it already - later generations will call it *The Magic Explosion* ..."

Janine smiled at Harry. "I love it - hearing him with his politician droning ... Other people have to switch on TV for that, while I get it for free."

Ron didn't bother to glare at her. "... Ten years from now, we'll need a million teachers, tens of thousands of schools ..." He stopped, glanced at Harry. "That's impossible."

"Yes it is."

Suspicious again, Ron examined his brother's face, then sighed. "I give up - you had time enough to think it over. I confess - I'm not as quick as Hermione, I need a measurable amount of time ... Tell me."

"You have to destroy the traditional wizarding school system. You must establish magic courses in every normal school ... That's the outline."

Totally serious now, Ron put his chin in his hands, staring ahead for almost a minute. Then he looked up. "I see ... A magical nucleus in every school - for the last four years, we can grow

more openly because then the magic kids are in ground courses ... And we have to concentrate."

Harry nodded. "And get rid of courses nobody needs urgently."

"Yep - Divination, for instance ..."

"Defence against the Dark Arts."

"Transfiguration."

"Quidditch."

Ron grinned. "True, nobody needs it, but I'll make it survive, mark my words - more, it'll be the driving force on every school to build a decent wizard faculty, to have a team, to win tournaments ..." He beamed. "Hey - I always knew I'd make my mark in Quidditch history, and that's my chance."

Harry looked satisfied. "Say thank you when I'm prompting you to your fame."

"Thanks." Ron was thoughtful again. "What will Dumbledore say?"

"He knows what's coming. He has some ideas what to do with the old magical schools. Talk with him."

"I will - but I think I know already. Some kind of elite school, or wizard universities - after all, somewhere must be a centre of those magical arts not taught in normal schools ..."

"Maybe except for Divination."

Ron shook his head. "No. The Muggles love it. There are more make-believe artists on earth than real wizards and witches ... Anyway - I think the course is clear - six years in the treadmill, and them treating me like a criminal, and then - bang."

Harry nodded. "There's something else ... night schools."

Ron let his mind inspect this idea from all sides. "I see what you mean - flexible concept, filling gaps, teachers can have another job and so ... But where's the market?"

"It will come." Harry told him and Janine about his conversation with Clara.

Janine was delighted. "What a wonderful idea! That was thoughtful of you, 'arry."

"Clara, huh?" Ron grinned. "I remember her - yes, Harry, that was quite thoughtful of you."

His wife peered at him. "Don't mess with two witches at once, my dear - you'd be surprised about the side-effects."

Ron went over, kissed her. "Just joking - you'd be disappointed if I wouldn't, isn't that so?" He looked at Harry. "Will there be more?"

"Could be. We might find out we have to - er, transmigrate some people, for some reason, for example to keep their mouths shut. Or Aram'chee gets bored, and she starts wandering around, giving people magic for a change."

"But the planning's just for the new-borns?"

"Yes." Harry smiled. "With one exception."

* * *

Michael finished his song, took a long gulp from his beer, belched. "That's singer's privilege," he added.

Rahewa drank from her coke, belched back. "Is it?"

"Now you have to sing."

Rahewa grinned. "You don't know what you're asking for." Toward Clemens, she said, "What do I get for *not* singin'?"

"Nothing, but I'll just make sure of it." Clemens closed her mouth with his'.

When he let go, Vanessa said, "Then you have to dance ... What about your Grass Dance?"

"In jeans? No way ... Besides, that's nothing you can dance alone. We were six, then."

Aileen said, "I never had a chance to see you - I was too young to join these balls, and without connections ... Maybe we should start it again, what do you think?"

"Are you mad?" That was Jeremy, looking desperate.

"Are you serious?" That was Rahewa, looking expectant.

"We're six, ain't we? ... Why did you stop?"

"The last one - that was shortly after my mother died. I danced it for her, and then ..."

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't know."

"No - the idea is quite interesting, actually. It would be just one performance, or two, if we'd got invited from Beauxbatons. Yes, we should think about it."

Jeremy and Clemens looked at each other, grimacing.

Micheal glanced over to Vanessa, saw her eyes shining.

Rahewa said, "We could train here - it's really danced on grass, you know. Harry turned the parquet into a plain with prairie grass, and back afterwards - I'm sure he'd do it again for us."

Out of interest, still more in an attempt to move the conversation away from this unfortunate idea, Michael asked, "Where is he? He didn't come lately - playing for Sandy, that's always something special."

"He's busy." Rahewa beamed. "And today I know for sure he won't come, because he asked me to deliver something."

"What?"

"To whom?"

Rahewa checked her wristwatch. "Should be here any minute ... Michael, c'mon, play us another song, then I think it's time."

Michael fetched his guitar, started picking, still feeling a slight doubt, dropping it, feeling thrilled for an instant, dropping that too, started singing.

*"Wake up, wake up - Darlin' Cora,
wanna see you one more time.
The sheriff and his hound dogs are com-in'
I gotta move on down the line."*

It was a song from the southern part of the States, about a prisoner who'd escaped, who was on the run but couldn't leave without seeing his girl once more. A rapid rhythm, pretty simple, while the singing raised a true challenge - holding a tune for five seconds, sharp stops, skipping voice ... In a way, this was his first public performance.

*"... I'm no man to be played with,
I am nobody's toy -
have been workin' for my papers
long, lo-ong time ...
Now comes he an' calls me a boy."*

It had to be sung with outrage, and some desperation, which meant his head had to come up, almost shouting, then fall down again, his voice becoming small, nearly inaudible. Coming to the end, Michael saw a figure approaching.

*"... If it wasn't so dark, Darlin' Cora,
you'd see tears tricklin' down my face.
It breaks my heart, Darlin' Cora-a,
but now I've to leave this place."*

He stopped picking - the last line was sung a capella, and also the reason why he always had shied off from performing it in public.

"Wake up wake up, Darlin' - Co-oho-raa."

The last tone died in his throat. Michael was breathless - from singing and from expectation.

Total silence.

Looking up, he saw awestruck faces. Into their stare, he said, "I wouldn't mind some comment, but we have a newcomer."

For a moment, there was some chaos - people didn't know what to do first, express their admiration or welcome Clara. Then Clara sat down, said, "If nobody does, I will," and applauded.

The ban was broken. People joined her, Vanessa hung at Michael's neck, and Jeremy said, "Sorry, Michael, that was ... I didn't know you ... Why didn't you do that before?"

"Well - I didn't know either."

Then Rahewa said, "That's the right evening - Michael shows us his real talent, Clara has finished her first lesson with Remus, and now," she turned to Clemens, "there's something Harry gave me for you. Except I thought this particular something should be passed over by Clara, and for good reason."

"What is it?"

"For which reason?"

Clara looked at her brother. "I have no idea - that's what I should give you." She handed him an envelope.

Clemens broke an important-looking seal, bent forward to read in the firelight. Pleased like a child, Clara took her wand, said, "Lumos," to give him better light, and to read together with him.

Michael saw how Rahewa could barely hold herself from jumping up and down.

Clemens looked up. "It's from the Goblins ... Can someone tell me what a Request is?"

"Yes I can! Yes I can!" Rahewa's head came around, to look at the parchment. "What - I knew it! I knew it!" She started to strangle Clemens.

Michael, who knew a bit more about Goblin Requests, looked at Clara because Clemens was totally out of combat, fighting for sheer breath. "What category?"

Clara studied the parchment again. "They call it Privileged ... What does it mean?"

* * *

She looked around in the café, a place she had visited often enough, while not in civil clothes like now. It looked almost empty. This was probably her last visit, although she hadn't come because she would miss it. Certainly not ... She was done with Tiberias, like she was done with the army.

The door opened. Seeing the familiar triple figure, Laila braced herself for the storm of excitement that would wash through her mind in an instant.

And here it came. "Laila!"

Harry walked over, kissed her, dropped the girl into her arms. "Hello, Laila, let's share - Sandy for you, Nagini for me."

While he ordered, Laila was busy welcoming the girl, and tickling her, and settling her in her lap. Suddenly, she felt a lot better.

Harry examined her. "How are you?"

"Until a minute ago, the answer would have been, don't ask. But now I feel great."

"How come?" He smiled. "A minute before, I mean."

"I'm trying to find myself again. I quit the army. Then I looked for a flat. You won't believe what they demand for a rathole ... Then I looked for a job. Seems as if I have the choice between a place to sleep or something to eat, with the salaries they offer ... It gives me a totally new perspective of my time as a sergeant."

"Did you already rent something?"

"Not yet. Till the end of the week, I'm still allowed to use the barracks. But I won't stay here anyway - what's so great about Tiberias, after all?"

Harry grinned. "The castle."

"Been there - seen that ... Scary place, as I remember."

"Would you mind coming with me once more to that place?"

"What for?"

Harry's expression was unreadable. "It's planned as a surprise."

"Now that's a real change, that is. Whenever I went up there, the scene was dull and boring."

Harry's smile came back. "That sounds more like you. What kind of job did you look for?"

"Just something reasonable to make a living." Laila grinned. "I got a call from a certain agency with an aversion from ads in the newspaper - seems as if they are interested in army drop-outs, or maybe some of them."

"And?"

"I cannot quote my answer - not while Sandy's listening."

"Hmm ..." Harry drank from his coffee, grimaced, looked into her face. "I'm here to offer you a job."

Laila felt her heartbeat accelerating.

"The job has two parts - a public one and a non-public one. The public one is simply challenging, stressing, with irregular office times - provided you see the office at all, that is."

"You'd do great as a used-car salesman - I can't await to say yes." Which was the truth.

Harry no longer smiled. "The non-public part - that's something special. Very special. In a way, it's like with this agency, because you won't be able to resign."

"Sounds better by the second. Yes."

"It's sort of risky."

"Yes."

"If it comes out, they'll kill you."

Laila snorted. "What's new with that? ... Don't you hear me? Yes!"

"You don't even know what it is."

"It's in California, right? And it's Groucho, right? ... That's all I need to know. My answer is yes."

"Very good ... So then - welcome aboard."

After a moment, Laila started to laugh. "It's already like a dream, but somehow a few details won't hurt, I think."

"Remember that guy with the collection of non-traceable pieces?"

"Ramon?"

"That's him, yes. He needs an assistant."

Laila remembered what Cho had told her about this Ramon. "You mean a secretary?"

"Nope. I mean an assistant."

"Now wait a sec ... He's the CEO of Groucho Biochemicals, right? ... And this man needs - what makes you think I'd qualify for that? Or Cho?"

"He's an ex-cop, and you're an ex-sergeant. We thought you two would do great together. And then there's of course the non-public part."

"You're not going into the arms business, are you?"

Harry laughed. "Certainly not. This was totally private, had nothing to do with his job."

"What - er, kind of assistance does he need?"

Harry's eyes were sparkling. "None of private nature - sorry, I think I put you on a totally wrong track, just because I cannot tell you yet ... He needs someone he can trust, someone who knows about - by the way, Marie-Christine, his girlfriend, knows about that too, for more than one reason."

"Sounds like a big conspiracy."

"Something like that, yes." The sparkling was gone in Harry's eyes.

Laila tried to grasp it completely, failed. "That's ... Assistant of the CEO ... Why me, Harry? Is it ..." She stopped, not wanting to spoil the moment.

"It's because we trust you. That's more important than anything else - the list of people who know is very short, and it won't grow much. And it'll take some time." Then Harry grinned. "Although I don't think Ramon will complain about our choice."

Realizing what was lying ahead, suddenly Laila felt weak, encountering a shock of pleasure that seemed almost too much. "I wish Cho was here, to tell me it's real."

"Wanna meet her?"

"Now??"

"She's in the office - except we have to do something else first."

Laila stood up. "Let's go, then. I feel a bit sick anyway."

Outside, Harry took his wand, pointed it toward a pole at the boardwalk, murmured something, looked up. "Touch this."

Laila came out in the castle yard. She watched Harry with daughter and snake reaching the well, to sit down. Then she followed him, sat down herself, looked into the darkness. "No drinks today?"

"And no coins either, because we don't need them ... Laila, I want to ..."

"Aram-chee!"

Laila looked at Sandy, saw her beaming, wheeled around, at the corner of her vision registering how Harry's arm stretched out behind her. Registering the figure, she stared at the woman, felt Harry's arm supporting her. After a second, she steadied.

Harry's voice said, "Good evening, Aram'chee. This is Laila Belezikijan, the woman I asked you about ... Laila, this is Aram'chee - she's the High Priestess."

Laila swallowed. "Er - good evening. I wonder if it's nice to meet you."

The woman came closer, stood in front of her. Like in a trance, Laila felt a hand touching her forehead, stroking her cheeks, while the look from these eyes held herself caught.

The woman made a step back. "Welcome in our world, Laila."

While she tried to decipher this message, the woman turned to Sandy, held her arms up. "Can I have her for a little while?"

Laila saw the girl floating into the woman's arms. Quickly losing track with reality, she turned to Harry. "Somehow it's good I'm no longer walking around with an Uzi - I might have done something stupid."

Harry beamed. "I don't think so ... But try this."

Laila glanced at his wand. "What for?"

When Harry didn't answer, a crazy thought filled her mind. Totally crazy. An impossible idea. She grabbed the wand, whooshed it through the air. "Hocus pocus."

Next instant, it fell from her powerless fingers while her eyes were staring at a thin arc of sparkling glitter, quickly fading in the air.

Harry fetched his wand, stored it, grabbed her, hugged her. "Welcome in the magical world, Laila ... You're a witch."

She glanced at the High Priestess, who responded with a short smile, only to concentrate again at the girl. Then she pushed Harry back to stare in his face. "Really?"

"Really."

She started crying.

He held her, supported her, said, "Take your time. Aram'chee is in no hurry, as long as she can play with Sandy."

Which was only good because it seemed much harder to stop a crying of pleasure than a crying of pain or sorrow. Eventually, Laila steadied, walked over to the woman with Sandy on her arm. "Thank you. This means so much to me ... Thank you."

"It was Ha-ry's wish. I had no reason to deny this request, and now I see no reason to regret. May your magic flourish."

The girl touched her nose. "Laila witch."

"Yes I am, yes I am!" Laila almost jumped through the castle yard in her excitement.

Harry checked his watch. "Steady on, Laila - we have to do another visit."

"You mean Cho?"

"Not yet. But I'd say you need a wand - what do you think?"

"A wand ..." Laila tasted the word, its sound, its meaning, tried to imagine herself with such a piece ...

"C'mon, you can daydream afterwards - even Mr. Ollivander has a closing time." Harry turned to his daughter. "Come, Sandy, we have to get a wand for Laila - remember Mr. Ollivander?"

Maybe mentioning this slightly weird man was the reason, maybe not - Sandra shook her head. "No. Aram'chee." Smiling friendly, and very determined.

The woman said, "I did not suggest anything, Ha-ry. But I would be very pleased to wait here with Sandra until you have found a fitting wand."

Harry studied his daughter for an instant, nodded. "Fine with me. I'll leave Nagini with you, so she can sit if she wants ... See you later." He came to Laila. "Ready?"

"Er - where's the portkey?"

"What portkey?" Harry grinned. "You're a witch now - you won't throw up from a little summoning, would you?"

* * *

He reached the Montalembert, remembered the location of the bar from another visit in Paris, went inside. He ordered a red wine - a proper choice at this place, still more for this occasion - and sat down at one of the small tables to have room for his notebook, should it take longer.

She would be in time if she could, late if the event took longer than planned. Waiting for her was still better than most other methods of killing time.

After a while, Paul Sillitoe's thoughts drifted back to a time some years ago, to the situation then, and today, to figures that had played a role, still were doing so ...

"Hello, Paul - I'm glad to see you."

He hadn't seen her coming, used his startling to come up and greet her. "Hello, Ginny. Sorry, I was far away in my thoughts ... A drink?"

"Not now - I held glasses in my hand all the time. Let me just sit, and look at someone who doesn't twist and shout and blurt excited bubbles of bullshit."

Paul smiled. "You look great."

"No I don't. I'm tired, and upset ... It's just the dim light here."

"I can see enough, and what I see is you, not the model. I could look at you all the time."

"And nothing else?" Ginny grinned. "That might become a bit boring, after a while, what do you think?"

"Would be a long while. What we're doing instead is great, yes, ... Only it's almost all we're doing together. I wish there was more."

She looked at him softly. "I know."

"Walking through a park ... Sitting side by side, doing something as stupid as watching TV ... Would that be so bad?"

"No."

Her armour was really down, today. Paul went for his chance. "Then let's do it."

"Now?"

"Now, tomorrow, next week - next month, next year - and the year afterwards ... Marry me."

She glanced up, looked down again. "Paul ..."

"I'm not going to challenge your job, Ginny, you know that. Not now, not later. I'm travelling myself a lot. But there's always time in-between. I want to share this time with you."

"I cannot, Paul. Please ..."

"I'm not greedy, Ginny. I won't demand more than what you can offer."

Her head jerked up. "And what if it's not enough?"

"And what if it is?" With some difficulty, Paul kept his voice calm, low, urgent. "I had time to think it over. Quite some time. And when we started to see each other again, I had time to check myself, to ask myself seriously ... My answer is - yes, I'm ready to live with your dream, not to fight him, because then I can live with you."

"It won't work, Paul. It would be totally unfair ..."

"To hell with fairness! There's no fairness, there's just ..." Paul exhaled. "Here's my offer, Ginny ... I will not stop you loving him. I love you. What I have in mind is being there, and to be the best husband you can get."

She put her face in her hands.

"Do you like me?"

Her face came up. "You know that I do - it's more than that, it's just ..."

"Is there any other reason? Anyone else?"

"No. I left you because ... It wasn't your face I couldn't look at, it was my own, feeling like a cheat." Ginny leaned forward, her voice as low and urgent as his own a moment ago. "But I'm no longer, Paul. I'm honest with you. When we make love, it's only the two of us in the room, no one else."

He heard confirmed what he had figured by himself, still felt something in his chest for which there was no word. "I thought you were, and that's why I can stand to my offer. So what's your answer?"

She kept silent for a while. Then she said, "For the first time, I can imagine it might work. I'll think about it, Paul ... Seriously ... I'll give you the answer as soon as I can - it won't be months, maybe not even weeks ... But not today."

"It's a deal?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes, we have a deal. Some of these days ..."

"Good ... Did you see him recently?"

She looked surprised. "No, why?"

"I think you should see him more often. With me, with Cho, alone with him. I think there's still some work to do, in order to get it settled to something you can handle."

"You mean, banning a demon?"

"Taming it, I'd say. Come to terms with it. He's an artist with this technique, but I learned from him, just by watching how he does it, and what effect it has."

"I know, I know - maybe I just needed time to face this kind of treatment ... Did you see him recently?"

"No, but I'd like to."

"Then why don't you just call him? He wouldn't say no."

Paul smiled. "I thought I could come with you - it looks better that way, in particular when asking him some questions."

"What do you mean?"

"He's up to something. Or Cho is, or both of them. Something's going on."

Ginny laughed. "Hey, what's this? - A proposal or a trick to sneak into some family secrets?"

"I didn't say I'd stop being a newspaper man, did I? ... Killing two birds with the same stone, there's nothing wrong with that. And Harry knows that I can spell the word confidential."

Ginny looked wondering. "Seems as if you know more about what's going on in my family than myself. But that's my own mistake ... Yes, I think we should do some visits."

Then she smiled archly. "But not today. There's a room upstairs waiting - for just the two of us."

* * *

Harry watched the small spheres float up like balloons. They didn't come far - after three feet or so, approximately the height that could be surveyed by a two-year-old without craning her neck, they came to a halt, dropped dead back into the bathtub, creating a tiny splash.

For all he could see, they were perfectly round.

Bit disquieting, that.

They weren't bigger because Sandra didn't want them bigger. Splashing large chunks of water was no art, she'd done that before. His daughter's learning curve, to be measured in minutes spent with the High Priestess, was incredibly steep. Frighteningly so, for anyone else - except Harry had no intention to discuss it with anyone else.

His phony rang.

He fetched the piece, checked the display. "Hello, my little big dragon."

"Hello, big monster. Where are you?"

"In the bathroom, watching the waves parting."

"Are you dry?"

"Like a beggar's fart."

He heard a giggle, then, "Where do you learn that language?"

"I come around ... Wanna lift?"

"Yes - ready."

A second later, Cho stood before him. Harry made a step, grabbed her. "Hi, beauty."

"Hi, beau - watch your hands."

"Can't - they got out of control, just the moment ..."

"Mummy!!"

Cho bent down. "Hello, my ..." She stared at the small water ball that was parading up before her eyes, finished slowly, "... little one."

After watching it for a moment longer, she glanced at Harry. "New tricks, huh?"

"Well, you know - she comes around too." Suddenly, Harry found it wise to make an end to the spectacle. "C'mon, my little mermaid, let the water rest."

He took the rosy bundle, feeling relieved - what if she'd apparated herself onto the padded table?

"What today? Airstream or towel roller?"

Towel roller seemed a clear favourite, in particular since airstream was often enough the only choice at Tony's pool. And for a few moments, the muffled gurgling that emanated from the cylindrical shape was that of an ordinary little girl.

When Harry's oil-soaked hands moved over the small body, Cho behind him asked, "Did you ever bathe Michel?"

"No ... Why do you ask?" In spite of his question, Harry could follow Cho's thoughts, since he just had finished his administrations at a delicate organ that looked just too large between these small legs.

"Just so."

Harry tried to interpret his wife's voice. It was a bit more than just so ... What if his answer had been yes? Would Cho have shown something like jealousy? ... This seemed one of these moments when using his *haragei* would have meant breaking into privacy.

In the dining room, Sandra in his lap already fighting sleep, Harry waited until Cho had talked with the house elves, then asked, "How was your day?"

"Quite interesting. I was downtown the afternoon, left the office to Chrissy. But first I had a little conversation with her."

Just in time, Harry recognized the trap - an attempt to make him ask two questions at once. Looking innocent, he said, "This conversation - was this one of the interesting things?"

Cho grinned, acknowledging his watchfulness. "She's the only Muggle who knows. I was a bit concerned about that, whether she might feel envious, you know. So I tried to touch the issue carefully, sort of beating around the bush ..."

Cho and beating around the bush, that'd be the day. Harry laughed. "I can see it - you, wand in your hand, walking round and round ..."

Cho nodded. "You're right, she knew instantly ... Anyway, she's not interested. She said, what's the sense in teaching an old dog new tricks?"

"Old dog? What a nonsense, she's ..."

"That's what I said. I said, I'll call you to tell her that, but come to think of it, I better not, with your particular taste."

Harry feigned astonishment. "It never really crossed my mind, but now that you mention it ..."

"Liar!"

"No, really - I meant, it never seriously crossed my mind."

Cho looked satisfied.

"What were you doing downtown? Shopping?"

"Kind of."

Seeing Cho's triumphant grin, Harry realized that he'd done exactly the mistake she was trying to force - asking a question too much ... Kind of - that meant no, meant something else. What was more important - finding out or pretending he hadn't ...

Cho's words interrupted his thought. "Our daughter's learning fast, isn't she?"

"Very fast, yes."

"Maybe I should have a word with her teacher."

"That'd be more of a conference - she's getting it from everywhere."

Cho stared into his eyes. "I was thinking of one in particular, and you know whom I mean ... I didn't change my mind about her request - neither about the one, still less about the other."

Harry suppressed the impulse to ask which of the two was *still less* - it would have been the wrongest remark at the worst time. "That fits just right - she'd like to meet you ... And besides, the idea with the - er, surrogate is no longer in discussion."

"Oh, isn't it? Am I glad to hear that."

"Nobody's challenging this monopoly of yours ..."

Seeing Cho's face, Harry regretted for the shortest instant his choice of words, only that this was a sensible issue anyway, and who said that he had to take it all the time from her just because his fuse was considerably longer? ... And for this pending decision - it was time to make clear that there wasn't anything pending any longer, except in a sense that might not find Cho's immediate approval.

"... while otherwise - do you know that Rahewa has lost her rank in Sandy's top three of people to visit? Do you know who's ranking on a par with two musicians? ... Cho, at the time the question becomes acute, it will not be our decision. Our daughter will tell us what she thinks of it, and that'll be that."

"Monopoly, huh?"

Harry stared at her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that - say, did you hear anything of what I just said?"

"Every single word - I'm not deaf. Now, coming back to that monopoly ..."

"Please forget it! ... What's your comment on my estimation how the big question will be solved?"

"Oh, that ..." Cho waved dismissively. "It might turn out one of these discussions between mother and daughter ..."

Harry could barely trust his ears. So suddenly Aram'chee's request should be at the same level with something like the issue of always rice pudding and turkey??

"... but of course you're right, I'll lose the fight." Cho beamed into his speechless face. "That's okay - daughters usually win against their mothers, why should I be an exception? ... Can we *now* come back to that monopoly?"

"Yes, dearest wife-oh."

Said wife's eyes were sparkling. "Some day soon, we have to work at your language, really, we have ... But what I was going to say - I didn't realize that - I mean it's true, I just didn't look at it that way."

Cho constantly agreeing with him - it felt like high time getting suspicious.

"A monopolist has some responsibility, isn't that so?"

Once more, Harry mastered the temptation to spy deeper. "Yes."

"Ain't you interested to hear what I did in the city?"

Harry felt his eyes widening. If this wasn't a sudden change of tack, then ...

"There's something Biochemicals couldn't find its own version yet, and chances are low they'll find time for it soon - it's a certain test, done with stripes - you have to pee on it, and ..."

Harry dropped Sandra in a chair, shot around the table, reached Cho. "Really?"

"I'm not joking - not with that."

He tried to do it all at once - hug her, kiss her, look at her, tell her that he didn't know what to say, wheel her around ... For once, his balance and coordination had lost him.

Her smile was warm, and pleased, and tender. "When counting back, I remember that you were in some kind of stress at these days - a very special kind of stress. Quite tiring - which means, if they're right with their statistics, chances are high it'll be a son."

"Is it too early to ask Nagini?"

"How should I know? It's your snake."

"That's a myth - Sandy has inherited her already."

Then Harry remembered the scene in the bathroom, grinned. "I think it should be you who'll oil him - somehow, that feels more appropriate."

"You might be right." Cho's smile became wicked. "I should train that - the sooner the better."

----- The End -----