

Potter Profession

By

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01 - Vacation

There had been no warning. Or maybe there had, but without Harry paying attention. It seemed funny, in a cruel sort of way, because he'd heard or read his share of predictions, just counting those concerned with his own fate.

Mostly ill, they'd said.

Mostly wrong, they'd been.

But no matter how bad the prediction, whether in announcement or accuracy, none of them had forecast anything close to his current state. Yes, there had been the unavoidable Cassandra songs about the dreadful days people should expect once past their forties. But it seemed a bit early to expect him listen to them; and besides, most likely he wouldn't believe them anyway.

Yet with every day it became more difficult to ignore the signs, which had been unmistakable for a while already. Being honest should begin with being honest toward oneself, shouldn't it? Well, in this case:

A neutral observer might have called it *midlife crisis*.

At the age of thirty-seven, Harry had reason to believe this neutral observer's diagnosis was partly wrong. *Mid-life* should come a little later, hopefully.

About the rest ... calling it a "crisis" sounded a bit harsh. Or was it simply that he recoiled from the term?

A Harry Potter shouldn't recoil from anything, least of all his own problems, in particular since he seemed to be the only one having them. His loving wife Cho, a year closer to the roaring forties than Harry himself, showed no comparable signs: she was the personified self-confidence, always knew what to do next, and barely found the time for doing half of what she planned.

At least, this was the picture she presented to other people, with Harry at the top of the list. Maybe in her innermost thoughts - but Cho had been a bit reluctant to reveal her innermost thoughts lately. And this was part of Harry's crisis, unless he confused cause and effect here, which he doubted very much.

But whatever it was that clouded things between him and Cho, it represented only a minor part of his troubles. Something else worried him more, and now, with everyone else gone, this question felt more disquieting than ever.

What was his purpose in life?

A lot of people would have answered, "Defeating Voldemort, what else?" To any such person, he would have screamed, "But that was twenty years ago! What am I supposed to do now? Today? Tomorrow? Next year?"

He was yesterday's hero, in dire need of a job. Yesterday's fame had faded away - maybe not quite as fast as the proverb said, but he welcomed every grain of anonymity he could get. And to make him completely normal, he needed a profession. Not exactly for financial reasons, not with the royalties from the movies in which he had played either a kung fu fighter in his human shape or a dragon in his Animagus shape, and not with Cho's wealth as backup in cases of emergency. No, he wanted something to help the time pass, something challenging, something demanding. More than just a hobby.

Of course, he hadn't suffered from unemployment for the last twenty years. But, unlike everybody else he knew, he never had found a profession that would last for a lifetime.

Mostly with the intention to think hard about his problems, Harry hadn't made any holiday plans. The result was that for the past three days, he'd been the only resident in Carron Lough, the castle twenty miles north of Dublin which served as the home of the Potter family. Even Bolo, the dog, had left the castle to follow his mistress, Esmeralda, to the south of France. Dobby and Winky, the house-elves, were the only other souls left here, but they did their jobs so unobtrusively that Harry found it hard not to count them as part of the furniture.

Now he was paying dearly for this mistake. Children and wife spread across the world while he was alone at home, staring at the walls, slowly but surely going mad.

He had to find a solution, and soon - preferably today, before really getting lost in screaming madness. Visit some people, hear thoughts that weren't his own.

The first candidate that crossed his mind was Fleur. She had given him excellent advice often enough in the past. This time, though, he felt reluctant to follow this impulse. Bill and Fleur might already be in Egypt, their planned holiday destination, and Harry certainly didn't feel like apparating through the world in search of a sympathetic soul.

There was a second reason for his reluctance, perhaps weighing more. In a crisis of an emotional nature, Fleur's first recommendation would be to get laid. While Harry thought this good advice in general, he didn't consider it helpful for finding long-term occupation.

He dismissed some other names, including Hermione's. Visiting Hermione to ask for advice sounded just bizarre; too often, she gave it for free.

This left his old friend Ron plus family, despite the fact that they had discussed the issue not so long ago. Ron, much-disputed politician and successful writer of non-fiction books about the ongoing merger between Muggles and Magicals, had recommended to Harry that he do the same - write books. An autobiography, for example.

"With a yearly update?" Harry had asked sardonically. "Or do I have to commit suicide right on the spot afterwards?"

In the course of this discussion, several people had assured him that his attitude could only be called ignorance. After all, the bookstores were full of biographies of very young people - singers, actors, sports stars and other celebrities. But Harry didn't feel the power of the written word inside himself.

The spoken word was a different matter. Desperate to find something for him, Cho had suggested another movie role. When Harry had replied that this idea felt like betraying Tony, his friend and director, who had died six years ago, Cho had sneered that Tony would have been the first to point out what nonsense this was. Harry had growled back, "But only if it's not kung fu - and what director in his right mind would offer me a role as something else?"

"I could find you one," Cho had said.

"Sure. Money buys everything," Harry had replied, ending this particular discussion forever though not for good.

Maybe it was a desperate measure, visiting Ron again. But at least his friend wouldn't pity him. And the two youngest in this branch of the Weasley tribe, Elaine at five and little Felix at three, were great fun to play with, now that his own children were so much older. His own youngest two, Carlos and Esmeralda, could be found there, too; they had accepted this invitation as being the most attractive one in terms of company and location. In contrast to his older children, they wouldn't feel stalked when seeing their father appear.

The region was another argument. Ron and Janine's holiday home could be found in the Camargue, near Sète in the south of France. A good place for sun, baguette, and red wine, none of which was available in quantities here at Carron Lough.

Harry checked his watch. Early afternoon, probably siesta time down there. Whatever - ten more minutes here, and he would start screaming.

He apparated, aiming his jump for the spacious garden behind the Weasley bungalow.

* * *

Cho Chang-Potter stood in the entrance hall of the main building and looked around with mixed feelings. In a hotel, the hall simply would have been called a *lobby*. But although the building very much resembled a hotel of the expensive category, and although the entrance hall very much looked like a hotel lobby, with reception and everything, none of the employees would ever use that term.

That was, if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Speaking of employees - none of them were within sight, which was the reason for the bad part of Cho's mixed feelings. Even now, two days before the planned arrival of the first guests, no one should be able to enter the entrance hall undetected. The things she could see, in contrast, contributed to the good part of her feelings about this newest achievement in the MABEL organization.

In a few days, the buildings here would host thirty guests for a four-week seminar, in addition to housing the employees who provided the services of a luxury hotel - the minimum level of comfort the guests could expect, after having paid astronomic fees.

Then there were the moderators, and guest speakers like Cho herself. She was one of the hidden forces behind the MABEL program, but this fact would remain hidden, at least from the guests.

The buildings were new and splendid. They stood on a very quiet and isolated spot on Vancouver Island in the southwestern corner of Canada, about fifteen miles north of the Campbell River. Quiet places, well separated from the next town, were a trademark of the resorts owned by MABEL.

When stepping out of the main building, you could see the shoreline of the Queen Charlotte Strait, which separated the island from mainland Canada. This geographical fact had caused the first suggestion, *Queen Charlotte Resort*, as the name for this location. Then someone had argued that a Muggle queen wasn't the best choice for a symbol or a name in the MABEL program, which emphasized a strong connection to nature in general and the original roots of humankind in particular.

After some discussion, the place was dubbed *Vancouver Resort*. A perfect choice, in Cho's eyes, because somehow this name appeared as misleading as the entire MABEL program.

With the name Vancouver alone, someone could search forever before finding the place: in addition to Vancouver Island, there was a large city Vancouver on the mainland just across the island, directly at the border to the States, and there was a smaller city Vancouver in the south of the Washington state, almost at the border to Oregon.

But then, nobody would search for a MABEL resort unless he was invited, either as a paying guest or as a guest with a scholarship. In either case, the travelling route would be fixed to the proper destination.

The MABEL seminar program was a small hoax in the aftermath of the bigger hoax known as *The Great Plot*. For insiders, it was a very funny joke to find Cho at the steering wheel of this organization, at least when taking into account who was simultaneously the biggest beneficiary *and* the biggest benefactor of the MABEL program - the High Priestess, once Cho's worst enemy.

MABEL, to begin with the most obvious though least important detail, stood for *Magical Abilities Evaluation Labour*. It was the official name of a growing organization that appeared determined to convert every remaining Muggle to a Magical, by inviting them to a four-week seminar during

which hidden magical abilities would be trained until, hopefully, the former Muggle ended up as a wizard or witch.

Except it wasn't quite true. And it was hard to accept the term *invitation* after having put a look into the price list: the official seminar price was almost one hundred thousand US dollars.

Cho looked around once more. Just when she felt sure the staff of Vancouver Resort was in for a very bad surprise, a man came through a door and smiled at her without the slightest trace of surprise.

"You must be Cho Chang. Welcome to Vancouver Resort, and please excuse my being late. I was held up by a phone call I couldn't cancel quickly."

The man had addressed her with the name she used in her MABEL activities. *Chang* for short, as part of her real name, and to avoid unnecessary questions that might be triggered by her full name, Chang-Potter.

She examined the newcomer. Tall, broad-shouldered figure, who would have looked more natural when found in the forests outside, wearing a chequered shirt and with a chainsaw in his hands. Blonde hair, indicating a direct line of English or Scandinavian ancestors. And no matter how fast his reaction, the total lack of surprise left only one possibility. Again she glanced around, this time with renewed attention.

"Where is it?"

"Yes, you're right, there is a surveillance camera, and I could already examine you while talking on the phone ..."

The man's smile had something of a boy caught in a childish trick, and something that touched her as not childish at all, something that matched well with his choice of words. *Examine* - rather than something as simple as, *I could see you*.

"... but if you can't detect the camera, it means we found the right place for it, and I'd prefer to keep it a secret." He bowed slightly, not looking the least bit apologetic. "I forgot to introduce myself. My name - "

"You're Reuben Timball, the Resort Manager," interrupted Cho fully on purpose. Maybe this piece of male meat was God's gift to the women, and maybe she wouldn't disagree with this definition, but for sure she disagreed with someone who found it wiser not to answer a question she'd asked.

To emphasize the different roles in this game, she asked, "And who was on the phone, that you couldn't cancel earlier?"

"The Canadian Minister of Culture and Education. She's planning to appear at our opening."

Reuben Timball held his smile. It did not grow more triumphant, to have defeated this sudden attack so successfully. Nor did it change to a grin, to indicate that he knew about the motivation behind the attack.

Even so, Cho felt pretty sure he knew. She also felt sure that it was time for smiling back. She would have to talk with him a lot, because he was new in the MABEL organization and didn't know yet about certain things. Initiating a newcomer was her greatest joy, something which didn't happen very often.

And so she smiled.

* * *

Sandra Catherine Potter lifted her head and glanced at a scene close to the waterline. The scene included a boy of twelve and a girl of nine, the reasons for Sandra getting up. She was in charge of keeping an eye on them, and a second ago, the two had stirred something in Sandra's half-conscious mental guard.

Apparently, the short uproar was caused by some controversy in the kids' group, which the two had been full members of for some days. However, when the noise level didn't increase significantly and nobody showed the preliminary signs of a fist fight, she sank down again.

"Wassamatter?" asked a sleepy voice from the neighbouring mat, just a foot away from Sandra's own.

"Nothing," she answered. "Just the kids."

The kids were Donovan and Deirdre Lupin, the children of Remus and Almyra, friends of Sandra's own parents for an eternity. Almyra had been a classmate of Sandra's mother. She was also the one who had organized these holidays as a deal for mutual benefit.

Almyra came from Jamaica originally. Her mother, a Voodoo priestess, still lived there, reason enough to spend the summer break on this lovely island with its magnificent beaches. This year, Almyra had invited Sandra and her friend Héloïse to join them - as long as they wanted, provided they would keep an eye on the two children during the week in which Almyra and Remus made holidays from the holidays - a seven-day trip to a destination unknown to anyone else, at least in advance.

To Sandra, it looked like a late honeymoon. For sure it gave them a few days alone - no mother, no mother-in-law, no children, nobody. And since Almyra's mother was a bit too old - and, to be honest, a bit too fat - to tend a boy of twelve and a girl of nine from morning till evening, Sandra and Héloïse were more than welcome at this place on the outskirts of Savanna-la-Mar in the southwest of Jamaica.

Everybody knew that the task of guarding the children was left mostly to Sandra, because Héloïse had a bad reputation as a babysitter. But nobody objected, least of all Sandra herself, who was better equipped for the task than most others. The technique she used was a sub-conscious mental watching.

Very few people could do the same. Only two, for all Sandra knew: her brother Gabriel and her father, from whom Sandra and Gabriel had copied the technique, like many other tricks, whether magical or mental.

Sandra rolled over to lie on her stomach, like Héloïse had been since they were there. An indignant grunt from the other mat told her that she might stop making such a racket at this time of the day, when everybody with a working brain was having siesta.

Of course they were lying in the shadow of some palm trees. Even so, their tans would make their classmates envious when they returned to Beauxbatons. Héloïse, who didn't care much about Donovan and Deirdre this way or the other, developed deep feelings of envy at the sight of their skin - small wonder with a mother whose natural complexion was a dark bronze, and with an even darker grandmother.

Héloïse used the siesta time to tan her back. Later, she would turn around to tan her front - about the same time the first boys would appear. These boys would settle down somewhere close, only to jump up a moment later in some stupid macho game that gave them an excellent excuse to show their muscles.

Sandra felt as if she was the only one without anything to show. The boys came because of Héloïse, no question about that. Fleur, Héloïse's mother, was a quarter Veela. That made Héloïse one-eighth Veela - a small fraction of Veela genes, one might think, except that these genes apparently were quite strong, certainly enough to give Héloïse the same long, silvery hair as her mother, and a lot of other attractive attributes - long legs, for instance.

Sandra, with a mother who could only be called small, and with a father of average height, wished she had such legs. Still worse, there was one year difference between her and Héloïse, and here at the beach, with both of them wearing bikinis, this year showed.

Other people would have assured her that she had no reason to complain about her looks. When asked, these boys would have sworn every oath that the taller girl was *not* the only reason for them to gather every afternoon at the same spot of the beach. For Sandra, though, it made no difference.

Sometimes she felt as if someone had stolen this year - which was, of course, nonsense; Sandra herself had whole-heartedly supported the decision to skip a class in elementary school in order to join her friend Héloïse from the very first day in Beauxbatons. But at that time, it had looked as if magical power was the most important factor in school, a factor in which Sandra didn't feel any shortage.

As it turned out, age was a factor every day of the week. At least recently. At least around boys.

Compared to her friend, Sandra felt young, inexperienced, and childish. Young she was, inexperienced for sure, despite the fact that she had had a boyfriend since her first year in Beauxbatons - Frédéric. But lately it had cooled a bit between them, for no obvious reason at all. Or maybe it was because they felt unsure what to do, or more exactly, *when* to do it - and whether at all together. Strangely enough, when it came to sex, a long-standing friendship could be a barrier.

However, Sandra was fighting more fights, and discussing more questions than that about when to lose her virginity. These questions were prominent at home and in Beauxbatons while not here in Jamaica, and this was the reason why these holidays, which otherwise might have been slightly boring, gave her an opportunity to relax completely.

And then of course the children, who were really sweet.

Her friend Héloïse found these holidays quite entertaining. This certainly had to do with all these boys one could meet, on the beach and otherwise. But as Sandra remembered, Héloïse had been scheduled to meet some other boys, much more familiar and thus maybe less interesting - the other members of the student band in which Héloïse played her Goblin harp.

Her membership in this band seemed quite irregular, which was a joke, considering the band history: it had been Héloïse's music that triggered the musical careers first of Gabriel, Sandra's brother, and shortly afterwards Michel, Héloïse's own brother.

This irregularity was also responsible for the question that preyed on Sandra's mind. She turned her head to the side on which her friend's admirable body was stretched. "Hély?"

An exasperated grunt marked the answer. From bad experience, Héloïse knew that there was no sense in pretending to be deaf - "that damned super witch" noticed the short twist the question raised in other people's minds.

"Say, aren't you supposed to rehearse with the band?"

"No, why?"

Why? Because they had a completely new set of amps and loudspeakers. Because they were trying to change their appearance into something more professional than just a simple student group. Because Ireen, self-nominated band manager, had asked, ordered, begged ...

As if she had heard Sandra's mental outcry, Héloïse added, "Oh, they know how I play. And Tomas on a twelve-string is close enough to the Felison - he can take my part."

The *Felison* was the Goblin harp, a priceless instrument, one of six in the world. Calling it Héloïse's instrument was only correct in the sense of her being the player - nobody *owned* a Felison; these instruments were loans from the Goblin community, for a lifetime unless the player decided otherwise.

And Tomas, full name Tomas Alejandro Serrano, was the guitar player in the band. As a gypsy with a Spanish background, Tomas preferred the flamenco guitar. To say he *hated* the twelve-string steel guitar probably went too far, simply because Tomas couldn't hate a musical instrument, but it was somehow typical for Héloïse to demand such a favour just because she didn't feel like interrupting her own holidays.

"Is it simple laziness?" asked Sandra. "Or is there something deeply fascinating here, and I'm just too stupid to recognize it?"

Héloïse's face came around, a cool glance hit Sandra. "You might be not that far from the truth."

Contrary to her own words, Sandra wasn't famous for her stupidity. So she needed only a few seconds to come to the only conclusion left, and to stare at her friend in disbelief. "You cannot possibly mean those boys!"

A smug grin appeared in Héloïse's face. "No? Why not?"

"Because ..." Sandra seemed speechless, at a loss to find the words for the meaninglessness of a few Jamaican beach boys, even if some of them might be tourists from somewhere else.

"Oh my, you're never going to get it, are you?" Héloïse came around, her face the living example of patience in desperation. "Those boys are for free, you twit!"

"For free?" Sandra's eyebrows knit in concentration.

"Yes, for free." Héloïse fell down on her back, the rhetorical equivalent of giving up hope.

"Because they'll be gone in a few days, or even if not, you'll be gone in a few days. No obligation, no investment, no regret. Get it? ... You can do with them what you want, they can do with you what you want, and two weeks from now, all these names and faces are shadows of the past."

Listening, watching, Sandra saw how Héloïse emphasized her explanations with a languid, sensual movement of her body. As if she had needed confirmation - there was no doubt, her friend with this one year additional age was also leading in experience.

Damn Veela.

* * *

The name of the band was "Dragonfly." Aside from its reminiscence of majestic animals, with wings for flying and fire for breathing, the name brought images to mind that resembled the band's music: quickly changing directions, floating sound, and an element of something from out of time.

Like a survivor from antediluvian times, although the band was pretty young. As were its members.

Giving the band an English name didn't really fit, since all band members were students in French schools. France was also the leading country when counting their origins, although none could be assigned to a single place or culture.

Gabriel Uriah Potter, half English and half Chinese by parents' origin, half Californian and half Irish by the places he'd called home at times, played the flute and occasionally the accordion, concertina, harmonica, xylophone, or keyboard. At fourteen, Gabriel was the youngest member but one of the driving forces, together with the band manager.

Michel Weasley, half English and half French by parents' origin, French by environment yet with Veela and Goblin attributes by nature and education, played the drums and other percussion instruments. He also played the famous four-bodied tubular drums that were manufactured by Miyikura. Together with Gabriel, Michel represented the nucleus from which the band had developed.

Tomas Alejandro Serrano, gypsy by blood and Spanish by location, played the guitar and other instruments with strings to pluck, even if the techniques were quite different - acoustic guitar, electric guitar, banjo, mandolin, whatever suited a particular song best. Being the oldest member with his eighteen years, Tomas could have played a leading role in the band, except he was no leader, not voluntarily. And besides, there were two adults within the band's periphery who might find a taste for this job.

Finally, there was Héloïse Weasley, representing the same mix as her brother, and undeniably the one who had started the musical obsession when, at the age of three, she had received her Felison harp from her godfather Wynor the Whistler. Héloïse's music had caused an overwhelming effect on Sandra, whom nobody would have called the Veela's friend at that time. It was a safe bet to assume that Gabriel had started playing out of respect for Sandra's vulnerability - Héloïse would play or not play as she felt like it, generally using music as a currency for trading and blackmailing in any suitable order.

To ease the tension between the two musicians - Gabriel, the stubborn one, Héloïse the hot-tempered - Michel had started playing the drums, to balance.

With her history, Héloïse and her Goblin harp might have been the spiritual - or musical - centre of the band. But she wasn't, because of competing interests in other things. And for the same reason, Héloïse was the only band member missing today, the days before, and the days to come.

Her absence annoyed Gabriel a great deal. Probably he wasn't alone with these feelings, but nobody expected Michel to complain about his sister in public, and Tomas - well, one might call him a victim of a seventeen-year-old with Veela genes.

Truth be told, Tomas would play music in any congregation of instruments, and solo guitar if nobody else was around. The concept of a band seemed somewhat alien to him.

They were rehearsing as much as experimenting with their new concert equipment: microphones for input, loudspeakers for output, mixers and amplifiers in-between. The complete set, enough for halls the size Dragonfly could fill, came as a present from the manufacturer, Groucho Technomagic. Even if Groucho's major stockholder had been someone other than Gabriel's mother, this company might have sponsored them for marketing reasons - the loudspeakers, sixteen boxes altogether, could float in mid-air, pretty close to an audience, thus allowing for an excellent sound mix without drowning anyone in a deafening noise level.

Playing the pieces in their repertoire, again and again, was the fun part in these rehearsals. Mixing the sound by adjusting the microphones and amplifiers was the hard part, also the reason why they did it here, in the Great Hall of a deserted school in a godforsaken place called Durmstrang.

To create realistic conditions, Gabriel had conjured up first as many chairs as fit in this hall, and then wool blankets to cover them. In terms of acoustics, these surfaces came close to a hall filled by an audience.

It worked, and the charms required for all these chairs and blankets did not cause Gabriel much trouble. The mixing, on the other hand, was an art by itself - they'd found out as much already, and were more than glad to welcome the band's *official* sound engineer.

His name was Desmond Flourey, an Irishman who made a living by mixing sound in recording studios for professional bands and soloists. As Desmond had considerably fewer holidays than schoolboys and girls, it seemed strange to expect him, in these most precious days of the year, to use his professional skill in favour of a widely unknown student band.

The linking element was Ireen.

Ireen Chee, widow of Tony Chee, former movie producer and director in the kung fu category, had arrived in Ireland six years ago, after her husband was murdered by kidnapers only minutes before his friend Harry Potter arrived at the scene. Once in Ireland, Ireen somehow had never found the way back to their splendid bungalow with swimming pool on the wrong side of Santa Monica, California. Instead, she had found reasons to stay.

The first reason was Ireen's self-nomination as band manager. It had probably been her doing that had turned Dragonfly into a musical group one could send on tour, at least to single concerts. So far, these concerts mostly took place in schools, although it seemed only a question of time until Dragonfly would perform in larger halls.

In the course of putting the band together, Ireen had managed to create a CD album. It served as a linking element between the four difficult individuals more than as a product, because nobody could have lived off the sales. Ireen met an important prerequisite for this manager job - she had a steady income from her late husband's movie royalties.

However, as so often, things happened in clusters. In the process of producing this CD, Ireen met Desmond. They fell in love. They forced Dragonfly to record a second album, hardly more widespread than the first. They shared the conviction that Dragonfly was at the eve of a great career, reason enough for Desmond to lend a helping hand in sound mixing.

That was, if he found the time, which would mean recoding public performances, not spending day after day in rural Bulgaria.

Of course, they could have installed the equipment once and left it in place for the next day, except that the idea was to practise stage installation for the performances to come. Desmond had told them that this would make the difference between a performer and a band member - the musician only cared about his music and his instrument, while the band member also felt in charge of equipment, installation, transport, logistics, sound ... and maybe groupies, some years from now.

Héloise, apparently, considered herself a performer only.

Gabriel knew that this wasn't really true. Under different circumstances, Héloise would have found pleasure in rehearsing with the three boys. It was just that, in this summer break before Héloise's last year in Beauxbatons, the band members were scattered around the globe. Perhaps Héloise was enjoying Jamaica too much to come over.

After receiving the new equipment for the band, Ireen had looked around for places - school halls - where they could rehearse their skills and get used to the gear. After conversations with various headmasters, headmistresses, and teachers, she came back with an offer that seemed a perfect match because it included everything.

The offer came from Hermione Krum, Potions teacher and surgeon at Hogwarts, wife of Viktor Krum, who still had strong connections to his native country Bulgaria. The traditional wizarding school of Bulgaria, Durmstrang, would be deserted during holidays, in sharp contrast to Hogwarts. The Durmstrang Headmaster, Kristof Drilencu, old friend of Gabriel's parents, gave his permission immediately. So the location aspect was settled.

As was her habit, Hermione had killed two birds with the same stone. The second bird in this case was the family aspect. Hermione and Viktor's oldest daughter, Sophia, was seven. Ireen's only daughter, Tanitha, was eight. And it so happened that Ismène, Michel's younger sister, who adored her brother, was eight too and not yet scheduled for any holiday plans.

In such a large group, it was a piece of cake to find someone to take care of Hermione and Viktor's younger children at any time of the day. Alexandra was five, Timothy two.

Here in Bulgaria, however, the Slavic versions of these names would be more appropriate. Timothy became Timotei and Alexandra changed to Aleksandra - a spelling that pleased Gabriel no end, because suddenly his own sister's name was in it.

Maybe this was the reason why the girl hung around with him outside the rehearsals - like Ismène with Michel, or Sophia with Tomas, so that Viktor, suddenly bare of daughters clinging to his neck, invested the free time and emotions in Tanitha, who deeply enjoyed having a borrowed father for some weeks.

At the moment, however, Viktor and his wife were nowhere near while the girls filled some seats in the front row, together with Ireen, who held Timothy in her lap. The boy looked sleepy, totally unconcerned about the noise from the loudspeaker that floated some feet above his head. After a few days of music, electronically amplified but clearly below hazardous sound level, Timothy kept his sleeping schedule come blare or blessed silence.

Some other people in the small audience would notice a difference, Gabriel felt sure about that. They were playing a new piece in which he had to alternate between flute and accordion. Because there wasn't enough time to mount and dismount the large instrument on his shoulders, he had created a small rack on which the accordion could rest while he played. Altogether, this little artistry represented a totally new challenge - he'd done it before, but only in studio, where you could spend eons between the recording of different tracks.

While playing, he became aware of one aspect in which this rehearsal still was unrealistic - they could see the faces of their audience. In a real concert, with the spotlights on, this would be impossible. He saw that most eyes were hanging on him. It was only natural - he was the only one standing, even walking, while Michel sat behind his drums and Tomas, who played acoustic guitar in this piece, kept sitting on a tall stool, with his feet on a footrest.

Well - even when playing the electric guitar, Tomas was very reluctant to move or jump like a rock star.

The finale was the most difficult part for Gabriel - several quick changes between flute and accordion, slowly fading out, like two friends chatting animatedly while leaving a room. Today, for the first time, he was getting the hang of it.

So he felt quite satisfied when the last tune had faded away. He put down his flute, stepped from the low stage and asked, "How was it?"

"Good," answered Sophia, Tanitha, and Ismène almost in unison.

"Your changes are done in plenty of time," said Ireen. After a second, she started to smile and added, "All that's missing is the stage expression in your face - but I guess this will come by itself when the hall is full."

Gabriel had his doubts. Aloud, he asked, "And the balance?"

"Felt quite all right to me," replied Ireen. "Could be that the accordion should be toned down still a bit, so that it sounds smaller compared to the flute, but that's something only Desmond can do."

"Yeah ... High time he joins the crowd here."

He received a quick glance from Ireen. She had mastered apparition two years ago, after just four years as a witch, so she could have visited Desmond each evening. Or each night. But for all Gabriel knew, she stayed in their holiday resort all the time.

Maybe this was a trick to increase the passion. Or to reinforce it. Some years from now, Gabriel would know more about this topic. In the meantime, he knew better than asking stupid questions.

Just then, Alexandra asked, "Why does nobody sing?"

When she saw that she had Gabriel's attention, she explained, "In other music, there's always someone who sings. In your music is nobody who sings. Why not?"

Before answering, Gabriel exchanged another quick glance with Ireen. They had discussed the topic before, thoroughly, in particular after Desmond had told them that the lack of a voice in the band was a major roadblock on the way toward success at a larger scale. But first they didn't know a singer, at least none they'd accept, and there was a strong opposition against this idea. Mainly from Héloïse, who declared she wasn't going to accompany some low quality vocal cords with her Felison.

At that time, nobody had dared to ask whether she could imagine doing so for high quality cords.

And today, Héloïse was absent when she should have been here. And a girl of five, whose judgement had weight for Gabriel, raised this topic. He looked at Alexandra again.

"We have no singer, that's why."

"Then get one."

Gabriel examined her face, which showed great determination. "And what if we don't find any? Don't you like the music even without someone singing?"

"I like you playing flute," said Alexandra with seriousness. "And I like Tomas playing guitar. And Michel too. But why do you play together when no one sings?"

A professional critic might have used more sophisticated terms, but even so, Gabriel found the girl's verdict very much to the point. He glanced over to Ireen, awaiting her comment on this coincidence of a vigorous demand in the absence of a certain opposition.

Only after a second, he became aware that Ireen would keep silent, although it hadn't failed her attention how Alexandra's criticism had fallen on fertile ground. But mostly thanks to her Japanese roots, she would not jeopardize the effect by issuing remarks like, *Didn't I tell you?* Instead, she looked at him expectantly.

He turned around. "Hey folks - Alexandra says we need a singer. She says, why do you play together if not for someone singing? What do you think?"

"I think she's right," said Michel. "But you know who thinks differently."

Of course Gabriel knew. He looked at Tomas - the oldest of them in age while the youngest in membership.

"Héloïse and her harp have parts in less than half of our repertoire," said Tomas after a moment. "We have room for a voice even without violating her verdict."

Gabriel had pondered this sacrilegious idea already by himself. Hearing it expressed in words was all he needed to promote the idea to a plan. "Well, then - does anyone know a singer?"

Shrugs, shaking heads.

"Me neither," he confessed.

Next moment, a memory resurfaced in his mind - the memory of a voice he'd heard just once. A girl's voice. He almost giggled, so far-fetched seemed the idea of asking this girl - provided he could find her, after figuring out who she was.

Far-fetched or not, he couldn't think of anyone else.

* * *

Carlos watched the one of the twins whom he suspected to be Carole. However, he wouldn't be much surprised should this sun-burned, freckle-faced, red-haired girl turn out to be Diane. These two did what they could to confuse everyone, and now, with them being ten, it worked as well as six years ago when Carlos had met them for the first time.

Or as badly, depending on the perspective.

Every now and then, their parents tried to put markers on them. A kind of colour coding, like with their swimsuits: while preparing for these holidays, Janine, their mother, had tried to buy a green one and a red one. Not that she considered red as a particularly good choice, what with the Weasley hair and the freckles. But her twin daughters had a different opinion, and red ranked on top of their own charts.

Soon Janine realized that red was the only colour listed in the twins' charts, and that she could either buy a green swimsuit or just save the money and the hassle - they would not wear it, and she'd better have two red ones when leaving the shop.

More than once, Carlos had heard someone saying aloud what he himself thought occasionally - that these girls were devils in disguise, except that the disguises were wearing thin.

The remark referred to their merciless style. It did not imply a blemish in their character. Otherwise, they were quite pretty, especially in Carlos' eyes - even more so as he could remember occasions at which he felt the discrepancy between the twins' behaviour and their appearance with a nearly painful intensity.

During the recent days of his holiday with them at the Weasley summer residence, he had accumulated enough detailed knowledge about the twins to feel almost sure that it really was Carole he watched. The differences were hard to detect, so the name more than anything else made him select Carole as the object of his attention.

Carole and Carlos. Almost the same letters, only in a different arrangement.

Playing with names was a game Carlos had learned, not always voluntarily. His own name, for example: Carlos Garcia Potter. According to Spanish habit - or Mexican, for that matter - a man's name contained first his given name, then the family name of his father, and finally the family name of his mother.

Using this rule, his name would have been Carlos Garcia Th  roux - son of his father Ramon Garcia and his mother Marie-Christine, born Th  roux.

But his real parents were dead, and from his adopted parents he had gotten two more names. When asked during the adoption which name he would like for himself, Carlos had summarized the two old names and the two new names, coming up with Garcia Potter as the family names of his choice.

His sister Esmeralda had made it even simpler, using only the name Potter. Which was a wise decision, in one sense, because neither Garcia nor Th  roux had anything to do with her real parents' names. What for him had been the first adoption had for her been the second - her first adoption, into Carlos' family, had taken place when they were both three, shortly after Esmeralda's biological parents had died in the course of an illegal immigration from Mexico to California.

Where Carlos played the game with last names, the Weasleys did it with first names: running the alphabet by age - Alain the oldest, Felix the youngest; balancing between English and French names and pronunciations - Ron, the father, was English, while Janine, the mother, was French, and the children could choose which version to use.

Here at the beach, while the Weasley parents were still in their house taking siesta, Alain's eyes were fixed on Elaine, the five-year-old. The youngest, Felix, had a total of three bodyguards. The one who kept the Weasley parents at ease, knowing their three-year-old was in these hands, was Esmeralda. Wherever Esmeralda was found, Bolo the German shepherd would not be far, so it had been just a natural extension of the dog's protection instincts to include Felix in his special guard. And during the recent days, Bernard, the second son of Ron and Janine, had developed a similar habit - to be found somewhere close to Esmeralda, accepting his brother as an unavoidable factor in this equation.

Today, they all were at the Etang de Thau, a lake that was separated from the Mediterranean Sea by a narrow strip of dry land. The lake did not really offer sweet water but the absence of surge waves made it a better choice for such small children. From Carlos' point of view, which was shaped by the Pacific Ocean on the California coast and the Irish Sea at Carron Lough, the waves of the Mediterranean were almost non-existent, so for him the lake wasn't any different.

A merciless sun shot its heat down on the beach. The air was motionless; not the slightest breeze disturbed the surface of the lake. Later in the afternoon, wind from the sea would send a bit of refreshment, but until then, swimming or diving in the lake was the only way to cool down.

None of their group were in the water. After the past days here in the Camargue, they were all used to the heat, and Janine had sped up their tanning by a little spell - she wouldn't trust the protection from the sun oil, leaving it to everybody's guess whether the untrustworthy factor could be found in the oil or in the children.

A large parasol offered the only shadow within view. It was intended primarily for Felix - and for Bolo, who preferred the shade, while Esmeralda wanted to sit in the sun. She was the only one not requiring Janine's help in tanning. Well, compared to Mexico, the Camargue offered a mild climate.

The other girls were building a sandcastle, a pretty large one. Little Elaine walked around in search of ornaments - shells, pebbles, anything that looked different from the sand. Bernard lent a helping hand but only half-heartedly, maybe because Esmeralda didn't take part in the construction. So most of the work was left to the twins.

The suspected Carole looked up and gave Carlos a cool glance. "I wish your brother had taught you how to do magic without a wand."

"You do? ... Why?"

"Because then you could help us here and reinforce the castle walls a bit - after all, you should be familiar enough with castle walls, shouldn't you?" The answer was given in a voice that indicated barely suppressed impatience toward such a stupid question, expecting the worst for the one asking.

Carlos had taken lessons from Gabriel for the last six years. And from Sandra. Not systematically, just on occasions, when they felt like it. But these lessons concentrated on mental arts - unspoken communication with his siblings, especially with Esmeralda, detecting the presence of people nearby but out of view, sensing the mood of conversation partners.

His skill level was way below that of his teachers - and that of his adoptive father - but similarly way above zero. In addition, he had learned never to trust anything the twins said, with the notable exception of holy promises.

Both experiences together made him reply, "Yes, Carole, probably so ..."

And right - he was rewarded with a beaming smile.

"... but I can at least help with my bare hands." Without waiting for an answer, he went over, knelt down, and started to elongate a wall support.

Carole's voice now held appreciation. "It's been a while since the last time you confused us. How come?"

Carlos felt like swelling of pride. "I *did* take lessons from my brother."

"Really?" The girl paused in her work. "Because of us?"

"Well ..."

Carlos' purpose in life was to protect his sister Esmeralda. This duty, which had started shortly after this sister arrived out of nowhere, encountered the most severe stress test when the two devilish twin girls and Esmeralda met for the first time, finding themselves in competition for Gabriel's attention and favour. Carlos' new father had found a way to hold him back and simultaneously channel the dispute to a happy ending. This experience rested at a prominent place in Carlos' memory.

"... not exactly, but I often thought of you when training with Gabriel."

Carole digested this confession silently while shaping her tower.

Carlos found this a good moment to confess a bit more, and to ask a difficult question. He said, "One of the things we trained was a kind of talking without words, what Gabriel and Sandra can do, because I wanted to do the same with Esmeralda. And you and Diane, you do the same, or something similar. Can you tell me how you do it?"

Carole thought for a moment, shook her head. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because ..." Carole shrugged. "I wouldn't know how to explain. And I don't know whether this is really the same as what Gabriel and Sandra can do."

"Hm."

Carole smiled apologetically. "I'm not holding back. It's - it's as if I had to explain how to think. Could you explain to someone how to think?"

Carlos laughed. "If this someone didn't know how to think, he'd be too stupid for sure to understand me."

"Ah - but you know what I mean." Carole didn't appreciate this unplanned joke effect. "And with Esmeralda - you know, when you come to Hogwarts after the holidays, there is this Sorting, where the new students are sorted into different houses. Wait until you see how you and Esmeralda are sorted. Maybe it won't be the same house, and then you'd know that there is something different between you and her - and this would explain why it doesn't work, your talking without words."

This frightening thought had crossed Carlos' mind before. He said, "That won't happen."

"How can you be sure?"

Carlos nearly jumped - the question was asked by Diane, some feet away, giving proof that she had been a silent participant in this conversation, held in a low voice.

Before he could answer, Diane added, "You can't be sure. Papa told us about twins there, girls - one

a classmate of him and the other in the Ravenclaw house."

"Oh, yes," Carole smiled at the memory of an apparently funny story. "And one of them was Papa's first ball partner, and the other was Uncle Harry's first ball partner."

Carlos had heard the story too, but never in this context, never as such a threatening prospect. A cold knot seemed to form in his stomach. If this could happen to twins, what chances had he and Esmeralda, who didn't even share the same natural parents?

"We're not going to be separated into different houses." His fist damaged a piece of the wall he just had formed.

Looking up, his eyes met those of Esmeralda. Maybe she hadn't followed the entire conversation, but for sure she had heard his last remark, because he could see the suppressed worry in her face.

02 - In Search of Help

Harry appeared in the garden behind the large bungalow of the Weasley summer residence. Being able to keep this size of a garden green in summer, in this part of France, was the ultimate sign of Ron's wealth, and gave Harry pleasure whenever he came here.

This wealth was something new. Ron had known since boyhood what it meant to turn every sickle twice. As a politician in the educational sector, Ron had a good income, but as a politician with the wrong convictions, he'd never hit the pot at the end of the rainbow, the one found so effortlessly by others with better connections. And with a large family ...

In support of Ron's secret work for the Great Plot, Harry and Cho had of course paid him an extra salary. But these payments were as hidden as Ron's work, which meant they went into savings accounts for the children, and Ron and Janine didn't even dream of spending a single euro for themselves.

Finally, some years ago, Ron had struck gold. When the wave of children with magic grew into a tsunami, all the schools which, in time, hadn't listened to the warnings of a certain Ron Weasley found themselves totally unprepared. Ron could use his sudden popularity to publish guides for the cooperation between Muggles and Magicals. It was exactly the topic he had preached about for years, except that now these guides sold like crazy, making even Ron's branch of the Weasley Tribe wealthy enough to buy this estate.

Harry walked to the building. With its white-plastered walls under a red-tiled roof, it represented the rural architecture of this region. His senses told him that there was more than one person inside but certainly less than the complete family plus his own youngest children.

The children probably were elsewhere, maybe at the beach, and only Ron and Janine were home. Hoping he didn't arrive at a very untidy moment, Harry pressed the button for the doorbell. He could hear the chiming inside.

After a moment, the door opened. Janine stood there, leaning at the doorframe. She looked at him with the trace of a smile and more than a trace of neglect.

"Hello, Janine. I do hope my unannounced visit isn't inconvenient for you."

"Salut, 'arry. No, your timing's fine. Actually, this would be a good opportunity to seduce me."

He smiled, acknowledging the joking part while ignoring the bitterness. "Really? But you aren't alone, are you?"

It earned him a real smile in return. "Your manners are truly flawless, 'arry, you didn't even tell me how I look. Come in."

He followed her into the kitchen, sat down, and accepted a drink.

Janine took a seat across from him. "The children are all at the lake today. Ron is in his office, writing his next book." She made a wry face. "So you were right. Was it guesswork or did you sense him?"

Harry could sense the presence of people within a certain radius. Janine knew that; however, since this sensing required some efforts and since Harry didn't invest these efforts as a permanent habit, Janine's remark could be understood as a question whether he had some reason to be on constant alert.

"It wasn't guesswork," he replied, "but for no special reason. It's bad enough that I gave up on

aikido and kendo. With a daughter like Sandy and a son like Gabriel, you have no choice, you ought to keep a few tricks in which they can't play rings around you."

"That's a worry I lost a while ago." Janine sipped at her own glass, which she had filled with red wine moments ago.

A few minutes earlier, still in Carron Lough, this trademark of French life had been one of the expected attractions. Now, glancing at his sister-in-law, Harry wondered if he could watch a warning signal, and decided to ask.

"Some trouble in paradise?"

"Not with my children," was the immediate answer. "And none with yours, either; they're sweet." At these words, Janine's expression again turned to a genuine smile.

Harry used the opportunity to interrupt, "Then it must be the dog. Bolo."

Janine laughed mockingly. "Yeah, sure, because there isn't anyone else left."

After a moment, in which he gave no reply while tasting every sound of this particular laughter, she said, "You know, money doesn't solve all problems. And sometimes, it raises new ones. And occasionally, it just doesn't play a role."

"Maybe I should drink to this deep insight." Glancing at Janine's glass, he added, "And maybe I shouldn't."

This time, her short laugh was joyful. "Don't you worry, it's not that bad. And what about yourself?"

"Hmm - maybe I came here just before drowning in the booze looked like a good idea."

Janine's face grew serious. "Cho?"

"No ..."

Seeing Janine's expression, he added, "At least not in first place. I was sitting at home, and the walls closed in on me, and I asked myself how to pass the time. Janine, I'm looking for a job. Need a babysitter? I can show first-class references."

"No doubt," replied Janine. "Unfortunately, one of your own references already got the job." She described how Esmeralda found pleasure and satisfaction in tending the youngest, Felix.

"Competing with my own daughter," said Harry. "Somehow, that sounds familiar. And what about for Elaine?"

"That would mean competing with my son. Alain is a very caring older brother." Janine's voice revealed pride. "Maybe you should have tried your luck in Bulgaria."

Janine's remark referred to the Krum children - Hermione had started her family later, so her children were still younger. But no matter how much any stressed mother might welcome Harry on a particular day, these could only be visits, not a full-time job as it had been in the past years with his own children.

Harry's taking care of the children, playing the househusband while Cho ran her Groucho Industries, had started with Sandra. It had continued with Gabriel, and when he and Cho adopted Carlos and Esmeralda, after their parents had been killed, it seemed only natural to keep it that way. Cho had done her sabbatical around that time, had never resumed her Groucho job full time as before, but she had found other ways of spending her time, and after all, why not? Harry loved raising his children.

Now Sandra was sixteen and Gabriel fourteen, both of them old enough to prefer a bit of separation from their parents. Carlos and Esmeralda, now eleven, would start their first term at Hogwarts after

the summer break. The prospect of an empty house was one of the reasons why he was sitting here, asking for help.

"No," he said, "I guess I should try something entirely new instead."

"At the risk of touching a touchy point" - Janine's smile told him she remembered the past discussions about this issue well - "what would be so bad at doing another movie? Or two, or three?"

Harry snorted. "If I needed the job mainly for money, that would be the best solution for sure. But honestly, Janine, I'm not really an actor, never have been. And playing the kung fu fighter at my age, well ..."

He had played this role in three movies - the *Eagle* trilogy - immediately after finishing school. His crusade, which had ended with the destruction of Voldemort, had raised a deep desire in him for something simple, something easy, and free of responsibility. Playing the young Caucasian kung fu fighter with his aikido skill had been the perfect choice.

The director, Tony Chee, had become his friend and his partner in practising the arts of weaponless combat. But Tony was dead and gone, so this chapter was closed for him.

"So Tony being dead is not the only reason?" asked Janine right now.

"No," replied Harry. "I'm too old for kung fu, I'm out of practice, and I never learned to play a role that wasn't a mirror of my own situation."

"What about your Animagus shapes?"

Harry had played in other movies as a dragon, his Animagus shape. He had also provided the shape of a Centaur - not his own, that of his Golden Patronus, as something that had to be recoloured in the final movie but provided more natural movements than any computer animation.

"Dragons are out of fashion," answered Harry. "At least that's true for movies, and as you know, I'm not going to do commercials. While the Centaur shape - well, I always felt a bit ashamed, misusing it for a movie."

Janine nodded. "Yes, I can understand that. And the Great Plot - it's funny to watch how this project employs all kinds of people but not you."

Harry flushed. "These days it's mostly administration, and, you know - me and routine work ..."

The Great Plot had started fourteen years ago. It was a conspiracy with the goal of converting all Muggles to Magicals, involving the High Priestess at the top, the Goblins in the middle, and Groucho Biochemicals at the bottom. But Harry had been, and still was, the spirit behind the plan, no doubt about that.

The goal was not reached yet, not completely. But for the last four years already, since nearly every child on earth showed magical power, there wasn't much plotting left to do. Now it was a mere administration task, resting in hands better suited for routine work than Harry's. Janine's remark referred to some other people's involvement in the Great Plot - that of Ron all these years, and that of Cho lately in her position as a MABEL executive.

Now she asked, "What about Groucho?"

Harry looked amazed. "You know what happened the last time, don't you?"

"Yes, I know." Janine waved impatiently. "But that's as old a story as your fame and, besides, Cho is no longer CEO, so wouldn't there be a place for you somewhere in the company?"

Harry didn't think so. Groucho was Cho's playground. The fact that she was seen in the Headquarters hardly once a week made no difference to him. He had messed in her business once, at the age of seventeen, and this lesson stuck. Time might pass, circumstances might change, but he wasn't ready to do more than play the occasional consultant in Groucho meetings, offering his opinion when asked, and his occasional help in the matters of portkey production.

Some years ago, the Law Enforcement Squad would have offered him a job any time, any hour of the day. The Squad no longer existed, not as an independent authority. His godfather, Sirius Black, had been their last chief, before his early retirement had cleared the way for the Squad's integration into the regular police forces.

As Sirius was only in his sixties, this retirement hadn't really come that early. Nonetheless, he felt as though he'd been moved aside, and drove his wife, Deborah, crazy. He and Harry shared the need for something to do, something more meaningful than writing their memoirs.

"If you don't need a job for money like other people," said Janine with some exasperation, "then why can't you develop a hobby that consumes all your free time?"

Because his children were his hobby, Harry was tempted to reply. He left it unsaid out of respect for Janine, who might face the same void in some years, when even Felix, her youngest, was old enough to get along without his mother. Aside from that, he *had* tried to find a hobby. Sailing - an outdoor sport, seemingly natural for someone living in a castle that overlooked the Irish Sea. Sailing had been an attempt to compensate for his fading interest in aikido and the other martial arts he used to practise with Tony, and didn't want to practise with anyone else. Sailing was something you could do alone.

Provided you were a sailor. Harry wasn't.

He did okay. He could sail a boat, yes. But he never exceeded the level of a "good weather sailor," not in his own eyes, because he'd never caught the excitement, the true adventurer's fever. And besides, his family also showed limited enthusiasm for it. They had better things to do than sit in a ketch or a katamaran just because the helmsman was Harry.

There was one hobby which Harry could imagine himself doing for hours, days, week after week. This was music. Learning how to play the guitar, and playing it on and on, was a dream he sometimes had. He had never told anyone, never even tried, and for good reason. Confronted with his son Gabriel and the other people in Gabriel's band, he would have looked like an old fool in his amateurish attempts. They were just too good.

"Well," said Janine when he kept silent, "if there isn't anything new that would solve your problem, maybe you should return to old ways. The other day, Ron said he could use someone with a sense for oddities as good as yours."

"I wasn't aware of this quality," replied Harry, nonetheless feeling pleased. "It also takes me by surprise to hear that Ron, of all people, saw that in me."

Janine grinned. "Well, what he really meant - and what I tried to express in polite words - was more something like your presence alone ensures that the shit will hit the fan some time soon ... Provided there is some." She touched his hand. "And never mind the expression - it was definitely meant as approval."

"And what was it? Or where?"

"Something with schools, what else?"

He could hear the weariness in her voice.

"I didn't pay attention to details, if there were any. This is also the reason why I'm sending you alone to him - if I hear him talking again about schools, I might start screaming."

"Is he so single-minded recently?"

"An acute case of workoholism for sure." Janine's jawline tensed. "You may tell him that - maybe he listens to you more. And you may tell him also that, even if we aren't going to have another child, there's nothing that forbids screwing his wife, because if he's not going to do it, then - "

She stopped herself, looking pleadingly at Harry. "Please find a better way to express the message, but make sure the message comes through, and clearly."

Next moment, a quick grin crossed her face. "What about that job?"

"Erm - maybe I should talk with Ron first." Seeing Janine's face at this reply, Harry added, "And, besides - wouldn't this exactly match the description you gave a moment ago? About my presence alone, and what'll happen soon?"

Her laughter accompanied him all the way to Ron's office.

* * *

The rehearsal was over. Released from their obligations, the band members were sitting idly, noodling around.

Ireen set the sleeping Timothy down and started to dismount the electromagic equipment while the girls looked at each other, wondering if they should ask for their favourite pieces. Since the three musicians knew them by heart, they hadn't felt the need to play them as well.

Gabriel put the accordion away in its case. Because of its silky bellows, the instrument was considerably more delicate than his small wooden flute, even though it was so much bigger. Even with the bellows tied together, he wouldn't leave it exposed to accidental damage.

This done, he sat down on his own stool for another moment, idly listening to Tomas' guitar. The gypsy seemed to be doing hardly more than a leisurely stretching of finger muscles, but he would have gathered an audience quickly, had there been other people around.

Gabriel relaxed in preparation for scanning his memory. What girl had he heard singing?

He'd been six or seven; they'd been living in Ireland, though it wasn't long after the move from California to Carron Lough. Beverly, who'd been his babysitter on the few occasions when both of his parents had had other obligations, had found herself double-booked, with two jobs on the same evening.

It was probably because the Potters had called her at the last minute, Gabriel reflected - otherwise, Beverly wouldn't have accepted the other job.

Anyway, she'd managed, by bringing both children over to her own apartment. And when Gabriel, after some prompting from Beverly, had confessed that he'd begun playing flute, the other little girl had explained that she sang, and had sung a song. Or maybe two.

She'd been a bit older than he, if he remembered correctly. And her name ... something Irish, but similar to a name that was more common ... similar to Kathleen ...

"Caitlin!"

Ireen halted her step and looked at him questioningly. "Caitlin? Who's that?"

"A girl I heard singing once," said Gabriel, smiling with childhood remembrances. "It was long ago, and I have no idea whether it's realistic in any sense - but she's all that comes to my mind for singers, so I guess I should try."

"Right," said Ireen. "And the sooner, the better ..." She grinned. "Using the opportunity, if you can follow my drift."

Oh yes, Gabriel could. Creating a *fait accompli* until the next time Héloïse, the barrier between the band and a singer, paid attention to her Dragonfly fellows. Or duties.

To find the girl, he had to find Beverly first. To find Beverly, he had to ask her mother, Chrissy Vanzandt, who was his mother's former assistant and, today, her successor to the highest chair in Groucho Industries.

It would be interesting to watch their reactions: that of Beverly, and that of this girl, Caitlin. Especially when he said what he wanted from her - and there would be the inevitable question, and he would say yes, he was indeed serious ...

Already grinning in anticipation, Gabriel walked to the bag with his phony, the magical version of a cellular phone as manufactured by Groucho, to call Mrs Vanzandt. She wouldn't be on holiday, not while his mother took time off to spend a few weeks in far-off Canada.

She wasn't in his shortkey list either. So he pressed the request button and said, "Mrs Vanzandt, please - Groucho Headquarters, Dublin."

A few seconds passed, then the still-familiar voice of Beverly's mother said, "Gabriel, is that you?"

"Yes, Mrs Vanzandt, hello, it's - " He stopped himself, remembering his manners. "Er - do you have a minute for me?"

"Ahh - can I call you back? In about ten minutes?"

"Yes, sure, I'll be here." He pressed the disconnect button.

Looking up, he could see that the girls were still uncertain what to do next. Sophia, who was their spokesperson because the holiday house at the Black Sea, a few miles north of Primorsko, had been rented by her parents, asked Gabriel, "So what's going to happen here now? Do we get our favourite music?"

Gabriel grinned back. "You mean the Chitty Chats?"

The Chitty Chats were a girl group who currently ranked on top of the charts. They were a far cry from Dragonfly in both success and musical quality, though in different directions for the two criteria.

"No," replied Tanitha with some disgust, then added accusingly, "You know what we mean! Your music."

Gabriel shook his head. "I'm waiting to be called back - I can't concentrate on music in this kind of mood. And most likely I'll be gone for a while after this call. But why don't you ask Tomas to play?"

Tomas was the only band member who couldn't be found easily, because didn't hang around all day at the holiday house or the beach, so it seemed only natural to use the opportunity.

However, *natural* apparently meant different things for boys of fourteen and girls of eight. "No, not him," said Sophia, obviously expressing a shared opinion. "If you can't play, can you summon us back?"

Gabriel glanced at the guitar player, to see how Tomas handled such an offhanded rebuke of his string artistry. The gypsy looked the same as a second before, except perhaps for a slight twisting in the corner of his mouth - a change Gabriel noticed only because he had felt Tomas' amusement in

his mind. After all, neither the Serrano family nor the entire gypsy tribe were short of kids of all ages, so being used, misused, or ignored by children had to be a familiar experience for him.

Gabriel examined the waiting group. "Summoning, huh?"

Expectant nods. What they meant was something truly unique, something no one else could offer - chain summoning. They would hold each others' hands, and Gabriel would summon all of them together to the house near Primorsko. Not one after the other, no matter how quickly - no, simultaneously.

During the last six years, Gabriel had perfected his summoning technique, to the effect that today he left everyone else behind. It was his way of coping with an experience in which his previous abilities had been insufficient to let several people escape from a deadly trap. They had, eventually, escaped - thanks to Sandra's efforts, supported by Gabriel's own power and that of Héloïse and Michel.

Since then, Gabriel practised summoning like he practised playing the flute - in other words, using every opportunity.

Of course, the girls weren't really dependent on his skill. They all had porties, which were phonies combined with a magazine portkey; pressing a button was all they had to do in order to appear in the Krum holiday house. It had been a question of honour for Gabriel's father to provide these porties for all children, as his own way in preparing for holidays in which his son's band caused the need for journeys between the Durmstrang school and a house at the Black Sea. It didn't turn him bankrupt; porties were manufactured by Groucho Transports and Security.

But a portkey journey was a lonely affair, compared to group summoning, and so Gabriel felt no surprise to see all four girls nod in unison.

"And Timothy?"

Before any of the girls could answer, Ireen said, "Leave him with me - no need to wake him up now." Her voice sounded casual, and only someone with a finer sense might have noticed that Ireen, a Muggle for the longest part of her life, felt somewhat scared at the thought of Timothy involved in a group summoning that relied on hands holding each other.

Someone like Gabriel, for example - who simply nodded and said, "All right, then. Gather round, my ladies ..."

Beaming in expectation, the four girls formed a circle together with Gabriel, grabbing each other's hands. Suddenly it looked very much like a scene in a kindergarten class.

Gabriel looked at the youngest of them. "Come on, Alex, count us down."

This counting down was a necessary part of the ceremony, and woe to Gabriel if he forgot. A small risk, after all, since Gabriel himself had been the one to introduce the habit, taking over a ritual his father had established when Sandra was a girl of three.

Five-year-old Alexandra looked important and fully concentrated. "Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... go!"

Gabriel, perfectly aware of the four other presences in physical contact with each other and himself, apparated and summoned at once. They appeared on the small patch of grass in front of the Krum house, exactly what he had selected as their apparition target.

He could as well have carried them directly into the house. But the blast from five bodies displacing an equivalent volume of air, even bodies as small as these girls', would create two tornados, first a real one which would damage the orderly room, and then a metaphorical one from Hermione to damage Gabriel's pride. He could do without that.

He accompanied the girls inside to make sure they wouldn't be alone in the house. When he saw Viktor look up and smile at the group, he waved a hello before apparating back to the Durmstrang hall.

Contrary to what he'd said to the girls, he could well put his flute to his lips and whistle some snippets while waiting for Mrs Vanzandt to call back. But this was something totally different - single notes, incoherent phrases, little more than breathing through a flute rather than through his nose, while his mind wandered back to memories of Beverly's babysitting.

Then Mrs Vanzandt called, and the first thing she said was, "Say, why don't you just come over, so we can talk over a cup of tea?"

Yes, why not indeed? Gabriel apparated into the lobby of the Groucho Headquarters, the closest point possible because all offices in the higher ranks were protected by apparition locks, another product manufactured by Groucho Transports and Security. From the lobby, it took him only seconds to use a portkey lift to the CEO's antechamber, and from there he could walk through the open door into Mrs Vanzandt's office.

She looked up, smiling. "Hello, Gabriel, have a seat. How are things in Carron Lough?"

"Good, I hope. I just came from Durmstrang."

"You came from where?"

"From Durmstrang, the school in Bulgaria. We use their Great Hall for on-stage rehearsals."

Mrs Vanzandt started to giggle, stopped, then looked at him with a slight touch of embarrassment. "Sorry, Gabriel - you know, sometimes it's still a kind of culture shock for me." She shook her head. "Me saying, 'Why don't you come over,' and you ..."

Chrissy Vanzandt was remarkable in more than one way. Probably her most impressive attribute, in her job as the Groucho chief executive officer, was her Muggle nature; she had never shown interest in being converted to a witch by the High Priestess.

"Why? You were right," said Gabriel apologetically.

"Yes, sure, I know that you might as well have been in Japan, it's only that knowing is one thing and being used to ... Anyway," Mrs Vanzandt interrupted her own musings, "what can I offer you? Tea? Soda? Orange juice?"

"Tea is fine, thanks. You know, they drink a lot of tea in Bulgaria - tasting the home brew once in a while is nice."

"Why, is it that bad down there?"

"Not at all." Gabriel shook his head in emphasis. "They know what they're doing with their tea. No, it's just totally different - not quite as strange as tea in Japan, but -"

Mrs Vanzandt laughed. "Oh yes, I only can agree with that."

As the Groucho CEO, Beverly's mother travelled to Japan when visiting the production plants. Gabriel and Michel together paid visits to Miyikura Inc., not only the manufacturer of Michel's tubular drums, not only the manufacturer of the finest wood flutes you could find around the globe, but also Dragonfly's second-largest sponsor after Groucho. They offered their own instruments for free, which was more generous than it sounded, considering their prices. For Gabriel and Michel, visiting Miyikura gave the same thrill that visiting a theme park gave to other boys.

The tea arrived, and Gabriel told Mrs Vanzandt why he was looking for Beverly.

"A singer, hm? Well, this should be the country to find one. At any rate, I don't remember the families for whom Beverly did babysitting." Mrs Vanzandt looked wondering. "But why didn't you call her directly?"

"Well, erm ..." Gabriel shrugged. "It's been a while since the last time I saw her. I mean, I know she studies medicine in Edinburgh, but - er, calling her without preparation somehow would have felt like apparating into someone's family room when you could as well come to the door and ring the bell."

Mrs Vanzandt smiled warmly. "You're so much like your father, especially where he and Cho do contrast so sharply - "

Noticing the expression on the face of Gabriel, his mother's most devoted fan, Mrs Vanzandt laughed. "Yes I know, but I can claim a friendship of twenty years with your mother, and if that doesn't allow me to point out a few truths, then I don't know."

Politeness prevented Gabriel from protesting aloud. However, good manners weren't enough to avoid his look, not at a time when he himself worried a bit about the coolness between his parents. Maybe a similar thought just had crossed Mrs Vanzandt's mind, because she dropped the issue at once.

"Beverly had a practical for some bloody knifework or other, just at the end of the semester. She wasn't sure how long it would take, but she planned to be on holiday right the next day with her friends." Mrs Vanzandt showed a grin. "With one of them in particular."

"Where?"

"Somewhere in Spain - a campsite by the Mediterranean, if I remember correctly." Mrs Vanzandt wrinkled her nose. "Call me a snob if you want, Gabriel, but I'd have preferred a bit more luxury for my daughter ... Oh, it's not the young man's fault, they both could afford more than a tent, but this group is truly classless, from what I've been told, and for some of them tents are the only choice."

Beverly was twenty-three, old enough to make her own decisions, and camping by the shore sounded lovely to Gabriel. For their own group in Bulgaria, with a two-year-old as the youngest, a house made things simpler, but Beverly and her friends didn't have this problem.

He finished his tea with Mrs Vanzandt and thanked her for the information, then went down to the lobby. Seeing the crowded hall, he went out into the small park that surrounded the large building. During lunch time, the park would be full, but now he had the choice between several benches.

He sat down on a bench under a tree and fetched his phony. "Beverly Vanzandt, please - either in her student apartment in Edinburgh or at a campsite in Spain, on the Mediterranean coast."

Seconds passed - more than at his previous call. Then Beverly's unmistakable voice said, "Gabriel! Where are you?"

Before he could answer, a squeak came over the phone and Beverly's voice saying, "No! Don't do that! ... Stop it, now!"

The words were accompanied by so much giggling that Gabriel didn't feel like interrupting. After a moment, he said, "Right now I'm sitting in the park behind Groucho Headquarters. I wanted to ask you a question."

"Then ... ouch ... Cameron!" After a second, somewhat quieter, Beverly's voice again. "Gabriel, why don't you come over here? Cameron won't let me talk with a guy he doesn't know, not over the phone." Another giggle.

Gabriel had to grin in sympathy. "You mean, he's going to relax at seeing me?"

"What? No, quite the opposite," replied Beverly, "I thought you'd come and teach him manners."

Gabriel suppressed a laugh. True, he didn't need a wand to teach any person a lesson. Only that was the last thing he had in mind, bullying a total stranger of whom he knew just the name and that this man was deeply in young love with Beverly. The funny thing was that years ago but for quite a while, Beverly had had a terrible crush on Gabriel's father, so much so that everybody couldn't help but notice. At that time, Beverly would have died of shame to learn that everybody knew. And now she behaved as though she had gotten herself the most jealous man one might find, and found pleasure in letting someone else teach him lessons.

Gabriel wasn't ready to believe in the jealousy at such a degree, nor in Beverly's serious wish to give her boyfriend lessons. But meeting her sounded like a good idea. Enjoying the company of grown-ups, no matter how young, instead of children between two and eight, even for a little while - that had appeal right now.

"Okay then," said Gabriel into the phony. "Please tell him to watch out - if you ever manage to tell me where you are, and if I can find the way."

* * *

When he heard the doorbell chime, Ron Weasley didn't pay much attention. There were many possibilities as to who it could be, and most of them didn't matter to him.

Then he heard voices without recognizing them, except that one of these voices had to be that of his wife. Then he heard nothing, which meant Janine was sitting with the visitor somewhere, probably in the kitchen. This limited the number of possibilities.

Now Janine laughed, loudly. This narrowed the alternatives down to just a few. It had to be a family member. From the Baillard family, it could be Raoul, Janine's brother closest in age, and a possibility Ron couldn't estimate better, for he didn't know Raoul's whereabouts these days.

From his own family, it could be his sister Ginny. Her sharp tongue would raise such laughter. But Ginny would be drowning in work at this time of the year - the autumn collections would hit the market soon, and model agencies were spinning in a frenzy to manage the photo shootings.

However, Ron could cross off some other siblings. Certainly not Bill - Janine liked Bill, but Ron's oldest brother just wasn't the type to raise a roaring laughter. A smile, yes, any time, but if Bill ever learned a new dirty joke, he would tell his wife Fleur privately, so she could tell it in public. She was so much better at that task.

The visitor was certainly neither of the adult twins, either. Janine's excitement about Fred's and George's kind of humour could only be called limited. She considered them both to be not quite mature, and she never forgot certain remarks they'd made during tight times, while the twins could practically print their own money with the successes of *Swashbuckle Sweets*, their sweets company. Listing Percy in this context was a waste of time and energy.

This left just one sibling, an adopted one, and also the most likely source of Janine's outburst. Harry.

This, in turn, raised the question of why Harry was here. Ron would hear about it any moment now, but he preferred to be prepared for Harry's presence.

The reason was that - well, his friend and brother would be deeply astonished to learn that, to Ron, his presence, and especially his arrival, always came as something of an attack. There was no rational explanation, or perhaps a very simple one: the Great Plot. It was Harry's work, from Ron's perspective, and this work had condemned Ron to a career as an undercover agent in public for ten

years. At a time when everything seemed fine, Voldemort dead, old threats gone, Harry had started something new and - in its own way - more frightening than any Death Eater plot Ron had ever seen. And Ron's own role was that of the preacher among pagans.

Several times, these pagans seemed to become cannibals. Agreed, only in a metaphorical sense, except that for a politician there were moments when the literal sense might have been preferable.

For the last few years it had paid off. Ron could finally have the life he had dreamed of, could spoil his family beyond reason if he felt the impulse, but deep down he kept a kind of wariness toward things coming from Harry's direction, most notably Harry himself.

So what could it be?

Coming to check the well-being of his children? That couldn't be the sole reason; the list of Harry's flaws did not include the belief that he alone could handle them. Coming to report news? Bad news? Maybe that this strange rift between Harry and Cho had deepened beyond a certain limit? Or good news?

No. In either case, Harry would have chosen another time. It was something urgent and immediate. An accident or another unpleasant event could be dismissed at once - such an urgency would not have faded so suddenly in the presence of Janine alone. Which left only solitude - an acute attack of loneliness, boredom, frustration -

A knock at the door.

Ron decided to gamble a bit and called, "Come in, Harry!"

The door opened, showing exactly the face and the figure he had predicted. Harry came in, stepped closer, then leaned against a sideboard and smiled.

"What a clever boy you are! Always have been, come to think of it."

"Only a bit insensitive, huh?"

Harry looked confused. "Do you expect me to protest? This particular flaw in your character is exactly the reason why I'm here."

"Oh, really?" Ron leaned back in his chair. "Then how come I suspect you of trying to catch me in my own wisecrack?"

"Your bad conscience." Harry grinned. "And besides - about that, I was ordered to reprimand you a little bit. It should be no problem for you to determine the origin of this order, should it?"

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Wanna polite answer or an honest one?"

"Actually, none at all," replied Harry nonchalantly, "because this was a rhetorical question. What I'm ordered to tell you is this, you should drop your keyboard and mouse every now and then and use your joystick instead ... the built-in one," he added after a second, "in case you wondered."

"I didn't." Ron felt a twist at his mouth, however not from a humorous impulse. "Can we now come to *your* problems?"

Harry held his arms up like in a kind of surrender. "I'm sorry - I didn't ask for this particular messenger job, so don't look at me that way. But you know what? It takes one to know one."

"Huh?"

"What I mean is, I won't ask you when you did it with your wife the last time, and you won't ask me how long it's been that I did it with mine. All right?"

Disarmed in shared guilt, Ron grinned wryly. "And it's not even because we'd have an affair with another woman. What a bloody shame, isn't it? Well, my excuse is - writing is such a creative process, it consumes up all of your libido. And what's your - "

"Stop it!"

Harry shook his head. "Don't excuse yourself, don't apologize, least of all to me - as I said, it was just a message I had to deliver. I'm here to ask for a job, and Janine hinted that you might have something for me."

"Really?" Ron couldn't follow at once. "What did she say?"

"Something about sending me would be enough to let things develop to the worst ..."

He still couldn't remember any such conversation with Janine.

"... and it had to do with schools, probably that's why Janine suppressed the memory of any detail."

"Ah - that." He nodded. "Yes, at least I can remember now. But that's more of a bad joke than any specific idea. It was just - I remembered how you found things out of nowhere, traces, and there was a school situation in which such an ability would be welcome. But I can't see any job for you in that, so let's look somewhere else."

"Would you please tell me what you're talking about? Me, finding things? What did I ever find? It was always the other way around, things found me - with trouble taking first place." Harry's expression showed a mix of stubbornness and desperation.

Somehow it looked very familiar to Ron. "I know," he said, "those were Cho's words - you aren't looking for trouble, trouble finds you. But it never was really true, I mean, not since we've known each other. Whenever things looked smooth and straight, you had a talent to see the odd corners, to figure out that something was fishy."

"But I always had help - "

"That's exactly what I mean," interrupted Ron. "You meet these people, these figures nobody else would notice. Remember how you uncovered the Magical Tours conspiracy? It all started with a bloody first-year Ravenclaw, sitting at the lunch table and crying."

"Oh, that." Harry smiled at the memory. "Young Damon, who didn't reply to his parents' mail. But he was a second-year then."

"Whatever. This ability of yours - it's a pity the Law Enforcement Squad doesn't exist anymore. You'd fit there seamlessly." Ron sighed. "Maybe you should apply to the regular police ... Criminal Investigation, I mean."

"And maybe you should just tell me what it was that made you wish I was there."

Ron chuckled, however more from embarrassment. "Funny you use these words - the typical holiday greeting. Because it's a school, exactly as Janine said. And there were some things that made me think, this is just one coincidence too many ... Maybe I tried to play Harry, after all these years." He felt his cheeks flush.

"And who said you weren't successful?" asked the real Harry. "I'm the wrong person to argue about coincidence versus fate, I gave up on that game long ago. So please, just tell me what caught your attention."

Ron sighed deeply. "There's a school. It's not a - " He stopped himself. "No - wait a second, you should get the facts in the order I got them, I want to see whether you come to the same conclusion I

did. It starts with - " Halting again in mid-sentence, he rummaged through his desk, stood up, walked over to an attaché case, extracted a sheet, and came back.

"This is a letter that I got." He passed it over to Harry, who started reading.

*Dear Monsieur Weasley,
I write to you because I heard that you fought for the union between Muggles and Magicals in school for years. Then, by accident, I saw one of your books, and it explained how to contact you.*

My son Jean-Jacques is one of these children who have trouble with their magic. So we sent him to this special school in Brest where all students have the same problem. At first he was quite happy to meet other boys and girls like him, and no longer looking so stupid, but then he started to behave strangely. Of course we do not see him often, because this is a boarding school, but the last time he even cried when we left.

I don't know if this is a necessary part of the training for becoming a better wizard, but I am worried. Jean-Jacques has never been like that. Since I don't know whom else to ask, I write to you. The text on the book said you are not only an expert in this matter, you are also one of the authorities in the EU.

Thank you in advance for any help you can give

Sincerely yours,

Geneviève Delacroix

When Harry looked up again, Ron explained, "I get many letters with a plea for help, in one way or another. Most of them are filtered out before they can reach me. What comes through is special in some regard - it means it's more than just begging for money or influence or breaking the rules or whatever. That's how I came to read this letter."

Harry glanced at the sheet in his hands. "This special school in Brest, what is it?"

"Right, that was my next step, too." Ron nodded in satisfaction about a shared first response. "The school is called *Ecole des Etudiants Magiques Génés* and it's exactly what the name says, a school for magically handicapped students. Those who can't cast spells like others, who show only traces of magic, or no magic at all, or just need more time to learn spells than a normal student ..."

Ron had as much authority over this school - or as little - as he had over any other in the European Community, in which he was an employee in the culture and education section. Someday, after the completion of thorough research, they would know whether these students were real squibs, Muggles resistant to magic, or just children whose mothers never ate or drank any of the food or drinks in which the magic-inducing potion was hidden. For the time being, treating the symptoms was the only cure.

"The school is big, although not the only of its kind in France, and it receives students from all over the country. That's why it's a boarding school. It's located on the estate of a former Navy cadet school."

Harry snorted. "I wonder what the locals think about this particular change. And I wonder what the students themselves think of this estate. But anyway - what was your next step?"

"Guess what? What every good bureaucrat would have done in this situation: check the reports."

"Ah, yes, of course - that's a great source of information about oddities."

Ron smiled triumphantly. "You shouldn't comment on things you don't know about, Harry - actually, that's a bad habit you developed over the years. It didn't happen to you when we were together in school. But to come back to - "

He stopped because Harry was chuckling heavily, apparently unable to calm down. "What's so funny?"

"There must be some nostalgic filter on your memory," explained Harry. "But that's fine with me, so - never mind, just go ahead."

Ron made a mental note to see about this filter in the next weeks with some contemporary witnesses like his sister-in-law Fleur, then continued, "Well, what you obviously don't know is that every school for children who are handicapped in some physical or mental sense, or magical like here, is ordered to report any event out of the ordinary, including every accident that requires more than outpatient treatment ..."

Harry bowed silently, acknowledging the defeat of his prejudice against bureaucracy.

"... For a school of that size, the amount of violence between students seemed astonishingly low, in particular when taking into account how much frustration they must feel. At first I thought this might be a benefit from the psychological support services this school offers - "

"No, there's another reason," interrupted Harry. "Coming to that school, all these students suddenly realize that they aren't the only freaks around. That's something you never forget."

Ron felt pleased, and showed his feelings in a smile. "See, I had to ask a psychologist to figure that out."

"Not your fault," replied Harry. "You grew up with the full knowledge that you're a wizard, while I got the Dursley treatment." Harry touched the double scar at his forehead. "There's a built-in freak expert inside here."

"Okay, so watch out. The reports also listed some suicides. In such a school, it shouldn't be too surprising. I mean - remember how Bill lost his magic for just a few weeks, and how close he came to jumping from a bridge?"

Harry nodded. Bill's temporary loss of magic, together with an almost deadly fever, had been the triggering event that brought the Potters and the High Priestess together.

"I checked a few more numbers. For example, the ratio of teachers applying for transfer. It's high, compared to other schools, still higher compared to other schools for handicapped children. But then, this type of handicap is fairly new, so it'll take a while for these schools to be as stable as those for physically or mentally handicapped students."

Harry said, "I'm in no position to agree or disagree with your judgement."

"No, you're not. At this point, I decided to forget it. There wasn't the slightest hint of anything weird. A school with traumatized students, lots of stress for students and teachers alike ..." Ron looked at Harry. "It may sound brutal, uncaring. But believe me - in my position, I can't arrive on a white horse to save every damsel in distress, not like some other people."

"Whoever that may be" - Harry looked pleased - "all I can say is, apparently you *did not* forget."

"Purely by accident," replied Ron. "A few weeks later, the new quarterly reports were due. And because I hadn't completely managed to forget about this letter, I had nothing better to do than check the newest report from that school. And - well, there was another suicide."

"Jean-Jacques Delacroix," said Harry, and there was no question in his voice.

"Right. It was one of these moments - something touches you, if only from a distance. Just because I remembered the name ... This time I called a psychologist in that school - actually, that's when I got explanations for the low violence and the high transfer ratio. This doctor offered to send me the files of all four suicides, and I said okay."

Harry sat silently, expectantly.

"Three of these four suicides were in the last year - " Ron made a dismissive gesture. "You know the old saying - don't trust statistics you didn't fake yourself. And I have seen my share of statistics. I knew that all these numbers were within likely ranges."

Harry smiled. "If you think I could locate the triggering detail with this little information, or ask the right question, your estimation of my fishy sense is totally unrealistic. But obviously, something in the files rang the alarm bell in your mind."

Ron smiled back. "Maybe alarm is too strong a word, but otherwise you're right. And this was the moment when I wished I had this special feeling - "

"Hey," interrupted Harry, "don't make it more thrilling than necessary! What else did you find?"

"I checked the grades of the students who had committed suicide. The first two showed no magical improvement whatsoever, fully matching the picture. But the last two were different - and this Jean-Jacques Delacroix was graded as 'weak magic but reliable results'."

Ron looked at his friend. "So he wouldn't have been a powerful wizard, but a wizard for sure. Why does such a student commit suicide?"

03 - Invitations and Promises

Cho leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She moved her shoulders upward, backward, and forward, stretching muscles that had hardened during her work at the laptop computer. She repeated the little exercise; then, feeling herself finally relax, she opened her eyes again.

After a moment of motionless laziness, she reached in her bag for the phony. She pressed the topmost shortcut button and settled back in expectation of the well-known voice.

The voice didn't come.

This took her by surprise, very much so. The shortkey meant Harry's phony, but only at home in Carron Lough. Not getting an answer left two possibilities, either Harry wasn't at home, or he'd ordered his phony to play deaf.

She pondered calling him wherever he was, but then dropped the idea. If she got through, it would look as though she was controlling his activities even across this long distance. And if she was rejected again, she wasn't any wiser than before.

The large number of options how to respond to a call - or refuse an answer - was the most significant difference between a normal mobile phone and a phony, its magical equivalent as manufactured by Groucho Communications. If Harry had ordered his phony to play deaf, then Cho could think of three variations: deaf to anyone, deaf to anyone but his children, or deaf only to herself.

All phonies had the same rank and power in magical terms, meaning there was no way of overruling one phony by another, something Cho desperately wished for from time to time. So far, she had resisted the temptation to ask her engineers for a prototype with *special powers*. Right now, for instance, such a prototype could have told her exactly why Harry wasn't answering.

She couldn't really imagine an order to play deaf only to her own calls. The problems between her and Harry weren't *that* bad. Just a kind of low exchange frequency. Not really unusual for a couple after twenty years together. A temporary phase, probably.

Privately, Cho blamed Harry more than herself for their problems. She thought he was stuck in a moment of which he couldn't get out, as an Irish band somewhat more famous than Gabriel's had once phrased. At least she had the wisdom not to tell anyone her opinion.

Not in words, that was. Otherwise ...

One particular aspect was *not* her own decision, no matter how involuntary. It was mostly Harry's way to correlate a low exchange of words with something similar in terms of bodily fluids. Whether on purpose or not, it put some pressure on her - lack of sex made her testy, quite a handicap for someone whose patience wasn't world class even at the best of times.

For the last two hours, she had worked with her laptop computer, preparing for the seminar that would start here day after tomorrow, as well as for future seminars in other places. She had used one of the seminar rooms. Her suite with bedroom and living room would have offered equally good working accommodations, but she preferred the plain atmosphere in this workroom. And what was more, sitting here gave her a chance to meet a moderator, in case one of them came through these rooms.

Nobody had opened the door to look in.

It struck her as unlikely yet not impossible - very much like Harry not being at home in Carron Lough.

She stood up to have a drink at the bar. As she opened the door, another thought crossed her mind. Reuben Timball, the Resort Manager, might have told the newcomers not to disturb her. Of course she hadn't asked for that, but she had closed the door - he could have misinterpreted it that way.

He might have done so in particular if he knew a bit more about her position in the MABEL project. Well, by the time this first seminar in the new resort was over, he would know better than to read between lines she hadn't said.

Reaching the bar, climbing one of the stools which so nicely made up for her shortness, she realized that the bartender was the same Reuben Timball who just had crossed her mind - obviously a true multi-talent.

"A gin and tonic, please," she said.

Watching the man's quick movements, giving proof that he was a professional in this job, she couldn't stop herself asking, "Are you moonlighting in your own resort? As a bartender?"

"No, madam - "

The desired drink appeared in front of her.

"- what you see here is still the manager - same person, same job as a while ago. I took over Kenny's duty for a while, so he can have a few bites. He's doing double shift while the number of guests is still small."

Cho became aware that her question and what it implied had been quite insulting to a Resort Manager; in MABEL terms, this position ranked at the lower end of the top management. She was about to prepare for an apology when she saw the man's face change from the professional mask to an amused grin.

"But otherwise your observation was correct. I *did* moonlight as a bartender in the past, in the literal sense, and I liked it a lot."

She raised her glass like in a salute, apologized with her smile and her eyes, also with her voice when she asked, "In this case, wouldn't it have been most natural to open your own bar? *Reuben's Retreat*, or something like that?"

"Well, maybe so. Only I had more ambitions than just running my own version of *Harry's Bar* ..."

For a short moment, Cho wondered whether this man had used the first name of her own husband in a complex game of simultaneously hinting - *I know who you are* - and teasing - *And I won't play Harry's role* - then she relaxed. Apparently, the manager had simply referred to the most common name in the short list of famous bars.

"... my own version of a luxury hotel, except that this is no longer possible today, not outside a chain. And then there was this offer - it came closer to my dream than I could have dreamed of, so to speak."

"How's that?"

Reuben Timball made a gesture toward the visible interior. "This resort and the purpose it serves - that's like the best luxury hotel you can imagine, only with a clientele better than any luxury hotel can expect."

"Really?" Cho, herself a frequent guest in luxury hotels around the world, wasn't sure if she wanted to agree. "What's so much better in our own guest list, a few days from now?"

"In a normal hotel ..." Before Cho found the time and the energy to look disapproving because of this taboo term, Reuben showed a quick grin and corrected himself, "... in a real hotel, I mean, you always find a - well, let's call it a sediment layer: the unavoidable con man, the unavoidable whore -

"

Cho laughed. "A MABEL seminar isn't exactly known as a chastity congress."

"No, certainly not, but they do it for fun and for free." The manager smiled. "Besides, these types of professionals I just mentioned are not the worst. Sometimes it's the rich young heir with his or her entourage - stupid, bad manners, and money buys everything."

Cho suppressed another flinch. Quite involuntarily, this man had quoted her own husband, with a remark that stung inside her still today.

"There's nothing wrong with being rich, and most of our guests have to be, but I want to see it combined with a bit of style, that's all."

"And you think our guests have it? Style?"

Reuben nodded. "Definitely. I don't expect a particular type - I mean, you can play even the rich stupid heir with a charming attitude - but if someone is ready to go through a four-week seminar for such a purpose as here, for me that's a sign of style. These boundaries are still wide enough for a variety of characters, but there's a lower limit. At least that's what I was told - concerning MABEL seminars, I'm a rookie."

Cho nodded affirmatively. If a seminar guest tried to just sit around and watch - something that would occur only among paying guests, as an attempt of ultimate snobbism - the moderators made a quick end to that, either by convincing the guest that it was worth a try, or by kicking him or her out. The contracts entitled them to that.

Reuben calling himself a rookie was a good sign. She had known it already, but she hadn't necessarily expected him to reveal his inexperienced state. In the course of this seminar, he would be informed about the true source of all magic that would be found in the seminar members, a task Cho liked to do herself.

Holding up her emptied glass, she said, "Would it violate your professional ethics to have a glass with me?"

"Actually, yes ..." Reuben pointedly glanced at his wristwatch, looked up, and smiled at her. "... but only as a bartender. In a few minutes Kenny'll be back, and then I might take you up on that offer."

"That's good," replied Cho. "In this case, we should use the time for a few business details - even if it seems a contradiction to discuss them with the bartender instead of the Resort Manager."

The man who held all these titles acknowledged the joke with a smile, and the hidden order with a nod.

"Say, did you see any of the moderators arrive? I wondered why nobody passed by in that seminar room I used as an office."

The manager shook his head. "No, madam, nobody."

With satisfaction, Cho noticed that the man didn't even try to express polite speculations about something he couldn't know - the habits of moderators at the eve of a seminar. Keeping her voice neutral, she asked, "Which connections do you have?"

"One with Vancouver Linkport, the other with Seattle Linkport. Both ways for both of them, which makes four cubicles altogether."

In the past years, linkports in many cities had started to offer portkey gates to temporary or small-scale customers. The Vancouver Resort here was a good example, renting two cubicles each in the

two linkports, one for either direction of portkey jumps, then giving them back at the end of the seminar, after the last guest had left. Depending on the schedule for the next seminars, it might be more sensible to sign a permanent leasing contract, but the resort would remain a single-target contractor, in contrast to Magical Tours and other companies that offered travelling networks around the world.

Cho herself had apparated to this place. She had been here before, during the time when the resort was built.

"The cubicles are operative," said Reuben. "I check them every morning."

"Well, the official part doesn't start until tomorrow," admitted Cho, as a black man dressed in a white shirt with black bow tie and black trousers identifying him as the regular bartender came toward the bar. "So if they arrive late in the evening or even tomorrow morning, it's early enough." Cho nodded toward the newcomer. "Since this is obviously Kenny, may I extend my invitation to dinner?"

"That won't do," replied Reuben, "inviting me in my own realm. But I can turn it around, or so I hope, in particular since I can offer something that's not part of the official schedule."

"And what would that be?"

"A candle." The man grinned. "Which makes it a candlelight dinner, right? And I'm the only one who can do that, because nobody else knows where the candles are."

Again this boyish element. In a moment in which someone else might have talked about romantic music and them being alone in the dining room, this man simply knew where to look for a box of candles.

Very efficient, Cho thought. Aloud, she said, "I feel privileged. Please call me Cho."

* * *

For a few moments, Harry pondered the question Ron had asked. Then he took the letter again and read it for a second time. Looking up, he said, "The Delacroix family seem simple people, judging from the style of this letter. I can still imagine many reasons for a suicide, in particular if there's a lot of superstition in the corner of France where this Jean-Jacques came from."

"Not more than anywhere else," replied Ron. "The Delacroix are farmers from the Cotentin, which isn't exactly Wales" - he smiled - "or some other spooky corner of our homely island *l'Angleterre*. This is France, after all."

Yes indeed; Harry was fully aware of this fact and wondered for an instant why his friend told him something as obvious as that. But maybe one had to live here for twenty years before registering a fine difference in superstition, while for a Brit, moving to Ireland meant escaping the frying pan by jumping into the fire.

"I can still see other reasons," Harry said after a moment. "Being bullied by other students - your reports wouldn't show that, would they?"

"Usually not," admitted Ron.

"At any rate, the boy is dead and gone, and whatever it was, I wouldn't know how to find the true reason. I mean, if someone started an investigation, it would be someone in authority, right? So what could I do? Join them to sniff out the oddities?"

"I didn't ask you to do anything!" protested Ron. "I made a remark, that's all. And besides, such an investigation would be a waste of time. You wouldn't believe how tightly closed a school can become if some administration authority comes along to have a look! The day before, they wouldn't

risk turning their backs to each other, but the moment they saw a Ministry official - "

"Which means it would have to be an undercover agent, right?"

"If we really wanted some results, yes."

Harry could remember some undercover agents. Snape had been one for years, his godfather Sirius only for months.

"What would be an undercover agent at a school?"

Ron gave him a look as if this had been a very stupid question. "A teacher, what else? Or a student," Ron chuckled, "except that your student days are over, my dear Harry Potter."

A teacher ... Harry wasn't a teacher, wouldn't know what to do, how to behave. The thought alone seemed ridiculous. Even so, almost against his own will, he heard himself ask, "What's required to be a teacher at this school?"

Rather than responding, his friend gave him another look, this time an expressionless one.

Harry paid back in Ron's own coin, except that it was more pretence than anything else. He knew, Ron would read the expressionless stare as a silent challenge, while in fact Harry felt rather uncertain about how to proceed, and whether to proceed at all.

Only after another moment of wordless glances meeting each other, it crossed his mind that Ron, his friend for a quarter century, might know him well enough to guess even his true motivation.

Eventually, Ron said, "It would be possible. Like every other school in Europe, they're screaming for more teachers. I could smuggle you in easily - under a different name of course, but that'd be the smallest - "

"Would you please answer my question?" growled Harry.

"Bit testy, aren't you?" Ron grinned. "That indicates a recent shortage of - " He stopped himself - the topic of sexual activity, or the lack of it, had been discussed some minutes ago, and a look at Harry's face told him that this was no time for wisecracks.

"Okay, okay - are you aware of the standard requirements for teachers in the European Community?"

"Hmm ..." Harry calmed down quickly, being aware of little more than his ignorance. "I have four children in school," he said, "but these systems are so different, maybe you should just give me an introduction. The short version, please."

Ron grinned, maliciously for an instant, as if this had been Harry's final mistake, asking a politician for a speech. But then he looked friendlier.

"The short version, then. A teacher must offer two courses, and these courses must belong to two different sets. A set is a collection of related courses ..." As Ron explained, all schools had to cover the mandatory nucleus of the European education program, while local enhancements were a matter of the respective school, city, county, region, or country. This nucleus consisted of six sets, and at least one course from each set had to be found in the schedule of every student, from the first to the last year. Any school, any student was free to consolidate a certain set as long as the basic requirements were met.

Language and Literature formed the first set, called *LangLit* for short. It contained all language courses, with the native language normally in first place.

"If the school is worth a sickle, they extend it by requiring one foreign language as the minimum,"

explained Ron. "That's true also for this school in Brest, which is just fine because English would be your most natural first course, right?"

Yes, probably. Harry felt a weird constriction in his stomach, a feeling he hadn't encountered for quite a while. It came suspiciously close to - well, anxiousness might be the most accurate term.

The second set contained two courses, Math and Computer Sciences. Here again, an ambitious school with a technical orientation would demand both of them from their students, while the school in Brest went for the standard only. It didn't matter, though; Harry couldn't teach either of them.

His skill was equally limited in the third set, *Social Sciences*, which included everything that could be called social in the widest sense. "History and Social Studies are the main courses here," explained Ron, "but stuff like Cooking, Sewing, or Do-It-Yourself courses also fall into this set." His expression made clear that it was here where hunters of the small efforts would find their luck.

Next came *Environmental Sciences*, which included the traditional sciences like Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. "There's a constant fight to establish Ecology as another one," reported Ron, "but the problem is - "

He stopped again, reminded by Harry's face that this had to be the short version, and continued with the last of the *traditional* sets, seen from a Muggle perspective. It was called *Recreational Sciences* and contained courses like Music or Arts, also Sports.

"This could be your second leg there," said Ron. "You did your weaponless combat arts long enough to meet the qualification for a Sports teacher. It might be a good idea to train a bit while - "

"Hey - wait a second!" Harry felt alarmed. "What about magic? Wouldn't this be my second - er, leg?"

"Normally, yes." Ron's face showed little pity - one of the reasons, as Harry darkly remembered, why he had selected this friend to call for help. "Magic is the sixth and last set, with Charms, Potions, Herbology, and Care of Magical Creatures as the four elementary courses. But for this school in Brest, magic is a mandatory course for *every* teacher. They don't ask for the top-level skill, which means any normal wizard or witch is sufficiently qualified, but you can't come along and say your second course is magic." Ron made a face. "If we could demand such a qualification from every teacher, we would have solved our most urgent problems, only ... well, not your problem," he added after another look in Harry's face.

"So, for me, English and Sports would be the combination, huh?"

"Right. And a different name, and" - Ron looked pointedly at Harry's forehead, where the double-lightning scar appeared as prominently as ever - "maybe something to hide this mark a bit."

Harry issued a short laugh. It sounded hollow in his own ears. "That's a crazy idea, Ron. I think we should forget it right away."

"Well ..." Ron shrugged. "You asked me, and you got an answer to your question. I didn't ask you to do it, to play teacher at the Ecole des Etudiants Magiques Gênes. But" - he inhaled deeply, to give a theatrical snort - "you could do it, there isn't the slightest doubt for me."

"No?"

Ron grinned. "If this was about regular spy work, Harry, I would call for the guys in the white coats right away. But this is about getting in touch with students - with children, in other words. Freaks without an exception, and that's your talent for sure."

Harry saw no reason to feel offended by Ron's remark. It was simply an accurate description of himself.

* * *

The hunt was on. The foxes were the hunters, or so they saw themselves, probably, charging after two bunnies. Only these bunnies weren't on the run, rested quietly on two bast mats, nonetheless being fully aware of the game.

Sandra lay on her stomach. Because Héloïse, at her side, had turned onto her back a while ago, they were basically looking in opposite directions. For rabbits on the run, this would have been the only suitable position, while for the beach bunnies they represented here, the effect was a bit awkward - the poor boys around them never knew on which side to perform.

Consequently, they went from one side to the other, with the two girls in the center spot of this circle, and the overall effect was that of some teenagers playing a chasing game.

It matched Sandra's opinion fairly well. "Brain dysfunction from hormonal stress," she murmured while watching discreetly.

Héloïse chuckled without opening her eyes. "I wouldn't say that. For what this is all about, they look clever enough. If I wanted a discussion about the complexity of all beings, I wouldn't be here."

This remark, in turn, gave Sandra a fit of laughter. "When was the last time you wanted such a discussion?" she asked after calming down.

"Ah, that's not the point," replied Héloïse, who would, or would not, take offence from such a needling only by her own mysterious rules. "But listen, you make it too difficult for them. Why can't you roll over and close your eyes like I do? These are such shy animals, you must - "

"Don't you worry," Sandra said, interrupting her friend. "One of them just took all his courage in his hands. I guess in an hour or so, he will have made it to our place."

"Be nice," said Héloïse. "Otherwise it takes them another day, and I don't need this merry-go-round any more than you do."

For once, Sandra agreed with her friend. Having watched the moment when the careful approach started, she got the impression that her heartfelt laughter had been the launching event.

While the figure in her view came closer, she wondered if she could - and should - play the capricious girl she wasn't, if only for practising. With Frédéric, it was neither necessary nor possible, while these boys might serve as involuntary training partners - as Héloïse had said, they'd be lost and forgotten some weeks from now. Provided she could find the courage, and her decision how to behave.

Too late - here he came.

"Hello."

"Hello," replied Sandra, completely failing to create the lascivious look and the almost imperceptible hesitation that belonged to the role she just had pondered.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"No, why should I?"

Dammit! Why hadn't she replied something like, *It's a public beach, isn't it?* But the boy's question had baffled her completely, as if this was a cafeteria, empty tables everywhere, and -

"Well," said the newcomer at this moment, "you might have, and I didn't mean to be impolite." He sat down, crossed his legs. "But the way you laughed a moment ago - I thought, give it a try, even if I couldn't help but feeling it was our childish game that made you laugh."

"Well ..." Sandra couldn't avoid a giggle, with Héloïse's words still ringing in her ears.

"Yeah, I know." The boy grinned. "Although, believe me, we could be even more infantile if there are no girls around."

Héloïse chose this moment to open her eyes and roll over. "That's all right," she said, "as long as you can muster a bit more seriousness in our presence. By the way, I'm Héloïse."

Sandra felt as if some grown-up had just arrived to take control.

"Hi, Eloise, nice to meet you." The boy shifted his glance again to Sandra, a reaction that struck her as a remarkable proof of composure. "Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself - I'm Zack, from Cleveland, Ohio."

"Hi, Zack, I'm Sandra. We both come from Paris, France."

"Really? Then how come I can hear California in your voice?"

Feeling pleased by such an attentive listener, Sandra revealed that she had indeed spent her first eight years in California and that her true home could be found in Ireland, while Paris was only correct in terms of school location.

Héloïse, who hadn't spent days at this beach to play second fiddle to Sandra, started her own offensive. "Hey, Zack, are you the only one in your group who's courageous enough to talk with us?"

The visitor laughed. "It looks that way, doesn't it? But it's really simple why they're reluctant; I was sent to invite you, and now they're afraid to interrupt the negotiations at the worst time."

"Negotiations?" echoed Héloïse. "That complicated? You didn't come to invite us for hide'n'seek, did you?"

"Nope." Zack showed the seriousness Héloïse had requested a minute ago. "My ladies, I have the honour and the pleasure to invite you for a disco evening. This evening, actually, in the Starlight Palace - coolest place in town, hottest sound around, maybe you know it already."

They didn't, but they had heard about it. A former movie theatre, renovated and rebuilt as a disco. The owner had kept the old name, fitting badly to a modern disco but well known in this part of the island. According to Mrs Benedict, the Starlight Palace had a very bad reputation. The question was how to judge this judgement from a voodoo witch who considered a graveyard at midnight as having a *good reputation*.

Héloïse had other concerns. "Before answering this invitation, I'd like to know who else is in on this party? How many boys, how many girls besides us?" Her glance flicked between Zack and Sandra, came to rest on the boy. "To make it short and clear - what's in for me? Do I have to buy a pig in a poke? Because from what I can see, you've made your choice already."

"Well ..." Zack smiled at Sandra before turning to Héloïse. "My friend Neil is a presentable guy for sure - it's him I had in mind as your partner this evening, only I didn't want to make it look as if you had no choice."

"Any colour, as long as it's black, huh?"

"You know him?" Zack looked totally baffled.

"No, what I said was a - " Héloïse stopped herself and smiled back. "Never mind, black is beautiful, the darker the better."

"You won't be disappointed," assured Zack, "Neil's as dark as the night, and if I'm not much mistaken, I can take this answer as an agreement - "

"Yes, you can," confirmed Héloïse.

Sandra slowly recovered from her surprise about this unexpected switching of roles. Normally her friend was the primary target of any invitation, and she had to make do with what was left. It had been that way from the very first day at Beauxbatons, when they met Benoît and Frédéric. Not that she saw any reason to complain, not at all, more than once the leftovers seemed the better choice. It was just an unfamiliar experience, to be the first.

In contrast, Héloïse responding without even asking Sandra was the common pattern. Here again, Sandra felt quite content to keep it that way because this was nothing other than *playing to their strengths*.

Zack still looked questioningly at her, and only now Sandra realized that he had not silently extended Héloïse's "Yes" to herself.

"Yes, sure, me too," she hurried to say, feeling clumsy and not cool at all, in particular since she could feel her cheeks colouring.

"Great," said Zack. "Then - where should we come to fetch you?"

Sandra had her mouth already open to give him Mrs Benedict's address when her friend said, "Right here - and let's see how the evening develops before we're going to tell you our address."

"Gee, what a suspicious mind!" Zack grinned. "I just wanted to save you the inconvenience, that's all."

"That's kind of you. But it's no problem for us, none at all, actually." Héloïse grinned back, not showing any intention to reveal their mode of travelling, which was apparating for Sandra and being summoned for Héloïse.

"Okay, then, right here. Half past eight okay? See you, then." Having received a confirming nod, Zack rose and left.

Sandra wondered what Mrs Benedict would say. The kids should be no problem, not at that time of the day. But Sandra didn't expect great enthusiasm about this idea from Almyra's mother. Maybe Almyra's comment would have been more interesting. Only she wasn't here and couldn't put her veto against this invitation.

About one thing, however, Sandra felt sure: Héloïse would send her home to Paris, to fetch some dress or other. *Playing to their strengths*, and one of her own strengths was apparating.

* * *

Fifty miles south of Tarragona, Beverly had said. The town closest to the campsite was Llamat del Mar, and the campsite itself was named after the beach, *Playa de la Cantera*. As Gabriel would find out later, this name simply meant 'quarry beach,' and the campsite was indeed located in an abandoned quarry.

But first he had to reach that place. His first apparition jump took him to Paris Linkport, a place he knew well. Checking the world map and the tables there, he found out that Barcelona was the right top-level target to reach Tarragona.

The next connection to Barcelona was due fifteen minutes from now. Taking the closest desk, he just barely got a ticket for this gate; apparently, lots of tourists were on their way to sunny Spain. He paid by showing his Global Network Card for the worldwide network of Magical Tours, the company which offered these portkey gates.

While not even this expensive card would have exceeded the family budget of the Groucho owner, not six of them for two adults and four children either, Gabriel knew that the Potter family didn't

pay a single penny for their cards. It had to do with things his father had done in the times of the Death Eaters, when some of them had used Magical Tours as a source of income.

Still more it had to do with the help Magical Tours had received from Harry and Ray Purcell in the project which finally provided a portkey gate Muggles could use. It was the invention which catapulted Magical Tours skywards in terms of economical success. The company responded in several ways, one of them being lifetime network cards for Harry and his family. There weren't many of these cards around, and Gabriel had the distinct feeling that for him as a normal paying tourist the gate would have been booked out.

Arriving in Barcelona, he checked the timetables for connections to Tarragona. Ten minutes to the next one, and again he couldn't help but think it was the card that took him through. In contrast to seats in a train or aircraft, the number of passengers in a portkey gate wasn't really fixed. The portkey would carry fifty or five hundred people; the bottleneck was the time required by these people to step forward, enter a cubicle, and disappear from view. The portkey carrier - here Magical Tours - established time frames, defined official limits for the number of passengers per time frame, and instructed its employees to give or take a bit toward very important customers.

Like those with the lifetime network cards. Not a gold card, not a platinum card, no - just black and white. Noblesse in travelling.

Except that Gabriel couldn't warm up too much for this tourist industry. Being used to his individual style of personal apparition, he felt annoyed from the need for a public portkey. But apparition required knowing the destination, to remember it from the last time. So, for unknown destinations, he had to use other techniques the first time.

Coming out in Tarragona, he checked the timetables again. No Llamat del Mar.

Well, that was pretty much as expected - from what Beverly had told him, this town offered three shops, two cafeterias, and one gas station. Not a likely target for a profit-oriented portkey company, while the transport authorities still used vehicles as conventional as trains or buses.

Sitting in a bus for the lesser half of an eternity? No thanks.

His father would have used a broomstick in this situation. Gabriel preferred another technique - that of the sight limit jumps. It consisted of a series of apparition jumps, each of them toward something visible from the current position, aiming toward the direction in which the destination was expected - very much the same technique a scout with a compass would use.

He went into the book shop in the Tarragona Linkport and bought a map of the area, with a scale that showed even the smallest settlements. Armed with this information, he left the linkport.

He had no compass. The position of the sun would give him a first bearing quicker than anyone could cast the Four-Point Spell. Once outside the city, the coastline would be a better guide than any direction finder.

As it turned out, leaving the city was the most difficult part of his jump journey. After having reached the outskirts, he could settle to a jump ratio that was equivalent to a driving speed of about two hundred miles per hour. He knew because it took him twenty minutes to reach the town where the sign at the entrance said 'Llamat del Mar.'

The campsite was located directly at the beach, Beverly had said. Gabriel hadn't seen a campsite since the last town, so this Playa de la Cantera had to be past the town.

And so it was. He saw the former quarry first; from a distance it looked like a missing tooth in this landscape. Coming closer, he saw tents, mobile homes, and huts. Mostly tents - anyone who could

afford more would find a better place than this ugly spot. Stones, smaller stones, and pebble - this site had nothing to do with the common image of beach holidays where fifty yards of finest white sand seemed the minimum.

He reached the main building in which the site administration would reside. Stepping inside, however, Gabriel found himself in a large bar that didn't leave much space for other rooms on the ground floor. Maybe there wasn't much administration here.

Not his problem. He had stepped in mostly to search for Beverly but now, seeing all these bottles, he became aware that he had spent the last hour in dry rooms first and full sunlight then. He ordered a soda, a can rather than a glass, so he could take it with him when looking around outside.

Not quite true. He emptied the first can where he stood, then ordered another one, feeling grateful for the fact that, since the last extension of the European community, even the Muggle currency was the same from Bulgaria to Spain.

Well, with the notable exception of England. Bloody Brits.

The barmaid, a young woman, examined him with open curiosity. She probably knew all the faces in this small campsite and, not having seen him before, wondered who he was.

He had ordered using Spanish - what he'd learned from Carlos and Esmeralda was sufficient to order a drink, especially in a bar where you could point with your fingers and say, "Esto." It wasn't enough to ask more difficult questions, so he met the barmaid's eyes and said, "Excuse me, do you speak English?"

Her face split into a wide grin. "Yes indeed, and much better than Spanish for sure." Seeing his wondering expression, she explained, "I'm a student from New Zealand on tour in Europe. This job is my way of financing the holidays. Actually, most of the staff here are students from other countries, and the Commonwealth is well represented, except what they have in common isn't exactly wealth."

She laughed joyfully about her own joke, making clear that this wasn't the time to worry about money. "I'm Susan," she added. "And you?"

"I'm Gabriel. Hello, Susan, nice to meet you."

"You sound very British, Gabriel. Say, did you walk all the way?"

With some bafflement, Gabriel realized that he had emptied the second can. "No," he said, "I wasn't exactly walking ..."

Susan smiled. For her - most likely a Muggle - his words probably sounded like a good imitation of her own joke.

"... but yes, I'd like another soda."

While serving his third can, Susan asked, "And what brought you to this wonderful place, Gabriel?"

"I'm supposed to meet a girl here. Her name is Beverly." He paid, then took his can.

"Beverly?" The young woman examined him again. "Yes, I know a Beverly, only she's a bit old for you. And besides - "

"There's Cameron at her side," completed Gabriel the sentence.

The young woman, apparently raised by New Zealand standards of ladylike behaviour, broke into another trumpeting laughter. Then she said, "You might find them outside at the beach; nobody's in the tents at this time of the day."

Checking the large clock at the wall above the entrance, Gabriel realized that he had won two hours

while travelling - one from Bulgaria to Paris, another one from Paris to Barcelona.

Susan pointed. "Through the building, then just follow the path. If she's there, you won't miss her - this isn't Ibiza."

"Yes, that crossed my mind too," replied Gabriel.

The barmaid chuckled. "If she's not there, just come back, will you? You have a funny way of talking. And that accent - I could listen for hours."

Gabriel gave her a sharper stare - he wasn't entirely sure whether she was making fun of him, because what he'd just heard sounded very much like making a move. A ridiculous thought, after all.

Susan held his stare. "It's true," she said simply. "No joking."

"Ah, okay. Sorry ..." Gabriel blushed, suddenly feeling embarrassment. "Well, then ... I think I'll have a look." He almost moved backward while speaking.

"You do that," was the answer that dismissed him sufficiently so he could turn and walk forward.

* * *

When Alain called that it was time to return home, Esmeralda only had to jerk her head a bit while meeting Bolo's watchful glance. The German shepherd understood at once. He came up and trotted closer; after six years of living together, dog and mistress understood each other without words.

It had been another beach where she and Bolo met for the first time. Some weeks before that, she had lost her second parents. And some days before that afternoon at the beach of Carron Lough, the young German shepherd, at that time still answering to another name, had lost his previous owner. Two lost souls meeting, feeling this inaudible *Click* in which their hearts had connected.

In the evening then, the dog had received his new name - Bolo, which was Spanish for ball and referred to the dog's favourite game, chasing after a tennis ball.

The dog's former owner had been the person responsible for the death of Esmeralda's second parents. Esmeralda knew it from the very first moment. She wouldn't forget this fact, but it didn't matter. Just one of those coincidences life had in store for little Mexican girls. The dog was the last to blame.

Three-year-old Felix toddled in the dog's direction. Bolo sat down, patiently awaiting his clumsy caresses. When the boy reached the dog, leaning in to hug him and to bury his face in the fur, Bolo waited until the face came up again. At this moment, a large pink tongue quickly washed over Felix' face, raising a happy giggle in response.

Watching the scene, Esmeralda felt like cuddling the boy on and on. She had done the same often enough - burying her face in the fine-haired fur of this German shepherd. Only she hadn't giggled, at these times.

Warming up to her new family and opening her heart to the people in Carron Lough had been a long and painful process. Not because they made it difficult for her. Not because she didn't want to, oh no.

But for all little five-year-old Esmeralda knew, she only had to start loving someone to seal his death. It had been that way with her first parents. It had been that way with her next parents, Ramon and Marie-Christine. By some inattentiveness of a bad fate, Carlos stayed alive - the topic of many a nightmare that made her come awake with a jolt, panting and drenched in sweat.

And then the new people. Gabriel with his pan pipe, this pipe that found its way to her inner core so easily, a soft arrow, slow but obstinate. She could sit for hours next to him, silent, not moving a

muscle. She would die before confessing aloud what she felt, before exposing him to her bad fate - until one day, he put down his flute, grabbed her and slung his arms around her to whisper, "I know why you don't dare to tell me. But that's okay, I know anyway."

Since then, she could come to Gabriel and take his arms to put them around herself. A kind of pretense-not-to expression of her feelings for him. But she still had to say the words for the first time.

Or the one who arrived at her bed often enough, only moments after she had come awake from one of her nightmares, offering a fresh pair of pyjamas just before the cold sweat would start feeling chill. He also had appeared out of nowhere in this linkport, at the evening of her last parents death, to fetch her and Carlos, to take them home - what had been their home until this evening that changed everything.

Calling him *dad* or *daddy* - or *pap*, the Spanish form - had taken years, and it had happened involuntarily the first time, a slip of the tongue that caused her almost a panic attack because for sure her bad fate had listened right at this moment. Harry had offered to hide on the other side of the globe - for a week or so, until her fate would forget about this little accident. With this and similar remarks, he had made her superstition a public fact, the first step in the process of overcoming them.

With Sandra and Cho it had been simpler. Esmeralda looked up to Sandra with a feeling of awe - totally free of anxiety but awe nonetheless. Sandra, in return, treated her as a little sister who came as a present of fate. They both agreed that fate was nothing to joke about, nothing to be careless with, and Sandra taught her how to fight fate in her thoughts and feelings - another milestone in this long process.

Cho was the simplest, in a way. It had taken Esmeralda only weeks to realize that Cho suffered from her own fate - being forever torn apart between her love for her family and her ambition as a businesswoman. This kind of permanent punishment looked severe enough - fate would not spoil it by killing Cho prematurely - so Esmeralda felt it safe to express her emotions toward Cho earlier than toward anyone else in the Potter family.

Alain called, "C'mon, folks, get moving - I'm so hungry, I could bite pieces off this prettyprat here ..." He grabbed a giggling Elaine. "She isn't the smallest but I'm sure her flesh is more tender than Felix's."

His smallest sister took it as the greatest compliment ever.

Alain looked at the group of Esmeralda, dog, and boy. "Aside from the fact that I know someone who'd rip pieces out of my flesh if I even made a try at Felix."

Esmeralda heard one of the twins say to Carlos, "I wonder if he really meant Bolo," and took it as her own version of the greatest compliment ever. She reached for her porty and knelt in front of Bolo and Felix. "All right, you two, hold tight."

Felix knew the drill; his right hand grabbed some of Bolo's fur while his left hand came to rest in Esmeralda's outstretched right one. The dog simply looked attentive.

Esmeralda put her left arm - the one with the porty in hand - around the dog. "Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... go!" She pressed the button for the Weasley bungalow.

A short moment of a feeling words could not describe, except that the three of them together remained a discernible facet in this whirling kaleidoscope. Then the world stabilized, revealing itself as the garden of the Weasley residence.

Soft pops around indicated the arrival of the other portkey travellers - Bernard, the twins, Carlos, and Alain with Elaine as the last. When programming the porties, Harry had put safety distances of twenty feet and more between the destination spots. Not because he felt the need for them, just for Janine's - and maybe Cho's - ease of mind.

Esmeralda had made a few steps, small ones with Felix at her side, when Bolo sniffed something on the ground just in front of her. He started getting excited, followed a track perceptible only for dogs, and ran toward the house, nose tightly over ground.

Esmeralda had a kind of premonition. Losing patience with the slow-pacing Felix, she heaved him into her arms. "Come on, sweetie, we've got a visitor."

The boy, about to protest because he preferred walking on his own unsteady legs, became infected by the expectation, and craned his neck to watch the dog's and their own approach toward the house.

Esmeralda opened the door for a whimpering and scratching dog, and followed as quickly as she could with the boy on her arm. She went into the living room, where a panting dog attempted to lick the visitor's face.

"Daddy! ... What's wrong? Why are you here?"

Esmeralda put down Felix, reached her father, was hugged, and only when she heard that no, nothing was wrong, he just hadn't known what to do alone at home, could she return the embrace.

Janine knew about her ravenous adolescent son who invested all this food into height rather than fat, so she was nearly ready with the supper. By the time everybody had welcomed Harry, they could sit down at the large table in the dining room.

The Weasley children took Harry for granted, or if not, they were too polite to ask. Esmeralda wasn't. "Are you staying longer?" she asked her father.

"No, I don't think so," came his reply after a moment's thought. "Ron has something that looks like a job for me - it's not decided yet, but if I take this job, the days will be too short to get prepared for it."

"What is it?"

Esmeralda was used to watch the glances between adults, most notably parents, when they tried to run a wordless discussion about how much they should reveal to their children. Funny how, at some point between the age of twelve and that of parents, the knowledge was lost that they might as well spit it out at once, simply because these glances alone had betrayed them. But Harry went farther than any parent she knew, and usually revealed everything.

"There's a school where strange things happen, and nobody knows why. If I agree, I'm going to work as a teacher there. Of course under another name, and with a bit of disguise."

Hearing this keyword, one of the twins called, "You're a teacher in disguise then!"

Apparently this was a reference to the term *devil in disguise*, which had to be quite familiar to the twins. Even so, Esmeralda couldn't help but think that the one year between herself and the twin girls meant a lot, sometimes - she wouldn't utter such stupid remarks, or did no longer if she ever had, which she doubted.

Just then her brother asked, "Can we come with you?"

"What?"

Many eyes were staring at Carlos, who held his glance fixed on his father. "We've been talking about Hogwarts, and about these houses. Carole told me that there were even real twins who got separated into different houses."

"Yes," confirmed Harry, "Padma and Parvati. So?"

"We don't want to be separated into different houses."

Harry laughed. "So tell the Sorting Hat what you want. I always had the impression it's a reasonable hat, and listens to preferences. He did so in my case."

True, thought Esmeralda, who knew this story as well as anyone else in this room. But Harry was Harry, while other students might find it harder to talk that hat into a different opinion.

"And besides," said Carlos, "if strange things happen in this school, and you want to find out, you need help from the student side. And if you have us ... We would have to be disguised too, of course ..."

After a quick glance to Esmeralda, Harry looked at his son again. "Say, is this a gene in the Garcia line? This criminalistic impulse?"

Carlos' eyes lit up in pride. His real father, Ramon Garcia, had been a lieutenant in the Los Angeles Police Department before being hired by Cho as the head of Groucho Biochemicals.

"Although I wouldn't know how to manage the disguise in your cases," said Harry, "because this is a school for magically handicapped children. If you two are magically handicapped, then I'm a squib."

Most of the Weasleys laughed. Carlos didn't, nor did Esmeralda, who was fully aware that their father tried what he could to joke his way out of a corner he could smell miles ahead - the corner of a promise to his children.

Totally unaware of her own mercilessness, she decided to nail him. "But we can't be separated into different houses," she said into the fading laughter.

Her father's eyes signaled her that the two of them understood each other. "The Sorting in Hogwarts is one thing," he said, "and me playing teacher is another. I don't want to mix them up unnecessarily." Having failed his escape with jokes, he tried with rationalizing.

Esmeralda closed the corner shut. "If this stupid hat separates us into different houses, will you help us?"

Total silence around the table. Quickly as ever, the Weasleys had caught on to what was going on between father and daughter.

Years ago, in the first month after her arrival in Carron Lough, Esmeralda had received a promise from Harry. That he would be there for her, should she be in trouble. He hadn't promised anything unrealistic, had said he had to be alive for that, which meant it was deadly serious. In response, she had promised never to misuse this promise. Then he had declared this their "mutual obligation," after explaining to her what it meant.

Feeling his eyes, which had darkened, in her own, she held his hard stare. She knew what she did, she knew what it would mean to Carlos and herself. She hadn't misused his oath.

"Yes," said Harry eventually. "If you are separated into different houses, which isn't acceptable, I'll come to help."

04 - Social Habits

In another million years of waves lapping and milling, this beach called Playa de la Cantera might show sand - maybe brown rather than white, but fine and smooth under your feet. For the time being, a mix of gravel and pebble covered the beach; only the waterline showed fine shingle as a first step toward the goal in this long-running project.

Gabriel placed his steps carefully, grateful for the sneakers on his feet. Glancing around, he saw unknown faces, but not too many of them. A tighter group fifty yards ahead, noisier and more vivid than the other guests, looked exactly like the crowd in which he was expecting to find Beverly.

He had guessed right. He was still walking, checking one face after another, when a voice from the flatwater zone called, "Gabriel!"

He shielded his eyes. "Hi, Beverly! Am I glad to find you here."

She came out of the water, reached him, and hugged him. "Hey, Gabe - boy, have you grown since we met the last time. Come on, let me introduce you to our lot."

With a grin, he noticed that Beverly didn't care about the rivulets she dropped on him while hugging. They certainly would evaporate quickly, but the Beverly in his memory had been considerably less casual.

She turned around and put her arm around his shoulder, then called, "Hey folks! Look here, we've got a visitor. This is Gabriel, fastest traveller in town."

She turned toward the waterline, where a young man was walking in their direction. "And here's the one who didn't let me talk on the phone. Gabriel, meet Cameron, jealousy on legs. Cameron, here's the one who'll teach you manners."

Laughter rose in the group. Someone made a remark Gabriel didn't register because he concentrated on the one figure who stepped closer, who examined him with an expression more outraged than mocking.

"Hello, Gabriel. Before you start your lesson, let me tell you, as long as you're not telling me where you really came from I won't believe a word. Considering the time when I heard you on the phone, you must have been somewhere in the next town."

Gabriel smiled. "Hello, Cameron, nice to meet you. No, I really was in Bulgaria, that's why I'm still one hour in my own past."

His attempt at a joke failed completely. Cameron, apparently not used to travelling through time zones, said, "Huh?" and turned to the other people. "Here, you're all witnesses. Not only isn't he telling me where he came from, no, he's using some psychobabble that's way beyond his age. I guess he's a hoax from the shrinkhead faculty."

A young man sitting next to a girl on a blanket said, "Never mind, Gabriel - you must understand, in the first fortnight after their practical, there's just no sense in listening to the nonsense these prosperous shamans blurt out. Nothing serious, just stress symptoms."

"That's lawyer bullshit," protested Cameron, and tried to say more but a howling and whistling chorus drowned out his words. From what Gabriel could hear, law was much more strongly represented in this group than medicine.

"Sit down," said the young man to Gabriel, examining him in a way that somehow didn't fit a lawyer. "You look sufficiently tanned but those dark sweat spots worry me a bit. This sun is nothing to fool around with, so - "

"That's okay," interrupted Gabriel, then began to strip down to the swimsuit he wore underneath. "I just emptied three cans of soda over there in the bar. I had a talk with Susan."

"Then it's not Cameron you should teach a lesson but Willy. He's been trying to get into a conversation with Susan for quite a while." Ignoring the laughter his remark had raised, the young man kept his eyes on Gabriel's body a moment longer until the shirt was off, revealing a deep tan. Then he nodded.

"What kind of lawyer are you," asked Gabriel, "that you behave like a doctor?"

"None at all. I changed from law to medicine, to show them that a working brain isn't counterproductive for a doctor. By the way - I'm Don, and this young lady at my side is Fiona."

"Hi, Don - hi Fiona," Gabriel managed to reply before his hand was grabbed by Beverly, who pulled him to the waterline.

For the first few yards, the water was muddy, more from all these people wading around than from waves breaking at the shoreline. Some yards further on, Gabriel felt the ground drop off beneath his feet. This coast seemed extremely steep, compared to the Black Sea and others he knew.

He dived down, only to realize that the water wasn't nearly as clean as that of the Black Sea. Well, he hadn't intended to paddle around anyway. With strong kicks, using his legs only, he approached the spot in the shallows where he sensed he would find Beverly. But when arriving there, he found the water in this area so clouded that he quickly lost interest in the common water game of surprising attacks. He came up, climbed out, and reached the spot with his clothes.

The girl called Fiona looked at him. "Want a towel?"

"No thanks."

In this hot sun, he'd be dry within less than five minutes, except maybe his swimsuit. Even so, Gabriel hardly ever used a towel - coming out from the shower, he would hold his arms in a triangle upward to cast the air stream spell that dried him more efficiently and in a more hygienic way than any towel, and it didn't make laundry work for the house-elves. But he didn't feel like saying all this here.

Don turned to him. "So where do you really come from? Or is this a secret?"

"Not at all," replied Gabriel. "But it's like I said - from Bulgaria, more precisely, from Durmstrang. Actually, our holiday house is near Primorsko - that's by the Black Sea."

"Ah, yes. And what gives us, of course with Beverly in first place, the honour of your visit?"

Judging by Don's look a second ago, the medical student didn't believe a word of what Gabriel had said. The last question - asked in a tone of friendly sarcasm - confirmed this assumption.

Gabriel remembered a lesson from his father on how to cope with such situations, a lesson that had stuck with him well because it matched his own approach. According to this lesson, the best he could do was simply tell the truth - in the dullest words he could find.

And so he did. "I'm looking for a singer for a band."

Fiona nearly collapsed with laughter, then came up again. "That's great," she gasped, "that's ... I've been waiting so long to see someone shut Donald up like that, after him asking things that are none of his business, as usual."

She sent Gabriel an appreciative smile, which froze upon seeing his face. "Erm - you ... please tell me you aren't ... you're serious, aren't you?"

Gabriel just nodded.

Don started a low chuckle, which grew more strongly after a moment, then he rolled around in a fit, unable to defend against the blows that rained down on him from a red-faced Fiona.

When Gabriel himself, infected by the scene, started to join in Don's laughter, the girl calmed down. "I'm sorry," she said, "please excuse my bad manners - it's just, well - "

"It's okay," interrupted Gabriel, still chuckling. "I know that it sounds a bit weird. We're a student band, you know, and we got the permission to rehearse in the Durmstrang school - practising with the equipment, getting used to halls that size and so. Well, and today we had a rehearsal ..."

He waited a few seconds because at this moment Beverly arrived from the water, closely followed by Cameron.

"Yes, we were rehearsing, and when we had finished, I asked how it was, and that was when Alexandra asked, 'Why do you play together when nobody sings?' Well, and we had asked that ourselves before, but when she said it ... Alexandra is five, you know, and doesn't bother to be polite. Anyway, now we're looking for a singer."

Beverly's face was a living question mark. "Why'd you come to me for that? You don't expect me to sing in your band, do you?"

"No." Gabriel grinned. "But I remembered a girl I heard once, and this was an evening when you were the babysitter for both of us. Caitlin's her name, if my memory serves - "

"Yes, of course!" Beverly's eyes had widened. "Yes, her voice should be up to the task. Caitlin - er ..." Beverly pulled her lower lip between her teeth, then looked up again, beaming. "McFarlane! Caitlin McFarlane, her father's an engineer for Groucho, so it shouldn't be a problem at all for you to find out the address. Best you ask my mum directly."

Gabriel nodded. "I talked with her first, before coming here."

"I KNEW IT!" Don turned toward the frowning audience. "I knew he didn't come directly from Bulgaria. Ireland - that explains everything."

Groaning, and a remark about someone who'd made better jokes than this one in the past. Fiona looked at Gabriel and said, "Just ignore him."

"This Caitlin," said Gabriel to Beverly, "how old is she now?"

"Older than you - about two years, I think, maybe a bit more."

Which meant she was sixteen now, or maybe seventeen. Good news, in Gabriel's opinion, because it would simplify things. With a girl of fourteen, most parents would go crazy at the thought of their daughter performing on stage in the evening.

"Don't you worry about that, Gabriel. A bit older is just the right age, believe me, them being ahead in experience is much better than the other way - "

"Will you shut up!"

The first voice, as Gabriel learned a moment later, belonged to Steve - a grinning face, not looking guilty at all. The interruption had come from his girlfriend Blair, who looked pinkish now, muttering something about stupid young men who seemed having forgotten how delicate -

"Yes, sure," said Steve at this moment, "I know, but a bunch of med students is just the wrong place to expect any tact - and besides, look at him, he didn't flush the least bit."

Which, of course, was all Gabriel needed to turn dark red, and Blair to chide Steve again for having the tactfulness of a ramrod.

Just then, another voice said, "I'd like to hear about this band, Gabriel."

When Gabriel looked up, the owner of this voice added, "Hi - I'm Mitch. I play the guitar - acoustic, that is. And you?"

"Flute, mostly."

Gabriel was grateful for Mitch, who had saved him from embarrassment, had saved him again when he didn't ask immediately about other instruments, and instead suggested they should discuss the issue some minutes later uphill at the tents, while some other people *hopefully* prepared dinner.

Gabriel found this an excellent idea. His body was two hours ahead of these students; the word *dinner* alone seemed enough to make his stomach rumble and his mouth water.

The tents belonging to Beverly's group stood in a loose formation around a center place - a kind of open-air kitchen with camping stoves, with wooden planks forming a bench here, a low table there. It was far from the comfort the Krum holiday house could offer, but to Gabriel's eyes it looked great.

Mitch returned from his tent with a guitar in his hands. "This place isn't much by any standard," he said, "but it has some big advantages. Here you can do what you want because nobody keeps any order, and the people you'll find here are either poor or young or both, that makes for a nice atmosphere. Lots of music here, and I'm not talking about radio or something like that."

He sat down. "So what else do you play, if flute isn't the only one?"

"Accordion, or concertina. And harmonica of course. Then xylophone. And keyboard, but only because there's no one else, and sometimes you just need it."

"But flute's your preference?"

"Yes," nodded Gabriel, "definitely."

"Pity you didn't bring it with you, because then we could - " Mitch stopped himself and watched as a beaming Gabriel opened a narrow pouch at the left leg of his jeans - just opposite the pouch for his wand - and extracted a small wooden flute.

"Hey - great, doesn't look much but at least you weren't fooling me." Mitch grinned. "Okay, let's see how we go together before anyone asks us to do kitchen duty."

Without another word, he started to play his guitar. Maybe he was no Tomas, but for sure Mitch knew what to do with six strings. After a moment, while Gabriel still listened, he started to hum, and then to sing. *Greensleeves* - no doubt selected because it was well known, offering a quick way of uniting two musicians who had met for the first time only minutes ago.

Gabriel kept silent until Mitch had finished the first verse. Just when the refrain started, he took over, hitting the long tune without any preparation, replacing the voice with the clear, sweet whistle from his flute.

On the next verse, he fell down to low volume and looked invitingly at Mitch, who understood at once and resumed his singing. In the next refrain, Gabriel still kept his volume low enough so Mitch's voice could be heard over the flute, then in the last and final verse he returned to his higher volume - and to his improvising.

By then, people had already gathered from the various tents. They stood there, watching the two musicians, and after a moment sat down, staring.

For the next five minutes, Gabriel kept *noodling around*, as he called it - playing with the theme of

the song, well in sync with Mitch's guitar, climbing, falling, accelerating while Mitch followed - Mitch who didn't play in such an improvised session for the first time - almost falling silent when it was time to let the guitar lead, until they both stopped at once ... to add a final, quiet refrain in which Mitch's voice could be heard again.

There was a few seconds' silence, two musicians beaming at each other, then the applause rose from all sides. In all the noise, Beverly came over, grabbed Gabriel by the shoulders, and gave him a kiss on the cheeks. Then she turned to send a challenging glance toward Cameron, who did his part by waving a fist and growling dark threats.

When the audience had calmed down, Mitch said, "Well - I had little doubt that you would find the right note at the right time, Gabriel, but you still took me by surprise. Such a rich sound from this small thing!"

"It couldn't be much bigger," explained Gabriel, "not for my taste. I have bigger ones, but that's a different style. And what's more, this is a Miyikura, they know how to do it, real masters in wood they are."

"Masters, huh?" Mitch nodded. "Yeah, that's the keyword here. All right, you Irish piper, what next?"

* * *

Sandra sent a last glance at the mirror, then stepped back to make room for her friend Héloïse. "Your turn," she called over her shoulder in the general direction of the bathroom where Héloïse was laying the fundament for blinding beauty.

In the Benedict household, a mirror large enough to check one's own appearance belonged to resources in short supply. The two girls had figured out long ago how to divide scarce goods: Sandra got her share first, but Héloïse's share was bigger.

Usually it worked to mutual satisfaction. Here, too, Sandra felt no need for incessant turning and bending and craning of the neck to check that her clothes fit as well as they did a minute ago - or as badly.

These clothes gave her no reasons to complain. They had fetched them from home: Héloïse from the house in the Goblin quarter of Paris, and Sandra from Carron Lough. She had dropped the initial idea of apparating home alone and selecting Héloïse's dress rather quickly when realizing that her friend was unable to give a clear order. So she had summoned her to Paris, had apparated further to Ireland, returning five minutes later ... and then had waited another half hour until Héloïse could make up her mind.

The Veela came out of the bathroom and stepped in front of the mirror. She wore cream-coloured pants, a halter top, and black high heels, comfortable enough to dance in them without qualifying as an acrobat. The pants were skin-tight from the hips to the knees, then grew in width according to the current fashion. Héloïse used this form quite expertly - she wore her wand in a kind of holster at the lower leg, out of view yet not farther away than a quick reach.

Sandra's own solution had a similar elegance; she would go without a wand at all. For her, this was a small penalty because she could cast most spells in a wandless mode. Sure, there were a few spells that would not work without a wand - *Lumos*, for instance, only who needed a glowing wand tip in a disco?

Her own clothes looked considerably more conservative than Héloïse's - at first glance, that was; Sandra felt not the least bit second-rate. A blouse of deep red silk with golden ornaments, cut like a traditional Chinese cheong-sam in its tightness and its half-height collar, emphasized her Chinese features. Only the sleeves were different: while a traditional cheong-sam was sleeveless, the sleeves

of her blouse covered half of her upper arm. Her make-up added to the Oriental expression. Except for the colour - black - her pants were pretty much like those of Héloïse. Even so, she had no chance to use the same holster trick; her wand was longer than Héloïse's while her legs were shorter.

Also with respect to her friend's hair, she wore her own jet-black hair short. Not as short as an animal's fur but in clear contrast to Héloïse's long, silvery waves. There was just no sense in competing against Veela hair.

Sometimes, such a cut paid off, if only in the amount of time required for hair care. It gave her twenty minutes for sure until Héloïse would be ready. She walked down into the living room.

Grandma Benedict and the kids were sitting in front of a TV. This thing looked really old; it had probably already been outdated the year before Sandra was born. She came to a halt and asked the traditional question of any girl dressed to kill.

"Do I look all right?"

Donovan gave her a short glance, said, "Sure," and resumed watching the program.

Deirdre took a moment longer to examine her, then said, "You look gorgeous! So - so Chinese."

"Now, isn't that a surprise," laughed Sandra. "It took me long enough to learn this style of make-up."

Grandma Benedict couldn't muster much enthusiasm. "You look fine, sweetheart," she said, "only that place you want to go - I don't like it much."

This worry wasn't particularly new to Sandra. She had heard it earlier this evening, when they returned from the beach to tell about their plans for the evening. Patiently listening and not protesting seemed the best answer; how would someone with such an old TV appreciate a modern disco?

As though having sensed Sandra's thoughts, Grandma Benedict rose from her armchair with a sigh, followed by a deep groan. "You take me for senile, don't you? Follow me, young lady, I want to give you something to put my mind at ease." These words were accompanied by a look that wasn't old-fashioned at all, then the old witch waddled toward the room in which she kept her voodoo stuff.

Sandra followed, gripped by curiosity but at a loss to have a guess. It wouldn't be a chastity belt, would it?

Metal ... The material was the only match between Sandra's mental joke and the thing Grandma Benedict held in her hand. An ornament - long, thin, in a style of costume jewellery that would have looked horrible anywhere; luckily, Sandra's fire engine-red blouse covered even that. Still stranger yet was the shape - it looked exactly like a trident about four inches long.

Sandra took the piece and examined it, then looked up. "What is it? And what am I supposed to do with it?"

Grandma Benedict showed an amused grin. "No, dear, this isn't a sample of bad taste in mulatto jewellery."

Sandra blushed slightly, reminding herself not to underestimate again a voodoo priestess just because she was old and fat.

"You can wear it as an ornament, or carry it in your bag if you like. It's important only that you have it at hand. To the outside, it's a picker for the pieces of fruit in the typical drinks here on the island - you know, it's quite unladylike to grab them with your fingers or to push them into your

open mouth. So it looks perfectly normal when used in such an environment like the Starlight Palace."

A picker for the fruits in a punch! Sandra nearly giggled.

"But on the inside it's a drug tester. See that hilt? If this little disk changes colour, there's something in the drink you should avoid at all costs."

Sandra stared at the small disk-shaped handle at the end of the three tips, suddenly feeling admiration. "Hey, cool! It's magic, isn't it?"

"What else?" Grandma Benedict put the ornament in Sandra's hand and took that hand while closing it around the piece. "And now promise me to test every drink! You're a sensible girl, very much so for your age - if you say you'll do that, I feel a world better."

Sandra was astonished. "Is it that bad there?"

"I've heard stories - enough that I worry. It depends on the people you are with, and I don't know them - but you don't know them either. So if you use that thing, we're on the safe side - the fruit drinks are the best anyway, so there's no risk of having an embarrassing scene."

Sandra didn't think this precaution was really necessary; on the other hand, if it was as simple as that ...

"Okay, I promise. Can you fix it to my blouse? I think that's the best place for it."

The woman smiled in relief. "Good girl! Hold on - yes, doesn't even look bad on this terrific garment."

When Héloïse came down the staircase a few minutes later and noticed the ornament near Sandra's shoulder, her only comment was, "That's the weirdest thing I've seen on you in a while, and that says something. Anyway, let's go."

They said goodbye, then walked outside - Grandma Benedict would have a fit from the air popping into empty space after an apparition jump right from the living room. Out in the street, Sandra took Héloïse's hand, said, "Here we go," and aimed her jump into the space between two palm trees only feet apart. Nothing in the boys' appearance had indicated they were wizards, so she wasn't in a hurry to reveal their witches' nature.

The time span between apparating and summoning measured in fractions of a second, about the time someone might need to blink an eye. Nonetheless, each time she carried herself and her friend to some destination, Sandra was reminded of her brother's superior technique. Maybe it was envy.

They came out exactly as planned, well covered by the tree trunks. Looking around, Sandra saw the headlights of a car in the distance. Focusing her attention on that spot, she saw that the car had to be a convertible, and the two heads that were visible just above the chassis had to be those of Zack and Neil.

"Where do you want me to send us?" Sandra asked her friend. "To the rear of that car or right into the back seats?"

"No, not the back seats - you'd scare them off!" Also thanks to her low voice, Héloïse sounded almost imploring, a very unusual attitude for her.

Sandra had the wisdom to suppress any reply. Instead, she brought them to a point about ten yards behind the car. From there, they walked side by side toward the vehicle.

Coming closer, Sandra realized that what had looked like a convertible was actually a normal

limousine with a sawn-off top and a lot of rust, the typical style here on the island. At her next step, the figure in the driver's seat first jerked his head and then turned around as much as possible in this position, and gasped, "Whoa - where did you come from?"

It was Zack, and the black face that spun around at this moment on the passenger seat could only belong to Neil.

"Never mind that now," replied Sandra. She had reached the car, put her left hand on the upper edge of the rear door, and swung herself in a single fluid movement into the back seat.

Sometimes, she thought, shorter legs paid off - especially in combination with the half-forgotten skill from some exercises with her father, when he still had a taste for aikido.

Héloïse made it simpler. She just stood there, had to wait only a second or two until Neil stepped out of the car to open the rear door on the other side for her. "Thank you," she said with a blinding smile before climbing inside.

"Ready?" asked Zack. "Let's go." He started the engine and drove off.

* * *

Cho watched as the waiter filled her dish with this and that from the large plate of hors d'oeuvres. She saw salads, seafood, and other things of which she could only guess the nature or taste. The mix was unknown to her, so she let him select for her without ordering any preferred food.

Looking up, she noticed that for once during the past minutes Reuben's attention wasn't fixed on her. He too watched the waiter, although not quite as idly and relaxed as she'd done a second ago.

The waiter came around and put the dish down in front of her. "Very well, madam, please enjoy your meal."

"Thank you."

A moment later, when the Resort Manager's attention was back on her, she asked, "So, did he pass the exam?"

"You are the guest!" replied Reuben Timball as if in protest. "You are the one who should answer this question."

"Yes, I'm the guest."

Cho took her glass and showed her best smile. "But otherwise, my dear Reuben, you know bloody well that it's not true because your answer is most likely different, and while on this particular subject" - she raised the glass like for a toast - "we'll get along much better if you either answer my questions or tell me that's none of my business ... Cheers."

The man opposite responded to her toast, then put his glass down. "He did okay, in particular with me sitting at the table watching. By the time the seminar is over, he'll do excellently."

Cho hadn't seen any clumsiness, any trembling fingers. "What was missing? What could he have done better?"

"Oh, the way he filled your dish was flawless," conceded Reuben. "But he could have talked to you more - asking you for your preferences, or recommending something, or maybe just asking you whether you'd allow him to select for you ... Anyway, he's young, this is the part he still has to work on."

"Maybe he was taught to do his job as silently as he could." Cho didn't care much about their waiter this way or the other; she was only interested in the Resort Manager's responses. "Especially at a table like ours."

What she meant was a table with a man and a woman, a table with two candles while the lights above were dimmed. Currently, their table looked even more noticeable because they were the only guests.

"Yes, I know." Reuben sighed. "This might be the worst crime in hotel and restaurant schools - to teach the students they should behave like well-oiled machines. They aren't, and they couldn't do worse - " The manager stopped himself and showed a rueful smile. "Sorry - you just pressed the button for the standard monologue. But at least I caught myself in time, and in a few weeks, the Vancouver Resort crew will know that they should behave as humans with a service task. As simple as that."

They ate silently for a while, then Cho said, "You shouldn't have worried about a monologue on your part, except that it might not do justice to this excellent food. Since I have to fill you in on MABEL and this seminar, there's a high risk of me getting into monologues. I'll try to avoid them, but if not, well, at least they won't be boring."

"Maybe if I ask questions - "

"Yes, absolutely, you should do that - " Cho smiled apologetically, "but even answering simple questions in this context might trigger a monologue."

The man in the opposite seat made a face like a boy anticipating a new fairytale. "But then, maybe I won't object at all listening to your monologues."

"Let's see." Cho put down her fork on the now-empty dish. "What's your first question?"

Her dinner partner made a gesture toward the candles on the table. "Since this is a more private atmosphere, rather than an office meeting, I hope you will agree to the questions being a bit more private too, so please tell me ..."

That had to be seen, thought Cho while Reuben made a short pause during which he looked as if he were contemplating the most urgent of all his questions, although she had no doubt that he hesitated only to give her time for a protest that didn't come.

"... what brought you to MABEL?"

It took her only a second to come to a decision on how to answer, and how far to go in revealing private issues. Then she replied, "Nothing - I invented it."

"Yes, I had that feeling. What - "

Cho interrupted him. "What I said is a tiny bit exaggerated, but only in the sense that I wasn't the only person involved. But of all people who founded MABEL, I was probably the most determined one."

"So why did you invent MABEL?"

"Isn't it obvious? There aren't enough wizards and witches for all the tasks that result from almost every child on earth showing magical powers now. We need more Magicals, and MABEL is an institution to provide them. But it's also a profit-oriented company, and that's why each seminar is a mix of paying and non-paying members. The number of people worldwide who desperately want to be magical is growing every day, and - well, if they're rich enough to pay the fee, they are welcome to our seminars. The demand is growing faster than we can build resorts and - "

Cho stopped in mid-sentence. For a monologue, her explanation had been pretty short so far; however, the Resort Manager's face told her that she was indeed telling him the obvious.

She said, "I guess I didn't answer your question, did I?"

Reuben Timball waited with his reply while the waiter removed the empty dishes. Then he said,

"You explained how it ended. You didn't say a word about how it started."

For an instant she thought he was referring to what - among insiders - was known as the Great Plot, the reason for all children worldwide suddenly showing magic. While she knew everything about it, she would not tell a single word.

"What was your personal starting point?"

"Oh, that ..." Cho showed a smile that covered her short moment of confusion and, simultaneously, won her time to decide again if she really wanted to tell him such private details.

"It all started with a sabbatical," she said eventually.

It all started much earlier, only she didn't intend to uncover her complete life in front of this Reuben Timball. Voldemort, her husband's great enemy, could be blamed for everything. The Muggles detecting the magical world was the result of his work. The growing tension between the two worlds led to the Great Plot, and its effect, the millions of magical children, led to the demand for something like the MABEL program.

At a more personal level, the development had motivated an old Death Eater to kill Ramon and Marie-Christine, the parents of Carlos and Esmeralda. The adoption of these two children had led to Cho taking her sabbatical.

"Before that, I was the CEO of a manufacturing company," she continued. "But during that break, I realized that I could see trends and developments much better from the outside. Being in an office all the time creates a certain kind of corporate blindness. Watching from the outside gives you a much clearer view for strategic decisions ... On the other hand, strategic decisions aren't made twice a week. If there's someone else for the daily business, you have a lot of time left for other things."

The waiter arrived with the main course - several kinds of fish, grilled, on white rice mixed with a generous amount of black rice, the local specialty.

While the young man prepared the dishes for herself and Reuben, Cho surveyed in her mind the years after her sabbatical, selecting things to tell and other things to keep silent about - like the two new branches in her Groucho imperium, in which Chrissy Vanzandt, her former assistant, now held the position of the CEO. Both branches were results of her unfiltered perspective from outside. The first, Groucho Technomagic, manufactured machines and devices that had a mix of magic and Muggle technology in common. This was also true for the spectors from Groucho Spectors and the phonies from Groucho Communications, but the new daughter company manufactured a large array of traditional household and entertainment devices. A toaster that could toast a slice of bread crisp and dark while not black no matter how thick the slice, no matter which kind of bread - such devices with a three year warranty had a large market despite their high prices.

The new daughter company reached break-even at a breathtaking speed. However, it was the following branch that made the term "money" almost meaningless in the Groucho Industries, thanks to incredible profits - Groucho Power Cells. Monocells, batteries, accumulators, any size the market needed, with magically increased capacity. A Groucho-powered laptop computer could run full-scale operations for more than twenty-four hours. The monopoly had lasted for fifteen months - enough to dominate this market for years to come.

Richer than ever, Cho had looked for a new challenge - and had found it in the MABEL program.

The food on her dish wouldn't take well to her chatting about all these events. Moreover, picking like a bird, a bit here and there, wasn't her style of nourishment anyway. So, for the next minutes, she decimated fish and rice in equal shares.

"Well, in this sabbatical," she finally continued, "I found out that I didn't really want to return in my old office. In the beginning, there were still lots of activities with that company, expansions into new markets, but after a while, it really had settled and I looked for something new. That was when the idea of MABEL started to form." She told him an edited version of the first seminar - how an interview with a celebrity in a magazine had given her the idea, and how the initial plan had been enhanced by the scholarship idea, and how the first seminars were held in rented rooms, only to discover that these celebrities attracted too much media people, whether involuntarily or on purpose.

"So we decided to build our own resorts, and to make sure they aren't under siege by the newspeople," she finished. "In the course of expanding, we bought this place and built Vancouver Resort, and now it's your turn to tell me what brought you into MABEL."

Reuben laughed. "Is it? ... I got an answer to my question, yes, even a lengthy one, only you did a hell of a job not to reveal a trace of your true motivation. I'm sure every single word is true, but ... That company, for example - you weren't a hired hand, am I right?"

Feeling very pleased, Cho just smiled, however in a way that was answer enough.

"And it wasn't - or isn't - particularly small, so much for sure. So in other words, at a time when other women would have finally found their way into the pool with the charity sharks ..."

Cho laughed out loud in appreciation of this expression.

"... you have nothing better to do than found a complex organization, do a lot of travelling, and run some scheme that turns Muggles into Magicals. It works - that's all I believe."

"We'll come to that," she said, dismissing his attempt to skip his own confession. "And if you think I told a lot while missing the point the whole time, then why don't you do better in your own story?"

Reuben stared at her for a moment, apparently pondering the challenge. Then he said, "That's fairly simple. Young, promising hotel manager ... meets the hotel king ... meets his daughter ... finds himself in a paradise with a pre-defined career ... every step already outlined until he's sixty-five ... young manager and king's daughter look at each other, wonder if their feelings for each other are real or just something to please daddy ... young manager leaves this paradise, drops quite a number of levels on the scale, and is driven by the ambition to run a hotel *and* to prove that he can manage not only without daddy's support but even against daddy's fatherly wrath." Reuben shrugged. "And he's not quite as young as he was when the story started."

"And the king's daughter?"

Reuben smiled. "Oh, we parted as friends. Which didn't change anything - she wasn't curious enough to find out how rough the world can be without daddy's cushioning, and I missed her a bit more than I'd thought, but not enough to come back, so ..."

After a moment, in which the man didn't bother to finish his sentence, Cho said, "Granted, you made it short and you revealed your true motives, only you presented them like the headlines in a story that misses the details."

She was rewarded with another of these boyish grins. "That's true," he said.

"Well, step by step, it looks as if we both prefer the same policy here. Our next step has to do with some details about the seminar organization - and about the way these Muggles get their magic. Interested?"

"Very much so."

"Then ..." Cho saw the waiter approaching their table again. "Let's do it at a less public place. If this place can offer room service for coffee and a brandy, I can offer a suite."

Telling him about the High Priestess as the real source of magic surely was a task that needed more privacy than could be found in this restaurant. So far, inviting him into her suite was simple business. Even so, it crossed her mind how quickly the topic could change in such an environment.

* * *

The engine's low rumble told Sandra that there had to be a bit more to the car than met the eye. However, Zack kept a decent style of driving, in this regard showing better manners than most European boys of comparable age. Within less than ten minutes, they reached a car park next to a large building with an old-fashioned neon sign that said, "Starlight Palace."

This time, Sandra waited until Zack opened the door on her own side, thanked him with a smile which she hoped might pass for beaming, because for her own standards it was.

It seemed good enough though not blinding - Zack gave her an admiring look and said, "You look great."

Sandra wished she had a reply that was charming, brilliant, and cool, all at once. What she came up with was, "Thank you."

Walking toward the building, she thought for an instant the disco hadn't opened yet, despite the hour and despite the number of cars around - the quietness had fooled her. Only when coming closer, she could hear the sound, almost completely muffled.

Inside, having passed the door guard who waved them through with an appreciative "Yeaaaah," she saw the typical architecture of a movie theatre, with floors outside the center hall, and this was also the reason for the astonishing quietness on the street. Opening the door to the disco hall, the familiar cacophony hit her ears.

It was full. Following Zack, Sandra wondered if they would find seats at all, a risk she could live with because she was used to French discos, which offered considerably more space for standing around or dancing than for sitting. Then she saw Zack wave to some boys who had occupied two tables and now gathered around one of them, offering the other table to the newcomers.

Under different circumstances, she would have asked Zack what made these boys so obedient to defend seats in such a crowded place. But, as in any disco she knew, conversation was difficult, short, and across a few inches from mouth to ear. Non-verbal communication worked better.

Pointing toward the list of beverages, raising his eyebrows in an unspoken question, Zack asked her which drink she wanted.

She took the laminated sheet and scanned the list for her preferred drink, which was known as *Haiti Punch* or *French Flip*, both names meaning very much the same - juice from various fruits, soda, and a bit of champagne. It was the lightest alcoholic drink she knew, the best also, and it bore pieces of fruit.

Table service was unknown here. Zack shouted her choice in Neil's ear, and Neil went to the bar, after being told by Héloïse what she wanted, no doubt containing a bit more alcohol.

Glancing around, Sandra found little that would have been out of place in a disco somewhere in Paris. More black faces perhaps, although certain quarters in Paris could offer even more. The music would be nearly the same; international charts showed little difference between France and the Caribbean.

Neil returned from the bar, expertly balancing four glasses. Sandra took hers, mouthed a "Thanks" to him, mouthed a "Cheers" to Zack, and drank. Then, remembering her promise to the old lady, she unclipped the trident from its holder to spear a piece of fruit and to shove it into her mouth.

Of course, the small disk didn't change colour. For a short moment, Sandra felt embarrassment from

this ridiculous manoeuvre, then Zack brought his mouth close to her ear and shouted, "Clever trick!"

She nodded, grinning in relief. Looking up, her eyes met Héloïse's. Her friend wasn't fooled - Héloïse might not guess the exact purpose of this thing but she didn't take it for a ladylike tool only.

There was no sense in waiting for a break. The DJ did what he could to splice the songs together, his remarks were erratic at best, not bothering much with announcements, and only an expert could have distinguished one song from another. So, after sitting there for another five minutes during which she got used to the atmosphere, Sandra sent a questioning look to Zack, effectively asking what he thought about dancing.

Yes, he thought it was worth a try.

Rising from her seat, Sandra watched how Héloïse took this as a signal - to grab Neil's arm without even asking and follow them toward the dance floor.

In dancing, Sandra felt on a par with Héloïse - and second to no one. Fleur, Héloïse's mother and also her father's dance teacher long ago, had made sure that both girls could handle the classical dances like waltz, slow waltz, or foxtrot. Following the same approach toward more personal goals, the two girls had mastered the more contemporary challenges of disco fox, hip hop, and techno, to name only the mainstream versions.

So Sandra felt totally at ease when she started moving to the pulsing rhythm of the music. Glancing over, she saw that this was also true for her friend and for Héloïse's partner, Neil, who moved expertly and very much as expected from a black brother.

Her own partner, in contrast, looked a bit stiff. Well - scoring second after Héloïse seemed her fate when it came to boys. At least Zack kept in sync with the rhythm, Sandra told herself by way of consolation - after all, she had seen much worse. And maybe he would improve a bit in the course of the action.

A bit, yes. For compensation, Zack wanted to sit down much sooner than Sandra herself. She followed - being invited meant she had to show consideration for her partner's preferences, and besides, they had been on the dance floor for at least twenty minutes.

Back at her place, she emptied what was left of her drink, only now remembering what Grandma Benedict had said - that each time her drink was lost out of view would count like a new one. Suppressing a sigh, she unclipped the trident again, moved it through the last drops in the glass, picked a piece of fruit.

No discolouration. Of course not.

"Another one?" The question came from Zack, in the noise around understandable from context and intonation while not the words themselves.

She nodded.

When Zack returned with her new French Flip, he asked what she had to do with France.

While doing another trident ceremony, with the same result as before, she told him that they went to school there, and that Héloïse's parents had a residence pretty close to that school, while her own home was in Ireland. It was all true but she felt like lying because she didn't tell him that she returned home each afternoon, or evening after visiting the Weasleys first.

Telling this would have meant revealing her witch nature. She felt reluctant to do it, in particular since this would imply the revelation of Héloïse's nature too, and who knew what her friend thought

about this matter? On the other hand, all exchanges here were short sentences, shouted in a close ear, so being scarce in details wasn't the worst crime.

In return, she learned that Zack would start at Harvard this autumn, which told her that he was one year older. She wondered whether Neil would also start at Harvard, wondered if asking this question was a good idea, and decided it wasn't. And besides, wasn't it time for another dancing round?

Zack's enthusiasm seemed limited. Anyway, he followed.

On the dance floor, he steered an energy-saving course in his movements. Interestingly enough, this method made him look better than the full-scale movements before. Sandra sent him a grin and drowned herself in dancing.

When she came awake, she was alone - not literally, of course, the floor was full with people, only her partner was gone. Next moment, she saw him - leaning at a pillar just outside the dancing area, watching her.

She crossed the distance. "Did I dance too long?"

"It's okay." A fleeting smile. "You know, I'm not the keenest dancer - unlike Neil."

She suppressed the question of why the hell he had invited them to a disco if he didn't want to dance? After all, there were few alternatives, and his friend had a different view of things, and it wasn't totally unknown to her that one could be in a disco even without twisting and shaking in rhythm.

They returned to their places, where Héloïse and Neil were also taking a break. Héloïse looked hot, with a flushed face, but maybe this had to do with their *inflight*; the two of them had stopped at the arrival of Zack and Sandra.

The trident showed nothing different from before. Zack looked as if he would like a bit of *inflight* for themselves, in particular since the other two had resumed their smooching.

Sandra's enthusiasm was limited. She emptied her glass, this way gaining time because Zack went for another round, this time also for Neil and his obedient prey.

When Zack returned with four glasses, Sandra took hers and sipped a bit, indecisive how to proceed. She knew - the moment she put down the glass, Zack would close in on her.

So it took her another moment and another sip to realize that this drink tasted differently. Sweeter, stronger ... Tasting again, she felt pretty sure that this wasn't a French Flip as it should be. Using the trident, picking a piece of fruit, she could at least exclude one possibility - the small disc kept its colour.

Tasting the fruit and its sharp odour, she knew what was wrong. This wasn't a light alcoholic drink but a booze bomb.

She put it down, pointed to it. "This is the wrong drink."

"What's wrong with it?" Zack examined the glass, took it, sniffed at it. "Looks exactly like the previous one."

"But it's full of liquor."

"Really?" Zack chuckled. "Then maybe I should drink it, and get you another one." He stood up. "Just a minute."

"No - wait!" Sandra made a quick movement to grab him. "Just a large soda this time, please."

A shrug, a nod, then Zack disappeared in the crowd.

The few sips from this glass certainly had given her as much alcohol as a complete drink of her own choice, so pausing with a plain soda was a good idea anyway. Waiting for Zack's return, Sandra pondered another question: had he really been surprised?

She just didn't know. Not having paid attention to his emotions at the critical moment, she found herself reduced to judgement by visual appearance like any other girl. And the sound of his voice ... As if anyone could register a false note in this acoustic inferno.

Because if it hadn't been a surprise to him, then he had ordered the drink that way. This wasn't the bartender's mistake - by rough estimation, Sandra guessed this drink five times more expensive than a French Flip; liquor didn't come cheap on this island.

Glancing over, Sandra felt an impulse to test Héloïse's drink with her little trident. But why? Nobody needed a drug to find his way into her panties ... Well, okay, Sandra corrected herself, *nobody* was the wrong term for sure, but Héloïse had sent very clear signals all the time, so -

Zack appeared in her view, a large glass in his hand.

A lemonade rather than a soda, for what she could see. The difference was negligible for sure, only in this situation, Sandra didn't like the tiniest departure from her expectation. She took the glass, nodded her thanks, unclipped the trident once more and stirred through the lemonade.

The small disc turned as red as her blouse.

Sandra stared at the device in her hand, for an instant totally baffled. She held it up, almost like in trance. "There's a drug in this drink."

She hadn't been particularly loud at saying these words. Strangely enough, the young man in front of her apparently had understood every syllable, for his eyes widened in astonishment.

Not about the fact itself, as her alarmed senses told her. Only about her ability to discover it.

Suddenly very quiet, she clipped the ornament on, then looked at Zack.

"You stupid piece of shit, why didn't you try something as simple as charm and seduction? You could have been successful, after all. Was it too much hard work for you?"

It was impossible to tell how much he'd understood of her words; at any rate, he got the bottom line all right, as his burning cheeks revealed.

She stood up, made a step in Neil's direction, and tapped his shoulder, which prevented her from reaching her friend. When he looked up, she said, "Stop it! The party's over, your friend made sure of that."

Here again, it was an open question how much Neil had understood. What he said before turning back to the girl in his arms was, "Do me a favour - get laid or get lost."

She almost giggled - in a few words, Neil had summarized the large difference in opinions between herself and Zack. Sobering again, she was about to tap the black boy harder when another hand grabbed her own shoulder and tried to put her back on her seat with the words, "Don't be such a prissy prat!"

He was much stronger than she was for sure. Also, she was no expert in weaponless combat as her father once had been, aside from the fact that here, in this tight space, it would have been difficult to send a kick or blow. But her father had taught her how to defend in situations like this one, situations in which an attacker was very close to her.

She wheeled around and made a half-step toward Zack, then put her hands under his chin with the

thumbs together - the pointing triangle that could replace a wand any time.

"VANDEGRAFFO!"

With an inarticulate sound, Zack twisted back and fell on a chair. His right hand went to his throat, rubbing, while he groaned and his mouth distorted in a grimace of terror and pain.

Turning, Sandra saw that her spell, which caused about the same effect as an electric eel or the stun guns of riot cops, had won her Neil's attention as well. He stared at his friend, then at her.

"What's wrong with you?"

She pointed with her thumb. "Ask him." Toward Héloïse, she said, "Get up! Time to go."

Neil held his hand up in a pacifying gesture. "Wait a second ... You're witches, right?"

"Yes," replied Sandra. "So what?"

"Did he try to dope you with a drink?"

Héloïse had heard this question and sobered up a bit. She stared at Sandra. "Did he?"

"Yes."

"That stupid asshole!" In Neil's voice was anger, weariness - and frustration to see a promising start being jeopardized that way. He looked at Sandra. "I'm sorry - really sorry, believe me, this isn't at all what I expected from this evening - "

"You may tell him that he's lucky not to suffer more, and - " Sandra stopped herself - this place was badly suited to exchange longer sentences, and for all she could see, Neil knew all he needed to know. She turned toward her friend. "Ready?"

Héloïse came up, whispered something in Neil's ear, gave him a last kiss, and reached Sandra. "Ready."

Outside, Sandra asked, "Is it okay if we walk for a few minutes? I'm so angry, I need fresh air."

"Then why didn't you let it out on him? He's the one to blame - he spoiled such a great evening, I could walk back and finish what you started."

"I don't know," said Sandra truthfully. "It was so - all the time I thought, Grandma Benedict and her stupid promise, and then it really comes true ... It was so cheap, somehow I didn't feel like taking revenge."

Héloïse pointed. "Over there is his car - your last chance to hit him where it hurts."

Sandra could already laugh. "If I wanted to hit him where it hurts, I knew something else. Damaging the car would hurt Neil too, wouldn't it?"

Héloïse joined her chuckle. "Now, that's generous of you."

After a few more steps, Sandra asked, "What did you whisper in his ears before we left?"

"How to get in touch with me - I mean, he didn't play foul, and if there's some dope running in my veins, it's my own." Héloïse sighed longingly. "Although you could blame him on that for sure."

Sandra took her friend's hand in preparation for summoning her. Walking down this bloody street helped neither of them, and at least Héloïse still might have a chance for a successfully completed evening.

05 - Small to Medium Talk

It was nighttime. In Harry's bedroom, the moonlight played shadow games on the opposite wall, creating astonishingly sharp boundaries separating light and dark. Cool air streamed in through the wide open window; a faint noise down at the beach told of waves lapping up from an otherwise quiet sea.

Harry lay awake in his bed, his open eyes staring sightlessly ahead while his sweat-stained body failed to register the balsamic touch from the nightly air. He was thinking about teachers. In his mind, a procession of well-known faces competed against a shapeless group of faceless figures that filled the halls and corridors of buildings he'd never seen. Teachers - those of his own past serving as a scale in which he could try to place the staff of a school in Brest.

The ones he could remember were a terribly small number compared to the faceless figures. Sixty teachers worked at that school in Brest, maybe eighty - Ron hadn't been sure about the exact number - but somewhere in this range, dwarfing the small number of teachers they'd had at Hogwarts.

It would make his life simpler, such a large number, if he really did it and started working there as a teacher for English and Sports. In a circle of less than ten teachers, his cover would be blown within a few weeks, if not days, while the anonymity of a large group could protect him. So this part of the idea, the pretence of being someone else, didn't bother him too much. The pretence of being a teacher was what kept him awake.

What made a teacher a good teacher?

Failing that, what made a teacher popular? If he agreed to the undercover job, his goal wasn't to become the most successful teacher Brest had ever seen. All he had to do was to confirm or deny a vague suspicion. Gain the confidence of enough students to hear some gossip, be asked a treacherous question, be told an astonishing confession ...

What made a teacher a popular teacher?

The answer to this question would have been difficult enough twenty years ago. Today's students were a different generation. Still worse, they were a different society, even another culture - Muggles and Magicals had started to merge; the old traditions had lost their values.

But then, had these traditions ever made a teacher popular?

Scanning his memory for the old teachers of his Hogwarts years, Harry suddenly became aware that he was about to follow a wrong track, to confuse popularity with something else that might be much more important in his future role: trustworthiness.

Nobody would have called Professor McGonagall popular, but he hadn't dreamed of confiding in anyone else when he was struggling with his Goblin Request, the first one, the one that had brought the Steel Wings, broomsticks which then had played a key role in the Battle of Hogwarts. The witch with her rectangular glasses had an unbending air about her; often enough this was the reason why she wasn't really popular among the commonplace students.

Of course, sometimes a teacher could offer both strictness and an easy-going style. Lupin had been such a teacher, gifted as much as cursed. And, later, Almyra - or was it Harry's prejudice in her case?

He didn't think so. He would ask both of them, but first they had to return from their holidays. In the meantime, he knew someone else to ask - not about how to become popular, more about the idea in its essence. This person was available, as far as he knew, and with this thought, Harry found sleep.

The following morning, he felt glad that he had rejected Ron and Janine's invitation to stay longer. With a mind as preoccupied as his, other people's company would be more of a burden than a help, and he couldn't offer good company either.

Stepping under the shower and enjoying the hot water's caress, he pondered his next steps. With every droplet that drummed on his skin, he felt more certain - about the next steps, that was, not necessarily about the project itself. Even so, while towelling himself, he experienced an energy humming through his veins that hadn't been there for quite some time.

Sitting at the breakfast table, eating a mix of British food - scrambled eggs and ham - with French ingredients - baguette and café au lait - he scanned the newspapers for anything of interest, found only the three categories of crap he had expected - funny nonsense to fill the summer void, examples of bad taste from celebrities around the globe, and mind-insulting stupidities from politicians throughout the Commonwealth.

With every waste of printer's ink he read, his mood rose still higher. He was ahead of all of them, having something within reach they apparently couldn't find. Purpose.

Gulping down his last sip of coffee, he geared up his mind for the first step, a visit to his godfather Sirius Black. Because he felt so high-spirited, he apparated right from his seat to a spot in front of the Black residence, still the same bungalow Sirius had inhabited through his years as chief of the Law Enforcement Squad.

At his retirement, Sirius had negotiated with the authorities. This house, which went with the job, wasn't needed for a successor because the Squad didn't exist any longer. On the other hand, a new owner would be confronted with the need for a major renovation. So Sirius bought the house for a song.

Local press might have found this deal scandalous, due to the low price, but the most local press was Deborah, Sirius' wife, who shared his preference for this ugly piece of administration architecture in the outskirts of London. She took the heat out of the issue by placing a short notice in the Daily Prophet that reported the fact as one of those incredibly exciting things you could find on the inside pages for local news. *Ex-police chief buys ex-residence from ex-employer* was the title, with the subsequent text ridiculously nostalgic.

Sirius opened the door only seconds after Harry had rung the bell. Harry hadn't seen his godfather in a while, and now stared into a face he somehow remembered having much deeper creases. Sirius' skin showed a surprisingly healthy complexion.

"Hello, Sirius. You look younger every day."

"Second spring," explained the former Squad chief with a mocking twist of his lips. "It's supposed to be quite typical for people my age. After they recover from the aging shock, settle for a slower pace and a healthy dose of maladies here and there, they find new spirit in the ashes. That's what the doctors say, at least."

"Oh, really?"

Sirius watched Harry's expression for a moment, then his own face split into a wide grin. "Bullshit, from start to end - which doesn't mean I invented a single word I just said. If I look better than the last time we met, it's because I feel better than the last time we met. And for good reason, because I've got myself a job - you were lucky to find me at home, in a few minutes I need to go."

Before Harry found the time to let his disappointment about this half-rebuke show, Sirius added, "But if you want to talk with me, and that's exactly how you look, you can come with me - we'll

have lots of time."

"A job? What kind of job?"

"Private investigator."

Feeling a wave of disbelief, Harry was about to comment on that when he noticed the amused expectation in his godfather, who only waited to hear the disapproving remark that seemed inevitable. Just in time, Harry stopped himself and asked instead, "So what's the punch line?"

It was Sirius' turn to look disappointed. "Some people are easier to provoke than you," he muttered. "Anyway - it's for Deborah, she's my only client."

Deborah was a freelance journalist. She had left the Daily Prophet a few years ago because her preferred style of reports no longer matched the demands of a daily newspaper, and fit much better those of weekly magazines. Deborah would write about an acid-rain damaged forest - or its recovery - as readily as about an archbishop with a preference for choirboys; at any rate, she always had a lot of things to investigate.

"Researcher might be a more accurate term, but I get the distinct impression that she passes the juicier jobs over to me." Sirius laughed. "And besides - show me a cop who didn't dream of playing Philip Marlowe ... He's a literary figure, a private investigator," he added after a look at Harry's blank face.

Harry accepted a cup of tea and listened to Sirius describing his daily work. Then Sirius checked the time and said, "Look, we can continue this conversation if you come with me, but I have to go."

"What is it?"

"Pretty boring - sitting in a car and waiting, mostly. That's why I'd appreciate if you come with me. I'm sure there's time enough for the longest story anyone can imagine."

Harry followed his godfather outside and into a car - a BMW, as he noticed, very comfortable and with the smoothest engine sound he'd ever heard from a car. This moment of luxury passed quicker than expected, because Sirius drove to a car park next to a subway station, with large signs saying "Park'n'Ride" all over the place, where he moved the BMW onto a parking lot and killed the engine.

When he climbed out without any comment, Harry followed - to a rusty delivery car with painted signs on its sides that promised quick help in all cases of blocked sewage pipes. Climbing onto the passenger seat, he felt relieved not to find the smell that might be expected inside such a car.

The engine coming alive was another surprise. Harry wouldn't call himself an expert for Muggle cars, not at all, but even to his untrained ears this thing sounded so smooth and powerful that the contrast with the neglected-looking exterior was unmistakable.

"My observation car," grinned Sirius. "If I have to follow a car, and they spot me and try to shake me off - boy, they'll be in for a surprise when that piece of rust doesn't fade in their rearview mirror."

"Has it ever happened?"

Sirius' grin faded. "No," he admitted, "but it's only a question of time - and don't tell me this is just an old man playing with his toys, because you're probably right." The grin returned for a moment.

Harry shook his head, more to himself than to his godfather, whose attention was caught by the street traffic.

"I'm in no position to mock you. I'm looking for a job myself - there's something I could do, and it

might well be that my getting results is as likely as you getting the opportunity for such a street race - "

"Just wait a minute," interrupted Sirius. "It's not far, and once I've found a parking place for the car, I can listen more attentively." He sent an apologetic glance to Harry. "You know, all this stuff's quite new to me - in a year or so, I might do it half asleep but now I still have to concentrate."

With his own situation in mind, Harry asked, "How do you learn the tricks of the trade?"

"Well ..." Sirius chuckled. "I'm not completely inexperienced, after all, I was a cop for twenty years. Only I was a pen-pusher most of the time, and a front-line soldier knows things a general has never heard of, so ... I know someone I can ask," he confessed after a moment. "A real private investigator who did errands for Deborah in the past. Nice guy that, won't tease me more often than twice per hour."

Harry couldn't laugh at the joke. Assuming Sirius didn't declare him mental when hearing what he planned to do, his next visits would be paid to real teachers, and then the situation would be just the same - nice people each of them, they wouldn't tease him more often either.

"Okay, here we go. This is my lucky day, Harry, a free slot right where I need it." Sirius steered the car to the kerbstone and stopped it, then he killed the engine and leaned back.

"All right, I'm listening."

"What are we doing here?"

"I'm listening, I said - there wasn't a word about me telling you anything, was there?" Sirius kept his gaze toward something on the other side of the street while talking. "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies, Harry - I'm not a private eye by half, but at least I can quote such lines."

"Quote lines? Who said that, Philip Marlowe?"

Sirius laughed. "No idea, Harry, honestly - and believe me, why I'm here is a pretty boring story, so just tell me what's on your mind."

"Yeah, boring, that's the keyword." Harry told his godfather how he'd felt panic at the thought of the empty weeks to come, how he'd visited the Weasleys, and how Ron's remarks had started something that might result, after the summer break, in Harry starting work as a teacher at a boarding school in Brest, France.

That was, unless Sirius put a halt to this crazy idea before it was too late.

Sirius had listened without ever meeting Harry's eyes. Still watching the other side of the street, he said, "This letter - do you have a copy?"

"No, I didn't expect it to be that important. Why, what about that letter?"

"Nothing in particular, for all I can see." Sirius showed a half smile for a short instant before resuming his watch of the other side. "Just a cop's habit, I guess."

"No, but let me try, though. I used to be quite good at quoting such pieces of text accurately." Harry concentrated on the memory of yesterday's scene in Ron's office, of this letter he had read three times. After a moment, he quoted hesitantly but, as far as he knew, without a mistake.

"Okay, thanks. And now? What do you expect from me?"

For the first time, Harry found this staring at an imaginary point irritating, and wished Sirius would look at him. "What do I expect? A comment, for starters."

"Nice idea. Keeps you busy."

Sirius' face came around for another instant. "You know what, I think Ron's right - you'd be a hell of a teacher. From the students' perspective, that is, not from that of the Ministry." Sirius chuckled.

"Now that puts my mind at ease," retorted Harry, not feeling the least bit pleased. "And what about this school, or what could be wrong there?"

"No comment."

"Huh? Come again."

It was a reflex, not a request to repeat something Harry had understood well already the first time. But maybe he wanted to hear it again because he wasn't sure whether he'd heard it right, a flat, expressionless tone that seemed to raise an alarm for no good reason at all.

"I said, no comment."

"Yes, I got you the first time, thank you very much. What I wanted to hear is - "

"You're planning to do an investigation, and you expect me to put your mind on some speculation that might be farther off the track than we can imagine? I can't believe it."

Harry knew the tone. Sirius was building a smoke screen of words behind which he could hide his real thoughts; there was no sense in pushing the issue now.

"Any suggestions on how I can disguise myself? Ron said I should hide the scar."

A short pause, as if Sirius himself had to readjust his mind to the new and less suspicious topic, then he said, "Hide behind the obvious, Harry; it's still the best method."

"Yes, I'll do that, naturally so, provided I can find someone who can tell me what's the obvious, but since it's the obvious, I probably have the best chance to - "

Sirius' chuckling interrupted him. "I mean hiding behind something everybody can see. In your case, it means don't even try to hide the scars. Instead, place something on your forehead and higher and maybe even at one side of your face - a discolouring, like from a fire, with lines that look like more scars, the entire thing so big that it's just impossible - "

"Okay, okay, I got the idea." Harry felt a slight embarrassment at his untidy outburst - after all, he should have remembered this technique.

"Grow a beard, Harry. A short one - if you were ten years younger, you might do it anyway. And keep your hair short, too, very short, so that the discolouring is clearly visible - like someone who says, what the hell, let everybody see it." Sirius laughed. "It might even look pretty sharp, I could imagine - the women will come swarming."

"Yeah, right, that's the true reason, isn't it? Some thin story about something odd, while all I have in mind is a longer holiday from marriage - " Harry stopped himself - the joke was bad, and parts of it were too close to the truth.

Maybe Sirius had sensed it, for his voice had sobered up completely. "Whatever you do, Harry, just remember: if you go into the kitchen, be prepared for the heat, okay?"

Again this flat voice. Harry asked, "What is it, Sirius? Why do you behave as if I'm about to storm a house full of Death Eaters? You have some idea about what could be wrong at that school, am I right?"

"Maybe so, only I won't tell you. But so what - " Sirius' voice sounded almost angry, "- the number of possibilities is somehow limited, right? And Death Eaters are not the only evil one can imagine, not by far." Sirius' face came around once more, looking concerned. "All I'm saying is, if you're

going to do it, do it professionally, don't fool around, and - dammit!"

Before Harry's widening eyes, Sirius reached for something behind his seat, found it, then moved his arm forward again - his hand was holding a camera with a tele lens, a camera he now brought into position, adjusting the focus; then he pressed the button, and Harry heard the whining and clicking of a motor-driven reflex camera shooting pictures in rapid succession.

Across the street, a man had been about to pass the entrance to a building. Now he halted, turned, and looked over. Maybe he could even hear the sounds, because he froze. Next moment, the man turned and disappeared through the entrance.

"Who was that?" asked Harry.

"Never you mind that now," grinned Sirius as he put the camera away. "Wait til' Deborah's report is published. Just remember, if you ever think you have to rent your mistress an apartment, find something where people like me can't park on the other side of the street."

About to protest that he had no mistress at all, Harry closed his mouth again. Sirius had only meant to emphasize his previous remark, that if he started something, he should play it seriously, rather than fooling around.

He had heard that before, many years ago. Even so, Sirius' advice didn't sound like a statement of the obvious.

* * *

The building in front of Gabriel showed the number "21" with digits that were impossible to miss even across the flowerbed which separated the house from the street. 21 Primrose Alley was the address Mrs Vanzandt's secretary had given him, and now he stood in this street with its well-maintained houses and stared at the McFarlane family home.

Maybe it had been a mistake not to call, not to announce his coming. But then, he simply hadn't known what to say over the phone. Wanting to talk with Caitlin, yes, that was the simple part. And why? Because he'd heard her singing once, eight years ago, and now ... Better this way, taking the risk not to find anyone home.

It gave him an opportunity to check the background. This street, for example - a house with garden here in Primrose Alley indicated a certain income, matching Gabriel's information that Mr McFarlane, whom Beverly had called an engineer, held a seat in the upper ranks of the Groucho management. When trying to guess what it meant for his plan, though, Gabriel felt at a loss.

There was a way of finding out more. He reached the entrance to the building and pressed the bell button.

A woman opened the door. She looked at him questioningly without saying a word.

"Er ... Mrs McFarlane?"

"Yes?"

"Er - good afternoon, my name is Gabriel. I'd like to talk to Caitlin, if she's at home."

Early in his life, Gabriel had found out that his family name raised an attention he didn't always welcome. More recently, he'd found out that his first name could easily be mistaken for a family name. Since then, he used this form of introduction whenever he saw reason to play the boy next door, at least for a while. In the family of a Groucho employee, the impulse to explain himself before revealing his parents' identity was still stronger.

"Please come inside."

Mrs McFarlane, who didn't know about all this, motioned him to follow her through a hall and a living room to another door leading to a patio. A table surrounded by chairs occupied half of the patio. Two girls sat there, books in front of them. The scene might have looked perfectly ordinary a few weeks ago, when end-of-class exams were due everywhere while now, during the holidays, this picture seemed a bit misplaced.

But Gabriel had a more urgent problem, he didn't know which of the two was Caitlin. They didn't look like sisters, despite the fact that both of them wore a T-shirt over a bikini, an appropriate dress for the location, weather, and time of day.

Mrs McFarlane said, "Caitlin, there's a visitor for you."

Watching her glance and how the two girls responded was enough to tell Gabriel that the girl with the slightly darker hair - light brown rather than dark blonde - was the one he had met eight years ago. With this knowledge, suddenly he could see certain similarities between mother and daughter, while his memory refused to provide a picture of the younger Caitlin.

"His name is Gabriel," reported Mrs McFarlane. "That's all I know." This said, she stepped inside.

Gabriel had a short instant to sense her amusement together with a kind of patient curiosity. Politeness had tempered this curiosity, and probably the certain expectation to learn more later. Then he found himself examined by the two girls, who stared at him with a curiosity not tempered by anything.

"Hi," he said. "Er - Gabriel, that's my first name. My full name is Gabriel Potter."

The girl who was Caitlin had showed a short moment of surprise; now she looked as though trying to remember something. The other girl, the one with the curly hair of lighter colour, said, "You wouldn't be related to the Groucho people, would you?"

Her voice was friendly, casual, marking her question as the kind of small talk a girl of seventeen might consider appropriate to a boy of fourteen.

"I'm afraid so," Gabriel answered. "The Groucho people you mean, that's my mother, although she has given up her job as the boss."

"Oh!" The girl put a hand over her mouth, maybe afraid of what might have come out next. She glanced over to Caitlin with an expression of guilt and embarrassment.

Following her glance, Gabriel saw something like recognition grow in Caitlin's face, and a grin about her friend's faux pas. To him, she said, "We met before, didn't we?"

"Yes we did. It was Beverly who had to take care of us one evening, both of us, and - "

"Yes, right, and she put us together, and afterwards I asked her who that was, and she said that's the son of my mother's boss, but it would be okay because ..." Caitlin smiled at the memory. "I don't exactly remember why, but I asked Beverly if you were one of these spoiled brats - rich parents' kid, you know?"

Before Gabriel could comment on that, Caitlin turned to her friend. "Now relax, he wasn't a spoiled brat then and it doesn't look as if he's become one."

"Yes, er - I mean, no, uhm ..."

Gabriel wouldn't classify himself as particularly shy or clumsy in the presence of other people, no matter which gender. However, telling a good-looking girl three years his senior to stop feeling embarrassed was a difficult task by any means, still more so in this situation, especially since nobody bothered to tell him her name.

Caitlin saved him by asking, "So what brought you over to our house, after all these years?"

"Well ..." The rescue had a short half life; a second later, he felt his tongue stuck again.

The other girl now really looked alarmed. "Want to have a private conversation with Caitlin?" She tried to rise from her chair.

Caitlin answered first. "No, what nonsense - "

"No, it's okay - er ..." hurried Gabriel to assure.

"... sit down - arrggh, I totally forgot - " Caitlin raised two hands in an imploring gesture. "Okay, folks, let's try again ... Hello, Gabriel, welcome - this girl with the nicely coloured cheeks is Reb, full name Rebecca, and if you call her Becky, you might find your own cheeks nicely coloured ..."

Gabriel giggled, found an echo almost simultaneously by Reb, full name Rebecca.

"... and I hope iced tea is fine, because that's what I can offer."

Gabriel nodded his agreement while Caitlin rose to walk inside for drinks. Then he turned to the other girl and said, "Hi, Reb, nice to meet you."

"Hi, Gabriel. You sure it's okay with me sitting here and - "

"Yes, of course, it's not that - er, private, and you'd hear it next minute anyway - I mean if you two are friends - "

Rebecca giggled. "How does it look?"

"It sure looks that way, only when I saw you sitting there, with books, - well, it looked as if you were doing your homework, and you know, sometimes you do homework with people you wouldn't tell everything, but it's holidays, so ..."

Gabriel's voice trailed off - for a reason unknown to him, Rebecca started blushing again, just when Caitlin returned with a tray, balancing three glasses of iced tea. He could watch a very short and totally wordless conversation between the two girls, then his view was blocked by a hand with a glass.

He took it and said, "Thank you."

Caitlin sat down, not completely relaxed herself, apparently for the same reason that had made Rebecca blush. She said, "Okay, then, Gabriel, what's the matter?"

"I got your address from Beverly's mother," he began. "I had to ask Beverly first, because I hardly remembered your first name ..."

"How is she?" interrupted Caitlin into his short moment of hesitation.

"Fine, I'd say." He smiled at the memory. "She's in Spain, holidays at the Mediterranean - in a group of a dozen people or so, and she's with a guy named Cameron. They're funny, her friends."

His mentioning Cameron had wiped the last traces of embarrassment from the girls' faces and now brought knowing grins in return.

"By the way, do you remember the details of that evening with Beverly?"

"No, why?" Wondering appeared in Caitlin's face. "Is it important?" There was a hidden impatience in her voice, telling him he might finally reveal his agenda or else get lost.

"Er - yes. That evening, Beverly had me confessing that I had started playing the flute, and then you said, you'd sing instead, and then you sang a song, or maybe two."

"Well, could be - it's not particularly difficult to make me sing." In a kind of politeness over barely

tempered impatience, she asked, "And you? How did your playing the flute go?"

"Pretty well," he grinned, extracted the flute from its special pocket at his jeans, just opposite of his wand. "Here it is ... And you still sing, you said?"

"Yes, but - why can't you just tell me why you came here?"

"Please - give me a few more minutes, I promise that I'm not fooling around." Seeing her reluctant agreement, he asked, "So you don't mind singing in the presence of people, right?"

"No, why should I?"

Gabriel might have known a reason, the one that prevented him from singing in the presence of other people. Aloud, he said, "Would you mind singing a song now? Here?"

"You sure that's nec- " Caitlin stopped herself, seeing his face. "Okay, then. What shall it be?"

"Ummm ... What about Scarborough Fair?"

His suggestion wasn't quite as random as it sounded. Yes, this song was a traditional, everybody knew it, but in addition, it could be sung in a range between fair and extraordinary, and it offered room for interpretation. He could list five different singers, who had created five very different versions of this song.

"Sure, why not?"

Caitlin opened her mouth, about to start singing when she saw what he meant, that he would accompany her on his flute. So she nodded, waiting expectantly.

He rose - nobody could play the flute while sitting in a garden terrace chair with massive wooden armrests. In contrast, sitting on one of these armrests worked much better. He played a short introduction, told her with a glance and his raised eyebrows to stand ready, and nodded just when it was time for her first tune.

She sang.

It took her until the end of the first verse to get used to the accompanying flute, to synchronize her pace with his own. At that point, she already had changed from her initial flat style to more expression in every line.

He felt her eyes on him while he played little more than a filled pause in this song without a refrain, then she was there for the second verse - a clear, vibrant voice that wouldn't hesitate to jump an octave up or down but seemed to shy off a bit from sharper accents and more dramatic expression.

He elongated the next pause, filled it with a bit of noodling around, showing her how to alter the standard tune to something with sharper edges. In the third verse, she was still sitting on her chair but just barely, using only the foremost edge in order to find room for her torso to swing with the tune.

The fourth verse went just one line, then Caitlin was out of lyrics. She continued humming while he raised his flute's volume from an accompanying instrument to leading level, growing, growing until her humming drowned in the whistles of his flute. Then, ebbing down, he returned to the initial level to support her while she finished in the fifth and last verse, which repeated the lyrics from the first.

Gabriel and Caitlin beamed at each other as the applause rose - from Rebecca in her seat, and from someone behind Gabriel. Turning, he saw it was Mrs McFarlane.

"Hey, great, that was cool!" called Rebecca. "Add a guitar, and you can go on stage."

"That would be Tomas."

"Huh?"

"Tomas," repeated Gabriel. "He's the guitar player in our band, and yes, that's why I'm here, we need a singer for our band, Michel's the drummer, and then there's Héloïse with her Goblin harp, but we have no singer, and then I remembered that evening and ... Here I am." His glance rested on Caitlin. "So, what about singing for us?"

She only stared at him.

"On stage, huh?" asked Rebecca.

"Yes. We give concerts in schools, so far. But Ireen, that's our manager, she says it's only a matter of time until we can try larger halls. At any rate, these schools are located in different countries, and for autumn, Ireen plans a tour - "

"Just a second!"

Gabriel turned around to the one who had interrupted his suada: Caitlin's mother.

"Singing with a band on stage, did I get that right?"

"Yes, Mrs McFarlane."

"And when would that be?"

"Well, in the coming year it would be about one concert every four weeks or so. And rehearsing, of course, and right now we are rehearsing in - " A raised hand stopped his explanation.

"I'm awfully sorry to cut into this negotiation," said Mrs McFarlane slowly, emphasizing every single word, "but this young lady - actually, these two young ladies - have got a grace period of four weeks to pass a school exam. On which it depends whether or not they stay back a year. I can remember a few occasions in the past year when I said something like, 'they'll be sorry because it'll hit them at the worst moment,' but ..." She met Gabriel's stare. "I didn't really expect to be that right. Sorry, but no way."

Turning around, he saw two hanging heads, partly obscuring flushed faces. And now it was clear what these books meant.

He might have grinned, if not for the presence of Caitlin's mother, and also for his own goal at stake. He asked, "What is it?"

Mrs McFarlane answered the question. "French."

"French?" An almost hysteric giggle escaped his throat.

"Not your problem, huh?" Caitlin looked up, anger and frustration in her face. "I happen to know that you attend a French school, so I guess if you're close to the edge then it's something other than French."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't laughing at you - it's just, well, you could call most of the band members French, one way or another."

"Gabriel - " Mrs McFarlane interrupted herself by asking, "may I call you Gabriel?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, Gabriel, you are not trying to hint that Caitlin would learn more French per hour when singing with your band rather than sitting here cramming, are you?"

He grinned at her - this slightly menacing tone, this slowly increasing rhythm in a rhetoric question wasn't unknown to him.

"I didn't mean to hint anything, Mrs McFarlane, it's just that - " He stopped, his grin fading, returning an instant later. "But what if it was true?"

The menace was no longer hidden in Mrs McFarlane's voice. "Stop it, Gabriel. Now."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs McFarlane - what if it was true?" He too could put some steel in his voice.

For a few seconds, in which his eyes didn't move off of hers, it looked pretty much as if his visit would come to an unfriendly end soon. Then Caitlin's mother said, "Ryan, that's my husband, has a few stories in stock, about meetings with your mother." She sat down and grinned. "Somehow, suddenly I can understand some of these stories much better."

Gabriel didn't grin back. Nobody was going to make jokes at his mother's expense, not in his presence.

"Ryan says she never broke a promise," said Mrs McFarlane. "The hard part was getting it from her. So, Gabriel, as far as I'm concerned, I'm ready to put the same trust in you. What do you suggest?"

He exhaled. "I have no suggestion yet. But these people - Michel's mother is French, he's a classmate of mine. And Tomas, he's a gypsy from Spain but at the same school, and Héloïse is Michel's sister ..."

He took a second to regain his composure. "Given that she passes the exam with our help, do you agree that Caitlin will be the singer?"

Mrs McFarlane took her time, stared at him silently. He could read from her face what she thought, that he was his mother's son in negotiations, only that wasn't new to him while the answer to his question -

"Did anyone ask me whether I'll agree?"

Gabriel turned to Caitlin and giggled. "Sorry, it went all so fast that - "

"My condition is that Reb and I get the same treatment to improve our French, whatever that is. As for the band - well, I'm not sure yet - "

Rebecca looked almost panicky. "Don't try to put me on stage - I can't sing, and I can't play. While for the French, I really would appreciate any help."

"Yes, sure," replied Gabriel. "I didn't mean to drive a wedge between you two, and since the other band members have known each other for a while already, it would be good anyway to have an old friend nearby for her." He turned back to Caitlin's mother. "Of course, in the long run, she'll be perfect, because normally we talk to each other in French, simply because - " He stopped because Mrs McFarlane had started to laugh.

After a moment, she grew serious again. "I guess we'll get along, Gabriel, after all, the McFarlane's don't break promises either" - she sent a quick glance to her daughter - "once they give them. So let me ask more precisely, what do you have in mind to support the learning process?"

"A crash course, sort of - bombarding them with French from morning till evening, with the exception of one or two hours rehearsal per day. I have to talk with Hermione and Viktor first, because it's their holiday house we use, but - "

"Wait, wait!" Mrs McFarlane bent forward. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, of course - sorry." Gabriel grinned. "Our rehearsals take place in Durmstrang, the wizarding school of Bulgaria. And our holiday house is at the Black Sea, and us, that's a lot of kids, and three adults - "

At this moment, he had the best idea of the last minutes. "Our hosts are Mr and Mrs Krum, both of them teachers at Hogwarts. Of course I have to ask them first, although I know that there's still room for more guests in that holiday house. In the meantime, Mrs McFarlane, I could imagine you'd like to talk with our manager, that's Ireen - er, Mrs Chee. She and her daughter Tanitha are also staying there."

Caitlin's mother found this an excellent idea. She had heard the name Krum before - small wonder, Hermione was a star of Groucho Biochemicals, and Mrs McFarlane's only concern seemed to be whether she could accept an invitation *for free*, just so.

Gabriel told her anything else would be totally unrealistic with a native Bulgarian like Viktor, who felt pride of every guest for whom he could play the host, an argument to which Mrs McFarlane could agree. Then he asked her whether she could take over the task of talking with Rebecca's parents about this unplanned crash course for French in bucolic Bulgaria, and was glad to hear that Mrs McFarlane would cover that part of the negotiations.

At this moment Caitlin asked, "What am I going to sing?"

"Huh?"

"If I'm going to be the singer in your band, what lyrics do I sing? What kind of songs do you play?"

"Erm ... Good question, actually."

Gabriel suppressed a nervous chuckle. Dragonfly already had filled two CD albums and was building up the stock for another, but nobody could offer a single line of lyrics.

"That's something we have to think about," he said. "But let's put your French straight first, because otherwise we don't have to worry about lyrics at all. Maybe we should start with 'Sur le pont d'Avignon'."

Without any preparation, Caitlin started to sing this old French song. Noticing the glance from her mother, she stopped, said, "It's French, isn't it?" and resumed her singing.

When he saw the twisting of Mrs McFarlane's mouth, Gabriel reached for his flute and put it at his lips. Even with such simple songs, accompanying a singer seemed very addictive.

* * *

Cho put her key card into the slot below the doorknob. When she heard the faint click, she pulled the door open and stepped into what looked like a very small and seemingly useless chamber. Closing the outer door, she moved forward to reach the inner door - this pseudo chamber was a double door system in which only one door could be opened at a time.

For an accidental passer-by, it would have looked totally inconspicuous. When asked later, such a person probably would report that someone from the hotel staff had passed through - a girl, or young woman, maybe Korean, or perhaps a Native American, at any rate not Caucasian but definitely pretty.

This description would have been very accurate because Cho had done what she could to give this impression. A while ago, after the official opening ceremony for the Vancouver Resort was over, she had changed from business costume to T-shirt and jeans, from high heels to sneakers, from loosely falling hair to a kind of ponytail. The only thing she couldn't hide as efficiently as her rank was her beauty, but a pretty face wasn't unlikely for a chambermaid.

The opening ceremony itself had been mercifully short. Cho as the MABEL representative said a few words - less than three minutes, after which she passed over to Reuben. Reuben went through the ceremonial sentences like a priest at a wedding ceremony, no more but no less, before passing over to Chantal McGovern, the Canadian Minister of Culture and Education. This woman didn't

waste much time with cutting a red and white ribbon - the Canadian colours - because the next topic on the agenda offered first a glass of champagne, maybe two, before it was time to sit down for lunch.

Of course, Cho had been sitting at the same table with Reuben and the Minister. The lady turned out to be quite entertaining and not nearly as dull as expected; her laughter was as addictive as loud, not ladylike at all.

Even so, Cho had managed not to eat more than planned, and not to drink more than she could afford. The afternoon was already part of the four-week seminar, one of the most interesting parts actually and also the reason for her entering the room behind the double door system in semi-disguise.

Inside the dimly lit room, a woman was sitting at a table with a large monitor and a keyboard. When Cho closed the inner door, the woman's head came up and around despite the large headphones covering her ears. Recognizing Cho's face, the woman's alarmed look calmed down to make room for a smile.

Cho smiled back, a circular movement of her hands close to her ears suggesting to put down the headphones for a moment.

The woman obeyed. When the headphones were hanging around her neck, she said, "Hello, Cho - more or less, I've been expecting you."

"Yes, of course. Hello, Mandy."

Amanda Bloom, an old hand from the Recording Division of Groucho Sectors, had gladly followed the call from MABEL, a call sent by Cho herself. This desk was something like a video cutter workstation, and Mandy's job was to enhance the recording by tab stops whenever the scene changed. With these tab stops in place, moderators and other people - Cho, for instance - could quickly browse through hours of sector recording, or select scenes from a table of contents.

A sector recording was comparable to a video recording, except that a sector was a sphere in which the recorded scenes appeared truly three-dimensional. In this case, one scene meant one member of the MABEL seminar. Today's program was the introduction of all members, a self-introduction with a special twang. Cho hardly ever missed these introductions, provided she had a chance to participate - hidden, of course.

To a Mandy who had already turned back to watch the monitor, Cho said, "You were totally right, and I'll be here for quite a while. So, if you want to do something else, I can guarantee one hour at the very least."

Her offer meant an official taking over of Mandy's job for this period of time, with tabbing, entering titles for scenes, and all. While the room was just large enough to provide room for both of them, it would not be convenient, in particular with only one monitor and only one set of headphones.

Without turning, Mandy said, "If you can make it two hours, it gives me enough time for some shopping in Vancouver. I haven't seen a bookstore from inside in a while."

Cho's initial offer of one hour didn't imply that she would stop afterwards, it only meant that after this time Mandy had to be on stand-by somewhere close. But Mandy knew her well enough: Cho would most likely sit here until the end of the introduction session, and Mandy had no problem whatsoever asking her own boss for such a favour.

Cho grinned. "It's a deal. Now get out."

They switched positions. Cho put the headphones on her head and over her ears, scanned first the keyboard with its special extension and then the small auxiliary display for the sector recording

state. She nodded and raised her hand to signal that the takeover was complete.

An instant later, Mandy was gone.

Cho just had time to get in sync with the recorded scene, then the man whose figure filled the monitor picture said, "... thank you for your attention," and left the lectern to disappear from the camera view.

Cho pressed a function key, then another and then held a cursor key down while the camera changed from close-up to half total. A camera doing this noiselessly had been one of the milestones in the MABEL development because since then, the recording could be done unnoticed.

The seminar members knew they were recorded - by a simple video camera at the other side of the room, constantly set to a viewing angle like that of someone sitting there. People could watch themselves afterwards, and if there was a discussion about who had said what, the video cassette could be reeled back to check what really had happened.

The seminar members had no idea that a second, hidden recording equipment delivered spectator movies that could be zoomed up until you were able to count the freckles on someone's nose. These recordings were used in discussions about which members to grant magic, discussions that involved the High Priestess, Cho, the moderators, and sometimes other people but never the candidates themselves.

Tyler, one of the moderators, came into view. He walked to the lectern, turned, and said, "Thank you, Mortimer, for introducing yourself. Okay, folks, who's next?"

Tyler Meredith was the *black male* among the four moderators that belonged to a seminar. Wherever possible, moderator teams included two males and two females, two whites and two blacks, mapping these roles to four people of which only two were present in any particular session. The co-moderator in the introduction session was Rachel Lippman, the *white female*. However, the other two, Ralph Crowninshield and Sheryl Breekes, were also sitting in the room to memorize the names and faces of their clients.

Tyler nodded to someone, no doubt the next candidate for the "introduction with a personal touch," as the task for each member had been announced. The moderator stepped forward to make room for the next member.

The newcomer was a young man, also black. He reached the lectern, turned, and started to speak without the small gestures of embarrassment most people would express in this situation.

"Hi," he said, "my name's Eddie Cochrane, but Eddie's just fine. I'm a musician, play the bass guitar in a rock band, and I'm quite happy that - "

"Which one?" asked someone in the audience.

"Well ..." The man who called himself Eddie grinned. "Let's keep that a secret for a little while, okay?" His suggestion was rewarded with some laughter.

The man had introduced himself under his real name, which was not unusual but not a condition at all. For the introduction and also in the days to come, the seminar members were asked to play any role, assume any name they wanted to present. The only rule was, they had to assign a name to themselves by which they could be called - and if someone else claimed the same name, the two had to find a distinctive addendum. If two men in the same seminar introduced themselves with the words, "My name is Nobody," then most likely they had to go through the weeks to come as Mr Nobody Senior and Mr Nobody Junior, or something like that.

Eddie Cochrane, as Cho knew from her own data sheets, used a very clever disguise. He was a DJ

in a British TV music channel, where he appeared under the names "Simply Black" or "Simpson". Eddie was a paying customer, had selected the Vancouver seminar as the earliest one and also because he hoped that nobody would recognize him.

Guessing from his job, he wouldn't be caught in some mistake that blew his assumed identity. Cho felt pretty sure that he had held a bass guitar in his hands before. Eddie's style of talking was of course fluent, no "ah"s and "erm"s - two minutes and thirty seconds later, Eddie made a slight bow before clearing the lectern for the next one.

In this short time, he had said more words than two other candidates together and had earned several laughs - plus a smile on Cho's face of which he had no idea.

The time limit for each member was five minutes. After this time, a moderator would cut the sermon without mercy. If every member had used the full time frame, the speaking time alone in the introduction session would last two and a half hours. However, there were many members who just said two or three lines, revealing their true identity, something invented, or a name known from literature or from a movie.

A woman appeared in the camera focus. After a moment of adjusting the camera angle, Cho recognized her - Sarah Furley, a street worker from San Francisco for whom magic was the only thing that would save her from capitulation to the gangs of witch and wizard kids. Of course Sarah was a scholarship member.

The woman leaned on the lectern, looked around with obvious amusement. "Hello, my name is Sarah. I'm a murderer."

The announcement was rewarded with murmur. Nobody laughed; Sarah didn't look at all like one of those figures in a sitcom.

"My score so far consists of three husbands who had different opinions about how to raise our children. Then two teachers, actually for the same reason, more or less."

For what Cho could hear, Sarah had the breathless attention of the full audience. There was a menacing serenity in her appearance.

"Oh yes, and two policemen who tried to give me a ticket for driving too fast. I don't like to list them because I'm afraid I was a bit prejudiced there. Anyway - "

A first, tentative laugh, dying quickly when Sarah shot a sharp glance.

"I came here because in my profession, magic is helpful for sure. And maybe also to look for new - er, targets; recently it was pretty quiet at the job front." Sarah's face split into a beaming smile. "I guess I found a candidate or two, but of course this has to be delayed - after all, we have more important things to do ... Thank you." Suddenly looking like a scared animal, Sarah tripped off.

Into the silence, Rachel, the white female moderator, came forward. Looking small in general, still smaller at Tyler's side, Rachel didn't even know how to look scared. She said, "Thank you, Sarah, for this impressive confession. Let me also confirm your sense of priorities; if you're here to develop your magic, there's no way of reducing the number of our round."

Outside the camera angle, Sarah's voice said, "Yeah, okay, that's understood."

Rachel suggested a break, apparently with the intention to engage Sarah in enough conversations to spread the news that this *mass murderer* was better than her fame implied. The audience gladly agreed.

Idly watching the room with the camera on wide angle, Cho thought about a world in which people

with the acting power of Sarah were street workers, and about street workers who - without magic - had the chances of a snowball in hell. Street gangs with kids of thirteen, fourteen, magical without exception and harassing Muggles who couldn't defend against spells, were a problem worldwide. In the light of these developments, granting people like Sarah a MABEL scholarship was less than the proverbial drop on a hot stone.

After fifteen minutes, the session continued with a manufacturer of outdoor fashion, a paying client, who introduced himself as "Asphalt Cowboy." Next came a real actress who hid behind expertly painted make-up and a false name. She was followed by a billionaire who said his name was Dagobert Duck, and his profession too.

As one member after another appeared at the lectern, Cho had fun guessing their motives by comparing their real names and titles with the claimed ones. However, the seminar group still seemed a bit subdued. Sarah's performance had been too successful.

Well - it wasn't Cho's problem, and maybe not a problem at all. A MABEL seminar was no animation holiday club; a bit of pressure from a member performing too well or too badly was a good method for judging the others.

The evening program listed a casual dinner, followed by a sitting-together - something like a party without the name. Cho had still some time to decide under which name and title she wanted to participate - as a small secretary or as the big boss. One way or another, it would be interesting to have a longer conversation with Sarah.

And afterwards, she would try to find a place at the bar. Maybe Reuben would play the bartender again. Or maybe she'd find him outside on a barstool. Maybe even at her side.

The prospect filled her mind with joy. Her initial plan, to travel home after the opening, was forgotten.

06 - Getting Ready

The day after his conversation with Sirius, Harry dusted his aikido training hall. This done, he practised half-forgotten movements - the first such exercise in six years.

The next day he was so stiff, he could barely walk. Never before in his life had his muscles been so sore. Every step hurt like hell. Had Hermione been at home rather than on holiday, he would have asked her for a curing potion. But instead, he practised again, letting his body chemistry take care of the soreness the hard way.

Afterwards, he used the devices in the recreation room as he'd been taught twenty years ago: shower, hot water tub, cold water tub. A lonely business, somehow.

As compensation, he stopped shaving. Grow a beard, Sirius had said, and the time left until start of terms seemed just right for this task.

Four days later, days during which he had spent hours practising and more hours thinking about how to regain fitness, the soreness had faded sufficiently to feel something like joy in his exercises, a faint memory of past pleasures. He was heavier than the last time he had used the training hall that extensively. Nobody would call him fat, there was no belly, his stomach still looked reasonably flat, but there were a few pounds more to move.

Harry felt determined to lose them. That evening, for the first time since he had started his exercises, he was relaxed enough to use the steam room.

Coming out of the final shower, he felt ravenous. Unfortunately, there was a clear conflict of targets between losing weight and satisfying his desire. He also felt horny. While actually following this impulse might have contributed to losing weight, there wasn't anyone around to satisfy this desire.

He bought a trimmer for head and facial hair. Presenting the little machine, he asked Dobby to trim his hair down to a size of about five millimeters. When Dobby had doubts whether this was really a good idea, Harry threatened to ask Winky instead. With some muttering, the house-elf obeyed.

Stepping in front of the closest mirror, examining the result, Harry asked himself whether this really had been a good idea. In the sense of Sirius' suggestion, though, cropping his hair as short as that was a full success.

Examining his double scar, more prominent than ever with his hair as short as it was now, he decided to complete his disguise instantly, if only to get himself used to the view. A first spell made his beard grow to the amount it would have achieved with three weeks' normal growth. A second spell made his forehead look as if he'd bumped into a door, while the scar rested there as distinctive as before.

Examining a few spell books, Harry couldn't find a better solution, at least none he felt ready to try on himself. What was the opposite of a cosmetic surgeon?

Hermione crossed his mind. She was a surgeon, and Harry recalled the one time when, by messing up a Polyjuice Potion, she had managed what would be the ideal disguise for him. But Hermione was still on holiday, and asking her to be an ugliness surgeon might have been a bad mistake.

Just in time, he remembered some people with a genuine skill in such matters: house-elves. Coming to Dobby and Winky, he had to reveal a bit about what he had in mind before they agreed, only to start a heated discussion in Elvish.

Listening, Harry remained very much at ease. All the horrible alternatives that were mentioned and dismissed at once couldn't disturb his peace of mind, mostly because he was unable to follow the language. Only one thing was a bit disquieting - never before had Dobby and Winky used this

language in his presence.

After a few minutes, the two house-elves seemed to have come to an agreement about how to treat him. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes while fingers touched his forehead, stroking his skin upward into the thin fur of cropped black hair, downward to his chin.

A moment later, Dobby asked him to check in a mirror whether their work was to his satisfaction. Harry stood up and moved to the mirror at the wall. Seeing himself, he stopped, stood frozen -

Then he made another step forward to examine his new self more closely. Something had blown up into his face and had left traces for life. In a complexion darker than before, black spots like needle points looked as if gun powder had burned into his skin. The lighter, unspotted skin at his neck made clear that the blow-up had hit only his face, that this was no suntan.

And then the real discolouration ... Starting at the bridge of his nose, expanding straight upward at one side and right above the eye socket at the other side, was an area of purplish blue, with streaks of natural skin colour in-between. Two sharp creases had added to the scars on his forehead, altogether creating a landscape of badly damaged epidermis.

Below this patch, two dark eyes glittered. It took Harry a second to realize that these were his original eyes without any alteration, staring as they always stared at something new, unknown, and potentially dangerous.

Moments later, these eyes started to beam. "That's incredible," he said and turned to the two house-elves, who looked anxious. "That's exactly what I had in mind, although I wouldn't have been able to tell you. Thank you, Winky, thank you, Dobby. You know, if you ever felt like quitting your job here, you could hire any time for special effects make-up at the movies."

Seeing their alarmed glances, he hurried to say, "Only joking - I can't imagine living here without your services."

It calmed them down a bit, though without raising a pleased expression on their gnomish faces. Probably an effect from his announcement that he was going to live in a French boarding school for a while.

Touching with his fingers, probing his own skin, Harry didn't notice a significant difference. Yes, he could feel the two new creases on his forehead, a bit more distinct than his scars, but otherwise the unfamiliar beard dominated the sensation in his fingertips.

The following morning, under the shower, it crossed his mind that this was a first stress test for Dobby's and Winky's skill in magical make-up. Of course it held - there was neither smear in his face nor on the towel, simply because it wasn't make-up at all.

While practising, with lots of stretching exercises before really starting with kicks and jumps, his mind kept idly musing over what Sirius had said, that his mask might even attract women. Maybe he should give it a try.

Next moment, he had a better idea how to test his disguise. His own wife - it would be interesting how long it took her to recognize him. And afterwards, they could do something they hadn't done in a while, and in the course of this something, he certainly would find out whether his new face had any effect on her.

He knew where to find her, had been on that island himself when the resort was built. After all, he was also a member of the steering committee that controlled the MABEL organization. But this wasn't the title under which he planned to appear there.

After some thinking, he knew how to approach. MABEL resorts did not act as hotels but weren't

run like private property either. Dressed as a lumberjack or forest guard, he would be able to enter the Vancouver Resort incognito, at least the bar and the restaurant.

Eight hours time difference separated Carron Lough from Vancouver Island. When he left, past midnight local time, it was late afternoon on the island. He apparated to the shoreline at some distance from the buildings; not only was he unaware of the exact topography, but arriving from the forest would match his cover story better than an apparition jump right into the lobby.

He wasn't sure how much his clothes fit to the role of a wood cutter. Reaching the bar, he took off his anorak and a red baseball cap to present a chequered shirt, which should be enough to classify him as an outdoor worker in the eyes of passers-by. At least for his entrance, he shouldn't have worried; the moment his cap was off, people were so busy avoiding stares that they had no chance of developing any suspicion.

He climbed onto a bar stool and ordered a whiskey and a beer. Not his taste at all, even though Canadian whiskey wasn't quite as bad as bourbon, from the perspective of a tongue used to scotch if unavoidable, but a lumberjack ordering a five-star armagnac, that wouldn't do.

A grin crossed his face as he thought of the extent to which his test was driving him. A Canadian whiskey, just in order to see whether he could fool his wife for a few moments.

Looking up, he saw that the bartender, a black man past his forties and maybe fifties too, had watched him. Seconds later, the bartender stood there.

"Interesting colour'n yer face, mate."

"Aye." Harry knew a few languages but lumberjack slang was none of them. So he escaped into a bad imitation of a Scottish accent, hoping the bartender was no expert.

"Why didn'tcha do sumfin' against it?"

"Why? Don't see it often mesself."

A slow chuckling shook the bartender's body. "Yeah, man, that's true - actually the same is true for us brothers, ain't it?" And now the black face showed rosy gums while a serious laugh shook the man. Calming down, he asked, "How'dcha get it?"

Somehow, appearing as a Canadian wood cutter hadn't been his best idea, Harry thought while his mind was searching frantically for a response. Following the old rule that when in doubt the truth served best he replied in the broadest Scottish he could muster, "Met a few elves. Had a word with them, aye, and when we were done, I looked that way."

"Elves, huh?" The bartender, ready for his next fit of laughter, noticed Harry's glance and closed his mouth. "Sorry, mate - "

At this moment, another guest caught the barman's attention, saving him and still more Harry from embarrassment. Even so, Harry's heart started beating faster - the new guest was Clifford, one of the two people in the hidden camera team. They had known each other since the early days of Groucho Sectors.

Clifford sent a glance to Harry, no doubt curious because for him, all faces in the seminar should be well known by now. This glance took in the chequered shirt, with the expected conclusion, as far as Harry could see and feel. Then Clifford noticed the discoloured face and quickly stopped examining the newcomer.

It hadn't been the most difficult test of the world. Still, Clifford would have recognized Harry any time, while now, he only showed a healthy person's embarrassment toward handicaps and injuries.

A moment later, a man and a woman reached the bar - moderators, as Harry became aware, because

he remembered the man's face while not his name. The woman, an attractive black, was unknown to him.

She noticed his stare and responded by staring back. Of course - MABEL moderators wouldn't suffer from the common shyness to look straight at someone crippled or disfigured. On the other hand, Harry wasn't sure whether she knew him.

Then the man followed his colleague's stare and examined Harry with similar calmness and casualness, before he finally looked away.

Ralph Crowninshield! That was the man's name, as Harry suddenly remembered. Ralph knew Harry for sure, so this was the second test passed.

For a few minutes, Harry contemplated the MABEL program in general and his wife's role in particular. More than most people he knew, Cho felt at ease in the circles which could afford spending a hundred grand in four weeks. In the beginning, before the candidates had started to queue up, waiting for the next free place in any MABEL seminar all over the globe, she had liked travelling around, beating the drums for this program.

Then there was the challenge of gathering the ten members with a scholarship. In any other business, it simply would have been called *free of charge* while for MABEL with its esoteric touch, such a mundane term was unthinkable. Finding the right candidates, selecting them from lists of suggested people, was the driving element for Cho. There were moments when she felt like a goddess, as she once had confessed.

Then, of course, the question of all questions - whom to grant magic, whom not? As far as the seminar members knew, their own efforts, and maybe God's grace, were the forces that brought them magic. As Harry knew for a fact, it was Aram'chee, the High Priestess, who followed the recommendations from the moderators. And from Cho, who liked to play the fifth moderator, the third camera woman, and the only MABEL representative with a direct channel to the High Priestess.

A man appeared at the bar - broad-shouldered, his impeccable suit revealing that he was an official of the Vancouver Resort. He spoke with the bartender, sent an investigative glance to Harry, and sat down in one of the cubicles near the bar. Moments later, a waiter served him what on this side of the Atlantic was called a *sandwich* - one of the things Harry missed in Great Britain since they had left California.

From where the man sat, he could watch Harry. This seemed hardly by accident; the man was an official, maybe the manager in charge, and he didn't trust a woodcutter who had strayed into this expensive bar.

Well, high prices wouldn't scare off a real lumberjack. As if to prove this point, Harry ordered another round. For late afternoon it was a bit much. For a man of the axe, it should be the absolute minimum, whereas for Harry himself it was just another drink after midnight.

A girl appeared in his vision. She waved at the moderators, and only now he realized that it wasn't a girl but a petite woman with Oriental features, and that he knew her well - Cho.

She said something to the bartender, apparently an order, and walked further to the cubicle with the eating man. She sat down opposite the man, with her profile to Harry. Now she said something to the man, and the way she did it, her stance while sitting there, struck Harry as quite relaxed, almost intimately.

The bartender reached the table and deposited a drink. He could have carried out Cho's order faster

only by running.

Harry watched how Cho raised the glass to something like a toast toward the man across and took a gulp.

The eating man said something to her. Next instant, she turned and stared at Harry.

For a few seconds, Harry held her stare without changing his expression and, for all he hoped, pretty much like an outdoor man would respond to a woman's stare. Then Cho turned back to the man opposite her, said something, and laughed. After a short reply from the man she laughed more, raised her glass again, and emptied it. This done, her head came forward as if trying to sniff at the man's sandwich.

Harry knew this gesture by heart. She was hungry, and with Cho in this state, nobody's meal was safe from her greed. Depending on how close she was with someone, she might or might not try to pick from this person's dish.

Suddenly Harry felt like a peeping Tom. He had come here to test his disguise on his own wife, not to catch her flirting with another man ... assuming this was still a flirt, a question of which Harry's mind refused to guess the answer.

He emptied his beer and reached in his pockets for his wallet. By then, the bartender was already there.

"Save it, mate; the drinks are on the house."

Harry thought he knew why, but his role forced him to ask, "How's that?"

"It's a closed society here, and the manager" - the bartender gestured toward the man opposite Cho - "said that we welcome the opportunity to see a resident of this wonderful island."

Very elegant, and definitely not too subtle for a Canadian back road lumberjack. Harry took his second glass with the remnants of the Canadian whiskey he had planned to forget, and raised it in his own salute to the man; then he emptied it. In rising and turning, he saw that Cho had turned again to watch.

Movements were much more treacherous than surfaces. Would she recognize him from his walk?

Reaching the exit, Harry could choose among three explanations why Cho hadn't reacted by jumping up and hurrying after him. His own movements weren't as characteristic as he'd thought. His exercises during the previous days, and maybe also his role, had obscured his normal walking pattern. Or Cho was too preoccupied with the man opposite her to waste a second thought on a foreigner in this seminar round.

All considered, his test had been very successful, although not quite as expected.

* * *

Sandra felt like an idiot. Her holidays were thoroughly messed up, thanks to a son-of-a-bitch known by the name of Zack, and she hadn't even kicked him in the privates.

In a very secret corner of her mind, she felt still more an idiot that she hadn't used him for a more pleasurable purpose. The thought seemed absurd, only the circumstances fed the suspicion that, all considered, this alternative might have been preferable.

After the Starlight Palace disaster, Héloïse and Neil had a good time. They didn't expect more than getting along until the end of their holidays, didn't invest more than time and goodwill, and their result was heaven for two weeks, maybe three.

During the day, Sandra had three choices: go to the beach with Héloïse and tolerate the presence of

Zack, who came with his friend Neil, or chase him off and afterwards feel like an insufferable three-year-old, or not go to the beach at all, at the cost of serious complaints from Donovan and Deirdre.

In the evening, Sandra had three choices: follow Héloïse into the Starlight Palace and feel out of place there, follow Héloïse into the moonshine under palms and feel badly in the way there, or stay with Grandma Benedict and feel terribly bored.

It was depressing. She wished she could forgive this asshole Zack. Failing that, she wished Neil would trade his friend for another. Of course he didn't, no more than Héloïse would trade him for another beach romance.

Once, twice, Zack made an attempt to make up. Sandra gave him the good advice never to touch her again. When Zack tried to laugh it away, to play the *Nobody can be mad at this All-American Boy* game, Héloïse told him he better believe it, unless he wanted to find out what the word *pain* really meant.

No, he wasn't that curious.

It gave Sandra little satisfaction. Quite the opposite, she felt more frustrated than ever. This inability of hers to forgive and forget was more of a character defect than a virtue, not the least bit helpful. Especially for someone like her, who had to cope with many duties all year long, finding the holidays spoiled like this was extremely unfair.

In her normal environment, she felt caught in a triangle of interests and demands. One corner of this triangle represented the school, where Sandra counted as a witch as powerful as she was skilled. According to Beauxbatons and its magical faculty, she simply had to be the magical champion, at contests and in-between.

Sandra didn't object to playing Beauxbaton's champion in public. On the other hand, she didn't like it either. For herself, proving magical power in a contest seemed as meaningful and mature as the games Zack and his cronies played at the beach.

The second corner in this triangle was her planned destiny - that of the next High Priestess. For years, Sandra had lived with the knowledge that she would take over this duty from Aram'chee, and until recently, she had felt content with this thought. Yes, Aram'chee had announced that probably it would be Sandra's task to end the role of the High Priestess - whoever had established the duty in prehistoric times hadn't intended to create an arbiter of all humans, only of the wizarding world as something hidden in the Muggle world. And now, after the two worlds had merged and soon every person on earth would be magical, the High Priestess had lost her moral authority.

But at the same time, Aram'chee had never left a doubt that it would be Sandra's decision to end the role and the authority. For that, she had to be High Priestess in first place.

And then, a while ago, the Theatre Group at Beauxbatons asked around for students who - if only temporarily - would join them to fill the gaps in a project. A movie project actually; performing on stage wasn't required.

Some people, among them Frédéric and his friend, Héloïse's devoted but often-ignored slave Benoît, suggested that Héloïse should sign up. For her, they said, this would be just an extension of her normal practice in which play-acting seemed an integral part.

Héloïse informed them that they were confusing things: she might be a natural in play-acting but only in direct contact and for entirely personal reasons, rather than in a situation as artificial as a movie scene.

Following an impulse of unclear origin, Sandra enrolled in the project.

Following an impulse everybody could understand, the director assigned her the role of a witch girl

who had to perform a few non-trivial spells. The role was too big for a beginner, only the director thought it simpler to teach acting to an experienced witch than teach an experienced actress to cast difficult spells.

In addition to mastering these expert spells, the girl had to be mean, malicious, malevolent.

Sandra enjoyed every second. Within the limited range of circulation this movie encountered, the spectators said she was the most remarkable character among the minor roles.

So she became a permanent member of the Beauxbatons Theatre Group. Thus the third corner in this triangle had formed itself and had opened up the dilemma which had torn her apart ever since.

If she hadn't promised to take care of Donovan and Deirdre, she would have left Héloïse to her dream come true with sun and rum and love under palms. She could have returned home by taking the kids with her, but she couldn't muster the cruelty of leaving Grandma Benedict alone ... alone with Héloïse, which was very alone.

Then Remus and Almyra returned from their private trip. They looked quite relaxed and very happy and as much in love as Sandra could ever wish for herself, and for her own parents as well, recently.

The two had been in Japan, as it turned out, and returned with presents for everyone. Those for Sandra and Héloïse came in pairs. The first pair were two kimonos, one black and gold, the other blue and silver. It was no question who took which; Héloïse with her Veela hair went for the silvery one without even asking.

The second pair were two theatre masks - replicas; an original mask from a Japanese theatre was out of reach. One mask was chalk white and represented a geisha, as Remus explained. The other mask, red with white stripes, represented a demon.

With a broad grin, Remus reported, "Almyra and I, we didn't reach an agreement which mask fits better who, so we thought we'd leave it to you how to split them."

Héloïse said, "That's easy - both of them go to Sandy. Not only is she the theatre freak here, she's also the one who took care of your kids."

Sandra stared at her friend. Once more, Héloïse had given an example how she could mix greed and generosity in her character to breathtaking patterns.

"Are you sure?" asked Remus. "You know, sitting at your harp, you'd look terrific with either of these masks."

Héloïse's cheeks flushed. "Hey, I look terrific with my own face, sitting at the Felison."

"Yes, of course, certainly so," Remus hastened to pacify her, not quite successful in suppressing a grin.

Sandra kept silent, managed even to keep her face steady. What Remus obviously hadn't noticed, in contrast to herself - Héloïse only pretended to be upset about this comparison while the flushed cheeks were a result of bad conscience. Reminding her of a Goblin harp was an accusation of neglected duties.

With the Lupins back, Sandra was basically free to leave. But even now she felt reluctant to use this freedom; not only was it equivalent to an admission of her failure in having fun, her presence also served as a cover for Héloïse. Suddenly it seemed as if the Veela girl had invested a Japanese theatre mask - which she didn't appreciate anyway - to gain a solid support for the rest of her holidays with Neil.

Sandra's feeling of being more stupid than allowed held for almost a day, then she got a phony call.

It was her brother Gabriel, and he called for help.

The call had reached her around eleven in the morning, which was equivalent to six o'clock - early evening - in Bulgaria, seven hours in advance of the Caribbeans. It took Sandra five minutes to tell Héloïse that she had an urgent task to perform and that Neil might find a way, and a car, to take Héloïse back to Grandma Benedict. It took her another ten minutes to reach said Grandma and to announce her early departure. Fifteen minutes later, she was done with packing. Another twenty minutes to say goodbye to the kids and their parents, then she grabbed her bag and her suitcase and apparated to Durmstrang, a place she knew from previous visits.

One hour after Gabriel's call, Sandra stood before the main building of the Durmstrang school. Three minutes later, almost exactly seven o'clock local time and just in time for supper, she stood in the Krum's holiday house, facing an astonishing number of faces, some of them totally unfamiliar.

She had greeted her brother already in the short moments at Durmstrang. They hadn't hugged, at least not visibly - Gabriel in his current phase wasn't too enthusiastic about such manifestations of affection, and they had other methods anyway, could welcome each other without anyone being able to watch. Now she looked around, unsure where to start saying hello.

Viktor beamed at her. Sandra raised the head count in his house to fourteen, a number of which a true Bulgarian could be more than proud. Hermione greeted her and asked about the Lupins, then she resumed her work to get the food ready for fourteen greedy mouths, helped by Ireen.

Sandra waved hello to Tomas and Michel, then started the welcoming procedure with the four girls - Alexandra, Sophia, Tanitha, and Ismène, before reaching Timothy, who had followed her movements from his father's lap.

She made him float into her own arms, a manoeuver which was accompanied by *ahs* and *ohs* from the girls while the father kept calm but only on the outside. The boy, though, was delighted. After cuddling him for a moment, she made him float back to Viktor, who plucked his son out of the air with undisguised relief.

Grinning and feeling better than in days, Sandra sat down to face the two girls unknown to her, both of them looking a bit awestruck after her little demonstration of wandless magic.

Gabriel pointed and said, "This is Caitlin, she's going to be the singer in our band - once we have solved the little problem that's still in our way, that is - "

"Hi, Caitlin," said Sandra and, toward her brother, added with a grin, "Do I happen to know the little problem?"

Her question of course referred to Héloïse; the harp player's opinion about a singer, no matter which sex, hadn't been kept as a secret inside Dragonfly. So it took her fully by surprise when her brother sent a warning at mental level, a warning that could only be understood as, *Don't raise this issue!*

Aloud, he said, "Yes, definitely so, because it's French. And this is the - "

"French?"

"Yes, French - you know, the language in which you can say, '*C'est la vie.*' And this is - "

Gabriel had to blame himself for this second interruption, because it was his reply that sent several people almost rolling over, most of all the one he had twice failed to introduce. So he waited a moment before he said, "Okay, this is Reb, full name Rebecca, and don't even think of other nicknames - "

"Such as?" asked Sandra.

"Nice try," replied Rebecca, "but no luck. Anyway, I'm here only to lend Caitlin support - spiritual, I mean, don't expect me to sing or dance. And I'm also here because of our common little problem."

"No," said Tomas, "that's no longer true, that Reb doesn't contribute. She knew at once where to help and how to assist, so you might call her our *backstage manager*."

Sandra sent a glance to Ireen, the official band manager, who nodded empathically. Then she looked at Rebecca, who blushed under this compliment, and finally she looked at Tomas again, to see whether this not-so-secret admirer of a certain Veela girl had changed tack.

When the gypsy held her stare without revealing anything, she turned back to her brother and asked, "So what's this about French?"

It was Caitlin who answered. "Reb and I, we messed up in French. We were so successful, the teacher wants to hear us again in two week's time. And if we fail again, then we'll stay down. And in that case, I can kiss my role of a singer in a band goodbye."

"I see," said Sandra, trying to keep serious.

"We're speaking French from morning till evening," explained her brother. "That's one reason why Caitlin and Reb are here - a crash course to make sure they pass the exam, because there's no question that they fit Dragonfly as if born to that purpose ..."

"And?" Sandra couldn't follow. "Doesn't it work?"

"Yes it does, but only up to a point."

Sandra looked at the two girls, back at her brother. "You're - what? Four people who can speak French with them, and you're trying to tell me this isn't enough to pass an exam? They don't look stupid at all - "

"Thank you!" An ironic bow from Caitlin was a reminder that both girls were older than Sandra herself.

"You're welcome. So what exactly is that point you can't overcome?"

After a short moment of embarrassed silence from Gabriel as well as from the girls, Hermione started to explain. According to what she said, both Caitlin and Rebecca made good progress, better than anyone might have expected, another proof how motivation could do miracles, heehee. So passing the exam was probably as much as a done thing - quite in contrast to a quick and fluent conversation, not hampered by any gap in the knowledge. To speed up things, Gabriel had suggested the same method their father once had used to learn French in little more than a week - fairy teachers with trances and learning in sleep.

"Right," said Sandra, "that'd be the fastest method. So what about that?"

While some faces turned even darker, Viktor explained, "Such courses are awfully expensive. The girls don't have that money, and they don't dare to ask their parents."

Sandra began to understand, and to grin.

"So Gabriel offered to hire the fairies, but they couldn't agree to that. Then Ireen offered to pay in advance of future royalties ..."

Sandra's stomach was already shaking in a low chuckle.

"... but neither of them wanted to start their band career with debts. Well, just for good measure, we asked whether they could accept such a course from two Hogwarts teachers but - right, you guessed it," finished Viktor with a look at Sandra, who already had tears in her eyes from laughing.

Hermione said, "Then I suggested to call you - you and Gabriel together, you can trance them any time in a learning session."

Sandra stopped laughing at once.

Caitlin stared at her. "Can you?"

"Trancing, yes, no question about that, but the - "

"Would you mind trancing us now? Here?"

Sandra responded with a cool glance. She was younger than Caitlin, true, but she was Sandra Catherine Potter, nominated successor of the High Priestess. "Can I finish eating first?" she asked after a moment.

"I'm just quoting your brother," said the girl, unafraid, "no need to give me that look."

Sandra's stare of disbelief was ended by Gabriel, who explained how he had met the girls and how he had made Caitlin sing before revealing the reason for his visit.

Sandra swallowed her bite and rose from her seat to walk around the large table and stop behind Caitlin's chair. Watched by big-eyed faces from Alexandra the youngest to Rebecca the oldest, she put her hands on Caitlin's forehead and tranced her without any hesitation, then she whispered something in her ear. She used the first two verses of a poem from the *Fleurs du Mal* collection by Charles Baudelaire - *à une mendiante rousse*, a poem used in the Beauxbatons Theatre Group to practise declaiming on stage.

A moment later, she ended the trance and marched back to her seat.

Caitlin glanced at her questioningly. "So?"

"Blanche fille aux cheveux roux ..."

"Dont la robe par ses trous ..." and Caitlin continued through all lines that had been whispered in her ear a moment ago. Then she looked as blank as the girl in the poem.

"That's what I just taught you while you've been tranced," explained Sandra. "Two verses from Baudelaire."

This said, she resumed eating while Caitlin asked her friend about what had taken place while she had been sitting there with glassy eyes. The two girls discussed the test for a moment, agreed that they hardly remembered the poet's name, and finally listened in mutual astonishment and delight as Caitlin spoke the few lines again - flawlessly, as Sandra assured.

"Hey, that's incredible!" exclaimed Caitlin at the end. "Is that what you and Gabriel will do with us?"

"Basically yes, although we might do it together, or take turns, just as we get along."

"And when?"

Sandra grinned sardonically. "Well, the fairies do it when you're asleep, lying in your bed. They sit on your shoulders - I mean, okay, we're a bit too large to do that, but otherwise ..."

A faint red was colouring Caitlin's cheeks. Rebecca stared at Sandra in disbelief. "You aren't serious, are you?"

Seeing her baffled face and that of a deeply embarrassed Caitlin, Sandra couldn't hold the pretence any longer.

"No, I'm not," she laughed, "in the night, Gabriel and I'll be asleep in our own beds. But what about the beach? Lying in the shadow, dreaming in trance, and getting a tan outside and French inside?"

Caitlin looked up, calmer than seconds before. "*Mais oui, c'est d'accord, je crois.*"

* * *

Gabriel stared at the girl who lay on her back. Her body appeared totally relaxed, eyes closed, so a spectator unfamiliar with the details might have assumed her asleep. This would be the most natural explanation why a girl in a bikini was lying motionlessly, on a blanket under an awning, close to noon at a beach of the Black Sea.

But the girl - Rebecca - wasn't asleep. She was tranced.

Gabriel laid down on his stomach, his head close to Rebecca's head while his body stretched in the opposite direction. Resting his chin on his folded hands, he began to murmur in her right ear. French, of course, because that was the purpose of this weird arrangement.

By now, he had lost his initial embarrassment. Michel's sister Ismène, the only one among the smaller girls who was fluent in French, had helped him a lot to relax while talking to Caitlin or Rebecca in these trances. Ismène simply sat down and talked in the tranced girl's one ear while the *teacher in charge* had the other ear for delivering some translations or adding to this conversation which was a dialogue or monologue between three people.

The teachers were Gabriel, Sandra, Michel, and Tomas. They had found out quickly that it worked best when taking turns, not more than half an hour per teacher and student. With a longer period, the teacher would fall silent, due to lack of topic. With more than one teacher per student, both teachers would fall silent almost at once, due to a strong feeling of embarrassment because the other teacher could hear them.

But murmuring in the girl's ear while the others kept out of earshot worked well. The teachers still had to be careful what they were talking about because the girl would remember - not immediately after awakening from the trance, only after a while. But they could express thoughts or tell stories they would never tell with a visibly attentive audience.

Doing it here at the beach, with all kids and teens within calling distance, had been a brilliant idea from Sandra. Any other method would have collapsed in tension and anxiety. The idea of being alone in a room with a tranced girl - none of the three boys in Dragonfly were known for stupid and tactless remarks, but still ... And the idea of having the other girl along as chaperone somehow felt even worse.

Doing it in full view of five children and four other teenagers worked. Even so, it was still a breathtaking experience - at least for Gabriel, but from what he could watch with just his eyes, the same was true for Michel and also for Tomas, the only one older than Caitlin and Rebecca.

Gabriel did very much the same he might have done with Rebecca sitting and awake - he told her how Dragonfly became the music band it was today. His story could easily be the same as told by Michel or Tomas, or what they might tell in the next days, but it didn't matter. They all had their own perspective, so Rebecca would hear three different versions.

This kind of intimacy was something Gabriel couldn't handle at once. Being so close to a girl that age who was neither his sister Sandra nor his cousin Héloïse was a new experience. Only little by little, he allowed himself to register the sensations to their full extent. The smell of hair and skin, when whispering in an ear ... The sight of two breasts, so prominent in his view while in this position, and when raising the eyes for the fraction of an inch, the sight of a flat belly that rose and fell in the quiet rhythm of the girl's breathing.

He wondered whether Sandra had been aware of all this, and whether her suggestion presented the only feasible alternative. He would ask her - after he had finished coming to terms with these sensations for himself. In the meantime, he took care not to dig deeper in anyone's conscious

thinking - even registering something as simple as a tender feeling for the girl outstretched on the blanket would strike him as a severe breach of intimacy.

Telling Dragonfly stories was a nice way of passing the time. It didn't need many interruptions to provide translations for new terms. So it seemed to Gabriel as if he'd told hardly more than a few lines when Sandra called, "Hey, Gabe - time to wake her up."

"Oh, really? ... Yes, okay." Gabriel finished the anecdote he had been telling, then put his both hands at the girl's neck to send the awakening spell.

Rebecca opened her eyes. For a fleeting instant, they were alone at the beach, and her eyes in his own asked him to come closer, to meet her lips with his own. Then she was fully awake, and he quickly took his fingers off.

Rebecca rolled around to lie on her own stomach and look at him face to face. "What did you tell me?"

They were talking French. Both girls had long passed the initial barrier of clumsiness and embarrassment. The younger girls with native English - Tanitha, Sophia, and Alexandra - adapted to the new group language with a speed that might have raised deep envy in the older girls, if not for this special treatment.

"Why don't you wait a few minutes? Then you'll remember by yourself," replied Gabriel, who was painfully aware of his flushed cheeks. He would have liked to sit up and look somewhere else, or to storm into the water, only he felt as if tied to this position opposite Rebecca.

She examined him for a second. "But you didn't turn red from what you told me, did you?"

"No."

"Maybe it's none of my business."

Maybe so, except that answering yes felt impolite and wrong too. Staring at the blanket between them, Gabriel said, "It's ... you know that I can sense emotions, don't you? Well, the moment you came awake, there was something - doesn't mean anything, I guess, it's just a bit ..."

Rebecca smiled. "I can remember *that*, and - well, you're right, we shouldn't take it literally." She laughed. "I think it's normal; you just aren't used to be close to a girl waking up, that's all."

He nodded, not feeling master of his own voice at this moment.

"But I don't fare much better," added Rebecca, "I mean, I'm not used to be close to a boy when waking up, so maybe that's why this moment -"

"Hey, you to two!" called Sandra's voice from a few feet away, "are you trying a new technique of waking trance or do you want something to eat?"

Rebecca raised her head to crane her neck. "Food beats conversation, even with your brother." With a last grin to Gabriel, she stood up and went for a seat near the food baskets.

With none of the adults around, eating and talking didn't count as two mutually exclusive tasks. Gabriel felt a fine sting of guilt because they were being bad examples for Alexandra and the other kids, but then he consoled himself; one had to be pretty stupid not to know that this particular rule bent easily when no education authority was present.

Caitlin, though, had the decency to swallow before asking, "Did you come up with any ideas on how to get some lyrics?"

Basically this was a question for the band manager. In Ireen's absence, heads turned to Gabriel - after all, he was the composer of most pieces they'd recorded, so wasn't he in charge of lyrics, too?

"Not really," answered Gabriel. "For the time being, we only have the choice between songs someone else wrote and traditionals. That splits our repertoire into pieces with and without a singer."

"So what's new with that?" asked Tomas.

Gabriel sent him a glare and a mental impulse that the gypsy almost choked on before looking guilty. Because for all the girls knew, Héloïse was either absent or absent without leave, period - nobody had told them about opposition to the idea of a singer.

"What's new is that we have a singer," said Michel into the short instant of awkward silence, "and new is also that we have to look for a songwriter." He turned to Sandra. "Do you, by any chance, have a drawer full of poems you always wanted to hear sung?"

Laughter in the round, still more when Sandra replied, "I won't exclude the existence of a drawer full of poems, but if so, I'm sure as hell I never wanted to hear them sung in public."

Michel turned to Rebecca. "And you?"

"No, sorry."

Rebecca looked so unhappy that both Gabriel and Tomas stared reproachfully at Michel because he had asked just the one who felt unsure anyway about her own role in Dragonfly.

Michel protested, "Hey, I asked her because girls write more poems than boys, and she's a bit older, so she had more time" - he glanced at Sandra, who found this argument worth a giggle or two, then resumed - "and besides, for me it's a matter of fact that Reb's our backstage manager, or does anyone think differently?"

Several heads were shaking vigorously, reason enough for Rebecca to calm down quickly and to look very pleased instead.

After lunch, almost as if hit by fairy dust, most people fell asleep. An exception was Ismène, who persuaded her brother to do a *trance tale*, as she called it, together with her. This, in turn, forced Gabriel to balance out by doing a trance tale with the other girl, which ought to be Caitlin because he had taught Rebecca the last time.

Ismène hadn't developed any preference yet, so that was fine with her, and after Sandra had tranced Rebecca, she started at once to murmur in an obedient ear.

Watching the scene still a moment before her own trance was due, Caitlin said, "I wonder how the older sister is."

"Héloïse?" Gabriel smiled. "I was asking myself what to tell you anyway, so unless I fall asleep, I'm going to tell you."

"In a way, I feel half as old as Ismène," said Caitlin. "Lying down to hear tales, somehow that's such a snug feeling ..." She laid down, closed her eyes. "Okay, go ahead."

Gabriel did as ordered, brought himself into position to tell stories of Héloïse and her Goblin harp.

He stopped when his wristwatch told him that thirty minutes had passed. Then he woke Caitlin as well as Rebecca because in the meantime, Sandra had fallen asleep. Checking the time, he saw that they had three quarters of an hour left before today's appointment with Ireen in the Durmstrang hall.

The two girls assured him that being tranced wasn't like sleeping at all, so they had to have a bit of siesta themselves, and suddenly, Gabriel was the only one awake - Ismène and Michel had fallen

asleep minutes ago.

Ten minutes before the scheduled time, he woke first his sister and then, with Sandra's help, all the others - using mind waves of different nature, gentler with the girls while Tomas and Michel received the *cold wave* type of waking call.

This done, he gathered all children for the group summoning into the Durmstrang hall, with Timothy in his arms. Sandra would summon the others, after taking care of the bags and baskets.

Alexandra counted them down, as usual, and an instant later, Gabriel felt the slightly stale air of the Durmstrang hall around him. Looking up, his eyes widened, and a half-suppressed "Uh-oh" escaped his mouth - about the only English sounds in quite a while because he never had gotten used to "Oh-la-la," the French equivalent.

He stood up, the small boy still on his arm, to greet the smiling figure on the stage. "Hello, Héloïse - long time no see, huh?"

"Well ..." Héloïse beamed back, exactly as Gabriel had expected from the Veela girl after skiving off for so long.

Before Gabriel could say anything else, there was a soft push of air, and the others appeared a few feet away - freezing in mid-motion, staring toward the stage, at a Veela with her Goblin harp.

"Hello everybody," caroled Héloïse. At this moment, she noticed Caitlin and Rebecca. "Oh, do we have guests today?"

Just when Gabriel made his first step toward the other group, he got a glance and a mental push from Michel - Héloïse's brother, also Veela but male, signaled him not to interfere.

Gabriel nodded, mentally as well as visibly.

"No, Hély," said Michel, "these aren't guests. This is Caitlin, she's our singer, and this is - "

"She's what?"

Michel responded to his sister's impoliteness with a glance - and maybe also with a rolling of his eyes, except that Gabriel couldn't see from his position. Then Michel continued, "And this is Rebecca, called Reb - she's our new backstage manager."

Completely ignoring such lower ranks, Héloïse pointed at Caitlin and repeated, "She is what?"

"Singer," repeated Michel pointedly. "Did you get sand in your ears, over there in Jamaica?"

The blood rushed into Héloïse's face. She rose as fast as possible behind the spacious instrument. "I didn't believe it the first time," she snapped, "that's all. But I got it now, got the message, all right, if you all think the same ..." She was about to leave the stage, glancing around like a cornered rabbit.

"Is this just another excuse for you to skip rehearsals?" The question came from Tomas, an expression of disbelief in his face.

Héloïse stared at him, her face looking hurt as if from a physical blow. She made another step. Just as she turned to flee the scene, Michel leapt forward and grabbed his sister. It was a hug more than anything else. Héloïse didn't resist.

"Can someone tell me what's going on?" asked Caitlin. Toward the group of brother and sister, she called, "Hey, you - Héloïse, right? Say, do you have a problem with me being the singer?"

After a moment in which Héloïse didn't show any reaction, Gabriel said, "We didn't have a singer all the time because Héloïse didn't want any. But we needed one, and when Héloïse wasn't around

while Alexandra said we need a singer, we got one - you."

"Yes," piped Alexandra up, "you are the singer."

Caitlin sent her a smile, then stared at Héloïse again. "I want to hear it from her. If there's a reason that's more substantial than playing the spoiled beauty, I want to hear it from her."

Héloïse's head came up from her brother's shoulders, revealing something Gabriel couldn't remember in her face - red-rimmed eyes. "How dare you?" she said, rather quietly. "This band is so much more than music, it's about certain people in the first place, people who've known each other for a long time and have a life and passion in common. And then you show up and tell me to justify myself just because I missed a few rehearsals? I've been playing the harp since I was three - trust me, I get along even so."

"So you play the harp since you were three? It's a Felison, right? And you're one of six in the world, right?"

Having caught Héloïse's attention, Caitlin continued, "I happen to know because someone told me, and I know how it was your music that brought the band together - but I never challenged your role here, I didn't object to a harp player that wasn't there, and I don't object to a harp player that is there. But you know what? I've sung since I was three, and funny as it seems, I fully agree with you - this is more than just music."

"You agree? Now isn't that great! Do I have to feel grateful or flattered for that?" Héloïse tried to sound ironic, however with limited success - more than anything else, she sounded hurt and unhappy.

"Neither," replied Caitlin. "If it was just for singing, I would say, listen, folks, settle your dispute without me - I can sing on stage or in the school choir or in the bathtub, what do I care? Until some days ago, I'd never heard of Dragonfly, wouldn't have been able to distinguish it from next Thursday. But then something happened."

"What? A miracle?"

"No, much simpler - Reb and I, we realized that this is the nicest bunch of people we ever met. And what's more, they helped us with our French problem, and that's why I'm ready to fight - "

"French problem? What French problem? If you have a problem with French, you can hide it well, to say the least."

"See - that's exactly what I mean. So I'm ready to fight for it. You too?"

Héloïse still looked a bit confused; probably she hadn't really understood what it was about this mysterious French problem. "Fighting?" she asked. "How?"

"You play your harp, and then I sing."

"And where's the fight?"

Caitlin showed her teeth in a way that mildly resembled a smile. "I dare you. If, after my singing, you can step in front of me and look me in the eye and tell me that I have to go, I will."

Héloïse examined Caitlin for a few seconds with a new look in her face. Then she walked back to her Felison and sat down.

"Something particular?"

"Yes - the piece from your first album, second or third track, I don't - "

"Seagulls in the wind?"

"Yes," said Caitlin, "I think that's what I mean. But only your harp, none of the other instruments."

Héloise took another moment to stare at Caitlin, apparently trying to figure out what the unwelcome singer had in mind. When all she earned was an expectant look, she put her hands on the Felison and started to play.

Caitlin grabbed the stool on which Tomas usually sat, sat down herself and hunched, apparently listening in concentration.

For the next two minutes, only the Felison could be heard. The piece Caitlin had selected was centered around the harp; leaving out the other instruments made seemingly little difference, in particular since Héloise was playing with skill and soul and heart.

Then, easily missed to be heard in the first seconds, another source of music rose - Caitlin's voice, singing something in Gaelic, about the saddest song Gabriel had ever heard sung. In combination with Héloise's harp, it was geared to tear hearts apart. According to the mythical tale, Orpheus could sing to make rocks cry - Gabriel never had been able to imagine such a music, but now he got a realistic impression.

Maybe Caitlin had altered the song a bit to match with the harp tune. Maybe the song was composed to fit from the beginning - after all, a Celtic harp wasn't too different from a Goblin harp. At any rate, after a few seconds uncertainty from Héloise, the player and the singer together created a music that Gabriel knew - they had to record the piece again, this time as a song.

Should this ever happen.

Caitlin finished singing. Héloise, having paid attention, let the harp music fade in a last, delicate harmony. She kept sitting there for another few seconds, seconds that seemed to go on forever. Then she came up, stepped forward.

Caitlin got down from the stool, stood there, waiting for the Veela. When Héloise reached her, she asked, "So?"

Héloise looked at her. Then she snorted. Then she said, "I didn't know that someone can sing like that to a Felison. I didn't think it possible. But ... well, I can't send you off."

From Gabriel's position, it looked as if Caitlin was hugging Héloise a fraction of a second earlier before the other girl responded. Michel, however, would later report it the other way around.

It didn't matter - both girls held to each other a long moment before turning toward the small audience, bowing together when the applause rose.

07 - Start of Terms

Carlos stared at his father with a mixture of impatience and reproach. "So what about our going shopping?" he asked. "Who's going to take us there?"

The reproach, well hidden, was an almost involuntary reaction to a previously unwavering source of support suddenly causing trouble. Harry, who should have been Carlos and Esmeralda's escort on their shopping trip for Hogwarts, had hinted that he oughtn't be seen like that in public.

Like that meant as he looked now, with a beard and hair cropped short and this ridiculously big spot on his forehead.

Carlos' impatience, unlike his reproach, wasn't hidden at all. It had grown since his father's vague answer to the same question a few minutes earlier, and his failure to clear the issue in the meantime.

Maybe his father had nourished the hope their mother would take them. Maybe Harry had hoped one of his older children would come down to the breakfast table in time to offer help. But no such luck. Cho, between looking sourly in the general direction of her husband, claimed urgent business in the Groucho headquarters. Sandra and Gabriel, both having returned just yesterday, were sound asleep. They could hardly be expected among the living before eleven o'clock.

"All right," sighed Harry. "Just a minute." The air popped, and the place where he'd been sitting was empty.

Carlos exchanged a glance with Esmeralda. Their father apparating inside Carron Lough - and in the presence of Bolo - was a sign of his bad mood. Normally Harry avoided apparating inside the castle because the German shepherd got upset from people disappearing suddenly.

And true enough - the dog breathed noisily and could barely suppress an angry bark.

Reflexively, Esmeralda put her hand down to soothe the dog.

The thought struck Carlos that someone ought to do something similar to his mother. She looked as upset as the German shepherd, except that her lips were shut tight - two thin lines, suppressing what otherwise might have been the same noisy breathing. Carlos regretted having started this discussion at a time without Gabriel sitting at the table as well; his older brother could make Cho smile in almost any situation.

His father came back, this time through the door. He walked to his seat and sat down. Then he looked at Carlos and said, "If you're willing to go with me like this, we can go."

The hair, a few minutes ago still short, looked almost normal. The coloured patch on the forehead was gone, as were the additional marks - the double scar resided there alone. The beard, neat and classy before, now looked wild and untidy.

"Now that's an improvement!" exclaimed Cho.

"Depends on the perspective," replied Harry - maybe even with a grin, except that it was difficult to discern expressions under this beard. "It's just another mask, a means to protect my real mask from premature discovery ... We have all quite different methods of slipping into new roles, haven't we?"

Carlos had been busy thinking about the term *premature discovery*, so he was somewhat unprepared when his mother suddenly slammed her napkin on the table. Pale with suppressed fury, she rose from her seat and left the room.

Harry watched her leave, then turned to his children. "She doesn't like the idea of me playing a teacher at a French school. I guess that's the main reason for this - er, *accentuated* exit."

The joke fell on the table and died unrewarded.

Shopping in Diagon Alley was nothing new to Carlos or Esmeralda. They left Bolo with his sad look behind to follow their father's summoning. As they walked down the street, passing the shop windows, he told them how in his student days the shopping list would have been much longer, filled with entries as weird as potion ingredients. Today, the school provided supplies for all students.

Also, the dress regulations had changed since then. A normal school had none whatsoever, while Hogwarts still demanded the traditional wizard's or witches' robe, though only for formal occasions. Carlos and Esmeralda's robes were waiting at home; their mother had taken care of that already before.

So as far as Carlos knew, there were only two items on today's official agenda - their schoolbooks and their wands. He expected that this list would be enhanced by something more informal, like a visit to an ice cream parlour.

Reaching two large shop windows with a huge sign above that read 'Quality Quidditch Supplies,' their father stopped to examine the display. Then he sighed and said, "Ah, well, we might come back to that once we know how you two get along in Flying and Quidditch."

Carlos exchanged a glance with his sister. For Esmeralda, like himself, a broomstick was an uncomfortable way of travelling short distances. They couldn't care less when a new Firebolt Something was released, an event that might send their father into rapture.

Sobering up, Harry moved on and led them to the bookstore, Flourish and Blotts. Inside, a large pile blocked their path after a few steps. It contained book packages, wrapped in something like cardboard strips that formed a box with a handle. Altogether, a package resembled a suitcase - and only after another moment of staring, they became aware that each of these packages was what a Hogwarts first-year needed.

All they had to do was grab two of these packages and pay for them, then they could have left the shop. In summary, that was pretty much what they did, only it took another thirty minutes of peering here and scanning there before they met again near the cash register, to look at each other and notice empty hands all around.

Spending half an hour in a bookstore without choosing something was unprecedented. For himself, Carlos blamed it on the task lying ahead, the purchase of wands. As for the others, he didn't know why they hadn't - maybe it was the same reason for Esmeralda, while their father ... Probably that strange task which he was looking forward to.

Taking a cardboard box from the pile, Carlos looked surprised - these books seemed to weigh almost nothing. The mystery was solved a moment later, when the sales clerk said, "This carrying box is magically enchanted to take most of the weight. You might want to use it for classes, too."

Carlos nodded, mostly to be polite. That cardboard would hardly survive a sharp pull, not to mention the stresses of regular schooldays. If the books really weighed more than what felt comfortable, he would ask one of his older siblings to put a clever enchantment on his bag.

They reached Ollivanders, the wand shop. It was so narrow inside that the three of them seemed too many people in this tight space. And the smell - a book shop smelled of paper and a shoe shop smelled of leather, so why didn't this shop smell of wood?

Dust, mostly ... Just when Carlos had come to this conclusion, the shop owner appeared as if materializing out of nowhere. But the air hadn't popped, Carlos would swear.

Mr Ollivander took a short look at Carlos' father, then greeted him with his name and a smile. In Carlos' opinion, this casual behaviour even added to the impression of weirdness; any normal person would at least have made a remark about Harry's beard.

The man extracted a tape measure, which turned out to be magical because it measured Esmeralda and Carlos on its own. Meanwhile, Harry asked Mr Ollivander how he was getting along with the huge numbers of magical children.

"Not at all, Mr Potter, not at all," answered the wandmaker. "My circle of customers hasn't grown considerably in the past years, for which I might be grateful. Although you wouldn't believe how all these young wizards and witches get equipped with their first wands. It's a shame what some of my fellow entrepreneurs offer. But still worse, there's even a mail order wand shop. Imagine that - mail order! How would those students ever find their true wand, if they have to make do with the next best wand that was shipped to them through - "

"Sir," interrupted Carlos, "excuse me, sir, but do you really need to know how long my sister's hair is?"

Mr Ollivander shifted his gaze from Harry to Esmeralda, on whom a somewhat overzealous tape measure had tried to pull a streak of her hair upward to measure it from root to tip. He said, "No, that's enough," and the tape measure let go of Esmeralda's hair.

Carlos watched as Mr Ollivander rummaged through his shop to present one wand after the other to Esmeralda. He listened as the man commented in a low voice on what he was doing and also on Esmeralda's attempts, expressing more than once the opinion Carlos had heard before, that the wand selected the owner, rather than the other way around.

He had his doubts - in particular because Esmeralda flatly refused to try certain wands. However, Mr Ollivander seemed more pleased than offended by this behaviour - an attitude that raised Carlos' opinion of him.

Fifteen minutes later, as she swooshed yet another wand through the air, Esmeralda created a sparkling stream of colour spots. Witch and wand had found each other, no doubt about that. A piece of acacia with a magical core of dragon heartstring, ten and a half inches, had won the race for which Mr Ollivander had done most of the running.

Now it was Carlos' turn to wave wands.

While he never had developed an opinion of how his wand should look, he felt quite expectant nevertheless. Without having revealed the thought to anyone, he believed that a comparison of his wand with Esmeralda's would be a first indication of whether or not they would be sorted into the same house.

Maybe it was superstition. After all, the wands of his father, his uncle Ron, and his father's old friend Mrs Krum had little in common, and yet all three of them had been Gryffindors.

Carlos knew that the wand size was determined mostly by the owner's height, rather than by magical power, as many people believed. The longest wand he'd ever heard of was that of a certain Hagrid, a former friend of his father who died in the Battle of Hogwarts. Hagrid's wand had measured sixteen inches, appropriate for a half-giant who never had shown outstanding magical power.

On the other hand, there were his father's wand and those of Sandra and Gabriel. All three of them had a phoenix feather as their magical core, and all three feathers came from the same phoenix. Sandra's and Gabriel's wands were both twelve inches, cedar wood the former, ebony the latter. So all considered, Carlos saw no reason to worry about different woods, only about magical cores.

Coming back from his last trip, Mr Ollivander had two wands in his hands, one greyish-yellow, the

other almost white. Without even thinking, Carlos snatched the white one and rushed it through the air.

Had someone asked him why, he might have answered that this wand seemed the right counterpart to his older brother's almost black wand, totally ignoring the fact that the wand in Mr Ollivander's other hand greatly resembled Esmeralda's. At any rate, Carlos' movement produced a glittering ribbon of silvery sparks.

It was pine - more exactly pitch pine, sometimes also called Californian pine, which pleased Carlos considerably. Ten and a half inches, same size as Esmeralda's, which pleased him still more. "Is it also dragon heartstring?" he asked expectantly.

"Not this one. It's Unicorn hair."

While his father paid, exchanging final remarks with the shop owner, Carlos tried to reason with his own imagination. Like, this was the only core that would balance out because with his wand, the Potter family employed all three core types manufactured in Ollivander wands. Like, it took the gentle unicorn to compensate for the fierce dragon. Because it was all about balancing, wasn't it?

Well, maybe so.

Outside, his father sent him a thoughtful glance. To Carlos' relief, Harry didn't ask him about his lack of excitement, maybe also because Esmeralda, in sharp contrast, was beaming with the anticipation of future wand magic.

After some steps down the street, Harry again turned to Carlos and asked, "What do you think about a pet?"

"Erm ..."

The question hit Carlos unprepared. He never had given this idea a second thought. His older sister had Nagini, the snake. His younger sister had Bolo, the dog. His older brother had no pet, so it seemed only natural to follow this pattern.

"No," he said eventually. "Bolo's enough for both of us."

His father said, "Well, in this case ..."

As Carlos knew, this half-finished remark was a polite way of asking, *Are you sure?* Such a question was unlikely to pass Harry's lips, not after he'd been in touch with Goblins and Giants for such a long time.

Well, maybe Carlos wasn't sure, but for sure he wasn't in the mood to wander through a pet shop. The ice cream parlour, to which their father now led them, was more to his taste.

They had been back at Carron Lough for a while already when a visitor arrived. It was Rahewa Stein, Harry's goddaughter. This visit struck Carlos as a strange coincidence because it had been Rahewa, six years ago, who had appeared down at the beach with Bolo, except that the dog had received his new name only later that day.

As if feeling the same synchronicity, the German shepherd greeted Rahewa with an unusual excitement.

Rahewa patted him, a broad grin on her face. "That's a clever dog, really. Remember how I brought him here?"

Carlos nodded, while his sister stared at Rahewa with a wondering expression, as if unable to figure out how someone could ask such a stupid question.

Rahewa seemed not to notice, or not to mind. "All the time," she said, "I planned to come with a companion for Bolo, because a single dog is nonsense - dogs are pack animals. But somehow it never worked."

Bolo became more insistent. Totally ignoring the gentle pushes from Rahewa, he tried to come closer, with an obvious interest in her bag.

As if the bag held some special treats, thought Carlos, although it was strange - Bolo had never been particularly greedy. Next moment, he saw how Esmeralda's eyes were getting bigger and bigger.

"Until today - your last day at home before travelling to Hogwarts." Rahewa's glance turned to the dog. "Yes my boy, I know, and you're totally right ..." Her both hands went into the bag and came out holding something that was small and furry and timidly meowing.

A kitten! Carlos watched how Bolo, calmer than a moment ago, sniffed the kitten from whiskers to tail. Apparently satisfied with his inspection, the dog sat on his hind legs, looking expectantly at the small bundle in Rahewa's hands.

Rahewa met Carlos' eyes. She said, "It's a she. When I came with the dog, it went to Esmeralda, so it's clear who's in charge of this little cat, right?" With these words, she made a step toward him and put the light-grey bundle into his hands, which had opened almost by themselves to form a tray.

Bolo had watched the movement. He came up and made a step like Rahewa before, then sat down again in front of Carlos - looking expectant, ears erect and bigger than ever.

"He's a shepherd," said Rahewa. "That's what he's been waiting for - to shepherd his own pet. Try it - put her down."

Carlos knelt down and moved his hands to the floor before opening them.

The kitten examined the location, made a tentative step, then another. Then she marched straight to the dog in front of her, tail up in the air. Reaching the dog, the small cat rubbed herself against Bolo's leg, then made another step between the two front legs. When she finished her next round around the other leg, the German shepherd's head sank down and a large pink tongue appeared to caress the new playmate.

The kitten sat down at once, holding still while the tongue worked over the small body again and again.

Enthralled, Carlos watched the scene. When the dog was satisfied with his work and laid down right next to the kitten, Carlos looked up and met his father's glance.

What he saw there made him wonder if Rahewa really had come on her own impulse.

* * *

Harry felt ridiculous. Carrying a heavy suitcase uphill was simply nonsense for a wizard with his apparition skills, one of the reasons why he could barely remember travelling with more than a light bag. Yet as a student he had dealt with more luggage - strange how the topic "school" as the common denominator brought back not only memories but also unpleasant duties.

He was walking toward the *Ecole des Etudiants Magiques Gênés*. Determined to create the smallest footprint possible, he had decided to reveal as little of his capabilities as he could manage. For the average person that he was trying to present, coming with a suitcase when moving into his small teacher's apartment seemed normal.

A real person with such limitations probably would have used a cab, while Harry, after exploring the area some days before, had apparated to a spot farther downhill. The former Navy cadet school, which today hosted the school for the magically handicapped students, was located at the topmost

point of Brest, rather than near the harbour or somewhere else closer to the water.

Still, the weight of the suitcase wasn't enough to put him out of breath, or pull his arm numb, not after all his exercises in the past weeks. He was fitter than he had ever been in the last six years.

And more nervous too, to be honest. But this state matched well with his adopted personality.

He reached the gate that separated the school grounds from the street. It was locked.

Only after a few seconds of glancing around did Harry notice the intercom on the wall. He pressed the button below the speaker opening. Waiting and staring at the peeling paint on the gate, he wondered if the system was really operative. If not, he could -

"Yes?" A female voice.

"Er - my name is Terry Pritchard, I'm the new teacher."

"As if we'd only one ..."

A buzzing sound from the middle of the gate informed Harry that he'd better move to reach the handle and push. However, the woman who owned the voice apparently knew that it took a second to open the gate because it didn't lock again before he could reach it.

Walking on the path toward the building in which he expected to find this woman and other members of the school staff, Harry recollected the relevant facts of his assumed identity. He had used the name "Terry Pritchard" twenty years ago, when he and Remus Lupin had helped two FBI agents to catch some assailants that turned out to be Dementors. The name was well selected, could even cover an accidental lapse into "Harry," and it wouldn't break a French tongue bone.

He reached the building, found the door open, and entered. As he walked along a corridor in which every step echoed dramatically, he heard the voice from a moment ago calling, "I'm here!"

It came from a room with an open door; when Harry reached the door, he saw that he'd found the office of the school secretary, the woman with the voice he'd heard twice before.

"Thierry Pri'chard? Salut, I'm Jeannette, Jeannette Clouzot, but we're on first names here, of course with the exception of Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel." A glance went to his suitcase. "You have an apartment here, right? Then I'll give you the keys and show you the way, so you can settle there yourself. Monsieur Fresnel isn't here today, only tomorrow, so your official introduction will be tomorrow, after he has spoken with you."

The woman stood up and walked to a map at the wall, apparently showing the school estate. She motioned him to come closer and to watch.

"We're here, in Brest ..."

Only after a moment of examining the map did Harry understand that Jeannette was talking about buildings. Every building in this former Navy cadet school bore the name of a French harbour. Basically, this was a good idea and certainly better than using the names of admirals, the version Harry would have expected from a British school with the same history.

"... your apartment is there, in Cayenne. Let me check the number and get your key."

While the secretary walked back to her desk to look up his assignment, Harry continued examining the map. The Cayenne building stood in a distant corner of the school grounds; the distance to Brest, the office building, couldn't have been longer. Cayenne was one building in a group of two; the other one was named 'Fort-de-France.'

From years of adventure travelling with his children, Harry's knowledge of geography was far

above average. So he could identify one of the two names at once, and with this information, tracking down the other was a matter of seconds. The harbour of Cayenne could be found in French Guiana, at the north-east coast of South America. From there, it wasn't far to Fort-de-France, the capital of the French island Martinique in the Lesser Antilles.

So the usage of French harbour names wasn't limited to the homeland, a fact that wouldn't worry a normal British citizen. A more suspicious mind, though, might wonder if these colonial names implied a social rank.

"Number twenty-seven. That's the seventh apartment on the second storey."

The secretary walked to a cabinet. She extracted a key ring and held it up, apparently waiting for Harry to come over and fetch it.

Business as unusual - that was how he would summarise his encounter with the school administration while walking from the Brest building to the Cayenne building. Jeannette Clouzot hadn't been overly excited to meet him, giving no more conversation than the bare minimum.

Maybe it had to do with his pending first visit to the headmaster, Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel. Maybe his assumed identity was to blame - Ron had taken great pains to add the proper hints of bad reputation in Harry's official papers. Or the social climate on this school was simply as poor as it looked.

The apartment offered two rooms, a bedroom and an office. Both of them were quite spacious, and this seemed the only good news Harry could detect. No kitchen, not even a kitchen corner - teachers participated in the school's official system of nourishment with fixed times for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Still worse was the second shortcoming - no bathroom, no toilet; sanitary demands were satisfied in a big washing room with urinals, toilets, and showers at the end of the floor.

Harry sat down to inhale deeply, to swallow, and to tell himself that renting this apartment had been an important part of his task as well as his role. Teachers could of course live somewhere else outside the school, but Harry as well as Ron had thought it mandatory to live inside for the time of this secret investigation project. Also, the fictitious Terry Pritchard wasn't exactly famous for spending lots of money in such matters, so the school offer for a cheap place to live would have, and had, been accepted gladly.

Well, a bathroom worth the name was an apparition jump away, Harry told himself by way of encouragement.

Thanks to Ron's warnings, he had arrived with a recently improved knowledge of cleaning spells. Using them, he removed dust and some traces of previous inhabitants from the two rooms. Then he emptied his suitcase, storing the items in cabinets and drawers.

Afterwards, his apartment looked hardly more inviting.

He gave the keys on the key ring a closer examination. Four keys, with two of them already identified - one for the Cayenne building, another one for the apartment number twenty-seven. The Ecole des Etudiants Magiques G[□]nés wasn't modern enough, or rich enough, to offer a state-of-the-art key system in which the same key would work downward in a hierarchy of locks. So the third key probably fit the gate lock.

Then which lock would open when using the fourth?

Harry decided to squeeze the school secretary a bit more about school details, including the answer to this question. But when reaching the Brest building again, he found the door locked. Apparently, Jeannette Clouzot had finished for today, leaving it to anyone's guess whether his own arrival had

sped up her departure.

One question, though, could be answered. The fourth key opened the Brest building, as Harry found out simply by trying. This was the administration building, except that everything useful or informative was hidden inside rooms with locked doors.

This school was so unbearably inviting ...

Well, a few days from now, things would look different. Terms at the Ecole Gêne, as Harry privately called it, started a few days later than other schools. Ron had explained this difference with a hint that these days - at other schools - were sufficient to figure out which students would be candidates to be sent to Brest.

From what he'd heard while walking twice across the school estate, Harry concluded that he was alone - not only in the Brest building but in the entire school. For his own floor in the Cayenne building, he could be sure about that; his senses had told him that the other apartments were empty. It didn't mean they had no inhabitants, it only confirmed that other teachers with an apartment there had the good sense not to return earlier than necessary, whether from holidays or from a more comfortable home base.

Harry decided to use the opportunity, and to start an inspection tour that would lead through quite a number of closed doors, using a skill he'd learned long ago.

And besides - should anyone catch him entering rooms for which nobody had offered him entry, it would only confirm the picture as drawn in his personal file, the one sent to *Monsieur le Directeur* Fresnel.

* * *

Esmeralda opened the door to the compartment. Knowing from experience which sequence worked best, she ordered the dog to take a seat first.

Without hesitation, Bolo bounded onto the window seat to Esmeralda's right. In a family in which apparating was the norm, he'd had few opportunities to watch passing landscapes, though he'd had enough to know what the seats meant, and how to use this chance at once.

Watching how the dog stared out of the window, Esmeralda had to smile before she stored her luggage in the rack above the seats. It was pretty much the first smile on this journey, a journey that looked more like a mistake with every minute passing.

Their father had expressed the idea first. Using the Hogwarts Express once, for their first travel to Hogwarts, had indeed sounded like a romantic idea. The train was hopelessly outdated; today's travellers on the Hogwarts Express were either romantics - or the children of them, like Esmeralda and Carlos - or students from families for which even the portkey journey with Magical Tours was a financial issue. The train was free.

She sat down next to her dog's seat, leaving the other side and the other window seat to her brother Carlos and his own pet, the kitten from Rahewa. The little cat was twice as curious as Bolo for sure but too small to find a position from where she could look through the window by herself. She needed a cushion, preferably in human shape, and Carlos was the most natural candidate.

However, Carlos hadn't yet finished storing his own stuff in the luggage rack when the small grey animal used his shoulder as springboard to jump into the rack. Finishing that fluid movement, the cat climbed onto the bag there, the only footing more solid than the metal bars that were spaced every few inches. From the top of the bag, she looked in the dog's direction as if to make clear how inferior Bolo was compared to her, because he couldn't reach her.

Bolo, unimpressed, continued staring out the window.

For a few minutes, Esmeralda sat there listening to the noises of a train about to depart, staring back when other students outside their compartment peeked through the window in the compartment door. There weren't many, and without exception, they dismissed the idea of entering the compartment in search of company - apparently, a large German shepherd was a bit more company than they liked.

Then someone blew a whistle, and the Hogwarts Express, slowest journey around, started to move.

Esmeralda watched her dog. Bolo seemed to tremble in excitement. Not only was this journey the first opportunity in a while to watch moving landscape, not only was the view through the compartment window much better than that through the rear window of a car, but the railroad track passed along places that were totally different from a country road, and much more interesting. People didn't seem to care about train passengers observing their backyards.

Glancing up to the cat, for whom the pushing and rattling of the train was similarly exciting, Esmeralda asked, "So did you find a name for her?"

"Hmmm ..." There was a few seconds pause. "No, not yet."

The answer sounded as though Carlos had a very clear idea how to name the cat but didn't like yet to go public with his idea - not even within the confines of this compartment. This was quite unusual, but then, so were the events.

"Want some suggestions?"

"Er - no."

Carlos' smile at his reply had confirmed her suspicion - he *had* a name, was mulling it over in his head, and would tell her when he felt like it.

"Then what else can we do to pass the time in this stupid train?"

Her question came dangerously close to blaming her brother for the shortcomings of this journey with the Hogwarts Express. Unfair as it seemed, he was in charge of smoothing the world's sharp edges for her, such was the unspoken agreement between them. However, the glance from Carlos was neither apologetic nor reproachful when he said, "Do you think it would have been better to hang around at home? To wait there till the evening, when it was time to jump by ourselves?"

Her brother's reply referred to their porties. In preparation for their time at Hogwarts, their father had extended the list of stored targets by a new one - the train station between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. This station, the destination of the Hogwarts Express, was the landmark closest to the protection zone over Hogwarts that prevented apparition. Just pressing the right button of their porty would have been the alternative to this train.

Her brother's reply also referred to the situation in Carron Lough. This morning, they had seen their father for a few minutes before he returned to his *new job* in that French school. The air between their parents was still cooler than during the past weeks; saying "Brest" was enough to make Cho's mouth a thin, straight line. Under these circumstances, every minute longer might indeed have been worse than sitting here, not knowing what to do.

"Well," she said, "before we get bored to death here, we can use our porties to jump from the train."

Carlos bolted upright, an alarmed expression on his face. "No! Don't you remember the story about how Daddy was chasing this guy in a car, and how they were flying over the beach dune?"

In this story, their father had found out that apparition did nothing to alter the velocity of a body at the moment of apparition. When apparating from within a car that was driving at hundred miles per

hour, the person would reach the destination with a velocity of hundred miles per hour, and in such a situation, most likely it didn't matter in which direction this velocity pointed. Their father had apparated with a body speed of fifty or sixty miles per hour, coming out on top of a large beach dune that dampened the fall and slowed down the body softly enough to avoid getting hurt.

Esmeralda pointed upward with a grin. "See these emergency brakes? If bad comes to worse, we can stop the train first and jump then."

Carlos grinned back - both of them knew well that Esmeralda would never do something as stupid and selfish as that.

However, asking *what if* and inventing actions and reactions in such a situation was a nice game. They played it for quite a while, ending with a scene in which the other students on the train, arriving at Hogwarts in an almost starved state, spotted Bolo, remembered the dog, and chased after Carlos and Esmeralda as the culprits of their near-starvation.

Talking about hungry students made them hungry. When the lady with the sweets trolley arrived at their compartment - one of the attractions on the train, according to their parents - Carlos bought a large collection while Esmeralda pacified the dog; Bolo hadn't taken well to the lady's totally unauthorized opening of the door.



No sooner had Carlos sat down again, the paper bag with his shopping in his lap, that he was hit by a cat landing on his shoulder. Apparently, she needed the hold from her talons for this manoeuvre because Carlos let out a soft squeak.

Esmeralda grabbed the bag. "You need your hands for that cat of yours, don't you?"

"And you need your hands for that dog of yours," retorted Carlos, who had plucked the cat from his shoulders and now saw that the German shepherd had lost interest in the moving landscape in favour of a bag full of sweets.

Bolo and his sweet tooth ... Esmeralda knew very well that she shouldn't feed him any sweets. But the people who had told her so hadn't known what a heart-breaking look could come from two amber eyes.

She extracted a small cake in the shape of a cauldron, broke it in two halves, one for herself and the other for Bolo.

The dog, as it turned out, could appreciate the piece more, while Esmeralda felt a bit disappointed. The cake wasn't on par with what she was used to from Winky and Dobby, the house-elves in Carron Lough.

Carlos made his own first try, closely watched by the cat. The ball-shaped cake he'd tried offered a filling, and the cat came as far as dipping a small, rosy tongue into the half-fluid matter before she lost interest, her whole body expressing contempt on such a boring food.

"The round ones taste okay," said Carlos.

Did they really? Esmeralda wondered, suspecting her brother caught in his habitual task of cheering her up. Her suspicion was fed when, after another bite, Bolo inherited the rest of the ball.

The dog devoured the piece without hesitation. But then, he was a bit indiscriminate in this regard; for him, getting sweets was as rare an occasion as watching the landscape flow past.

Esmeralda unwrapped one of the chocolate frogs; pure chocolate should be a safe bet. At the frog's base, she found a small picture card - she nearly had taken it for a simple piece of cardboard because she had looked at the back side first. The picture showed a figure who looked somehow out

of proportion, dressed like a farmer or shepherd und looking friendly but unsmiling.

Turning the card around, Esmeralda learned that this was Lleyrin the Fist, a Giant and the chief of a Giant tribe. She had heard the name before; this Lleyrin was an old friend of her parents, and about once a year, one of them said something about a visit they should pay Lleyrin and his wife, after all these years.

Reading further, she also learned that the current series of collector cards that came with these chocolate frogs was entitled "The Battle of Hogwarts" and that the cards in this series showed the heroes and villains of this encounter that had taken place twenty-two years ago, a time period twice her own age.

"Hey," she said, "have a look in these frogs, you might get a picture of Dad, or Mum. Or Uncle Ron." She showed her brother the Giant's picture because at first, Carlos had taken her words for a joke.

Carlos peeked into the bag. "We've got just three more," he said. "If I had known ..." He extracted a frog, unwrapped it, and took the card to examine it.

"It's a Goblin," he explained after a moment. "Gurin the Gentle was his name, the only Goblin who died in the battle."

Esmeralda opened her second frog, the last of her own share, to find another Giant - or so she thought until reading the card. It was a picture of Rubeus Hagrid, a half-giant, the one who had gathered the Giants who'd fought with the school in that battle. He was also one of the three human casualties from the poison attack against the four dragons that defended Hogwarts.

She looked expectantly at her brother, then at the bag.

Carlos offered the bag to her. "You take it."

"No, it's yours."

"No, I'll get my share with these licorice wands, you don't like licorice anyway."

"Okay, then - thanks." Esmeralda pulled the last frog out of the bag. A moment later, she snorted, "I knew it! ... You should have opened that frog, then it would have been another picture." It was a second card with Lleyrin, the Giant chief.

While emptying the bag - after all, not being as delicious as sweets from the house-elves didn't mean the cakes in there tasted bad - they discussed whether there would truly have been another card had Carlos opened the frog. They both considered it unlikely though not entirely impossible because these were magical pictures. Then they thought about a method to test it, only to realize that whatever they did, the question would be left unanswered.

They fell silent. Some minutes later, they fell asleep.

A noise woke Esmeralda. Opening her eyes, remembering where she was, she realized that the train had changed its rhythm, that the Hogwarts Express was slowing down.

Her brother came awake, looked around, and peered through the window. Then he turned to her. "Are we there?"

Esmeralda shook her head. "I don't think so. It's too early, according to what Dad told us. And there was no announcement."

Well, that was what she believed, assuming such an announcement would have awakened her as well. Then a thought crossed her mind. "When we come to a stop, we can use our porties and

apparate to the destination. I've been sitting in this train long enough, Bolo too."

The dog, hearing his name and something in his mistress' voice, came to full alert.

Carlos looked alarmed. "Why can't we just sit here until the end of the journey?"

"Why should we? And I bet Bolo has to pee. It was a stupid idea from the beginning. In a car, you can tell the driver to have a break, but here?" She reached for her bag.

Carlos, looking unhappy, followed her example.

They sat there for some moments, waiting for the final jolt that would indicate that the train had come to a halt. Esmeralda didn't know why the Hogwarts Express would stop before having reached its destination but she didn't care either, felt content to get the opportunity for an apparition jump.

Then Carlos spotted something outside and turned to her. "Railroad workers! The train only slowed down because there's a railway construction site - we aren't going to stop at all." He looked happier than moments before, still more so when a pull went through the train that signaled the start of another acceleration.

Esmeralda felt a wave of fury inside her. She snarled, "That's slow enough - come on!" With her right arm around Bolo, she pressed the button on her porty for Hogwarts, or as close as one could get.

A short moment of a feeling words couldn't describe, then she found herself on a train platform, Bolo in front of her. An irresistible impulse pushed her forward; she flew over the dog, came down hard on the concrete, and rolled over twice more.

Coming up with a moan, she saw her brother materialize, a bag in his hand.

Carlos might have managed to balance his momentum just by stepping quickly on his own legs, had he found the presence of mind to drop his bag. But he didn't, and the bag's weight made him stumble and fall down headlong, a split second after his cat had released herself from his hold, to scuttle over the platform, meowing reproachfully.

Esmeralda hurried to her brother. "Are you all right?"

"If so, then it's not your work," came the angry reply. "You really did what you could to get our bones broken."

She giggled in relief to see him in this mood. Carlos could be angry at her only if nothing serious had happened, and he could hold his anger only for a few minutes. The momentum at the instant of arrival had surprised her more than she would like to admit; after all, the train had looked slower than a pedestrian.

Carlos stood up. "You think that's funny, huh? But it's not, and if you - "

Her hand on his mouth interrupted the planned sermon. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I couldn't stand it any longer on the train. Now let's go to that lake down there, so Bolo can drink some water."

They left their luggage on the platform.

When they reached the lakeside, both animals drank at once, the cat in a very affected style, as if every droplet had to be savoured individually.

"Look at her," said Esmeralda, "like a princess who just noticed that the tableware isn't golden."

"Yes, sure," said Carlos. "That's Dona Gata, after all."

"So that's your name for her? Dona Gata?" It simply meant Lady Cat.

He nodded. "Yes, or Dona Minina, if she's pretentious and cute at the same time."

Dona Minina meant Lady Kitten, which Esmeralda considered a joke in itself. She said, "Let's see how Dona Gata can keep her dignity if her big friend is really wet." She gained Bolo's attention, then threw a tennis ball, which she always had in her pockets while together with Bolo, into the lake.

The dog jumped into the water, swam after the ball, reached it, snapped it with his mouth, and turned. All the time, the cat had watched in fascination.

Then Bolo reached the shoreline and climbed out. When all of his four legs had found dry ground, he shook himself, sending water everywhere.

Dona Gata twitched, made a jump, tripped a few more steps. Then she turned, sat down, and stared for a moment at the dog before she started to clean herself.

Sitting by the water, they enjoyed the late afternoon of a hot summer day. Still sitting by the water, no longer enjoying it, they waited for the train to arrive, and Esmeralda was fighting with herself whether she should admit loudly that it had been a mistake to leave the train.

Then, after a seemingly endless time, unmistakable sounds told them that the Hogwarts Express was closing in. They climbed the steep path up to the train platform, waiting for the other students, ready to behave as if they'd been in the train all the time.

It worked. The first students coming out looked at them curiously; however, since the train was just one method to reach Hogwarts, they didn't ask questions, and what was happening there in the first dark of the summer night took all of their attention anyway.

A voice gathered all first-years and ordered them to follow down the path. They knew from their parents that the voice belonged to a Mr Loew, Keeper of Keys and Grounds. He guided them to a small fleet of boats, where they had one to themselves.

Reaching the underground harbour, they climbed out, waited a moment until the last boats had arrived, then followed Mr Loew to a door where another man expected them. He introduced himself as Professor Snape, Deputy Headmaster and Head of the Slytherin house, and explained what Esmeralda already knew and of what she'd been afraid all day long - the Sorting.

Esmeralda watched, exchanging nervous glances with her brother every now and then, as the first years were called by the Deputy Headmaster in alphabetical order, from "Adlon, Matthew," to "Painter, Lucille."

And suddenly: "Potter, Carlos!"

Her brother marched forward and sat down on the three-legged stool, the Sorting Hat over his head. Esmeralda heard some remarks without registering a word - here at Hogwarts, the name Potter apparently raised comments no longer heard in the outside world.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Shouting and applause came from one table, shouts of surprise and disappointment from another. While Carlos was walking toward the first table, Esmeralda heard her own name called, walked forward, and sat down.

"Well," said a small voice in her head, "what we've got here might be Ravenclaw as well as Gryffindor. There is a sharp - "

"Forget it," said Esmeralda, "I want to be Hufflepuff, like my brother."

"Your brother? What brother?"

"Carlos, who else? The boy before me." It took her some efforts to keep politeness.

"That was your brother? But he had totally different parents, so how can you - "

"That's none of your business, but if you really need to know, he's my adopted brother, or I'm his adopted sister. And now, if you please - "

"Certainly not," said the small voice with a hint of amusement. "There's too much stubbornness and defiance inside you to put you into Hufflepuff, and with every second - "

"You stupid hat!" Esmeralda felt a deep desire to strangle the fabric over her head. "Now put me into Hufflepuff, or else - "

"Or else what?" There was almost laughter in her head while she desperately tried to find a threat that might impress the hat enough to fulfill her request.

"You dare me? Well, then - GRYFFINDOR!"

As if in a trance, Esmeralda removed the hat, stood up, and walked to the table from where shouts and whistles tried to welcome her. She couldn't release her gaze from her brother's at the other table as she tried to cope with the facts.

The hat, not the least bit reasonable, had sorted herself and her brother into two different houses.

08 - Inaugural Speeches

Harry arrived at 'Brest', the administration building, and found the door unlocked. Considering the time of day, he had expected it, but hadn't been sure because this school could as well have run a policy that would fit a prison. He entered the building and walked down the corridors until he reached the school office. The office door was wide open, so he went in.

"Good morning, Jeannette. Where can I find our dear boss?"

A disapproving stare told him that the sarcasm in his question wasn't lost on Jeannette, and that she didn't like it. A tilting of her otherwise silent head showed him the direction, a closed door not far from her desk.

Harry went to the door and knocked.

There was no reply.

The Headmaster knew that he would come; five minutes earlier, Harry had made sure of that by calling Jeannette in her office. Therefore, his not answering to Harry's knocking was strange, and Harry had a more-than-dim feeling that Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel was trying to discipline his new employee just for good measure.

In this case, Harry decided, he shouldn't lose any time not living up to his reputation as faked in his personal file. He opened the door and entered the Headmaster's office.

A large room. An expensive carpet. A large desk, and a man sitting behind the desk, seemingly busy with paper and an expensive-looking fountain pen. The man looked middle-aged, stocky, unremarkable, and balding; his head, where hair had once been, now run through by a polished, gleaming patch of skin.

He looked unpleasant when he lifted his gaze from the paper. "You couldn't wait for me to call you in, could you?"

"Well - " Harry flashed a false smile. "I wasn't sure if I'd failed to hear it. I didn't want to make you wait."

The mild sarcasm in the Headmaster's voice was replaced by a cold stare from his slightly protruding eyes. "You will address me as Monsieur le Directeur - and maybe we should play this little scene again, so you know how it sounds when I call, 'Enter!'"

Harry grabbed an uncomfortable-looking chair, moved it to the front of the desk and sat down. With another smile, genuine because it was small and cool, he said, "I don't think so, Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel."

"Then please sit down, Monsieur Pri'chard, and welcome to our school."

Harry's response was a slight bow as his mind readjusted his opinion of Fresnel, scaled him up a notch or two. At least the Headmaster wasn't afraid, wasn't one of those loud barkers who could be intimidated easily. So much Harry would grant him, and an acid-saturated sense of humour too.

In addition, the Headmaster walked with a light burden of politeness, as he confirmed a second later. Staring at Harry's forehead with the large discolouration, he asked, "Was it a similar hurry that earned you the mark on your face?"

His papers, as Harry knew, mentioned a 'severe facial injury in the line of duty,' making it mysterious enough to match the wildest story and the weirdest nonsense. Sounding casual, he replied, "You might say so, except it wasn't my *own* haste."

Fresnel waited another moment for his new teacher to reveal more. When this didn't happen, he

opened a file that looked familiar to Harry: his personal file, carefully prepared by Ron. Staring at a sheet, the Headmaster said, "From what I can see here, you make friends quickly - "

"Really? That's funny, because I make enemies even more quickly."

Harry watched the expression in Fresnel's face as the man tried to decide whether this new teacher was really too dumb to recognize sarcasm or had simply countered one wisecrack with another. The file, as Harry knew, gave little information on this particular detail because it described him as 'efficient' while leaving open the question of whether this came from a working brain or a robot made of flesh and blood.

In other regards, however, the file left no doubt. Terry Pritchard was "difficult," to say the least. According to the papers, he had been a 'foreign affairs agent' in the services of the British government, and this term alone placed him somewhere between James Bond and a real estate agent of the diplomatic corps. But whatever his job had been, said Terry Pritchard had been called home after messing up thoroughly. The file gave a very decent but unmistakable hint that other men's women had played a role in this messing up.

"So what particular miracle," asked the Headmaster after looking up from the file, "made you come to a school for students with a handicap in their magical abilities?"

"Of all the alternatives that were offered to me, this one looked best." Harry showed another smile, this time an honest one. "And it was in France, which is a benefit that can hardly be overestimated - I mean, after you ever spent a day in British offices at home in England."

Fresnel showed no reaction to this remark, which might have been a plump attempt at flattery. But the paper made it clear that Terry Pritchard had had trouble readjusting to the unspoken rules of his home country. Having been assigned to an office for 'Strategic Analysis', he'd lost no time in crossing with almost every fellow employee there, ending up in a fistfight with his boss. Both opponents had left the office - Pritchard with paid holidays, his boss in the ambulance that took him, broken ribs and all, to the hospital.

"Monsieur Pri'chard, may I ask what experience you have in teaching?"

"Yes - er, Monsieur le Directeur." Harry let Pritchard's smile fade. "None might be the most accurate description. While it's true that I taught a few people manners, and quite successfully so, I wouldn't count that as a recommendation for a school teacher."

"Can you offer *any* recommendation, in your eyes or someone else's, for the job of a school teacher?"

"Certainly, Monsieur le Directeur." Pritchard's smile returned. "I get along with kids, and I don't beat them."

Fresnel raised his eyebrows. "You mean, you beat only grown people?"

"That story in my last job, huh?" Harry *alias* Pritchard snorted. "Well, he had it coming, that's all I have to say."

"He was your boss, wasn't he? So tell me, Monsieur Pri'chard, how can I recognize when I have it coming?"

Harry produced a polite chuckle that sounded terribly artificial in his own ears. "That was a good one, Monsieur le Directeur, ha ha ... No reason to worry, it's not a habit of mine."

"Speaking of habits ..." The Headmaster made a pause and looked at Harry as if Terry Pritchard should already know what he was going to talk about. "You seem to have a talent of getting into

trouble when - erm, seeking your private pleasures. You'd be well advised not to play such games here - French police might not be quite to your taste."

"Police?" Pritchard looked bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about, Monsieur le Directeur. I play this particular game as a business to mutual satisfaction, and only with volunteers, if you get my bearing. Otherwise - this is France, and without getting into detail, let me tell you that these things never would have found their way into a French personal file."

Fresnel dropped the file and leaned back in his comfortably upholstered leather chair. "Be that as it may, Monsieur Pri'chard, I don't want trouble, that's all. Don't be unpleasant, and you won't find out how unpleasant I can be, that's what I always say."

Terry Pritchard narrowed his eyes, then looked down at his shoes when he said, "Yes, Monsieur le Directeur."

The Headmaster seemed satisfied, however not nearly as much as Harry, whom nobody would have called a good actor. But as long as it worked with tricks as simple as bending your head ...

"So let's come to your professional qualification. English shouldn't be a question with your origin. Sports - what about that, how did you come to this qualification?"

"Self-defence and other arts of weaponless combat, Monsieur le Directeur."

"Ah well, that explains the two broken ribs, huh?"

Terry Pritchard let out a genuine laughter. "Trust my words, Monsieur le Directeur, I can scale quite well. Could have been more, could have been less. Anyway, that's not what I have in mind to teach in my classes."

"How reassuring." Fresnel exhaled dramatically while putting his right hand on his heart - in Harry's eyes a very French gesture. "So Monsieur Jacquot and Madame Clément, the teachers in charge of class schedules, don't need to keep any restrictions in mind?"

"No, Monsieur le Directeur."

"Very well - maybe you'll turn out more successful here than anyone would have believed, huh?" The Headmaster was alone to chuckle as his guest's eyes narrowed again, more than ever before.

Apparently satisfied with this very personal insult, Fresnel added a more general one by saying, "Then let's come to an end - after all, I have business to do. How's your magic?"

"Good, I'd say. Why?"

The snappish tone in Harry's voice hadn't been artificial at all - the Headmaster's last remarks had provided him with enough fury to compensate for his poor skill in playing roles. Also, omitting the title in his last reply had been a purposeful act. Now he watched as, for his senses seemingly in slow motion, Fresnel grabbed for a wand to point in his direction.

His response came immediately and in what he himself would have called real-time speed. He drew his own wand, pointed it toward the figure behind the desk, and called, "*Expelliarmus!*"

When the other wand had landed in his free hand, he stood up and walked the step to the desk, then put the wand down there. "Voilà, Monsieur le Directeur - test passed, I'd say, wouldn't you agree?"

As if forgotten, almost by accident, his own wand pointed at the spot between the Headmaster's eyes.

When Fresnel nodded, more watchful than afraid, Harry stored his wand. While preparing for his appearance, he had made sure to remove the black tip his original wand had gained in his second wand duel with Voldemort. Such a two-coloured wand would gather too much attention for sure.

And besides - while his fame in the wizarding world had faded, certain details were always good for creating myths. Like a wand with a black tip.

* * *

The paralyzed state of Esmeralda's mind didn't fade. Since that fateful conversation on a three-legged stool, her mind refused to process what her senses registered. Consequently, the events didn't reach her memory, so they weren't stored for something anyone else could do: remember forever the first days at Hogwarts.

Right after the Sorting, she had sat at the Gryffindor table. People had talked to her - students, teachers she knew because they were friends of her parents. She had probably eaten; she could remember her hunger after the long time of waiting for the Hogwarts Express but she couldn't name a single course.

Later that evening, she followed other girls to a dormitory, through a picture that showed an overweight woman who asked them something. It was a password, except that Esmeralda was at a loss to say it. And her roommates - they had names, faces, voices, but Esmeralda couldn't recall their names to save her life.

What she remembered best was the familiarity of this paralysis. Even without clear pictures of the previous events in her mind, she knew that she had encountered similar states at two occasions. One was during the immigration from Mexico into California, when her parents were killed. The other was the kidnapping and subsequent delivery in a linkport at the time when her first adopted parents were killed. It always had been an act of unbearable separation from someone close.

Of course, Carlos wasn't out of the world. The following morning during breakfast, she saw him. There was a faint memory that she had tried to have breakfast together with him, and that some people had told her she couldn't do it, but she didn't even remember if these had been students or teachers.

The situation with Bolo didn't improve matters. Reaching the dormitory with the dog, she'd found herself confronted with complaints from another girl, or maybe two. They'd said they would talk with the Head of Gryffindor because pets beyond a certain size belonged into cages or whatever.

Had she been fully awake, Esmeralda would have earned her first detention for attacking a fellow student, or maybe two.

Had she been fully awake and clever in addition, she would have awaited this talk and its outcome with all calmness of the world - Head of Gryffindor was Hermione Krum, the same who had hosted Esmeralda's two older siblings until some days ago.

When she tried to enter the breakfast hall with the German shepherd, she was told this wasn't allowed, at least not during the meals. Yes, she could take some food as tidbits for the dog, to be fed outside or in her dormitory. She did it in the dormitory, only to earn another complaint from a roommate.

Entering the first classroom of the morning, the fog in Esmeralda's brain lifted a bit because the teacher was Remus Lupin, the same who'd been at Jamaica during holidays, where Sandra and Héloïse had taken care of the Lupin children. Seeing Esmeralda's face, Remus told her she might talk with Donovan, the son of the Lupins, who was second-year in Ravenclaw and who could tell Esmeralda and Carlos better than anyone else what a separation into two different houses exactly meant. This advice reactivated her brain's power sufficiently to follow the teacher.

The course was Charms. The man who, until the day before, had been Remus for Esmeralda, told

the class that his nominal title was "Professor Lupin," that he didn't mind being called "Mr Lupin," and that they all could save time by calling him "Prof."

The students responded with murmuring and beaming and anticipation. Esmeralda wondered if she would be confused enough the first time to call the teacher "Premus."

Then they learned that the first two weeks had a different schedule than the rest of the year. During this fortnight, which almost resembled a seminar, the first-years would exclusively be taught magical courses, to set the basics. Only afterwards, conventional courses like English or Math would regain their rank in the regular schedule.

Then they learned elementary spells like the one that made the tip of the wand glow, thereby providing light in the dark. Professor Lupin darkened the windows, raising ahs and ohs from the students who were successful with their spell, and more desperate sounds from the others.

Esmeralda had no trouble whatsoever making the tip of her acacia wand glow. However, the only thought that filled her mind was lunch as the first chance to see her brother again and talk with Donovan, as Lupin had recommended.

Before the noon break, she met another teacher with a face she'd seen before, as a guest in Carron Lough. It was Samantha Snape, the teacher for Care of Magical Creatures and also the wife of the Deputy Headmaster. She guided the students outside, made them sit on the grass, and asked, "Which of you have pets? Hands up for every pet."

The woman's drawl almost raised a smile on Esmeralda's face, which would have been the first since her arrival in Hogwarts. Her arm went up.

"And which of you have left them at home? Hands down for every poor pet that wasn't brought with you."

Esmeralda sent a glare toward her roommates who had complained about Bolo while keeping her arm in the air.

"Okay - fetch them and come back to us!"

Esmeralda didn't waste time, and was the first to reach the school building. Unfortunately, and very embarrassingly so, she had to wait at the stupid picture with the overweight woman because she couldn't remember the password. Then someone on his way downstairs opened it from the inside, and moments later, still panting, she reached the group that was waiting outside with Bolo at her side.

The teacher came over, winked at Esmeralda as the only sign that she had recognized her, and bent down to stroke the German shepherd.

The girl to the left of Esmeralda said, "What do all these pets have to do with magical creatures? And why is this dog allowed in a dormitory? He stinks!"

Without removing her hands from the German shepherd, the teacher replied, "My name is *Prof*, sweetheart, in case you forgot. And what's your name?"

"Natasha Palmer - er, Prof."

"Well, Miss Palmer, there are so many creatures around, sometimes it's imperative to take care, and sometimes it's imperative to beware. I like to start this course with popular animals to show how terribly wrong we can be to judge an animal's character by its appearance."

The woman put one hand under Bolo's chin so that her fingers could remove the chaps, thereby exposing impressive teeth. "This dog, for example," she continued, "has an intimidating exterior yet he's the best guardian one could imagine in the bedroom of young girls."

Natasha Palmer wrinkled her nose. "But he stinks."

"Does he really?" The teacher grinned. "A wet dog stinks, that's true, so maybe we should start our course with a spell to dry rain-soaked fur, huh?" She sent a glance to Esmeralda, then turned back to Esmeralda's roommate.

"Otherwise, a dog doesn't stink. There's a very fine smell, and even to notice that, you'd have to come very close to the fur. Actually, it's the other way around - from a dog's perspective, we humans stink because we're carnivores, but did you hear that dog complain about you?"

Natasha opened and closed her mouth, too baffled to protest. Her glance, though, made it clear that she might not know what a carnivore was but thought it very bad manners to give her such names.

This scene raised Esmeralda's spirit sufficiently to remain calm for the rest of the morning. Then, at lunch, sitting at the Gryffindor table, she let her eyes wander to locate first her brother and then Donovan, the boy who should explain to them what to expect.

Someone waved at her. It came from the Ravenclaw table, and an instant later, she saw the face that belonged to the waving hand. It was Donovan.

This settled, Esmeralda continued emptying her dish. Strange as it seemed, suddenly her stomach had remembered that she was made of flesh and blood and bones, all of which demanded food.

She let her mind drift and imagined herself, along with Carlos and Bolo and Dona Gata, leaving Hogwarts to wander through the wilderness of North England, on a journey to Carron Lough. It was completely unrealistic, what with their porties that would work half a mile from here, but somehow she was still chewing when suddenly two boys stood behind her seat: her brother and Donovan.

"Hi, Esmeralda," said Donovan. "It's great to see you here at Hogwarts. And it had to be Gryffindor for you, hadn't it?"

"Hello, er, Don," replied Esmeralda, just in time remembering what Sandra had reported, that the old nickname "Donnie" was no longer appreciated by the boy. "This house stuff is just what we'd like to talk about. Where can we talk?"

"Outside, I'd say" - Donovan grinned - "if you ever finish your lunch."

"Just a minute." She looked at Carlos - and next second, she made a face. She had planned to tell him he might use the time and fetch Bolo, but the path to the dog was doubly locked for her brother - because he was a Hufflepuff, not supposed to enter Gryffindor Tower, and because he was a boy, not supposed to enter girls' dormitories. It was maddening.

She filled a dish with a decent amount for a German shepherd and gave it to Carlos. "Here, wait for us just outside."

Then she went upstairs to fetch Bolo, and some minutes later, she was sitting in the grass outside, together with the two boys, and feeding the dog one bite at a time.

Carlos said, "So how is it with the houses? How much do they separate us?"

"How much?" Donovan had to think about this unfamiliar question for a moment. Then he said, "There isn't anything that you don't know yet. You have classes by houses, and you have meals by houses, and in the evening, if you aren't outside like now, you're sitting in the common room of your house. So what else is there?"

"Why can't we sit together in the evening?" asked Esmeralda.

"But you can!" Donovan, who apparently could well imagine hours without his younger sister

Deirdre, looked a bit confused.

"Where?"

"Oh - in the Great Hall, in the Entrance Hall, outside - "

"Can we be together in Gryffindor Tower? Or in Hufflepuff Tower?"

"Dunno ..." Donovan shrugged. "Probably so, only I never tried to visit someone in another house. Why should I?"

Esmeralda felt close to losing patience. She didn't think Donovan was stupid, but he just had no idea of what united her and Carlos, and that exasperated her.

"And the meals? Can we sit together? I don't care at which table."

"Well - it's not forbidden," explained Donovan. "But it's not done either. You would cause so much trouble, other students would look at you and ask you whether you've lost track of where you belong, or something like that."

"So it just doesn't work, huh?"

"Right." Donovan grinned. "Your house is your house. My mother says it's much more open than in her time, but I guess she means how the students think of students in other houses. Hufflepuff, for instance" - he looked at Carlos - "she says that in her time there was a lot of teasing. Today - well, it's more of a joke if you say, 'Stupid Hufflepuff'."

Esmeralda couldn't find anything funny at such a remark. Moreover, she couldn't find any additional reason to waste another hour here. She grabbed for her party.

Donovan saw it. "Doesn't work here in the school. There's a protection field."

"No," explained Esmeralda, "I'm going to use it as a phony. Or does that field prevent phony calls, too?"

"No, of course not. Who are you gonna call?"

"Our father," replied Esmeralda. "I'm going to tell him that he must come and get us out of this school, and to a school where Carlos and I can sit side by side, in classes and during the meals."

* * *

Cho stared at her husband. "That must be a joke," she said, "except that you aren't exactly famous for your humour in such matters."

Harry kept silent.

It drove her almost crazy. She knew that this silence was his method of avoiding a reply that wouldn't improve the atmosphere either, but the knowledge didn't help - not getting an answer destroyed her composure quicker than any insult she might have imagined.

"Lost your tongue?" she snarled. "Maybe as a bonus to this magnificent mark on your - "

"No."

She made her eyebrows rise in mock astonishment. "Ah, Monsieur le Professeur feels like responding! Such an honour for this stupid little Chinese. Then please, tell me - are you simply mad or is this an elaborate attempt to provoke me?"

"You might be surprised to hear that certain people, at certain moments, do certain things without wasting a single thought on you. In other words, they aren't interested in provoking you, they aren't interested in entertaining you, they aren't interested in you at all ... at certain moments."

Harry's voice sounded calm; a neutral observer might have called it well-tempered. But Cho knew him long enough to notice the unnatural flatness which revealed the fury inside him.

A moment ago, it might have given her some satisfaction, enough to scale down her own style of conversation. Unfortunately, his remark had scored a hit. She snapped, "These are my children as much as yours. If it's about switching from one school to another, I have a saying - "

"That's why I'm here," he interrupted her, "to talk with you - "

"And that's your only reason?" she interrupted the interruption. "Until recently, you called this bloody castle home!"

"I still do." A light sneer played around his lips. "But occasionally, I'm off, and sometimes, I'm off for a longer while - except that I can be found on the continent rather than on an island, to list *one* difference between you and me."

She tried to read his expression, to understand what he implied ... Was he doing it on purpose? Or was it just -

"But to come back to the point, no, I'm not mad. Carlos and Esmeralda want to leave Hogwarts because that stupid hat sorted them into two different houses. They asked me for help - it's as simple as that."

"Not quite," corrected Cho. "Leaving Hogwarts is one thing. Sending them to that school in Brest is something else, and it's a step I'm not willing to take."

"Why not? That's what they want."

Again, Cho examined her husband's expression. He couldn't possibly be so naive as to expect that this half-baked idea from two eleven-year-olds with an unclear dream about following their adopted father's example would find her approval. She felt like she was listening to a blackmailer, one who used euphemisms to express his demand and gain her support.

After a moment of silence, she said, "They've heard too many stories about Harry Potter, the hero. They want to join his newest adventure. But that's not going to happen, because I don't agree. End of discussion."

"Oh no. It has only just begun."

The temperature had dropped quite a few degrees in Harry's voice. Cho stared at him with some consternation. The growing storm didn't come unexpected - since her memory had made the connection between the mark in Harry's face and the mark in the face of a local wood cutter on Vancouver Island, she had been waiting for it. However, she had expected a tornado rather than a blizzard, a pulling off balance rather than a freezing in place.

As if there was any balance left right now.

"Whatever's going on at the Ecole Gênes can't take too long to be figured out," continued Harry in an almost dismissive tone. "A few months at the maximum. We can afford it, they can afford it, and it will give them something they didn't have before - it will balance out some differences between them and our biological children."

Balance again ... Cho knew what Harry was talking about. Sandra and Gabriel had superior magical powers while Esmeralda and Carlos were *ordinary children*, so to speak, who sometimes might feel inferior to their adoptive siblings. But she wasn't ready to accept the argument, for matters of priority.

"In case it didn't register, let me spell it out for you - I don't agree. Is this clear enough?"

"In case it didn't register, let me remind you - I promised them I would help, and I'm going to keep my promise."

"As if you couldn't help by sending them to a normal school! Beauxbatons would be a choice, joining Gabriel at the Goblins' school would be - "

"One of these schools will be the eventual choice, that's right." Harry's voice grew more steely.

"After a period of some weeks or months during which they encounter the adventure of their young life - "

Cho opened her mouth to protest, to remind Harry that several sets of killed parents might qualify for life-time adventures even better, or worse - too much. But Harry had anticipated that.

" - an adventure that's worth its name, one where people don't get killed."

"I recall there being some suicides."

A ghostly smile appeared on Harry's face. "So you listened more attentively than you let on, huh? Don't worry, the beauty of this plan is that I'll never be farther from them than by a few steps or minutes. That's closer than I could be in any other school, and it'll be a smoother transit for getting used to boarding school."

Almost choking on her own anger and frustration, Cho replied, "What's the sense in arguing? You're not going to let go of this crazy idea, and I'm not going to agree. It's an impasse."

"Is it?"

A cold feeling crept up her spine. "What do you mean? If you decided to do what you want, no matter what I'll say, what's the point of having this conversation?"

Harry sighed wearily. "You are confusing - no, I guess we both were confusing two things that should be kept separated. One is the issue of Carlos and Esmeralda, and the other is our own problem. If we can - "

"Forget it!" A short and bitter laugh escaped Cho's throat. "One of them makes me furious, and the other drives me crazy. If you can distinguish them, then you can do more than I. No way, José."

Harry looked calm. "In this case, you were right in one statement. There's no sense in continuing this conversation, because I only wanted to discuss our children with you. I had no intention of starting the big clean-up of our relationship."

Cho stared at her husband in disbelief. "You're cutting me off from this decision?"

"Decision? What decision?"

The calmness was fading even in Harry's face. "It was the bloody hat's decision to put them into separate houses. It was their decision not to accept this separation, and it was by some accident that my job at that school in Brest and their refusal to stay at Hogwarts coincided. For reasons you know well enough, I'm not going to play the family dictator, and I'm not going to let you play it."

"So they can do what they want, and you just nod and say, 'Fine?' And you call that education?"

At these words, an expression appeared in Harry's face that would have scared smaller souls than Cho's. He hissed, "Don't tell me what's education ... And don't tell me anything about who can do what."

Suddenly she was calm herself, as though she had reached the eye of the storm. "Do you mean something in particular?"

Silence.

"I know that you've been in the Vancouver Resort! Sitting at the bar, dressed like a wood cutter -

and I didn't recognize you, which is pretty much what you wanted, isn't that so?" Her voice turned shrill. "And I can't help thinking that it's that scene that's running in your mind, because - "

"Stop it!" Harry rose. "I told you, I'm not ready to discuss our relationship today."

"Why not? I might have very interesting news to tell."

"You think so? You really think you can tell me something I don't know yet?" Air popped into the space that had been occupied by Harry's body an instant before.

Cho fought the urge to scream out her fury, for not being able to tell him what she had in mind. A moment later, bitterness welled up in her. Condemned without a hearing ... She should return to Vancouver Island on the spot - ready to commit any crime of which she wasn't guilty yet.

* * *

Harry glanced around in this room he hadn't seen for many years. It looked different from what he remembered ... Smaller, which was normal because his main memory dated back to a time when he'd been a boy of eleven. And more orderly, which was normal as well, considering the room's resident since a few years.

And, of course, the biggest change - there was no longer a phoenix to welcome him, to fly over and sit on his shoulder. Fawkes had left with his owner.

He was at Hogwarts, sitting in the Headmaster's office. Except that the new Headmaster was a Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall, who sat opposite him and beamed.

"I'm more than pleased to see you, Mr Potter. After all these years!"

Despite himself, Harry felt a boyish grin creep into his face. "Hello, Prof - please call me Harry, otherwise I'll start wondering which rule I broke this time."

Professor McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor in his time, nodded in confirmation but didn't stop beaming. "That's true, Harry - although I'd be somewhat disappointed if your visit had to do with ordinary business."

That shook him. "What? Er, sorry, Prof."

McGonagall laughed. "Think back, Harry - whenever we met or talked outside classes, it was because of something irregular. Although I have to admit that it was me who started the habit, when I picked you as the Seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

He smiled. "Yes."

The old lady flushed a bit. "I owe you, Harry, because from you I learned that rules are only good if you know when you have to break them."

"That wasn't me!" he protested. "That was Professor Dumbledore more than anyone else. By the way, how is he?"

"He's an old man, and happily so, enjoying the quiet evening of an eventful life. And you, Harry? How is your family? I'm afraid we haven't seen as much of them here as we hoped."

Harry felt his own cheeks flush. "I'm sorry, Prof, but you know, with both Sandra and Gabriel things developed not quite as expected by anyone - "

The Headmistress' raised hand stopped him. "I know," she said. "It was more of a joke - of course I have my own sources of information about the most remarkable student who ever left Hogwarts."

Seeing the uneasiness in his face, McGonagall grinned. "I didn't say 'most famous,' mind - this title goes to Voldemort for sure because people will remember him longer than they remember you."

Harry looked relieved. "That's okay. I really prefer not being recognized in the streets."

The witch sobered up a bit. "Is that the reason for the changes in your face, Harry?"

"Er - yes and no, Prof." He felt his cheeks heating again. "Until a few days ago, I looked normal, because even so I could go unnoticed most of the time. This appearance" - he pointed at his forehead - "is a kind of mask, that's true, but for another reason."

Harry had planned to talk about his primary issue first and hadn't known in advance how much he should tell the Headmistress about his plans. But he continued by telling her his and Ron's plan, all the time feeling a tiny bit dishonest because the issue of his own children was still pending.

When he paused, after explaining that he would spend some time as a teacher at the French school, Professor McGonagall smiled warmly. "That's so typical of you, Harry ... And of Ron too, by the way. At any rate, I'm sure you will solve the mystery in time. Even today you give me reason to be proud of you."

He felt miserable. "Hold it, Prof - once you've heard me to the end, you won't be proud any longer."

"That's hard to believe, Harry."

"Then listen to this, Prof. I have to take Carlos and Esmeralda away from Hogwarts."

The smile faded from the Headmistress' face. "Why?"

"Because of the Sorting Hat." He explained how his children were sorted into different houses, how they had called him, and what promise he'd given them in advance.

McGonagall looked disappointed. "But ... They'd have different dormitories anyway. Why can't they visit each other? Aren't the houses open to guests?"

Harry shrugged. "They talked with Donovan, the son of Remus and Almyra. According to what he said, the houses seem as closed as they were in my time. What might look natural to me is considered an outdated system by Carlos and Esmeralda. You know, both Sandra and Gabriel made huge efforts to join classes with their respective friends, Héloïse and Michel. Carlos and Esmeralda are closer than most biological siblings - "

McGonagall nodded. "I know their story, Harry."

"So you know why I can't break my promise. Maybe it's just a little while - rumour has it that someone from Gryffindor and someone from another house can spend a lot of time together ..."

When the Headmistress smiled sympathetically at these words, Harry felt like a liar.

"... but in the meantime, there's no choice. And what's more, Prof, they want to join me at that school in Brest. They want to show up there in their own kind of disguise in order to help me, as they said ..."

Seeing the expression of disbelief on McGonagall's face, Harry finished quickly, "... and, well, Prof, I wanted to ask you for help in that matter."

She swallowed. "You can't be - " She stopped herself, then started again, "Of course you're serious, always have been." She sighed. "What do you expect from me?"

"Well, Carlos and Esmeralda must be declared magically handicapped in order to qualify for that school, that's obvious. In addition to this, I thought it would be best to specify that they are children who lost their parents - it's true, in a way, and that their being in an English school is quite accidental. After all, their mother was French, their father Spanish - okay, so he was Spanish-American, but no point in mentioning that - therefore they would feel more at home in a French or

Spanish environment. Something like that, Prof - together with Ron's help, it should be no problem."

"Children without parents, huh?" McGonagall looked unhappy. "Are you setting them up on purpose?"

"You mean by presenting them as somehow unprotected? But they aren't, Prof - I'll be around all the time, it would take me a few seconds to reach them in case of an urgency."

The Headmistress kept silent for a little while. Then she looked up. "You don't know what you're doing to me, Harry."

"I'm sorry, Prof - I told you that you wouldn't be proud of - "

"No, you don't understand." For McGonagall to interrupt him, it really had to be something that went deeper than losing two famous students. After another short silence, she said, "For years, I had the opportunity to watch how a man I deeply admired was setting up a young boy. That man had the best reasons of the world, but prima facie it was the opposite of what a teacher and Headmaster was supposed to do. That boy was you, Harry, and the outcome is known history."

He waited silently for her to continue.

"At some point during those years, or maybe afterwards, I developed a kind of envy, what you might even call jealousy. I said to myself, 'Some day I'll have the opportunity to do something similar, and if the day arrives, I hope I will have learned my lesson from my own teacher.' I swore to myself to jump over my own shadow, should I be offered the chance."

"I wasn't aware, Prof. If I had known ..."

McGonagall mastered a little smile. "Maybe it's good you didn't know, Harry. Just between you and me, I'm scared in the proverbial sense of my own recklessness, but you being the one who asks me, who's giving me this chance - I take it as a good omen. Sending your children to that school is madness, somehow, but ... What's your wife's comment on that plan?"

"Erm - calling her angry would be a euphemism."

McGonagall looked almost pleased. "In a strange sense, that's an even better omen, Harry - I remember the day when she was shouting at me - at me! - for setting you up. All right - I'll help you, and bite my nails only if nobody's around."

"Thank you, Prof." Only with some effort could Harry manage a smile of encouragement. For him, McGonagall's final argument had all ingredients for backfiring any moment. Keeping silent now made him feel like a liar more than any word he'd said, or swallowed, during the entire conversation.

Even so, he wasn't going to shy off.

* * *

When Carlos came down to the Great Hall for dinner, something made him look to the passage that separated this hall from the Entrance Hall. A man was leaning against a pillar there, a man with a familiar-looking discolouration on his face. His father.

Carlos started to beam, his step speeding up to hurry over. Next moment, he slowed down again and tried to look cool and bored - the figure had made an almost imperceptible gesture that indicated he was to avoid being noticed.

He reached the figure. "Hi, Dad." The words came in a whisper; Carlos was proud that he could produce them without moving his lips.

His father motioned him around the pillar, out of sight from the Great Hall. "Hi, Carlos. Please tell your sister that I'll wait outside, near the lake, for both of you."

"Okay." Excitement rose in Carlos. "She'll be downstairs within the next five minutes - "

"No, have dinner as usual, and let her have her own dinner. Tell her after the meal, then come out to meet me." After a short smile and a gentle push on his son's shoulder, Harry headed for the exit.

Carlos watched him leave for another moment, exhaled deeply, and strolled back to the Hufflepuff table. He sat down, waiting for the dinner to start and for his excitement to calm down.

Their father was here. For him and Esmeralda, the meaning was obvious. Having been called for help, Harry had come to take them to another school. Carlos didn't believe that their father could talk the Sorting Hat into another arrangement. So it could only be another school.

The one in Brest?

Carlos himself had been the one to express the idea first, that he and Esmeralda would join that school as students in disguise. At the time, it had been little more than a joke. But Esmeralda had caught on to the idea. She had emphasized it, and when she had called for help the other day, she had mentioned it as if it were the only feasible alternative to her being stuck in Gryffindor while her brother was in Hufflepuff.

Carlos wondered how much he liked the idea, now that it seemed to come true.

He wasn't scared. Their father would be there, and besides, he didn't get scared easily and even less so since the events which had lost him his real parents, when he'd had the opportunity to see things to be really scared of. But he was concerned.

This particular talent, being concerned for his sister and for himself, had put him into Hufflepuff - so much he'd understood since the Sorting. And now ... Of course, it still could be any other school, Sandra's or Gabriel's or another, but there had been something in his father's face and voice and mind that made Carlos dismiss this possibility at once.

Would he miss Hogwarts? Hufflepuff?

After these few days, it seemed unlikely. But the time had at least been enough to give him an impression of a new quality - a life in which he shared hours with people other than his sister. Nice people, actually. And truth be told, the Gryffindors hadn't chased him off, hadn't even laughed at him - it wasn't impossible to spend an evening in Gryffindor Tower, provided someone let him in because the sympathy didn't extend to the point of telling him the keyword.

Not even Esmeralda had told him, nor had he told her the one for Hufflepuff Tower. House solidarity did strange things to twins, even to twins by fate rather than birth.

During the meal, he kept silent, listening to the chatter of his roommate Martin at the left and the replies from Kenzie, a snub-nosed girl opposite, who occasionally sent him a glance to check whether he would laugh about the same jokes. At least he noticed that much, between his own glances over to the Gryffindor table where he suspected a similar scene was taking place.

When the noise level in the hall rose again, indicating that more people had switched to chewing words rather than food, Carlos waited until he saw Esmeralda glancing over to him. Then he stood up and walked to the exit to the Entrance Hall after signaling his sister that he would wait for her.

It took a bit longer than Carlos had expected. Seeing Esmeralda coming around the corner, he also saw the reason for the delay - Bolo at her side, what else?

"That's just the right time to come with the dog," he said, rising from his seat. "Someone's waiting

for us outside, at the lake."

"Who? Daddy?"

Another brother, toward another sister, might have made it a teasing game. Carlos could only nod. "Yes."

Girl and dog stormed forward; he followed. Outside, the German shepherd was busy sniffing along the way but only for a few seconds, then he caught something that made him run along the path, nose tight above ground. When they reached him again, Bolo was sitting there, receiving Harry's caresses as he watched them come closer.

"Daddy!" Esmeralda went into her father's hug, for just a few seconds before she asked, "Did you come to help us?"

"Yes."

"Can we come with you? To that school in Brest?"

"Yes." Carlos stared at his father in a mix of admiration and anxiety while Esmeralda hugged him again with seemingly undivided enthusiasm.

"But," said Harry.

"Huh?"

"There is a big *but* to this help. To come to that school, incognito of course, you must be handicapped, as you know. But you aren't handicapped. Not yet."

Carlos stared at his father in alarm. *Not yet??*

Esmeralda made it simpler. "What do you mean?"

"Very simple. You must lose your magic."

That did the trick. Esmeralda made a half-step backward to stare at her father in disbelief. "Lose our magic? You can't lose your magic ... And I don't want to lose my magic."

Carlos felt pretty much the same. Well, maybe not quite - Esmeralda loved every minute she spent using her acacia wand, while for him, it was just another class, not so different from Math.

"You can lose your magic," said Harry at this moment. "Of course not completely, you have to be handicapped, not a squib. And not forever, just for the time on this school. But otherwise that's the only way - we can't let you appear with some fake wands, because the first time you'd be forced to use another wand you'd reveal your true nature." He put his hands on Esmeralda's shoulders. "We can find another school for you, where you two will be in the same class, no problem there. Eventually, we'll have to do that anyway, because your time in Brest will be as limited as my own. But if you want to join me in this particular undercover work, your magic must be close to zero."

He looked at Carlos, back at Esmeralda. "So what shall it be?"

Had Carlos been asked first, he would have said, *I'll do what Esmeralda is going to do*. His father knew of course, and saved time and embarrassment by asking the girl first. However, there was no question about Carlos' own preference - for him, just staying at Hogwarts seemed more agreeable by the second.

Esmeralda exhaled deeply. "Brest."

From the outside, what happened then was rather unspectacular. They walked farther down the lake, out of the protection field around Hogwarts. Harry summoned them to Israel, to the place where the High Priestess rested in her lifetime-preserving environment while she wasn't needed. It was a crusader castle near the Lake Tiberias.

When Aram'chee appeared shortly afterwards, Harry explained to her what they wanted. The High Priestess looked at Carlos and Esmeralda, and when they nodded in agreement, she just touched them - smiling and reassuring them that the fever they'd get wasn't half as dangerous as the versions fourteen years ago, when Aram'chee and the Potter family had met for the first time.

After returning to the lake, they sat down for a few minutes, and Harry explained to them what would happen. The fever would probably start during the night, or the following morning. They would come through after two days or so, and afterwards, their spells would be nearly powerless. But the Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, knew what was going on, and she would handle the issue from inside.

For an instant, Carlos pondered the idea of asking his father how his mother had reacted to this plan. But he knew the answer, aside from a few details, and so it was his turn to save time and embarrassment.

09 - School Routine

Back at Beauxbatons, it took Sandra almost two days before she found an opportunity to talk with Frédéric alone. The second day after classes, Frédéric asked her whether she would like to join him on a shopping trip to the University bookstore. She said yes; neither of the other two people in their workgroup - Benoît and Héloïse - had shown the indecency to invite themselves on that trip, and now Sandra was sitting opposite Frédéric in a street cafe.

A million more students crowded the streets, bars, and cafes here in the University quarter. Term had just started, so there was still money in the pockets, giving the waiters a lot to do.

Sandra had a café au lait in front of her, nothing else, as she didn't like the cake that was offered here. In a little while, she would develop a ravenous hunger, and by then, she should have made up her mind what to do with Frédéric. She could invite him to the Weasleys, she could invite him to Carron Lough, or she could invite him to something local, maybe one of these Arabian restaurants in the Latin Quarter. She didn't know yet; it would depend on how the conversation went.

Frédéric sipped at his own coffee, sent a quick glance to her, put his cup down, and finally looked up again. "So how was your vacation, really?"

For an instant, Sandra pondered the idea of asking what he meant; after all, she and Héloïse had spent some time during the last two days telling about the past weeks, Gabriel's band playing a major role in these tales. But obviously, Frédéric's sharp mind had found some hints in these tales, despite their efforts to make them sound nice and smooth and slightly boring. Playing dumb now would have been a breach of style at the least - and besides, was there any reason not to answer honestly? If someone had something to hide, then only Héloïse from Benoît. Still ...

"Close to a disaster," she replied with a wry smile. "The last part with the Dragonfly people was okay ... No, it was great actually. Those two girls and what they think and what they said, that was fun. While in Sav'-la-mar ..." She paused, looking for words neutral enough to be quoted by Frédéric to his friend Benoît, volunteer slave at Héloïse's feet.

"You ran away from there, didn't you?"

His question told her which detail had given away the truth. Her arrival in Bulgaria, days before Héloïse had followed, said "escape" loud and clear to a listener as attentive as Frédéric. In addition, as she became aware, it left little space for hiding the reason. Only her own situation prior to her travelling wasn't outlined yet.

And, no doubt, this particular outline was the most interesting part for the young man opposite her.

She grinned. "It wasn't Ma Benedict who put me to flight." The grin grew broader. "And no admirer either, although I can only blame myself for that - which I'm ready to do any time, considering the options. I hope you can follow my drift."

"Easily." Frédéric somehow forgot to grin in return. "So someone else had fun while not you, and before this unbalanced state could drive you nuts, you left." He produced the curious look of a ten-year-old. "Were the alternatives that awful? Or was there nothing left you'd call acceptable?"

Sandra sighed. "Imagine two girls, at the beach. And imagine two boys, friends as close as the girls. And imagine a disco there - "

"Pretty much what I imagined often enough, these weeks." The words came lightly and Frédéric's grin, there at last, looked effortless enough to fool most people.

"And one of them uses personal charm and the other thinks a doped drink's enough." Sandra snorted. "Except that Ma Benedict had taken pains to avoid just that, with a dope tester in the shape

of a fruit picker."

"I hope you killed him right there." If these words were meant as a joke, Frédéric showed remarkably little amusement.

"Well, unfortunately not. Not a single bone was broken on that occasion. Don't ask me why ... Maybe because he was a Muggle."

"A Muggle!" You had to be French to express so much disgust and contempt in one word, and a you had to be Frédéric to do so into Sandra's face.

"Racist." She smiled, feeling better than a few minutes before.

"Well then," Frédéric replied, "let's move on to something totally different. What are your plans for this year?"

This year meant their last school year at Beauxbatons, and the question as well as the way how it was introduced presented multiple layers of meaning, expertly glued together. A light smile on Frédéric's lips, not reaching his eyes, confirmed that none of these implications came by accident.

The keyword *Muggles*, for instance, and the subsequent claim to have changed the subject completely were strong hints toward the true topic in Frédéric's question. Sandra was the designated successor of the High Priestess. The Muggles were approaching extinction, the care for them and the termination of the High Priestess' eon-old role were on top of the future agenda, and all these factors together had cast a shadow on the relationship between Sandra and Frédéric from day one, six years ago.

Nonetheless, they were boyfriend and girlfriend from an outside perspective and, to an uncertain degree, from their own as well. This degree, and its possible rise or decline in the months they had left together, was the nucleus of Frédéric's question, asked right after Sandra had described how a Jamaica tourist failed to reach a certain significance in his own degree, if only once.

Expressed in even simpler words, Frédéric wanted to know if there was a realistic chance that they'd make love to each other before the end of the term that had started a few days ago.

Was there? They were old enough. They were mature enough. They trusted each other for sure, and if the mutual affection ran at different levels, then at least both levels met the *minimum quota* for this particular purpose. So why not? Why not right now, or the same evening?

"I'm not sure yet," answered Sandra in response to both the spoken and unspoken question. "To some extent, I'm open for suggestions ..." She sent a glance to the other side of the table to tell Frédéric that yes, she had noticed the careful wrapping and was responding to it.

Before he had a chance to provide suggestions of any kind, she continued, "What I know for sure is that I want to do theatre, in our Theatre Group. That's long-term, within the scope of this year. Then I want to go with you to the Dragonfly concert day after tomorrow. That's short-term."

This concert, highly unusual so early after the start of term, was really a short-term affair. Announced only yesterday, with posters showing a girl with a microphone in hand, the concert was supposed to send the message that Dragonfly now had a singer. A less public reason was to let Caitlin become used to stage performance before she even found the time to become more nervous than was reasonable.

"And when this cup's empty I want to go with you to a place where they offer large chunks of food. That's now-term, so - "

"Now-term?"

"Yes. Or get-up-term. Also known as *right away*."

Frédéric lifted his cup in a gesture as if emptying it and getting ready to follow. Then he stopped and put the cup down again.

"Large chunks of food is okay. But you have to follow my guidance as well as my invitation."

Something in his tone made Sandra examine his expression more carefully than this not-so-unusual remark justified. "So you're suddenly an expert in food temples here around?"

"Yes I am."

"And you're suddenly so rich that you can invite me in this state of starvation?"

"Yes I am."

Neither Sandra nor Frédéric had ever lived with truly empty pockets for a week, not to mention a longer period. On the other hand, both of them had been raised by parents who believed in the educational value of limited budgets. So a state of being more afloat than usual was as attractive - and as rare - for them as for children of lesser wealth. Therefore, Sandra's question was predictable.

"How come?"

"Very simple. I jobbed during the holidays, as a tourist guide here in Paris."

"Oh." Now Frédéric had Sandra's full attention. "But you didn't bother to mention it in the past two days, did you?"

"Well - " He showed a sloped smile. "In a way, I had the same reasons as you not talking about this disco evening and how things developed afterwards."

"What?"

"I'm talking about Benoît."

Sandra relaxed in her seat, at once aware of what Frédéric explained in more words.

"He certainly had harder work to do than I, only he did it at home and for his parents or for their farm and of course without being paid. So I wasn't in a hurry to make things worse for him."

"I see." Sandra leaned back, eager to learn more about Frédéric as a working class hero. "So you led tourists through Paris. And that's a job where you can get rich?"

"Not from the salary alone," laughed Frédéric, "that's for sure. But there are the tips, and with the right clientele - "

"Only the high and mighty for our noble Frédéric, am I right?"

"Exactly." It was always a dangerous game to be sniffy toward Frédéric, and he didn't fail to prove it once more. "Even so, what you can get from regular business is limited. But there were the escort jobs."

Sandra stared in disbelief. "Escort, huh?"

"Yes." Frédéric's smile was a bit malicious.

"For middle-aged women, I suppose." The temperature in Sandra's voice had dropped considerably.

"Not quite. My typical customer was a girl of sixteen or so."

"Girls of sixteen don't spend a fortune in tips," replied the present member of this species with acid in her voice.

Frédéric watched Sandra's face for a moment. Then, as if she had agreed never to snap at him again,

he explained, "Imagine there's a wealthy family with a daughter who's no longer a child but not yet old enough to have her own vacation. Or a lone father with such a daughter. Father and daughter follow the guide all day long. But in the evening, the father could do without the daughter on his heels, if you get my bearing."

"Loud and clear."

"So what to do with the girl? Parking her in the hotel doesn't work; she won't stay there. That's where TOSCA kicks in."

"Tosca?"

"Yes. It stands for Tourist Scout Agency, the service that had hired me. They offer reliable escorts of comparable social level and education, and if these escorts deliver the girl alive and well and - erm, unchanged, so to speak, the father is awfully grateful."

"Yeah, I bet." Sandra watched Frédéric's face thoughtfully.

"That's how I learned to know a bunch of first-rate places in Paris for this and that, food for example. And thanks to all these grateful parents, I can offer you the full spectrum - financially, I mean. Can we go now?"

She stood up to follow her guide, a thousand more questions in her mind. For a moment, however, she felt unable to dismiss a disquieting thought. Rich parents' daughters came in all varieties, and the fact that a sixteen-year-old accompanied her parents on a trip to Paris didn't mean she'd never heard of hotel rooms booked by the hour.

Maybe just the opposite.

* * *

Gabriel took the flute from his lips. Despite the applause that roared behind the blinding spotlights, he didn't bow. Someone else bowed - a girl, somewhat shaky still, but ages past the nervousness of her first minutes, now that her first concert as a singer was almost over. Caitlin.

"Thank you. Thank you," her voice beamed into the microphone. Coming up from the next bow, she swallowed, then said, "Okay, folks, this is the time when I'm supposed to tell you the names of the other people behind me on stage. Only this is a bad joke somehow because I'm the youngest member in this marvellous band, and I'm pretty sure you know all the names by heart. But to keep the tradition," Caitlin's arm pointed at the figure on the four-legged stool, "Tomas with the guitar ..."

The applause grew again.

"... Héloïse, the angel with the Goblin harp ..."

Deafening noise, whistles, shouts.

"... her brother Michel with his drums and percussion ..."

More applause, joyful shouts in response to Michel crossing two sledges above his head.

"... and the one who lured me into this band even without using his magical flute - Gabriel!"

Caitlin reached Gabriel with a few steps and took his hand. Together they marched to the stage front. There, they bowed hand in hand into a last wave of uncoordinated applause before the audience fell into a chanting rhythm, demanding the unavoidable encore.

The Dragonfly Five were prepared for it. They had rehearsed a song in a new arrangement, not playing it in the regular program, to the loudly exclaimed disapproval of some listeners. It was the piece Caitlin had selected when challenging Héloïse. Caitlin raised her hand and held the microphone close to her mouth, waiting while the chanting died to make room for expectant silence.

"Okay, one more song. As you might have noticed, we're still short of lyrics for the original Dragonfly songs, that's why this evening you had the choice between Dragonfly pure and me singing traditionals. But there's one song in which we already can do better. It's 'Seagulls in the Wind' ..."

A short storm of approval rose and calmed down to another silence.

"... and as we found out, there's an old Irish song which is a perfect match to provide the lyrics. Originally it's called 'The Wind Dried My Tears'. Next time we'll have lyrics of our own, but don't be surprised if this particular arrangement will be kept. You might call it 'Seagulls in the Wind That Dried My Tears'."

Despite her words, Caitlin kept silent at first while Gabriel started the intro on his flute. The audience responded with a mix of satisfaction, at recognizing the missed song, and disappointment, because it wasn't the version they knew.

Tomas took over the theme on his guitar, passing it further to a few drum beats from Michel before a moment of silence prepared the ground for Héloïse and her harp. And into the rich flood of sounds as clear as a bell, into the swelling and ebbing rose Caitlin's voice, heartbreakingly sad.

She sang of love and sorrow, first to the harp and then, apparently not finding consolation from there, to the guitar. When this instrument couldn't give her comfort either, her mourning turned to the flute, which took it over, framed it, shaped it, phrased it before fading away to give room for harp and voice alone, finishing the song.

There was a moment of breathless silence, quickly followed by a final tumultuous applause. It ebbed away only after the Dragonfly members had disappeared behind the stage.

The number of backstage people had grown. Rebecca went to Caitlin and hugged her, at first not getting response because Caitlin seemed shaken by some kind of after-shock. Rebecca's boyfriend Matthew and his friend Tobin started to dismount the gear, moments later joined by Desmond for the sound equipment. Gabriel watched idly and in a state of mental exhaustion. Then he saw Sandra arrive, closely followed by Frédéric and Benoît. The two boys in her trail seemed equally ready to help or to hang around.

Gabriel knew that Ireen was somewhere downstage as the only person behind a stand where the audience could buy the former two Dragonfly albums on CD. Considering their outdated state - only instruments, no singer - a reasonable fan would wait for the next album, but Gabriel had wised up enough to know that *fan* and *reasonable* were contradictory by definition. So he stepped forward and greeted the newcomers.

"Hi folks. Could you please join Ireen somewhere down there and help her selling albums? I guess she's nearly run over by now."

Sandra turned to the two young men in her trail. "That's your job. I'm going to make sure that we all get seats in the cafeteria in a little while. Something like a separate corner, but open enough so the autograph fans can come and ask."

"Oh - yes, right, that had slipped my mind," Gabriel confessed before the other three disappeared on different paths, with that of Benoît passing the corner where Héloïse was busy storing her precious instrument in a protective box.

Ever so slowly, the numbness faded from Gabriel's mind. Some days ago, when discussing the next steps with their new and inexperienced singer, their first idea had been a concert at their own school, which was run by the Goblins. Then Ireen had suggested Beauxbatons, saying, "It's at such a short notice that we shouldn't expect too much. Maybe it's more like a public rehearsal. But

Beauxbatons is so much bigger than the Goblins school, might be we gather enough audience to have a real concert atmosphere."

Well, thought Gabriel, that had been an understatement, if there ever was one. Maybe they would find out why - it couldn't be Caitlin for sure, it couldn't be Dragonfly alone, and the combination of both was something new even for themselves. Maybe there was a simple reason, something like a deep desire to join in a social event after the long summer break, an event as different from the school's official start-of-term meeting as possible.

Gabriel walked over to Caitlin, who seemed to have recovered. He had time for a grin and the thumbs-up sign, then she almost knocked him over with her hug in response. Even so, he saw no reason to send a soothing mind wave - these were moments to be kept undiluted.

Caitlin had already treated Tomas and Michel in a similar way and was approaching Héloïse when Sandra returned, again escorted by two young men, considerably bulkier than Frédéric and Benoît.

"Dragonfly, listen!"

Having gained everyone's attention, Sandra continued, "You are all invited to the cafeteria. I guess the artists should follow the invitation instantly and let the other people do their job here."

Rebecca had as much experience with her backstage manager job as Caitlin on stage, therefore she didn't object at all to the undemanded support and nodded in vigorous agreement.

"... These two dwarfs here are César and André; they will escort you through the crowd and into the cafeteria. I'm told autograph hunters come with their own pens, so just follow them and write your share until the rest of the team can join you there."

César and André smiled and nodded.

Watching them, Gabriel had to suppress a childish giggle. They looked perfectly normal, and approaching Héloïse and Caitlin to escort them to the cafeteria was the most natural behaviour for any team of males up and down their age. But his sister's words had reminded Gabriel of this old show-biz joke about "the largest dwarfs of the world." Following them together with Michel and Tomas, he could stay calm only with some effort.

For the three boys alone, it might have been possible to reach the cafeteria unnoticed. With Héloïse, though, there was no way this would happen. The people crossing their path invariably showed the same reactions: the Veela was recognized first, by her hair. Then a closer examination of the group, inevitably resulting in the recognition of Caitlin. From there it took only a minor mental effort to map the three male faces to the players with the instruments they'd watched until a few minutes ago. The band members could practise their signatures on papers, CD cases, caps, and whatnot already before they got a chance to sit down.

The Beauxbatons cafeteria offered various drinks including bottled beers and wines, three kinds of baguette sandwiches, and a half dozen brands of sweets and cakes. The large room was split into smaller units by moveable walls with posters, by benches with plants, and by low platforms with the sole purpose of breaking the big-room monotony. The tables were of solid wood; the chairs had less sturdy metal legs and plastic seats and backrests. Of course, their seats were on one of the platforms, about one foot above the regular floor.

Gabriel sat down. When asked what drink he wanted, he replied, "A large coke," then he could watch how the number of autograph hunters was shrinking quickly. Somehow it put things back into proportion. Sure, they were an evening event, but they weren't celebrities, and a lot of those who had asked for autographs from Héloïse or Caitlin might have done so only to find an excuse for

a short exchange of words, and for fetching a personal smile from them.

Although - beaming was more like it, in Caitlin's case.

The three sales clerks - Ireen, Frédéric, and Benoît - were the next to arrive, accompanied by Sandra. They reported another hundred or so albums sold. Then came Matthew and Tobin, shortly afterwards followed by Desmond and Rebecca.

With their group complete, Gabriel was ready to go for his own share of baguette sandwiches. On his way to the counter, he passed a girl sitting alone at a table. The way she looked, and the way she felt in Gabriel's mind, made him think she was desperately craving for an autograph but too timid to ask. When his eyes met hers, she quickly looked away.

On his way back from the counter, she looked anywhere but in his direction. It could have been perfectly normal for any student sitting in the cafeteria, but it was paired with something only Gabriel's special senses could reveal: the girl's full attention was on him and his every step back to his seat.

Sitting at his table, munching a cheese baguette, he pondered over the girl, who sat in a position where she could watch him, seemingly unnoticed, while he had to turn his head to do the same. And watch she did, unwaveringly.

Such people weren't unknown to him. Normally it was nothing personal; they were drawn by roles they admired, or envied. But somehow this case felt different. From his careful mental investigation, Gabriel got the impression the girl was determined to do whatever it was she had on her mind, and that she meant him personally, rather than him being a Dragonfly stage artist.

Still not responding to the girl's stare, he sent a mental note to his sister. A moment later, Sandra walked over to his corner of the table, urged Michel to switch seats for a while, and sat down.

"All right, little brother, how do you like the welcome from Beauxbatons?"

"It's great. All these people, and they wanted even autographs." Lowering his voice, he continued, "Somewhere to my right, on the way to the food counter, there's a girl who's staring at me constantly."

Sandra made a show of inspecting Gabriel's plate of two more baguette sandwiches, then staring over at the counter, seemingly arguing with herself before shaking her head, as if her good intention to fight some non-existent fat had kept the upper hand. Then she smiled and said, "Got her. For all I can sense, she simply has a crush on you."

Gabriel suppressed an incredulous sneer. "Come on, Sandy - she must be fifteen at the very least, if not older. A crush on me, that's ridiculous. It must be something else."

Sandra's smile turned softer. "Soon you'll learn that the idea isn't ridiculous at all, but anyway, I can't detect any other reason. It's not simple curiosity, that's for sure - "

Gabriel nodded his agreement.

" - so maybe you should do something as old-fashioned and traditional as asking her."

"Yeah, only she looks as if she'd flee the moment I talk to her."

Sandra laughed. "Yes, that's true, and that's why I can't help thinking I'm right."

"Nah. But maybe if I take her by surprise ..."

Gabriel started his own charade. He stared at Sandra, down at his plate, at Sandra again. Then he took one of the sandwiches from the plate and gave it to his sister.

After Sandra had accepted, in support of his role-playing as much as from simple longing for food, he stood up, plate in hand, and walked toward the counter. He kept his eyes fixed on the spot where he might get a refill.

The girl, feeling safe, watched him.

About to pass her table, he made a sidestep and put his plate down on the table top, then he put himself down on a seat.

"Hi, I'm Gabriel. You want to talk with me?"

For an endless moment, her flight reflexes kept her in red alert. Then, maybe because he had started to decimate the remaining baguette sandwich and therefore looked even less threatening than before, she relaxed a bit. "Er ... yes."

Rather than answering or expressing more encouragement, Gabriel took another large bite - after all, he was really hungry - and chewed expectantly.

The girl stared at the baguette in Gabriel's hands, apparently not registering any detail. "It's ... Erm. It's about, er, lyrics."

Gabriel stopped chewing, swallowed. "You have lyrics?"

A nod.

"And you think they can be matched with our own songs?"

"Er, no." A frown from her side. "They're *written* for your own songs."

"And you wrote them?"

"Yes."

"Cool. Come on, let's go to the others and - " About to rise from his seat, the rest of his baguette forgotten by this thrilling news, Gabriel stopped. Then he started to sink down again, ever so slowly, all the time murmuring, "Okay. Okay, okay, it's okay, we won't do that."

The girl, who an instant before had been at the verge of escaping and maybe never come back, relaxed. "I'm sorry," she said, "but - er, you know ..."

Gabriel didn't know. "Is it someone at our table?"

"Oh, no!" The girl smiled, for a short moment amused of her own shyness. "It's just - it's so public here, and if I'd follow you and sit down up there, with everybody watching ..."

"Oh, I see. So if we meet in a more private place, it's okay for you to meet the rest of the band? I mean, you didn't plan to channel your lyrics through me to Caitlin?"

"No." The girl nearly giggled at this prospect.

"In this case ..." Gabriel could swear that the two of them were watched from other tables, half a dozen at the very least. But these were young people, the hype of the first minutes after the concert gone, so they did it very discreetly, apparently curious in a nice way what this lone girl had to do with the flutist from Dragonfly. Actually, he would like to know that for himself, past the scarce promise of lyrics waiting to be sung.

He seized for his baguette. Before ripping the next bite off, he said, "Why don't you just tell me a bit more about you? Your name, for instance."

Her name was Moira, Moira Wootton, and she had to spell her family name for him. Scottish origin, student here at Beauxbatons mostly because her father, a diplomat, was stationed in Paris for a few

years already. She was one class after Héloïse and the others, which meant she was one class ahead of Gabriel. That made her sixteen, although Gabriel was afraid to ask such a direct question at such an early point in their acquaintance, or should he say, at such a public place?

"How did it start?" he asked instead.

Well, how did such things start? She had heard Dragonfly, pretty early in their young career, and the music touched a nerve in her, especially ... At this point, Moira blushed and looked down at the table and hastened to tell him how she found out that these people were so much younger than expected and how she could dream and imagine herself being one of them - at that point, she blushed again but this time with a smile and just a little embarrassment.

"... and the only role I could see for myself was that of a singer, but this needed lyrics, of course, and so ... And when I saw the poster that announced this concert today, it was - it was such a shock, like coming awake and being told you're not a princess, but of course I had to come, this wasn't a question ..."

Needless to say, Moira had both albums on CD and, as far as they both could check, she had been to every single Dragonfly concert.

"... yes, and then Caitlin said you're still short of lyrics, and - " Moira stopped as if just saying the name *Caitlin* aloud was a heresy that might jeopardize her chances.

"I'm dying to see them, or hear them," said Gabriel, raising another rosy shimmer on her cheeks. "Today I feel a bit wrung out, but if we can meet again tomorrow, right here ..."

Oh yes, that would be great, and tomorrow nobody would pay attention.

"Okay, then." Gabriel rose to return to the others. "A last question," he said, "did you ever test these lyrics yourself?"

"Test?"

"Yes - singing them to our music."

"Oh, sure," replied Moira more casually than Gabriel would have thought possible. "That's how I found out how to write them, and since then I did it often, almost regularly - of course only inside my own four walls," she added hastily.

Returning to his seat, Gabriel asked himself how to interpret this confession. One explanation was to blame her shyness as the only reason. A realist, on the other hand, would assume that her lyrics were a mirror of her normal behavior - and this could only be called eccentric.

* * *

Harry buckled the control panel around his wrist. This thing, a masterpiece of combined Magical and Muggle technology from Groucho Technomagic, looked like a particularly pretentious wristwatch, although not out of proportion for a sports teacher in need of stopwatches and other timers. It was black, with a mini display and mini buttons - not worth a second glance by any contemporary consumer in the Muggle world. It allowed him to control his set of magical loudspeakers.

He was five minutes before his first sports class. He also was five minutes before the moment when his nervousness would be gone, so much he knew for sure. Another question was how his own approach toward sports would be received.

In the past weeks, carefully checking around for tips and tricks how to teach sports, he'd learned something that wasn't new to him at all: sports of any kind started with warming-up and stretching exercises. He had a large repertoire of exercises from his aikido training but didn't expect much

approval from kids and teenagers if he arrived with such boring movements. Thinking it through, it had been just a short step from *boring movements* to *exciting movements*, otherwise known as dancing.

And so he had prepared himself for that - with a program for which *choreography* was much too big a term, with music, and with this nice set of floating loudspeakers - similar to what Dragonfly used, only much smaller, what might be called the chamber music version. Plus two monitor spheres, plus this control panel, on which he now pressed the 'Rise' button to let the eight loudspeakers and two monitor spheres float into position. They did that pretty much by themselves, taking into account the dimensions of the gymnasium as well as the required height above human heads.

The door flew open. A shouting, giggling, squeaking horde of girls entered the hall, fifth-years in Hogwarts terms. Registering the new teacher, they froze for an instant, then walked slightly quieter to the benches and lockers.

"Hello!" called Harry. "Get dressed! I'll be back in a minute." With these words, he disappeared in his own small room.

Get dressed was a euphemism for more or less getting undressed first, and this was the main reason why Harry hid in the teacher's room for the next five minutes. It still felt wrong to him to have a male sports teacher for girls that age, although he seemed alone with such concerns. True, the worldwide developments for indoor and outdoor sports had established skin-tight sports dresses of any fashion as the norm, but this short period of transit from jeans into leggings just felt indecent.

His own dress was also part of his careful preparation. He wouldn't have known what to use, what to wear. Looking around whom to ask for help, he'd skipped Cho first, his own teenaged children then, and just when it seemed as if once more Fleur had to rescue him, the simplest answer crossed his mind. Ginny! His sister with her modeling agency should know what was proper for a sports teacher and a bit fashionable in the eyes of French students.

Ginny had done her bit, with much enthusiasm and still more joy - of course only after he'd told her what this was all about, a request Harry could satisfy easily because his sister's mouth wasn't exactly famous for spilling secrets.

First, she had made him swear holy oaths that he'd wear the underwear she came along with, rather than the Californian-Irish-British mix that filled his drawers and for which Ginny had a few terms that made him gasp. Micro fibre was the state-of-the-art fabric, also for his dress: a light tracksuit, almost as tight as leggings. Runner shorts and a thin sleeveless jacket on top. Thick, long socks covering the trousers at his legs, and shoes that reflected the results of modern research and development.

His tracksuit shimmered in a light grey. His sneakers were almost white, but the socks came as black as his hair. When he'd watched his image in the body-length mirror of Ginny's atelier, his sister had said, "They'll eat you alive," with an expression in her face that made Harry decide to swallow his reply. Some wounds healed slowly, if ever.

He left his room and walked into the hall with its panelled floor that looked better than he'd expected. Seeing him, the girls started to form a line with the largest on top and the smallest at the end - not too quickly but without hesitation.

"Bonjour, mesdemoiselles ..."

Harry bowed slightly, letting a moment pass so the small wave of giggles could fade.

"... my name is Terry Pritchard, but if you call me Thierry Pri'chard, like all of my colleagues here" - another wave - "I won't object either. When addressing me in classes, you can of course say, 'Monsieur le Professeur,' only there's a tiny problem."

Harry paused for an instant, feeling the attention grow. "This is sports, as you know, and by the time you've shouted, "Monsieur le Professor, watch out!" the malheur has happened long since. So ..."

There were first tentative chuckles and smiles in this collection of faces and freckles and breasts and bellies.

"... I suggest to call me Prof, like in 'Watch it, Prof!' I apologise for not having all your names ready yet, but that's something we'll settle in time. And now ..."

Harry paused again, his eyes wandering along the line from the skinny giantess on top to the pretty little thing at the end, meeting glances that were more open than a minute ago, that examined his face, his discolouration, his body, his appearance, his legs, his ... Eating alive might not be too far from the truth, some weeks from now. Well, he would throw spanners in that wheel.

"... let's do our warm-up, although not the way you're probably used to. Spread across the hall, so that all of you have equal space around themselves - and all facing the windows. The smallest in front. Quick!"

The girls started to take position in the hall, with more than one groan and low-voiced remarks what the hell might be different if it started exactly the way they knew, and what the fuck these funny balls meant that were floating in mid-air.

Harry took position in front of them, almost under his two monitor spheres. "I'll do the movements, and I'll announce changes. In order not to confuse you, I'll be facing the window front too. Oh yes, I almost forgot - in order to make it as rhythmic as a warm-up should be done, we're going to use music."

He turned, pressed the 'Start' button, and started to move - step to the right, step to the left, a slight bending in the knees at each step. "Aaand right - aand left - let the music guide you."

Ginny had recommended he use the music charts as an indicator when picking songs for this purpose. Harry had bought the top twenty albums, had spent hours listening, and had picked out the songs whose rhythms suited best.

"... aand right - and if you catch the rhythm and let your body swing and your hips move, that's just fine ... And those three girls at the right in the rear line, if they don't start to move in a hurry, they'll be sorry!"

The two control spheres, at both sides and slightly above his head, actually were spectors that presented an exact image of what happened in the hall and in his back. After his words, several arms were pointing at them, and the lazy trio quickly fell into step with the others, flush-faced and giggling.

"And now two-step! Right and right and left and left and right again and left again and that's the way and there you go ..."

Meanwhile, the class was moving as one. It wasn't discipline, it wasn't the new teacher - something as simple as a popular song of limited musical quality had done the trick.

Harry let them run through various step combinations for five minutes. Then he made them swing their arms, crane their necks, bend their torsos, rotate their arms once more, and finally shake out in another sequence of steps. When he stopped, they had completed two songs.

He turned to face the class again, and to show a broad grin. "All right, did I promise too much?"

"No, you didn't." The answer was given by a mix of voices from beaming faces, some of them sweaty.

"Okay, then let's come to - "

"Monsieur le Professeur! Prof! Why can't we do that the whole class?"

"What do you mean?" Harry's voice resonated with his suspicion - after all, the question had come from the same group of three girls who'd found it beneath their dignity to join the others in the beginning.

"This - er, this is almost like dancing, and pretty close to what they do in these music clips on Channel Five and MTV, know what I mean? It's called hip-hop, you know ..."

Seeing the teacher's ironic glance, the girl faltered for an instant, then resumed, "Erm, sorry, Prof, but you know, most teachers have never heard of something like hip-hop. Anyway, it's much more fun than running or jumping or apparatus gymnastics - "

"Is it more fun than volleyball too?"

"Yes! ... No!" Voices were shouting, and Harry became aware that it wasn't the cleverest move to ask a controversial question toward an entire class.

"Hold it! ... OY!"

Into the silence after his yell, quite unfairly spiced with a dash of his mental power, he said, "It's an interesting idea. I'm new here anyway, and the athletic challenge is at least as high as with another exercise. So - hands up who wants to give it a try."

Half of the class raised an arm at once. Half of the rest followed suit after an instant, and a moment later, nearly every girl had an arm in the air, some of them even two.

"In this case," said Harry, "we need a choreography to study, one of those that are offered for sale. I don't object buying it - " he grinned toward the three girls to indicate that he wasn't a complete ignorant regarding modern trends, " - but this will take a day or two. In the meantime - "

"I have one! Prof, I know one by heart, almost completely."

Harry turned to the girl who had shouted the offer. "Which music?"

"World In My Order."

Whatever that was. "Do you have it with you, by any chance?"

"Er ..."

The girl's embarrassed silence was answer enough. About to end the discussion and resume an ordinary sports course with mats and somersaults and other boring exercises, Harry felt an idea crossing his mind. Didn't he know enough exercises from aikido that looked like step sequences in hip-hop, simply because these hip-hoppers had stolen their ideas? And didn't he have some songs with him for which it wouldn't be a problem at all to map the steps to the music?

"Okay. Let's do a test. I'll show you a step sequence, and then we'll start to practise the first steps, and the next, as much as we can manage in an hour. And at the end, I'm going to ask you the question again - might be you'll be surprised at how strenuous these exercises can be."

Harry stepped in the middle and asked the girls to give him some room. He dialed a number in his wrist control panel, hoping he'd remembered the order of the songs correctly. When the first tunes came from the loudspeakers overhead, he nodded and took the start position for the sequence he had in mind.

For the next fifteen seconds, he was far away, maybe in his own aikido training hall down in the rocks underneath Carron Lough. *Stretching, a gliding step forward, another, one arm bent in the elbow, the other straight like an arrow.* He'd practised this manoeuver a million times before, more often than not with his friend Tony. *A thrusting step and his free leg swung around like a blade, failing its non-existent target so he was forced to duck and retreat from the non-existent counter attack.* But Tony was dead, and since then ... *A jump high into the air, a few running steps at coming down, a sudden stop.* He'd started again to get in shape for his new role ...

That brought him out of his reverie. He stopped the music, looked around. What he saw told him - throwing spanners was something else.

"You'll stop beaming quickly," he called. "Take position - we're going to practise the first four bars in that song."

10 - Setting Up

When Esmeralda awoke, she found herself lying in a bed that wasn't hers. The room showed no similarity to her dormitory; it looked lighter, more modern, and considerably more medical.

Next instant she remembered. This room belonged to the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. She was a fever patient who just had come out of a delirium.

The fever had been real, and heavy. Therefore it took her a few seconds to remember everything. They'd met the High Priestess ... she and Carlos, which meant her brother was somewhere close, only she wasn't supposed to know. And her magic was gone except for a weak rest, only she wasn't supposed to know either. She had to stage-manage something so that this effect from her illness was detected as soon as possible.

Her magic. Her precious little magic. For a moment, she felt like crying. She had told nobody how much it hurt to pay this price. Yes, it was only temporary, the unavoidable prerequisite to join her father in that school in France. She had enough faith in the High Priestess, who would re-establish her magic in due time. Still ...

Magic was what connected her to her older siblings. She would never come close to their power, but that was okay, because nobody did. With her magic, though, at least she was playing in the same league. Without, they had nothing in common.

She loved them with a force she wasn't ready to admit, not even to herself. It wasn't the same as with Carlos - she could easily go through a week without seeing Gabriel and Sandra, provided she knew where they were and what they did, and that she would see them again. Then Gabriel would address her with the broken Spanish she'd taught him, and Sandra would catch her with one arm and Carlos with the other, hug the one on the left and then the one on the right, as if showing affection was the easiest thing in the world.

A week of separation was something she couldn't even imagine with her brother Carlos. Probably he wasn't too far away, maybe just through the door - pity she couldn't do the tricks their older siblings did.

Although, with the magic gone, these tricks would probably have stopped working anyway.

Esmeralda lifted her head from the pillow to look around. Feeling a slight dizziness and a totally unfamiliar weakness, she sank back again. This fever had really kicked her flat.

Seconds later - or so it felt for her unreliable sense of time - the door opened, and the figure of Hermione appeared.

For Esmeralda and Carlos, Hermione was something like an aunt, except that nobody dared to call her so, not even as a joke. Here at Hogwarts, though, Hermione was Professor Krum, in charge of Potions and the laboratory duties that went with the hospital.

She looked a bit unfamiliar. Mostly it was the white coat, as Esmeralda became aware. But in addition, her face showed something new.

A moment later, she knew what it was. Hermione looked *professional*, and not at all like on the occasions when she came to visit in Carron Lough.

"Hello, young princess of the fever dream." Hermione showed a well-trained smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "So you're awake, as this sensor told me." She pointed at a piece of Muggle technology on the wall. "It looked as if you tried to reach the bathroom. Might that be?"

"Er ..." About to say no, Esmeralda felt that it could well be, and more so by the second. "Yes, but -"

"You felt too weak. Understandably so, after a few days of fever 'round the clock. But I'm going to support you, and it'll go better with every step. Come on, let's try."

Esmeralda came up again and lifted her legs from the bed. She stood up, swayed a moment while Hermione stood in front of her, arms ready to catch her whichever way she fell. But she didn't fall, she steadied, then walked to the bathroom.

Hermione was right - Esmeralda felt her body gain firmness with every step. Her bladder, in contrast, still seemed too weak to do its job because peeing took a small eternity. Or maybe there was just a lot.

Filling the toothbrush glass with water, Esmeralda heard Hermione's voice through the door, "Slowly! Sip after sip - better bring the glass out."

Wasn't that typical Hermione? Always ready with a recommendation.

After a first gulp, Esmeralda felt a light nausea rise in her throat. She stopped. With the glass in her hand, she came out and stumbled to the bed. When she was in again, her torso supported and the glass in her hand, she grinned at Hermione. "I thought you'd be overcautious again."

"Again, huh? When did I last do that?"

Rather than answering, Esmeralda giggled. The truth was, she had been quoting her parents. Yes, Hermione tended to be concerned, only Esmeralda couldn't remember a case when she'd been wrong.

The Potions witch acknowledged the implicit answer with a short smile. Then the smile faded, and she said, "I'd like to do a little test, to see if this fever has hampered your abilities."

"A test?"

"Yes. I want to test your magic. It's only been a few days, but at least something as simple as *Lumos* shouldn't be a problem for you, should it?"

"Of course not!"

Esmeralda played the slightly offended child for good reason - she wouldn't have known how else to hide her relief that she didn't have to invent some scene herself. Her skills as an actor taking the initiative were badly limited, while responding to a challenge from outside came almost as a genuine reflex. She watched as Hermione went to the small wardrobe and returned with her wand, that precious piece of acacia Esmeralda had quickly learned to love. She took it and called, "*Lumos*," in the tone of casual expectation she used toward her dog Bolo.

The tip of her wand showed a short spark, then faded to simple wood.

"That's what I thought," said Hermione, taking the wand from Esmeralda's hand, just when she - almost too late - played surprise and was about to try again.

Returning from the wardrobe where she had deposited the wand, Hermione came to a halt, put one arm as support of the other and her chin in one hand, and looked thoughtfully at Esmeralda. "When was the last time you met the High Priestess?"

"Aram'chee? Erm ..."

Nobody in the the Potter family was a good liar. Still worse, the question had found Esmeralda unprepared. "I think that was at the beginning of the summer break," she said after a moment of

scanning some fake memory. "Or was it the end of last term? ... Why?"

"Did you meet her alone?"

"No, certainly not. Carlos was there, and of course Sandra. *Why?*"

"Because I experienced such a fever already, fourteen years ago. A fever that doesn't leave traces in the blood or anywhere else. It was caused by the High Priestess, only that then it was much more dangerous than yours ... And that of Carlos, because your brother suffered almost exactly the same, and he's only a room away. But the funny thing is" - Hermione's scrutinising stare, more than her rising voice, stopped Esmeralda's attempt to climb out of the bed and storm into this other room - "Carlos remembers a meeting with the High Priestess that was about two weeks ago."

"Really? Then maybe I was wrong, or I can remember as badly as I can do spells."

Inwardly, Esmeralda sighed of relief. Had Hermione confronted her with this discrepancy at the beginning of her explanation, she might have scored better, might have caused a stammering and a blushing face while now -

"Yeah, maybe. But even stranger is this: *you* don't get upset at realizing that your magic is gone - you don't even ask. *You* don't get in a frenzy at hearing that Carlos had this fever too, and *he* remains completely calm and composed at hearing that *you* had the same fever he had."

Uh-oh. They'd botched it.

Hermione grinned. "You're up to no good. I knew it the moment I heard about the Potter twins being feverish at the same time ..."

Esmeralda couldn't suppress a beaming smile. *Potter twins*, Hermione had said. For that, Hermione might call her a liar and a thief and a dogkicker, and Esmeralda would still forgive her.

"... problem is that I don't know what you have in mind, and I don't think someone's going to tell me soon. You should be thankful, though, that I was the one to take over your treatment, especially now that you're awake again. And you know why?"

Esmeralda had a fair idea, but asked nevertheless. "Why?"

"Because you're such bad liars, Poppy would have gotten suspicious at once."

Was this a compliment or a censure? "But you too got suspicious at once, you said so yourself. Then why's it better that you get suspicious?"

"Because" - Hermione's grin turned broader and more malicious - "I'm ready to play along and not to blow your thin cover, that's why. But of course it has its price."

"Huh?" For a moment Esmeralda was at a loss to follow. The only thing she felt sure about - Hermione didn't mean money. She was so rich from her Potions royalties paid by Groucho Biochemicals, it would have taken a full-time spending job to use all that money.

"When it's over, you owe me a tale."

Esmeralda looked innocent. "When what is over?"

"Stop playing the clueless country bumpkin! I guess your father's involved, and I wouldn't even be surprised to learn that our Headmistress's involved too. Harry could always twist her round his little finger, just the way you can twist *him* round your little finger."

Esmeralda couldn't suppress another smile. It certainly would have given her away, had there been something left.

"So, do we have a deal, young lady?"

She nodded, her grin getting broader all the time.

"In this case, just wait until I'm back with - " Hermione interrupted herself. "No - there's a simpler way. You can find Carlos in the next room to the right. I'll be back with a potion and your breakfast in a minute - for both of you and in the other room, all right?"

Esmeralda was already out of the bed, which seemed answer enough for the smiling Potions witch.

* * *

Cho went through the short moment words couldn't describe, then she appeared at the destination of her apparition jump. She hadn't seen it for quite a while, hadn't missed it either. Now she stood in the arrival station of the Hogwarts Express, closest point to Hogwarts still outside the field that disabled portkeys and apparition. She was here to fetch her children, who no longer were able to benefit from the services of Hogwarts.

No longer. Ha! Cho suppressed the thought - boiling in rage on her way up to the school buildings was pretty useless. And besides, hadn't she volunteered for the job?

Harry, taking pains to keep her informed about the progress, had called her to report that the fever was over and their two youngest were as good as new - well, except for that little flaw of their magic being gone. Cho, in return, had offered to fetch them and to enrol them at the school in Brest.

Harry had agreed, not showing overly much surprise in his voice. He knew that she hadn't changed her mind about this project, but he probably also knew why she had offered her help. Staying away wouldn't change anything, it would only deepen the rift between herself and her children - and besides, there were several people who would have come to help otherwise, since Harry could hardly do it by himself. One of them would have been Rahewa, his goddaughter and Cho's protégé from her days as the Groucho CEO. Or Laila, should Rahewa look too young. Or Sirius, or Deborah, Sirius' wife. None of them would hesitate to commit any crime Harry might ask for, so Cho saw reason to commit this particular crime herself.

She reached the staircase that led up to the Entrance Hall. Climbing the stairs, passing the door and looking around, she couldn't help feeling that somehow in her memory everything had been larger and a bit more impressive. Maybe she should ask her old friend Almyra how the school looked in the eyes of people who passed these halls every day. But then, maybe she couldn't care less.

She reached the Hospital Wing.

Madam Pomfrey, the doctor witch, didn't recognize her at first but then, after Cho had mentioned the two children, exclaimed, "Yes, of course - Cho Chang! The only time you were ever here was after your concussion from hitting a tree, right?"

Cho nodded, smiled, and swore inwardly, asking herself why old teachers couldn't treat you as the adult you were today. And Poppy Pomfrey wasn't even a teacher. But Hermione had to finish a double Potions class, as Cho was told, leaving only the doctor witch, who escorted her to the one room with her children.

One room?

Carlos' room, nominally. A second bed had been moved in, although the beds were little more than a precaution and a simple method to keep the children separated from the other first-years. They were bound to leave the school anyway, so why not using the fever as the natural cut?

When Cho entered the room, two faces looked up as if controlled by one mind.

"Mummy!" A shout simultaneously coming from two mouths. Next moment, two figures in pyjamas came hurrying.

She dropped her bag to have both arms free. "Hello, my two bunnies ..." The hugs she received told her that any weakness from the fever was gone. It also told her that coming herself had been her best idea in a while.

After a moment, Esmeralda sobered up and asked, "Why did you come here?"

Cho made big eyes. "To fetch you, what else? You've lost your magic, so you cannot stay here, and I'm going to take you to your new school. Isn't that obvious?"

Apparently not, since the girl eyed her suspiciously. "Which one?"

"The one you've heard about, if you know what I mean," replied Cho conspiratorially.

She felt Carlos' thoughtful glance. After a few seconds, he said, "I thought ... The last time we talked about it, you didn't want us to go there."

"Well ..." Cho wrinkled her nose. "I'd be lying if I said that I like it any better than before. But you're determined, and your father too, and now that you've lost your magic I thought it would be just stupid to keep away and scowl."

It earned her another hug, however also another thoughtful glance from Carlos. The boy, Hufflepuff to the bone, was fully aware of the tension between his parents, and now wanted to check whether Cho's cooperation had any meaning in this regard.

To be honest, she'd like to know that herself.

While the children dressed and went packing, Cho had a word with Hermione and another with the Headmistress. Both women knew her - or remembered her - well enough to read from her face and to avoid stupid remarks about elaborate plots as a Potter tradition. She also tried to see Almyra, unsuccessfully so because her friend was in classes and wouldn't come out for a while.

Returning into the Entrance Hall, she found a group that had grown by two pets. She had missed the reunion of girl and dog, but Bolo's excitement was still high and jumped up again when she reached them. She had to kneel down and caress him, otherwise he wouldn't stop whimpering.

"Do you know," asked Esmeralda, "what's the rule about pets in that other school?"

That's the first thing you think about, isn't it? You were so busy throwing yourself into this adventure that you didn't think about your poor dog and the role he'll have to play.

Thoughts like that quickly crossed Cho's mind before they were pushed aside in favour of a more sensible answer - and, as she had to admit with gritted teeth, a very satisfying one. "Actually, yes. They're not allowed in classes and during the meals but otherwise there aren't any fixed rules. It means that if you can get along with your roommates, there's nothing that forbids Bolo sleeping in your dormitory."

"I'll get along with them."

Yeah, probably, using bribes or sheer force as she would see fit. The fierce stare of determination in Esmeralda's face left little doubt, once this crazy story was over, the girl wouldn't accept a school that offered less. Cho sighed inwardly.

Her sigh was considerably more audible when walking together to the Hogwarts Express station. While Bolo found it just great, Cho had only one name for the Hogwarts officials who still refused to open the protection field. She could have said it aloud, there wasn't much love lost between her children and Hogwarts, but trained parental reflexes prevented her from doing so. The slight amusement in her son's face told her that he knew anyway.

They reached the station. Had she been a witch of the same power as her husband or her older children, she could have summoned them. But she wasn't. Maybe some day she would stop feeling inferior for that, and in the meantime she apparated, after her children had used their porties. A moment later, they were at Carron Lough.

The castle was just an intermediate stop on their way to the school in Brest. Harry had asked Ron to prepare a smooth transit, but as it turned out, these were the days when students arrived at the school from all directions - after having concluded beyond any reasonable doubt that they were handicapped in the magical sense. Therefore it was a simple task to enrol new children; arriving there was almost all they had to do.

Still, at least they could have a decent meal at their home. Sitting at the round table in the dining room, Esmeralda asked between bites, "Who are we, there? We won't be Potter children, will we?" "No, certainly not. We'll use the most obvious choice."

"Oh, I know," exclaimed Carlos. "We are the Garcia children, and our parents are dead, and we were sent to relatives, but they aren't too keen to have us, and when it became clear that we have trouble with our magic, they sent us to that school. So we aren't exactly orphans, but as good as."

Cho stared at him. He had given a perfect description of their cover story. At the same time, his words had pointed out with cruel clarity how these two eleven-year-olds were set up - like two goats tied in a circle to attract a tiger ... And her husband was the hunter, and she was the one who had guided the goats into that circle. She felt like screaming.

Carlos had watched her play of emotions, misinterpreting it. "I'm sorry," he said in a subdued voice, "I shouldn't have said that. It isn't true, it's totally different ..."

Cho managed a smile. "It's okay. I know that it's different, I mean I know that you think so - it's just that it sounds so scary, if you remember what ... You must be careful when you're there, and report everything that doesn't look right. Hear me?"

"We will." Carlos nodded with emphasis. "Daddy said the same."

By way of consolation, Esmeralda said, "Mummy, you shouldn't worry. When things get hairy, it's never us who are in danger. It's always our parents."

Next moment, she became aware what she had implied, and added quickly, "But Daddy knows what to do, and besides, over there he isn't our daddy at all, so ..." She fell silent, apparently registering the weakness of her own argument.

Cho inhaled deeply. "This particular daddy is a survivor. He's been predicted dead so often, it nearly counts as a joke. So if I deliver you there and leave in a hurry, it's just to look after my own safety, right?"

Her own joke was awfully thin. Even so the children joined it gladly to escape the trap hole in their conversation. Cho had the small satisfaction that at least they had stopped anticipating that this bloody school would be a summer camp in which they could recover from the bad treatment in Hogwarts.

"And there's Bolo," said Esmeralda.

Cho nodded. "Right, and that's a lot of protection."

It was true - hearing that nobody objected a German shepherd as pet had calmed her a bit. But the dog would protect Esmeralda while not Carlos, simply because they would be in different buildings, and the suicides had been boys.

She reminded herself of the positive aspect in this fact, namely that there was no danger of the

children being killed by someone else. With this comforting thought, she finished the meal and prepared for the second part of the journey.

One hour later, she delivered the children to a Madame Clément, teacher in charge of schedules and also of new enrolments. To reach the school after arriving in Brest, she had used the most expensive car money could lease, chauffeur included, and had made quite a scene when the gates wouldn't open to let this car in, so she had to walk the few steps.

Driving back, she smiled at the memory of this scene. It had been a relief to shout and stamp her feet, to curse the school that swallowed her children. But she had used Mandarin, so nobody could understand a word.

* * *

Harry's whistle ended the volleyball game that had been running between the two halves of his last class for the day - girls, sixth-years in Hogwarts terminology. Here in Brest, they were called eleventh-graders, but in his mind Harry hadn't stopped using the system he'd been familiar with since his own childhood.

The girls marched in the general direction of the locker room while Harry, ball in hand, marched toward his own small room. Calling the *danse macabre* he'd seen a game was something like an euphemism, and he already had some ideas how to change that, but today his mind was preoccupied with something else. In the early afternoon of the same day, the number of students in the *class under construction* had grown by two he knew well - Carlos and Esmeralda.

Reaching his room, he sat down and fetched his phony. The first button he pressed was that for Carlos' phony. A second later, a calm voice informed him that this subscriber was currently unreachable.

So Carlos had switched off his phony. This was somewhat irritating, but just when Harry pressed the button for Esmeralda, the memory hit him like a kick in the stomach - he couldn't call them and say, "Hi, Daddy's here, how are you?" Carlos had probably been aware of that and, careful as ever, had switched off the device to figure out first how things worked.

Harry swore inwardly at himself. He nearly had blown the cover with a few thoughtless words. Involving his own children in this plot was madness, and his only excuse was that it hadn't been his own decision in first place.

"Yes?"

Esmeralda's voice - a bit vibrant of expectation because the display of her phony had of course identified the caller, but at the same time sounding careful and well controlled.

"Hello, Miss Garcia, this is Mr Letterbottom, calling in the name of Mrs Chang. She would like to know whether everything is fine and to your satisfaction."

"Er - yes."

Esmeralda's voice was slightly questioning. She didn't know what he had in mind.

"She also wanted me to ask you if the dog could be put in your room."

"Oh, yes, that works fine, I think. We're four girls in a dorm here, and when they saw Bolo, they agreed at once. We all feel a bit, er, away from home, and that - er, yes, you can tell her that this is okay."

"Splendid, Miss Garcia. Could you please tell me your exact address?"

"My address? But you - oh, okay, yes, of course, it's the building St.-Nazaire, second floor, room two hundred-and-seventeen."

"Thank you, Miss Garcia. I tried to reach your brother but unsuccessfully so. Do you, by any chance, know his address?"

"It's the building Toulon and also the second floor but I don't know his room number."

"Well, this might not be necessary. Please tell him that I, Mr Letterbottom, will call him as soon as he can be reached again."

"Yes, I'll do that, but I won't see him until later in the evening."

"There's no hurry. Thank you again, Miss Garcia, and goodbye."

"Bye, Mr Leatherbottle."

This name had been a deliberate joke from Esmeralda's side, to tell him that she was fine. Harry thought that the girl's performance in this first phone conversation between father spy and daughter spy had been quite remarkable. He stood up to examine the map at the wall that showed the school estate with all buildings.

St.-Nazaire was one of three buildings along a cul-de-sac, all three of them named after harbours with saints in their names - St.-Malo first, St.-Nazaire in the middle, and St.-Raphael at the dead end. All three of them hosted girls, this way giving room for bad jokes about their saintliness, as Harry had had the opportunity to hear from colleagues.

Toulon was one of two buildings along a short street that connected the two main streets in the school estate. The other building was called Dieppe, giving proof that the exact geography hadn't been a criterion when dubbing the buildings. Otherwise, the building should have been called Nice or Marseille, but these buildings were found somewhere else in the school.

Harry decided to inspect the locations now, a few minutes before supper time. Once he knew where they were and how they looked, he could apparate, or maybe find an opportunity to summon his children into his own office for a short talk. They had to establish a method for a regular exchange - once a day, if possible. A minute should be enough.

He took a light canvas bag and put three volleyballs inside. Totally meaningless by itself, this bulky bag over his shoulder made him look busy, official, harmless, and altogether ignorable. Coming out of his room, he felt glad to find the gymnasium empty save for himself - the girls in his last class might have asked questions about what he had in mind with these balls.

He reached the Toulon building first. Stepping inside, he found a small foyer and a large staircase. Without hesitation, he started to climb the stairs. What might have looked suspicious two hours later was now, in full daylight, something nobody would remember the next day: A teacher, more exactly a sports teacher, went through the building.

He reached the second floor and walked along the corridor, which had another staircase at the other end. He couldn't find any similarity whatsoever between this building and his old Gryffindor Tower at Hogwarts - light-flooded and boring the one, dark and mysterious the other. Well, this had been a building to host navy cadets, which was reason enough for a totally different architecture.

Sensing around, Harry felt quite sure he'd identified his son's dormitory. Two hundred-and-fourteen was his guess; one of the entities inside showed a very familiar mental pattern. For an instant, he pondered the idea of opening the door and closing it after a second or two with an excuse. But he dropped it next moment with respect to Carlos' untrained state as a spy.

Approaching the St.-Nazaire building, he saw four girls come out, a German shepherd between them. Without noticing him, girls and dog turned the other direction - apparently toward the corral that served for pet dogs during meals or classes, large enough so the animals didn't feel like in

prison and could maintain their own social contacts.

Harry halted his step, exhaling in relief when the group had disappeared. After all, dogs didn't play by spy rules, and Bolo's reaction at registering Harry would have looked *very* strange in the eyes of the other girls.

An hour from now, the building would be guarded by a concierge. Currently, however, Harry could enter unnoticed to climb these stairs as well and to reach room two hundred-and-seventeen at the second floor.

Should he have a look inside?

Putting his senses to full height, Harry could feel that at least this floor was deserted. He took the door handle and pressed it down, only to learn that the door was locked.

Unlocking doors with mental power, and locking them again, once had been a virtue Harry could master easily. Today, however, he didn't trust his fluency to do it here where someone else might arrive any moment. And besides, the dormitory wasn't the best place for apparating and summoning.

The washing room served this purpose much better, provided Esmeralda managed to enter it alone and call him to be summoned from there. Harry went down the corridor to inspect this room so he would be able to reach it via apparition. Peeking inside, he felt more embarrassment than nervousness at the thought of being caught. It would have been difficult to explain what he was looking for.

Walking down the second staircase, his senses still at full alert from the inspection a moment ago, he sensed a presence, somewhere below, that felt very much like a crying girl. While this alone might hardly be extraordinary at such a day and in this building, there was something that caught his attention: When reaching the ground floor, he still could swear that the girl was somewhere below him - but she seemed to have stopped crying, suddenly felt like on alert herself.

The staircase led further down into the basement. Gripped by curiosity, Harry stepped down, listening with all his senses. What he felt was a presence in growing alarm.

Coming round the last turn, he knew why. At the bottom of the stairs sat a girl, Esmeralda's age, looking at him with anxiousness, actually like a cornered rabbit. And cornered she was - the entrance door to the basement solidly locked, and the only other escape - up the stairs - had been blocked by himself, coming down.

"Hello," he said. "I thought I'd heard someone crying, that's why I came looking."

She just stared at him. Despite her tear-streaked face, she nearly shook her head, and her eyes told him that she didn't believe his explanation.

He smiled. "I didn't say I *heard* you crying. But there was such a heart-breaking misery that it was impossible for me to miss it. You must know, I can sense such misery."

"Oh ... Are you a wizard?"

"Yes, sure - all teachers are wizards, or witches."

For some reason, this information seemed enough to send her into another sobbing attack.

He sat down, a few steps away. "Is it so bad to be here?"

Yes it was. After a short wave of fresh tears, the girl told him a story he could have heard a hundred times these days. Her name was Chloé, Chloé Broussard. Chloé had expected to learn charms with

her friends, had learned instead that she couldn't do magic, and had been separated from them. There were two aspects in this story that made Harry ask further.

The first was Chloé's origin. She came from Nohanent, a small town near Clermont-Ferrand. There had been magical drop-outs already before, a fact that didn't surprise Harry at all. The worldwide outbreak of magic was the result of a worldwide distribution of certain potions in many different forms, however all of them dependent on some kind of consumer activity. A very small town in the mountains, here the Massif Central, was a likely candidate to show gaps in the supply network.

Even this fact provided just an explanation while no reason to do something. Harry's motivation to become active was fed by a much more specific bitterness that rose when he asked about her wand.

"It's elder," Chloé replied. "Nine inches, with a core of fairy cake."

"Fairy cake?" He'd never heard of such a matter, not to mention its usage as wand core.

"Er, yes. It's ... Dragon heartstrings weren't possible, or any of the other materials in that range ..."
Chloé's voice faded, misery shortly pushed aside by deep embarrassment.

Harry decided to ban at least this demon. "Too expensive, I assume?"

"Yes. With unemployment and so ..."

"Do you have it here?"

Yes she had, presented it to him with a gesture so hopeless, so far away from the pride he associated with first wands, that he had to mentally remind himself not to jeopardize this plot in favour of a girl he hadn't seen ever before in his life. But when he examined the wand, his rage grew by the second.

It looked as cheap as it probably had been, or worse. Holding it in his hand, there was hardly a feeling of solid wood, more of something like naturally grown cardboard. The core seemed to fall out crumb by crumb, and when he inspected one of these crumbs more closely, Harry had the distinct impression that the so-called fairy cake showed a strong resemblance to fairy shit.

He tested the wand. Somewhat to his surprise, he yielded a result, but so weak that he wished he could, here and now, strangle the salesperson who was responsible for this purchase.

"I don't get anything out of it," confessed Chloé, who had watched his attempts.

"Then why did - " Harry stopped himself in mid-sentence, remembering Mr Ollivander's words about state-of-the-art techniques. "How did you get it?"

"From Let-a-Prix."

Let-a-Prix, the largest mail order enterprise in France, sold everything from books and music over electronic equipment to magical tools. They went any pace and any price, from a few cents to thousands of euros. And, come to think of it, probably Galleons too, provided you revealed yourself as Magical.

"Have you ever been tested? Medically, I mean?"

"Uhm ..." Chloé wasn't sure what he meant, felt embarrassed again, and the tiny bit of trust she had developed in the course of this conversation seemed at risk once more.

"Waving a wand with some success isn't really a test," explained Harry. "If it works, it's proof that you're a witch, okay, but if not it doesn't tell us why, or why not. There are ways to check certain symptoms that can play a role. After all, you're not the first and not the - "

"Which ones?"

With a jolt, Harry realized that he was about to expose himself and his special knowledge beyond

reasonable measure, and that this Chloé might be miserable and magicless though not morone. He never should have climbed down these stairs. But now it was too late.

"I'm no expert. I have to check around myself, but I know someone who's a bit more familiar with these issues than I. Where can I find you, once I know what to test, and how?"

Here in this building, she replied in a tone suddenly indifferent. Room two hundred-and-twelve, second floor, as the number indicated.

Astonished from this change, Harry tried to read her face, a task that wasn't made easier from the girl looking down.

Before he found the time to ask or guess, her head came around and she looked him squarely in the eyes. "There isn't a test, right? You asked for my room number to be polite."

"I didn't lie to you about this test, Chloé, and I won't. I don't promise anything - except that I'll come back and tell you if there's a test and what it is and whether we can give it a try with you. I will come back and tell you - even if the answer is no, I'll come and tell you."

Another stare from these eyes, then an almost imperceptible smile, gone before she opened her mouth. "Yes, okay ... Thank you."

Harry was already outside when he became aware that the girl hadn't asked for his name, and he hadn't offered it. But a moment later, he calmed down again and continued his way, relieved at realizing the explanation.

There was no need. Chloé would identify him any time and out of any crowd, thanks to his large discolouration.

* * *

Gabriel looked around. The practise room Dragonfly had been granted by Madame Maxime, Headmistress of Beauxbatons, was quite spacious. They weren't the only ones to play here, but Dragonfly was the sole user of a small storage room next door, which made the setting-up and dismounting at the start and end of a rehearsal short and easy.

No doubt, Beauxbatons did their bit to make Dragonfly feel perfectly at home in the school. Well-minded and generous as it looked, Gabriel didn't fail to notice the subjective motivation behind. While it was certainly correct to call Dragonfly a student band, assigning them to a specific school could be done in more than one way. He and Michel, the founders of Dragonfly, were students at the Goblins' *Ecole d'amitié*, only that school lacked the space required to offer such commodities, and besides, the Beauxbatons students in the band wouldn't object to a title like *Dragonfly, the famous band from Beauxbatons*.

The Goblins wouldn't object to such a title either, as Gabriel knew for sure - at least not aloud, not in public. They just had a different perspective, and maybe he was the only one who felt this egotistic element behind Madame Maxime's support.

But then, sponsoring was a mutual business, wasn't it? Gabriel had experience with sponsors - Miyikura for instruments, Groucho for equipment, now Beauxbatons for locations ...

Anyway - they were here, it was a great room for practising, with excellent acoustics, and today they planned to run a first test with Moira's lyrics. Everyone was here for this - Gabriel, Michel, Héloïse, Tomas, and Caitlin. The managers Ireen and Rebecca were absent, as was Desmond. Rebecca would have liked to join her friend Caitlin for the occasion, but Gabriel had convinced her that the new source of lyrics still had to be considered evasive, to say the least, and needed time to settle in an environment with so many people.

Right now, this source of lyrics was walking toward Caitlin. They had scanned through the list of

Dragonfly pieces, and Moira had flipped through an exercise book or two, and together they had decided to try *Summer Sunset* first. As far as the players were concerned, this song was as good as any other, but it seemed as if Moira's confidence in these lyrics was better than in any other.

Moira reached Caitlin and passed her a letter-sized spiral notepad. While Caitlin started reading, Moira hurried back to her place, almost in a corner, and it seemed as if they should be glad that she didn't disappear completely.

Caitlin looked up, a smile in her face. "Hey, that sounds cool. I like it - kinda love at first sight, you could say ..."

If Moira's pride heard these words, it seemed not motivated to make her swell.

"... sure our audience will like them too. And all that's missing now - please tell me, how do I sing them?"

"What?"

"I want to know how I have to sing them." Caitlin pointed at the notepad in her other hand. "These are the words, okay, great. And what about the tune?"

"But ..." Moira looked utterly baffled. "The song is the tune - Summer Sunrise."

For a short instant, Caitlin's face looked as if she was going to give an answer one might expect from an Irish temper. Then, probably thanks to Gabriel's careful coaching in preparation for this occasion, she just walked to the CD player, put in the album on which this song was the second track, and pressed the play button.

Seconds later, when the first sounds came through the speakers, Caitlin stood there, notepad in hand, moving to the rhythm of the music. She kept that stance for about a minute, then stepped to the CD player again and stopped it.

Coming up, she looked at Moira. "Sorry. Either there are too many possibilities how to sing it, or just one but I'm too stupid to see it, or hear, or feel. Whatever. So please, show me."

"And how?"

"That's - " Caitlin swallowed another reply. "Sing it."

"Sing ..." Moira's face flushed at a speed that seemed unnatural. "Oh no, no, I can't sing it. Not with you sitting there, and watching, and listening to me singing. No, that's totally - "

Caitlin interrupted her, apparently no longer able to resist a tiny bit of sarcasm. "Am I allowed to listen? I can do it standing up, if that's a help."

To everybody's surprise, Moira giggled.

After a moment of amusement around the circle, enough to relax the scene a bit, Moira said, "I'm sorry, I know I sound bloody stupid and stuff, but ..."

Michel, thanks to his sister an expert in handling extravagant girls, said, "I guess I know what to do. She's right, in a way - playing the CD doesn't work. Come on, folks, let's play."

Moira looked partly relieved. The other part, though, looked as if robbed of the last defense, and no way to escape.

Caitlin watched her. Next moment, she asked, "Do you know French?"

"Huh?"

"French - the language that's spoken here around. Some weeks ago, my friend Reb and I, we had trouble properly learning this stuff, and the solution was that this guy over there" - Caitlin's head

nodded toward Gabriel - "and his sister tranced us. From that moment on it worked."

Had Gabriel suggested this idea, most likely Moira would have fled in panic. But it was Caitlin - the same girl who had been standing on stage, fearlessly singing into a microphone in front of several hundred people, this dreadnought had needed a trance to learn something as simple as French. Suddenly, Moira was no longer alone with her excessive anxiousness.

She looked at Gabriel. "What do you think? Would it work?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. I guess we just give it a try, then we know more."

A snorting sound came from the place where Héloïse sat. Before she could say more, most likely a sentence like, *You bet your sweet ass that it'll work*, Gabriel sent her a quick glance and an even quicker mental note.

Unfortunately, Moira had heard the snorting as clearly as anyone else. "Did you want to say something?" she asked.

Héloïse won Gabriel's admiration with her quick reflexes.

"Well, not really, it's just - you know, it's like in a crime play here, like will it work, or will they catch them ... Or maybe like in a romance, will the two of them manage, if you know - "

"Okay, okay," interrupted Gabriel with a sideward glance to a blushing Moira, although his own cheeks also felt a bit hot. "Let's stop telling each other how extraordinarily thrilling this is, and play a little music."

He stepped over to the girl. It would have been enough to just take Moira's head between his hands, except that suddenly he felt a barrier - face to face, in front of all the others? No way. So he made her sit down, stepped behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and close to her throat, keeping this position while the others got ready to play.

Feeling confident that he had calmed the girl sufficiently, he walked to his own place to be ready with his flute.

After the intro from Héloïse and her harp, after Gabriel's flute had played the cries of birds at an early morning just before sunrise, when Tomas' guitar took over and Michel's percussion gave a decent support, Moira started to sing.

- *"Hey, Sun, old fool, why can't you wait to start the day? I'm running late because your stupid face appears at such a pace. 'You sleep too long,' they say to me and point at you. 'Look! Can't you see? The sun is up for ages. Now go and earn your wages.'*
You bloody star, go hang yourself up in the air, what do I care? your sunrise isn't mine. Go find a singularity and shove your sphere down that hole where the sun will never shine."

The latter verse seemed to be the refrain, if there was something like a refrain. Gabriel nearly missed his next entry because he'd been musing about a sun that was swallowed by a black hole. He also had been listening to Moira's voice.

She was no Caitlin. She didn't have this melodious glow in her vocal cords. Instead, her voice sounded angry, barking like a street dog that was kicked time and again and still didn't surrender ... Only toward the end of the song, when the singer had stopped cursing the sun and could find some pleasure in its rays, the barking gave way to a husky purring, a dog turning into a cat.

With some efforts concentrating on the musical aspects, Gabriel noticed that she could hold pitch without any trouble, in this regard on a par with Caitlin.

As if this would be of any importance, he reminded himself. Moira sang there only for demonstration purposes, and only because he'd treated her with a calming spell. In a few moments, the song would have finished, and then they'd start over again, this time with Caitlin as the singer.

The song ended. Moira stood there, listlessly, as if stunned.

Caitlin, who had been sitting through the performance, stood up and walked to Moira. Reaching the girl, she took her hand and pulled her forward to the chair she'd left a moment ago. Moira followed like a puppet and obediently sat down when Caitlin gently pushed her shoulder.

This done, Caitlin turned toward the others. "Folks, I've got some news for you. Maybe it's bad news, or maybe not. But - well, I don't know how to say it, so ... I can't sing that song."

They just stared at her. Moira stared too.

"My voice is - well, it's beautiful, just right to sing beautiful songs. But the problem is, it has to be a beautiful song. I hope you know what I mean. The song I just heard - it's great, it's incredible, but it isn't beautiful. That's why I can't sing it. Maybe it's a protest song, or a special kind of rap, or maybe there's no name yet for this style we just - "

"It's Moira music."

Faces turned toward Tomas, the one who had said these words. He shrugged, as if to indicate that he just had given words to the obvious. Then the faces turned back toward Caitlin.

"Yes, I guess that about expresses it. So what I'm trying to say - I know what I can, and I know what I cannot, that's why I have no problem confessing that this song's beyond my range, and if that ends my short career as your singer, then - I hope not, but anyway, at least I know who can sing that song."

Caitlin turned and, with a theatrical gesture, pointed at Moira. "Ladies and gentlemen, here's your singer of Summer Sunset, it's - "

"Ha ha. Very funny." Sitting calmly, Moira looked at Caitlin without moving a muscle in her face.

"Funny, is it? Then let me show you something that's a real joke, except that I can't laugh about it." Caitlin marched to the recorder that had been running all the time, stopped it, let it reel back, and pressed the replay button. She had stopped somewhere in the middle of the song, and the speakers presented Moira's singing again.

When the recorded song had ended after a minute or so, Caitlin said, "To my untrained ear, this sounded pretty much as if it might as well have been the material for an album recording ... And me sitting there and listening and realizing that I can't sing it like that - you won't believe how funny that is. I could roll over from laughing."

She marched to the table where Moira was sitting, sat down herself, tense jaws resting on two fists.

A quick glance to the other girl, then she looked again straight ahead, ostensibly trying not to lose composure.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean ..." Moira became a bit more agitated. "Look, maybe we should sit together and go through my lyrics. There are others where a voice as yours fits better. And besides, I can't sing, so it's no question - "

"Stop telling me you can't sing!" Caitlin's snarl was testimony of her vocal range which, audibly for everyone, extended far beyond the scope one would call *beautiful*. "Otherwise I'm going to take this recorder and hit you - "

"Okay, sorry, what I meant was, I can't sing in front of an audience. If not for this trance from Gabriel, I wouldn't have sung here either. So maybe it's the trance that should be blamed."

Moira looked a bit confused when the others - Michel, Héloïse, and Tomas - let out a short burst of laughter.

Even Caitlin showed a grim smile. "Yeah, sure. It's probably the wrong time to point this out, but that doesn't make it less true - most of the Dragonfly pieces aren't well suited for songs with lyrics. In a normal song for a normal singer, the music is much less artful and more cut in units of verses. That's what I'm used to, and that's what I expected when joining the band."

"We know that," said Tomas. "We knew it since the day you arrived in Gabriel's trail." Seeing Caitlin's face at these words, he said quickly, "Listen, you will sing for Dragonfly, there's no question about that, not after the concert in Beauxbatons - "

Michel cut him short to address Caitlin. "You should watch the recording of that evening, then you would stop worrying about your role here."

Caitlin's face grew pink. "I did. I watched it."

Héloïse chuckled, however in a sympathetic way that lacked her usual teasing.

Moira asked, "Why can't we just sit together and go through my lyrics, and see what suits best, and then - "

"Fine with me," interrupted Caitlin. "And for each song, I'll sit and listen, and the band will play, and you will sing, right?"

"Oh."

Héloïse turned toward Moira. "Do you have more stuff? Poems you wrote just so, without a particular music in mind?"

It was Moira's turn to flush. "Might be, yes."

"Then maybe we should look through them, and see whether our composers can find music that fits and provides the basis for a normal song, like those you find in the charts, one week after another. But in the meantime you should stop fooling yourself ... If these cowards don't find the courage, then I have to be the one to tell you - we won't let you go, and we won't rest until you sing your *special* songs for an audience."

"I'm ready to sing chorus any time," added Caitlin. It was hard to tell whether her voice resonated in anticipation or maliciousness.

"I'd rather die," said Moira.

"Not before the end of the first concert," replied Héloïse with her usual cheer, which was softened by Michel, who added, "But at that time, there'll be no longer a reason, you know."

Into the laughter, Moira said, with a slight trace of desperation, "But I'm serious! I'm not trying to - to cheat you. It just doesn't work. When I'm supposed to present an essay in classes, my throat goes so tight, it feels like choking."

"No problem. Gabe will trance you."

Feeling the glances rest on him, Gabriel said, "Or Sandy."

"Huh?"

"Sandra, my sister. Her trance is as good as mine. But she's free - I mean, she isn't busy with the flute or the harmonica or whatever. Maybe she could sing chorus with Caitlin - after all, isn't a chorus supposed to be more than one?"

"I can sing a *lot* of chorus," said Caitlin, earning another laughter.

"She could be the tambourine girl," said Héloïse, "provided there's still room for a tambourine in that song." Seeing Tomas' sour face, she grinned. "If bad comes to worse, she still can be a go-go-girl."

"Yeah," called Michel, "with high boots and tight pants." He was also rewarded with heartfelt laughter, only his sister looked a bit surprised at her younger brother.

"In this case," said Tomas, "there's just one little question left."

"Which is?" asked Gabriel, realizing after some seconds of silence that Tomas had one of his rare moments when he put dramatic effect in his speech.

"Which is, who's going to hang the bell round the cat's neck? In this case, who's going to tell Sandra? She's just the most powerful witch around, that's all."

Faces turned toward Héloïse like cannons toward a target.

The Veela girl responded with an innocent face. "Why? Who said she wouldn't fancy high boots and tight pants?"

11 - Roles

Sandra sat on an uncomfortable chair at an unremarkable table in a large but windowless room. A small stage was the only sign that this room served various stage-bound groups for rehearsals. One of them was Dragonfly, a fact Sandra didn't know yet.

Today the stage didn't matter. Today her own group might as well have used a classroom or a café, provided they had it for themselves, because today's agenda had just one topic: a preliminary discussion to settle the basics in Hayden's project.

Hayden was the figure who sat on a similarly uncomfortable chair on the stage, but he only sat for a few moments before he would jump up again to walk a few steps, emphasizing his words with his arms - no, with his entire body. Hayden could only be called theatrical, which was okay because he was the director of the Beauxbatons Theatre Group.

Hayden Schaeffer, an Englishman whose main job was English teacher at Beauxbatons, could be held responsible for Sandra's presence here. This had little to do with his own self - he looked quite handsome, if a skinned skeleton with affected gestures could be called handsome, but nobody would have suspected him of inviting Sandra for anything dramatic offstage. Hayden was gay.

He exhibited it as if to say, *Yes I am, but only after hours, and now let's concentrate on the matter at hand.* Rumour had it that some colleagues with a tolerance as limited as their intelligence had tried to mock him in public, maybe even bully him. Hayden had fought fire with a firestorm. By giving proof of his acting skill, he had mimicked them in such a merciless caricature of their own mannerisms that the mockery had stopped quickly. No more stupid remarks, no more attempts to imitate his unmistakable gait for fear of being imitated back.

Hayden was the one who had given Sandra the witch's role in last year's movie project. His new project, though, which little by little was gaining outlines and simultaneously making Sandra's heart beat go faster, was traditional stageplay.

"... not an ordinary casting, and our evenings won't be ordinary rehearsals. Well, not after the first period when we'll rehearse the play in its standard framework. Only when this has been settled, with all actors who'll have signed within the next two months, only then will we start to work out the personal interpretations ..."

The play Hayden had selected was *Antigone*, the version of the French dramatist Jean Anouilh. In the original Greek version by Sophocles, Antigone was the daughter of Oedipus and Jokasta, the couple which - unknowingly - was formed by mother and son. When this scandal was revealed, Jokasta hanged herself while Oedipus, after years of being the king of Thebes, blinded himself. Antigone's two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, battled each other for the succession of the king's throne - unsuccessfully so because they killed each other. Creon, Antigone's uncle, gained the throne. His first decree was to mourn and bury one of them while letting the other's corpse rot in the sun. Antigone defied this decree and buried her brother but was caught. Her punishment was to be immured alive, which meant that she was buried behind a wall to die in the lightless cubicle.

In Anouilh's version, the events were of course the same, but were based on totally different motivations and subject to much discussion and interpretation. In Sandra's limited memory of this piece, the characters just talked and talked, more or less from the first opening to the last curtain.

"... uses a contemporary language in his adaptation, so you don't need to bother with the phrases and words of good ol' Sophocles, or what the translators made of them. Because the rule is, we'll keep the original text - Anouilh's text - word for word. Your interpretation, your positioning of the

character in a role of your choice, must be made with your contribution - body language, intonation, emphasis, gesture, whatever crosses your mind. If you believe you have to smoke a pipe to make your character believable ..."

Hayden's choice was well selected. Anouilh's version of the drama didn't need more equipment than a table and some chairs, so the characters could sit and talk, jump up and sit down again. That Hayden, of all people, had selected a play with a female hero seemed to surprise some of the *promising young men* in the group, but the teacher and director knew what he did. The surprising element in his project was the abandonment of a fixed cast for a drama that presented a two-character play for ninety percent of all words spoken on stage. Instead, he wanted different people representing different versions of the same character - under the restriction that all of them used the words as written by the dramatist.

For Sandra, who might not have come within calling distance of a main role for the next three years, it meant that she could play the Antigone, provided she had the nerve *and* she found an interpretation that was different enough from the others to count as individual.

"... figure is your Creon? Is he a tired manager who tries to see the big picture, only to overlook the human details? Is he your commonplace politician, who came to power more or less by accident and now is determined not to lose it again? Is he ready to kill for that or is there a limit how far his morals can be stretched? And if you really want a challenge, then draw him as the only one who's left to do a job that's two sizes too big for him, a small bookkeeper's soul, but he tries anyway." Hayden smiled diabolically. "And let the text guide you whether he grows with every minute or tries to hide behind his book of rules."

The text, yes ... Sandra knew that she had to read it as soon as possible. But no matter what the words were, they would not influence her decision. Would she dare to step into shoes as big as these, after a well-acclaimed but nonetheless limited role in a movie project?

Someone raised an arm. "And what about the minor roles?"

"My God, yes, the minor roles - I nearly forgot in my enthusiasm for this project. Imagine *that!*" Hayden exclaimed the last two words so effeminately that Sandra had to suppress a giggle, as always unsure whether he tried to provoke reactions or simply behaved as gay as he felt.

"... roles will be played by the same actors as for the major roles. If you sign for a Creon, you must cover Haimon or any of the guards ..."

Haimon, Creon's son, was Antigone's fiancé. In the original play by Sophocles, he killed himself after arriving too late to save her.

"... if you sign for Antigone, you must cover her sister Ismène or the nurse."

Her friend Héloïse, Sandra thought, had a sister by the name of Ismène. But this didn't qualify her any better to play the Antigone than it qualified Sandra, in particular since Anouilh had painted Ismène as a light beauty and Antigone as dark, thoughtful, and altogether unbearably difficult and stubborn.

"... play the messenger myself, and those not engaged in the current pairing will play the chorus. The side effect is that nobody can say, 'Today is somebody else's big scene, I better stay at home and have a rest!'"

Hayden imitating voices, or roles, could be terrifying for fear that he would imitate you. The *else* in "somebody else's big scene" was the whining complaint of a three-year-old being robbed of a toy, the shrill protest of an aging diva for not being treated like a queen, and at the same time Hayden's own voice when playing the caricature of a gay theatre director.

"But of course, if we're going to meet twenty Antigones ..."

Most unlikely. Looking around, Sandra saw three candidates - aside from herself, who didn't really count as such. Marie was the one she would have listed first - had Hayden simply announced that Marie was to play Antigone, Sandra would have nodded and thought, *Yes, who else?*

Michèle came next. Not quite as convincing as Marie, but maybe it was a matter of time and experience, rather than talent. In this year's constellation with as many alternatives as there were girls to sign up, it was no question that Michèle would go for her chance.

Then there was Denise. She would have given Marie a hard time - well, if not for the thirty-something pounds she carried in addition to what was a healthy weight for a girl her age. She could carry them quickly, agreed, and in a comedy she was a natural, raising storms of laughter. But an Antigone?

Sandra thought she'd better start to find her own picture of this character. Having a clear idea how to draw her seemed to be the most important part of her preparation - more exactly, the ability to find an approach she could cope with would be the determining factor for her own decision.

Antigone had been a girl with two brothers and a sister. Wasn't this a key element in Sandra's own considerations? She also had two brothers and a sister. Unfortunately, the age structure was totally different - had she been a brother to Gabriel and Carlos a sister to Esmeralda, then Antigone might have been the equivalent of Esmeralda, leaving for Sandra only the choice between the corpse that was buried ceremonially and the other one that was supposed to rot in the sun.

"... is all for today. Next week we'll meet again, and then I want to hear your decision - of course as a stage presentation of what you have in mind, how you want to shape the character of your choice." Hayden stepped down from the low stage, and when he sent the group off with the remark that he would answer any further question only while sitting at a table with a bottle of wine, it looked for an instant as if he was sending an encouraging glance toward Sandra.

But then, she thought while trundling after the others in the general direction of the cafeteria, a good director would do that toward *every* crew member. Even so, assuming she hadn't hallucinated at least he counted her as a potential candidate.

"Hey! What's this? Didn't you get the main role?"

Startled, Sandra looked up and saw Frédéric, who apparently had been lying in wait for her. Since his enthusiasm for the Theatre Group in general and Hayden Schaeffer in particular was severely limited, she could take this as a personal compliment. So she showed a pleased smile.

"Sure I did. Why?"

"Well, it looked a bit as if you were ordered to play the corpse in the freezer. I mean, okay, you'd be no doubt the most remarkable corpse in the freezer, even under the blanket. This admirable motionlessness! Would you agree to count it as your first nude role? Despite the blanket?"

She leaned over and stopped his suada with a light kiss. "That was kind of you to wait for me, so I'll forgive you this remark. Now let's go to the cafeteria and celebrate."

Frédéric examined her face. "What, the main role? Never! You'd look different."

"Clever boy. Now come on, drinks are on me."

Sitting in the cafeteria, each of them with a small bottle of beer, Sandra told him about Hayden's project, and that the main role really was within reach if she only could find the spirit to create her own version of this role. "All I need is a perspective nobody else would think of. Do you have any idea? That necrophilic touch a little while ago wasn't bad, but I guess we should work on it a bit longer."

Frédéric's grin in reply to her wisecrack came and went. "Antigone, eh? I'm trying to remember what was the reason that she refused to accept the simple solution at the end. We have to take that into account for sure."

It had been a while since they read the drama in class. In Anouilh's version, Creon had almost persuaded Antigone to give it a rest and to sweep the scandal under the carpet when she became aware that, as part of this hush-up, the guard who'd caught her would probably be killed. So she refused and forced Creon to make the announced punishment come true, even if it was his own niece.

Sandra told Frédéric. "I can't help it," she said, "I can think of a dozen versions for Creon but not a single one for her, for Antigone."

"Maybe you're not the only one with this problem," answered Frédéric with a knowing grin. "Sweet Haydy - pardon, our dear genius Hayden might have selected this unbalanced problem on purpose."

Sandra said with some irritation, "Don't be ridiculous! A drama in which the title role doesn't offer room for interpretation? You can't stand Hayden, that's all."

"True. All right then, what about this? Antigone's sexually attracted by her uncle and violates his decree simply as a means to come in touch with him."

Sandra stared at Frédéric in astonishment. "Say, are you a bit single-minded today?"

"I should be single-minded?" Frédéric faked disbelief. "Would you please remember that she's Oedipus' daughter? Antigone's own mother is also her grandmother from the father's side while her grandmother from the mother's side is her grand-grandmother from the father's side ... Compared to that, being obsessed by your uncle is a sane emotion!"

Despite herself, Sandra had to laugh. Then, suddenly thoughtful, she said, "Yes, I guess that's the perspective I should use."

"What? For Heaven's sake, Sandra, I was only joking!"

She shook her head. "Not her uncle - what you said before! It's a family affair, and that's all that matters to her. For Sophocles they were puppets in the hands of the gods, for Anouilh it was about politics and the only way not to get your hands dirty was to sacrifice yourself, but for Antigone it's something very personal. Her family's involved without anyone left out ..."

Sandra's voice had trailed off. After a moment, she said, "I'm not sure yet which handle to grab. Maybe her presence alone, as a fruit of this scandalous liaison, puts an obligation - "

"Isn't that quite unrealistic? That she blames her own presence?"

"No, she doesn't blame herself. But she faces an obligation and she accepts it - yes, I think I'll go for that. After all, I'm an expert in lifelong obligations, right?"

"Yes indeed."

Quite obviously, Frédéric didn't like to be reminded of Sandra's role as future High Priestess. Understandable as it was, at that moment Sandra only felt impatience. "Listen," she said, "it wasn't my choice, but since it is as it is, stop making a sour face by the sole mentioning of a major fact in my life."

Frédéric nodded. "You're right. I shouldn't have come because I don't share your obsession for the Theatre Group. But I have my own ..."

He stood up. "I'm not as altruistic as this Antigone, that's why I couldn't resist the temptation. If I had any drive to appear on stage, I would play Haimon. I guess I'd be brilliant."

With a quickly added, "See you tomorrow," he left.

Sandra watched him disappear. It wasn't too difficult to guess his obsession, was it? But Frédéric had found the presence of mind not to say it aloud, and for that she had to be grateful.

Did anyone really decide about their lives? Maybe that was the key to drawing the role she was determined to play.

* * *

The news of a Sports teacher using music and dance figures had spread like a bush fire. When Harry entered the gymnasium for the last Sports class he hadn't yet met, fourth-year boys, they greeted him with warnings that they wouldn't dance because they weren't girls, hear me!

With some effort, Harry swallowed a reply of, "I'd never have guessed." Boys this age, as he darkly remembered, didn't respond well to irony. Instead he asked, "Would you agree to warm up with exercises from arts of weaponless combat? It's called aikido."

Oh yes, they would, and yes, they'd heard that name before.

Harry made them go through some stretching exercises. Then he said, "We're out of sync. As you certainly remember from the movies, such classes must move as one, no matter what they do."

Yes, they remembered, only it wasn't as simple as it had looked while watching the movies.

"No, it's not," agreed Harry. "We'll do it slowly, and we'll use a bit of sound in the background to help the timing."

The boys, who would have fought tooth and nail not to move to music, found it a sensible thing to spice up aikido stretches with background sound, in particular since this sound included a bamboo flute and those large temple bells that called *Far East* quicker than you could speak the words.

Unsurprisingly enough, when the warm-up was over and Harry wanted to start the regular program, the boys demanded a regular training in the arts of weaponless combat.

"If we do that, then it'll be as a voluntary course, not as a replacement for normal Sports classes. But in order to give you an impression, for today it's fine with me, especially because you'll be surprised at what are the first lessons."

The first lesson was about walking and falling - walking in a balanced gait and falling without getting hurt. For the rest of the double Sports, first with mats and in the last half hour without, Harry let them practise in pairs that changed every five minutes. With fixed teams, they would have quickly come to a mutual agreement that they needed a little rest, while the new challenge every five minutes forbade such softy behaviour.

At the end of the class, looking into faces that were sweaty almost without exception, he told them to check out times and conditions for an aikido course for volunteers in the afternoons. Then, before disappearing into his own room, he reminded them of the showers and how grateful other people would be if they'd use them. As he remembered equally well, fourth-years had some trouble with hygiene as well as with appearing nude in public of any kind.

Reaching his floor in the Cayenne building, Harry used the showers himself. As he stood under the inadequate jets of water, he swore inwardly and, as always, fought the temptation to apparate into Carron Lough for his luxury bath. There was little doubt that some people watched a newcomer like him in every detail of daily behaviour, and never being found in this pathetic bathroom while still not developing body odour might raise suspicions.

As he walked toward the Brest building, Harry saw the girl with the cheap wand, Chloé Broussard, some steps ahead. Considering the time of day, she was probably on her way to the canteen. Her

walking alone made it clear that even after several days, she had failed - or refused - to make friends who would go to lunch with her.

He accelerated his steps. Having reached her, he said, "Hello, Chloé. How are you?"

"Fine."

The answer had been given with a dismissive voice, accompanied by a cool glance in his direction, but only a short one before Chloé had looked away. Even without his special senses, Harry had no difficulty to interpret the frosty greeting.

"Some minutes ago," he said, "I met the last class that was missing from my collection. I tell you that as an explanation, not as an apology. I've been up to my ears in work. But now I'm through once and can see light at the end of the tunnel, so I can find the time to get that test we talked about."

"When?" The girl sounded as if she were discussing homework, or a detention.

Somewhere inside Harry, anger was rising - toward this girl, who couldn't appreciate his concern, toward a world in which eleven-year-olds could appear as embittered as that, and most of all toward himself, who'd been unable to just go away when sensing a miserable soul somewhere downstairs.

He inhaled deeply. "This afternoon, five o'clock. Which place do you prefer, the gymnasium or my apartment?"

Her face showed that his answer came unexpected. An instant later, it showed some uncertainty.

"What do I have to do in this test?"

"Hold a sensor or a device, that's all. This isn't a medical examination, it takes about three minutes, and the sensor won't electrocute you. And when we're done, I have to return the device to where it belongs. All right?"

Harry's own voice had been curt enough to show a bit of his anger. Even so, it raised a smile in Chloé's face. "Yes, all right."

"So then, where?"

"Oh." She had forgotten his question. "I don't know."

"Then let's do it in my apartment. The table there is larger, so it's simpler to place the device."

"What is it? What does it look like?"

"Let me surprise you. Five o'clock, then." Harry accelerated once more, in part because it would be a surprise for himself, too. The true test device was something else, except that he couldn't show it to the girl, and over the next three hours, he had to find an apparatus that could pass as a magic meter.

At the entrance to the Brest building, he remembered his original purpose for coming here - the volunteer course in aikido. He marched to the headmaster's antechambre, said, "Hello, Jeannette, you look splendid," and in the time the school secretary needed to open and close her mouth, he had knocked at Fresnel's door and entered his office.

The headmaster looked up from what could have been the thoughtful study of a paper on his desk, or an open-eyed doze while waiting for lunch. He stared at the intruder with a kind of heavy-lidded disbelief.

"Bonjour, Monsieur le Directeur," called Harry with the false cheeriness of an insurance salesman. "May I have a word with you?"

Planting his behind on the edge of Fresnel's desk seemed a bit overplayed even for the notoriously bad-mannered Terry Pritchard. So Harry grabbed the uncomfortable chair that was intended for visitors like him and sat down, looking confident that the only possible answer would be, *Yes*.

The headmaster surprised him by escaping the rhetoric trap with more style than expected. "You have a talent of appearing only minutes before I might have called you - and making these minutes feel like a severe loss. I had planned to call you anyway, so let's use this opportunity to talk about your work here ..."

"Sure, why not?" said Harry nonchalantly, two long seconds after it was obvious that Fresnel would ask for his agreement no more than Harry had awaited an invitation into this office.

"I've been told that you use music in your Sports courses, and that you let the students dance. Where, and how, did you get the musical equipment?"

"Not from the school resources, that's for sure," replied Harry.

"I don't remember having asked where you *did not* get them, while I clearly remember a remark about how to address me properly."

This man was too good to be true, thought Harry. Yes, he was aware how incredibly outdated French authorities could behave in their insistence on habits which, in the rest of the world, were associated with the late nineteenth century, even outperforming his own countryfellows in this regard, which meant something. But having a legal base, and a cultural one too, didn't make this arrogant attitude any more tolerable.

"It's my private property, Monsieur le Directeur," he said without any attempt to hide his distaste.

"And where did you get it, *Monsieur Pri'chard?*"

Harry showed the number of teeth that would be needed for a smile. "Won them in a poker game, M'sieur l'D'cteur."

"I was also told that you use this uncommon technique toward girls and boys equally. This gives me the impression that I should remind you, M'sieur P'chard, that this is no goddamned dance school for sissies!"

"Oh, really?" Harry's smile was thin but genuine, a warning signal for those knowing him better than his present boss. "Awfully glad you told me, I mightn't have noticed by myself."

Like after his previous answer, the headmaster lost no time in looking outraged or insulted, this way giving proof that he hadn't really expected a honest or cooperative answer from his employee.

"Your impertinence is entirely out of place, and not very efficient either. As the headmaster at this school, I can stop that nonsense any time, and I can't help feeling I should do it at once ..."

For the second time, Harry had to readjust his estimation of the man behind this pompous desk in front of him. Not only was Fresnel more flexible in his own ways, and more difficult to put off balance through insults than it had appeared at first glance, the most surprising discovery was that the Headmaster didn't give a wet frog's fart about the well-being of the students entrusted to him, otherwise he would - at the very least - have asked how Harry's classes had responded.

"... unless there's something of importance in that matter I wasn't told yet."

What sounded like a manager's perfectly normal cross-check to the outside arrived in Harry's ear as an invitation to show remorse at his bad manners and to save the issue with apologies plenty, in particular since his senses confirmed him that the man opposite had a totally different understanding of importance. This insight let his rage mount to a calm glow.

"Being restricted to the news that reaches you inside this office, Monsieur le Directeur, you are

indeed in a difficult position ..."

The reaction came and went at astonishing speed. Fresnel, who had registered the implication and the insult at once, showed an expression of undiluted, murderous hate - but only for a second, then his face went flat and noncommittal.

"... but I'm sure that somewhere in these splendid bookshelves we'd find the book from the EMEC where these things are ruled, and even if not - a phone call's all that's needed, I guess I know already whom to call ..."

Harry let his voice trail off. The EMEC, the European Magical Education Council, was the authority above Fresnel, and even without dropping the hint on his feet, the headmaster was aware that somewhere in the anonymous hydra of an administration, a protective hand cared for this Terry Pritchard. Under such conditions, a discussion about the educational value of his methods was fairly meaningless.

After a short moment, Harry continued, somewhat calmer and in the style of a peace offer, "Well, as it turns out, the risk of raising sissies is kind of limited. My students want to learn the arts of weaponless combat, and I said that this is only possible in a group of volunteers in the afternoons. That's why I came here, Monsieur le Directeur, to find out what's needed to establish such a course."

Fresnel's answer sounded a bit mechanical, probably an indicator that his inside wasn't quite as fast in mastering the uproar Harry's remarks had launched. "Of course it can take place only within the boundaries of your contract - in other words, you are as much a volunteer as your students; extra payment or an accounting in exchange for a regular course is out of discussion. But if you want to spend your afternoons that way, I have no reason to object. It can only take place in the gymnasium, so if you make sure not to interfere with the regular schedule, it's agreed. Monsieur Jacquot and Madame Clément are the teachers in charge for class schedule, as you know. Talk with them to get the hours you have in mind."

Harry stood up. "I'll do that. Thank you, Monsieur le Directeur." He left quickly, to his own relief and certainly also to that of the man behind the desk.

On his way to the teacher's canteen, he sobered up. The relationship between him and the headmaster had been bound to fail friendship even before this conversation, no question about that. But within the few minutes in the office, he'd made a deadly enemy, and this was a bit disquieting, mostly because Harry hadn't expected such hate from a seemingly harmless difference of opinion.

He wasn't concerned for his own security. Fresnel might be capable of arranging an accident any time, but only after having figured out to whom the protecting hand over Terry Pritchard belonged. More important was the question of whether Harry's undiplomatic approach had jeopardized his chances for his original task, which was to find out what had gone wrong at this school.

As if finding such a headmaster wasn't a result in itself. But Harry didn't need a lecture from Ron to know that any attempt to shake Fresnel's chair was a waste of time.

In the canteen, he filled his tray and then stood there, looking for Jean-Paul Jacquot or Valerie Clément, hoping to find an empty seat near them so he could claim his request, and maybe have a decent conversation during lunch. To his disappointment, he couldn't detect either of them, probably because they were still busy organizing schedules.

Instead, a voice reached his ear that called, "Hey, Elvis, if you move your hips over here, you'll find a seat."

In Harry's current state, this remark had more of an invitation to a fistfight than to a shared lunchtime. But maybe he was just too high-g geared, so he decided to play along - not going so far as to imitate the King of Rock'n'Roll, only by walking to that table and putting down first his tray and then himself.

"Hello," he said, "I'm Thierry. We haven't met yet, have we?"

"No, we haven't, but the news about you went round." The man who had said that introduced himself as Laurent, Laurent Clerc, then pointed to his left. "And that's Gilles, Gilles Picabault."

Gilles looked a bit younger than Harry, just as much as Laurent looked older. Aside from that, they seemed to share opinions and habits, with the exception of the speaking role, which was held mostly by Laurent. With a grin that didn't make Harry feel better, Laurent said, "So you make the little girls dance, huh?"

"I'm sorry?" Harry's face revealed small regret at these words.

"Ah, c'mon, no innuendo intended." Laurent's grin changed to the man-to-man version. "We've heard also that you can make the big girls twist and shout, and maybe more than what's good for you, or so the rumour goes."

"I get along, thanks for asking," replied Harry non-committally, however only to the outside. When looking for a lunch in good company, this was definitely the wrong table, while from the perspective of his true reason for being here, perhaps he'd stumbled upon a profitable mine. "And may I ask in return where all this rumour originates?"

"You may."

After a moment of expectant stare, the two teachers looked at each other and exchanged a knowing laughter. Harry felt grateful that they hadn't waited until the disappointment would appear in his face, for not earning a real answer - even faking it felt currently beyond his capabilities.

Gilles, the younger one, opened his mouth for his first contribution. "We can tell you that much, don't blame it on Jeannette."

The school secreteary had indeed been Harry's first suspect, or maybe second place after her boss. Now he watched a very fast and very short exchange of opinions - a warning glance from the older to the younger that even this remark might be too much, an almost defiant and almost imperceptible shrug of Gilles, followed by a suppressed sigh from Laurent.

To follow this exchange, Harry had needed his special abilities too, because the visible part was much more limited than what he could sense. Had someone forced him to have a guess at this moment, he would have speculated that the younger one had a crush on the woman, or maybe an affair - and this had put him in a position to roam the personal files when Jeannette was somewhere else.

"How's it going?" asked Laurent, interrupting Harry's thoughts. "The dancing, I mean. Are they making progress?"

Harry looked baffled. "I'm here only for a short while. And besides, most of it is just warming up, contrary to what you might have heard. There's only one group that might develop to a real course, or maybe two."

"Which class?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You might be able to make money out of it." Seeing Harry's involuntary reaction, Laurent added quickly, "Hey, don't get me wrong again! It's just about dancing, nothing else. But if they can

manage a level where they could appear on stage, I'd know some places where their performance would be welcome ... No fortunes, though, but considering your investment in unpaid overtime, it's certainly worth a thought."

"Money, eh?"

"Yes." Laurent seemed eager to deepen what looked like a notch in Harry's conscience. "And no need to share it, the idea of performing in public is all these girls need to get - erm, excited. The sum's small enough anyway - as I said, you can't expect fortunes for a few legs moved in sync to some music, fortunes are earned somewhere else ..."

Laurent's voice trailed off while his glance, somewhat furtive, rested on Harry.

"Well, that'll need a few weeks this way or the other," said Harry in what he hoped sounded like a thoughtful voice, "because the way they move right now, you'd have to be crazy to spend a single coin."

"You'd be surprised," replied Laurent in a businesslike tone. All traces of a filthy grin were gone. "There are so many interest groups, it's astounding."

"Such as?"

"It can be something as simple and common as the culture club in a country town. Or a meeting of the French Veterans. Or a sales meeting of a larger company - Citroen, Monoprix, whatever. Nobody expects the Folies Bergères, neither in skill nor in dress ... not in age either." A searching look from Laurent tried to check whether Harry had been able to follow the drift.

Yes he had, very much so, while he nodded slowly, his own face lowered toward his dish from where he took a forkful to chew mechanically. He felt almost too sick to swallow, so he was grateful when a moment later the older man stood up, sending a nod toward the younger one to follow his example.

"As you said, Thierry, it needs a little time. But I wanted you to know that there are more places than just our gymnasium here." With these words, Laurent left the table, Gilles in his trail.

Harry waited until they had left the canteen. Then he added another minute for good measure, all the time presenting the picture of a thoughtful person who suddenly had found something more important than emptying his dish. Then he stood up and took his tray to the conveyor belt that would carry it out of sight. He no longer had to fight an impulse to throw up, but his appetite wouldn't return - not at this table.

He'd struck gold, no doubt. The dirtiest gold he'd ever been able to imagine. He already had enough findings to deliver a long report about things that were going badly wrong at the Ecole des Etudiants Magiques Gênes, should Ron ask. But Ron would ask why some boys had committed suicide, and Harry felt hardly closer to this answer than fifteen minutes ago.

And which devil had driven him to put his own children in this school?

* * *

Carlos didn't know how to do spy work. He and his sister had come to this school for the sole purpose of doing undercover work, but nobody had told him what it meant - not in detail.

Once a day their father summoned him and Esmeralda from the washing room or some other inconspicuous place into his apartment, to hear their *daily report* about what had happened for them. So far, not much had happened - with their English skills, they had been released from the English classes, which would have been with Harry. They could use the time to improve their French, and they could do it in a common room with a rule of silence. This was boring student stuff, hardly what you'd expect in a spy report.

However, at least he had learned the first rule of the successful spy: never be caught in a regular pattern! Their father altered the time of their meeting every day, from early afternoon to late evening and back. He also avoided full hours, always selecting odd times like seventeen past five or seven forty-nine.

Armed with these standards, Carlos tried to improve his skill and gain results in the limited time he had left for his undercover role - after classes, after homework, after meals, after daily chores, after times with Esmeralda and Bolo and of course after satisfying the demands of Dona Gata. Basically the rest was zero, if not negative, so Carlos had to combine the useful with the profitable, wherever and whenever possible.

Daily chores like washing, cleaning, dressing, or going to sleep were the times when he could spy on his roommates. Their room, Toulon two-hundred-and-fourteen, was inhabited by a Serge Maral, a Roland Casar, a Mathieu Lambert, and himself. Spying on them meant asking them questions, only to realize that they all suffered from the same severe shock - not having sufficient magical power - so they couldn't understand from where he got his enthusiasm about this school, and that he please might stop pestering them with all these questions. Either he asked about the school but they didn't know, or he asked about their own situation but they hadn't warmed up enough to exchange truly private information.

While his kitten was sometimes a help and sometimes a burden in these attempts, his close connection with Esmeralda created another barrier between him and his fate fellows. To call it jealousy was certainly wrong, but Serge, Roland, and Mathieu had to reach their own point of recovery at their own speed, and he was simply ahead of them. That was what his father said when he reported rejection, and he should give it more time.

Carlos used this time to walk around and make himself acquainted with the school geography. He had inspected the neighbor building, Dieppe, as far as he could, which meant corridors and staircases. His heart had been beating fast on that occasion, but nobody had stopped him or asked him questions. Since then, he had felt less restrained, or maybe just bolder than before.

"Look busy," his father had explained when Carlos discussed this spy journey with him. "Carry something, look like a delivery boy, and behave as if you were entitled to be there, simply as part of your task or your role."

Carlos understood well, although he found it difficult to find something he might carry. His father had said a paper bag with two baguettes was the perfect disguise here in France, but unfortunately this was true only in the outside world. Within the fences of this school, meals were served in the canteen, so walking around with two baguettes would have raised a lot of attention.

But walking around just so seemed to work well enough, in particular since Carlos was a good player of the game *Hide and Watch*. Basically it meant hiding in some cover and watch other people, something everybody could do, and old ladies behind curtains better than anyone else. But Carlos had developed into this game's next higher level, which could be called *Watch Visibly*. True, this version was a knowledge as common as the first, but Carlos had mastered the art of the small footprint. He could behave *unimportant*, with the amazing result that people who'd passed him sitting in some corner would have sworn holy oaths that there hadn't been a living soul along their way.

Of course it didn't work for the other people in his family, not to mention Bolo. Therefore Carlos benefitted from the cover version of his game when, in time for lunch, four girls with a dog left the St.-Nazaire building. He watched them wander toward the public corral and was about to leave his bush-covered hiding spot when another girl came out of the same building alone, her movements slow and spiritless.

Carlos had no clear picture of a suicide candidate, but this girl seemed about right for such a role. He should spy on her, rather than on people only because they were his roommates.

Having reached that point in his conclusions, he was again about to leave his cover and follow the girl when he saw someone else move quickly to reach her, slow down, and talk with her. To his surprise, this someone was his father.

The exchange was very short and, for all Carlos could watch from the distance, it wasn't performed with smiles all over. Then his father sped up even more to leave the girl behind.

Carlos gave both of them a few more seconds, then he left his cover and followed the girl's trail. Spying on his father too seemed a thrilling idea.

When the girl reached the entrance of the canteen, Carlos wasn't too far behind. When he grabbed a tray for his lunch, he had nearly reached her - she moved almost painfully slowly.

From a close-up perspective, he could see that she looked as happy as a wet cat. As a recent owner of a kitten himself, he knew exactly what this expression meant, but there was a difference. When Dona Gata caught her share of drops from Bolo coming out of the water, her face made clear that this was an awful nuisance but nothing to tear the love between cat and dog apart. This girl, in contrast, made a face as if someone had tried to drown her and would soon try again.

Carlos claimed considerably more competence in comforting girls than in spying. Knowing that his sister was in good company - her own roommates had formed a group from the very first day - he felt free enough, skilled enough, motivated enough to do something he wouldn't have done under different circumstances. He let the girl trundle toward a seat, of course in a corner, of course alone, then he made a small show of looking where to seat himself, and finally he reached the place opposite her and sat down.

A short look from her, a trace of surprise as if one had to be pretty weird to join her table, then she looked down again.

Carlos started with the simplest move, available in French or Spanish though not in English. "Bon appetit!"

Another look and a trace of bafflement before her social drill kicked in to let her give a murmured reply.

Searching for an entry, Carlos took the most obvious topic. "You look as if it was a very bad surprise for you."

Her look this time seemed to signal that she wasn't quite sure yet whether to flee, throw the tray right into his face, or just start crying. After a moment, she said, "Wasn't it the same for all?"

Carlos shrugged. "I don't think so. For me - I got a fever, a high one, really high, and when it faded, I had lost my magic."

"Really?" She stared at him. "And then?"

"And then we were sent here. I still think that I only have to wait a bit longer, and then ... Somehow it doesn't feel as if it'd be that way forever. But the fever has been gone for a while already ..."

Carlos voice trailed off because he didn't know how to continue, and also from a sudden start that he might have blown his cover story. For the girl opposite, guessing from her reaction, it sounded as if now it was his turn to fight the tears.

She said, "It will probably come back, if you really could do it before."

"Only for a few days," said Carlos. "Maybe using my magic launched the fever, and when it returns, the same's going to happen again, I don't know. And how was it for you?"

"There was no fever," said the girl, "I just couldn't cast a spell. But maybe ..." She hesitated, then continued, "I remember high fever when I was younger, but they said it was a flu. Could you really cast a spell?"

"Lighting the tip of my wand to have light in the dark - we hadn't come much farther when I got the fever. Why?"

Rather than answering, the girl asked, "Have you been examined?"

Carlos wasn't sure what she meant. But he was no doubt skating on thin ice there, sidetracking the question seemed a good idea.

"For the fever, yes. For anything else, er, you know, we live with relatives because our parents are dead, and they said that this school here is a place where one might find his magic again."

"Oh."

For a short while, they ate silently. Then the girl said, "I thought that maybe you could have told me if there's really an examination to check your magic, because there's a teacher who says he could find out."

"Really?" Carlos fought his excitement, what the girl said sounded very much like his first real news to report. "Which one?"

"I don't know his name, but he's the new one with this large spot in his face, and because he's new and does things differently anyway - he's the one who lets the students dance. By the way, talking about names, I'm Chloé, and who are you?"

Carlos coughed - the surprise from hearing about this particular teacher had sent a tiny crumb the wrong way. Clearing his throat with some effort, he gasped, "Nice to meet you, I'm Carlos Garcia."

"My family name's Broussard. Are you Spanish?"

"From my father's side. My mother was French."

"My parents are still alive, and they're both French. But we don't have money, and ..." Somewhere along the path of this conversation, a dam had broken in Chloé. Maybe it was the trade of poverty for parentless that had done the trick. Suddenly she could talk fluently, ask him questions, tell him things about herself. When she told him that she was in the St.-Nazaire building, on the second floor, he found the time ready to reply, "Really? Then maybe you're next door to my sister Esmeralda."

"You have a sister?"

"Yes, and for her it was the same with the fever and so."

"Oh." Once more, Chloé fell silent.

From the experience with his roommates, Carlos wasn't surprised at this reaction. Having a sister here was a privilege that separated people into different social ranks.

But he was prepared. "An adopted sister. She lost her real parents early, and then she was adopted, and then she lost her adopted parents. That's why I have to take care of her a bit."

"Oh, the poor thing."

"But with her new roommates, it looks as if she's getting along." Sensing his way over this psychological trap, Carlos was able to steer the conversation back into normal territory.

With their dishes empty, he said, "I have a pet, a kitten. She needs fresh air. Would you like to come with me and let her play in the park?"

"Oh yes, I'd like to do that."

The expectant smile on Chloé's face told Carlos that his great experience in smoothing the world for girls had done the trick once more. But even so, somehow it was totally different from doing nearly the same for his sister.

12 - Mutual Business

Testing someone for magic was the easiest thing of the world, provided you were a Potter, or a close friend of the family. Actually, the permission to use that particular family heirloom could serve as a test of whether you were really as close a friend as you thought, although this family hardly left anyone unsure about that.

In the current situation, though, the test Harry had in mind for Chloé looked almost as difficult to him as to any person without the privilege. The reason was his test device, the same which normally made it easy. More exactly, the reason was the device's very special nature.

Said device was of flesh and blood. It was a she and responded to the name Nagini - provided you spoke Parseltongue, because Nagini was a snake with a brilliant green skin. Formerly Voldemort's snake, she'd been abandoned by her old master in the Battle of Hogwarts, to be found only minutes later by Harry. Among Harry's first actions had been a reduction spell which had brought Nagini back to her original size: Voldemort had engorged her so she could provide him with the amounts of elixir he required in his bodyless state.

Still not exactly small, Nagini could be fed with acceptable quantities of food. Her first meal from her new master had been two pieces of dragon meat, from the dragons that were killed in the same battle, and since then Nagini would carry out *every* command from her master.

To be accurate, she would have done so in any case, because she had no choice, as she had explained to Harry during his unsuccessful attempt to figure out the scope of this mysterious *mastership*. But she also gave him her unwavering support, something Voldemort had never achieved because even snakes could feel exploited.

When Sandra Catherine had come into this world, the support hadn't wavered but had expanded to include the girl who, among other things, had inherited the ability to talk with Nagini. For several years already, most people considered Nagini as Sandra's property - as far as this term was appropriate for the snake. Recently, however, a neutral observer would have reported a much neglected pet of intimidating appearance and still more frightening abilities.

Nagini could distinguish between Magicals and Muggles. She also could distinguish between truth and lie, although in a somewhat scary way. She would report lies if the person just tried to be polite or express a compliment, and she would report truth without any side remark from killers and other beasts in human shape. Her ethics were totally serpentine.

Harry, experienced in filtering Nagini's comments through a sieve shaped by social concerns, would bring the snake and the test person together, and after a moment, he would ask Nagini to which category the person belonged. End of test.

For any other person, he would have chosen between the two alternatives of a visible or a hidden snake. In Chloé's case, neither of them was an option. He wasn't sure to which degree it was public knowledge that the famous Harry Potter had a snake that could recognize witches and wizards. But he wouldn't take risks in this regard, so Chloé seeing the snake, or hearing him talking with her, was out of discussion.

Unfortunately, Chloé *not* seeing the snake didn't work either, simply because she would not trust his statement. He could understand that - sitting down on a chair in a room, and ten seconds later the teacher going behind a curtain, a hissing sound, and then he had the result? This would look pretty much like the cheapest hoax in the history of TV entertainment, except that there was no camera hidden.

So Harry needed a halfway convincing device. Moreover, he needed it quickly, until late afternoon.

And it had to be something he could operate well enough to let Chloé buy the charade.

The picture that was growing in his mind was of some Muggle technology, and some magical ingredients. Something mysterious, and medical ... which often enough was the same thing, and this thought brought the name of the old friend who would rescue him from his dilemma. Hermione.

He had about two hours before afternoon double Sports was due; his appointment with Chloé was scheduled shortly after that class. He went back into his apartment, using the walk to sort out steps and arguments in his mind. Arriving there, he had his strategy ready.

From his office and living room in the Cayenne building, he apparated into Carron Lough to fetch a broomstick. He took his old Steel Wing because he might be forced to leave it unguarded at a public place for a few minutes, and the Steel Wing - personally branded twenty-two years ago - would punish any attempt of unauthorized use by another person quite painfully.

With the broomstick in his hand, he apparated to the Hogwarts Express station near Hogwarts. There he mounted the Steel Wing and sped to the tower platform. From there he descended the staircases down to the Hospital Wing. Early afternoon - he was lucky. Ten minutes later, he was sitting opposite Hermione in her laboratory office.

She grinned. "I had a feeling I'd see you soon." With a glance at his discolouration, she added, "But I wasn't aware how you'd look."

"Oh, really? And what made you feel that way?"

"Two patients I had, not too long ago, pretty young both of them, and therefore not particularly good at cover stories and poker faces."

"I see. Well, I'm dramatically better at that ..."

They both had the short smile an old but nonetheless good joke deserved.

"... and that's why I'm here. Hermione, I need something that looks like a device for testing magic."

Hermione's eyes widened briefly. "Strange how that fits, after those two patients had lost their own. But why don't you use Nagini for that?"

Harry smiled, genuinely pleased by this rare moment. "Do you remember my exact question?"

"Yes of course, you asked for - " Hermione stopped, smiled herself without showing any guilt. "All right, the picture's getting clearer. So you *will* use her, only she can't be shown, and you need something impressive instead."

Fast as ever, Hermione lived up to her reputation, saving him a lot of explanations.

"Yes, I think I know how to handle that, it should be convincing enough in this environment and with - "

"Huh?" Harry eyed her suspiciously. "What are you talking about? My idea was to fetch something from here and - " Seeing the expression in Hermione's face at these words, he stopped. "Why not? What's wrong with that?"

"Everything, but two arguments should be enough. First, I'm not ready to lend you any equipment. No need to take offence - you know, I trust you with my life and with the fate of the world but not with my equipment, see what I mean?"

Somewhere between laughter and rage, Harry just nodded.

"Second - you're such a bad actor in matters like this, and you know so little about how to play the

white-coated guru, that I strongly suggest to bring the person here."

Harry sat there for about half a minute, silent and with lips pretty thin, while Hermione looked expectant but with every second more confident.

Finally, he nodded. "All right, then."

"Great." Hermione showed a smile that lacked all gloating, and a second later, Harry knew why.

"I need about twenty minutes' preparation, and I guess you need another journey to bring Nagini first, right? In that case, you better tell me right away what this is all about."

He stared at her, meeting a glance that told him not to take it for blackmailing, and to remember that proper support needed proper information, and she would figure it out anyway, so why not?

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

In fast forward, he told her how he was playing teacher at the school in Brest, and how his children fit the picture, and how he'd met a girl that had been cheated first by fate and then by a French mail order service.

Hermione had listened attentively. "This Chloé," she asked then, "does she play a special role in this game?"

"Not that I'm aware of." Harry shrugged. "I just stumbled upon her, so to speak, and it's just for my self-esteem that I want to keep a - well, it was a kind of half-promise, but you know how it is."

"Yes I know, and I also remember that you have a talent to meet certain people who suddenly become a catalyst."

"Ah well, yes, you can interpret everything as an omen." Harry stood up. "I'm going to fetch Nagini."



The Steel Wing was just where he'd left it. That would have been the case anywhere else as well - at the main entrance for instance - but today's students didn't know Steel Wings and would hurt themselves when trying to use it "just for a short spin." Imagining McGonagall's face at hearing about his careless use of dangerous broomsticks, Harry had some fun at the short flight to the Hogwarts Express station.

Having reached Carron Lough again, he marched straight up to the winter garden that served as Nagini's home, heated round the clock and round the seasons because the snake's idea of comfortable warmth demanded a tropical climate. It took him a moment to find her half hidden under some leaves, in this state that resembled a wake trance more than anything else.

"Hello, Nagini, long no see. How are you?"

"As always, Master, in this room that satisfies my needs so well."

"Not bored?"

"No, Master."

It was a kind of joke Harry played on himself - a joke because Nagini was unable to grasp the concept of boredom, and on himself because Nagini had much trouble with the concept of humour. Serious again, he asked, "I want to test a girl for her magical abilities, that's why I need you. It must be done at Hogwarts, and you must remain hidden. Is this okay with you?"

"Certainly, Master. I welcome the opportunity to be of service in return for the care I receive from you and my Missy."

Missy was Sandra, who hadn't shown much care for the snake recently. But then, it had been her work to implement this winter garden.

Harry took the snake and held her while Nagini curled herself around his upper torso. The animal was as heavy as he remembered. He apparated back to the Hogwarts Express station, mounted his Steel Wing once more and delivered Nagini into Hermione's care before hurrying off to reach his own school in time.

After double Sports, he barely had time to shower and change clothes before the knocking at his door announced the expected guest. "Come in," he called while trying to close the cuff buttons of his shirt.

The door opened hesitantly, and the expected head peeked in.

"Come in," he urged, "this should get as little publicity as possible." In case she wondered why, he added quickly, "Otherwise I'd drown in students asking me to do the same for them."

Chloé entered and closed the door behind her, too busy looking around to ask the obvious question - why he did it for her. He wouldn't have known what to answer.

Closing his second shoe, he came up. "Okay. There's a small change in our plan. The person who owns that device wasn't ready to lend it to me ..."

In Chloé's face fought satisfaction at hearing why she couldn't detect anything strange and scientific with this mask-like stare that signaled the attempt to cope with another untrustworthy adult.

"... which means, if the prophet doesn't come to the mountain, the mountain comes to the prophet, right?"

"Huh?"

"The device couldn't come to you, so you come to the device, that's what I wanted to say."

"And where is it?"

"That," said Harry with a face as if asked about Santa Claus, "is something I'd like to keep to myself. You know what apparating is?"

"Yes, of course."

"And summoning?"

She had heard about it, yes.

"I'm going to summon you to this place. Are you ready?"

Chloé gave no direct answer, while from her face, anyone could have read that the honest answer was *No*.

"Listen to me," Harry said, sitting down for another moment. "This place is another school. We'll meet a woman, an old friend of mine, and she's a kind of doctor, and the place is like an examination room in a doctor's office or in a hospital. The last half mile or so, we must walk because this place is protected against apparition."

Chloé said, "Yes, okay," and when he offered his hand, she understood at once and came closer to take it.

He apparated himself and instantly summoned her to the Hogwarts Express station. It wasn't really simultaneous, something only Gabriel had managed, but the fraction of a second difference was meaningless. From the girl's perspective, they both arrived at the platform in the same moment.

He pointed. "It's up there, a few minutes' walk."

In the first two minutes, Harry could see that she twice started to ask him again where they were, and stopped herself because she hadn't forgotten his remark. Then the surroundings had caught her attention, and it seemed as if she liked to play along in this mystery tale better with every step.

Walking through the Entrance Hall and toward the Hospital Wing, they passed a few students whose conversation made it clear that English was the native language here. However, Chloé was so occupied in watching the floors and walls and ceiling that Harry wasn't sure if she'd registered that.

Hermione had been waiting for them. "Hello," she said using French, and toward the girl, "You must be Chloé - come with me, your spotty friend may wait the few minutes here."

Unable to suppress a grin, Harry watched as a giggling Chloé followed Hermione into the adjacent room.

As soon as the door was closed, he stepped to the corner of the room where, hidden from view, Nagini was lying. "Well," he said, "what is it with the girl?"

"She is no Muggle, Master," replied the snake, "but she is no witch either. She feels almost like the young woman I had to test here in these rooms, years ago."

This young woman, as Harry remembered at once, was Clara Stein, sister of Clemens Stein, the potions wizard who could be called the inventor, or discoverer, of the magic-triggering potion. The two of them had been as close as Carlos and Esmeralda, and his sister's lack of magic had been the driving force for Clemens to search for a cure until he finally succeeded, thanks to the help he found at Hogwarts.

Harry nodded to himself - this was pretty much what he'd expected. He sat down to wait for the end of the fake examination.

Ten minutes later, the door opened and Chloé came out.

"Well, how was it?"

She giggled. "I had cables everywhere, and it tickled and was cold too, and next moment it tingled." Chloé looked up expectantly, since at that moment Hermione entered the room with stripes of paper in her hands.

When Hermione's eyes met his own, Harry rubbed his nose. According to the code they had agreed upon, scratching his head would have meant "Witch" while scratching his beard would have indicated "Muggle," and any position in-between meant neither the one nor the other.

Hermione nodded and walked behind her desk to sit down and examine the papers for another moment. Then she looked up. "Okay, Chloé, from what this snake-like thing here tells me ..."

For an instant, Harry's eyes bulged from his efforts to avoid a snort, if not a laugh. He knew that this was Hermione's revenge for not initiating her into the plot from the very beginning.

"... you are something like an incomplete witch. Definitely not a Muggle, not a squib either, but as I said - for some reason, the development didn't quite finish."

"What does it mean?"

"It means something you're painfully aware of - you can't do magic. That's the diagnosis, that is the precise description of what caused your trouble. The prognosis is the realistic assumption of how it will continue. In your case, the prognosis is simple - it stays that way unless we find a treatment to complete your development as a witch."

Hermione exchanged a quick glance with Harry, then continued, "There's only one treatment I know about. It's no guarantee but it shows good results. With that - "

Chloé interrupted her. "What are good results?"

"Well ... I'd say, fifty-fifty at the least, probably better. The problem is, this treatment is incredibly expensive."

"Oh."

The hope that had started to sprout in Chloé's face faded, giving room to sad resignation and to a shimmer in her eyes that announced a losing fight for composure.

"There might be a chance," said Harry. "I've heard about people who do a kind of sponsoring for such cases. It means that they pay the treatment."

Chloé looked at him. Yes, she believed his words - since the moment they had entered these hospital rooms, she knew that his promises weren't hollow. Only she couldn't imagine anyone who would sponsor an incomplete witch from Nohanent near Clermont-Ferrand.

Harry stood up. "We can discuss this on your way back - high time we return to the school."

Chloé nodded obediently and followed him a moment later, apparently with her mind so full that she hardly noticed the Hogwarts students who kept staring at them with open curiosity. Outside, walking to the Hogwarts Express station, she finally found the courage to express her concern.

"Monsieur le Professeur, these - "

"My students just call me Prof," said Harry by way of support.

"Er, yes, er, Prof - these people you mentioned ... uhm, why would they pay a treatment for me?"

"It's one of these groups who take care of other people in need - or animals, for that matter, but in your case it's definitely human ..."

The joke died long before reaching its target.

"... so they see no reason to pay for people who can afford such a treatment anyway. None of their clients is somehow special, and many of them are as poor as you."

Rather than looking offended, Chloé's expression lighted up. Being as blunt as that seemed to help.

"They sponsor a limited amount of people each year. It's their decision, and normally they take their time to decide whom to sponsor and whom not. For each sponsored case, there are ten others. I tell you that to make one thing clear: don't expect me day after tomorrow to come and to shout, 'I've got it, I've got it!' It's worth an attempt, the chances are limited, and it'll take some time."

Chloé nodded. "Yes, I know, Prof."

Almost having reached the destination of their walk, she said, "I don't think they'll take me. Nobody in our family has ever won any competition or quiz. So, as long as it takes to ask them, I can at least imagine."

Harry stared at this small-scale philosopher, who looked quite content despite her words. Seeing his stare, she said, "Well, it's true, isn't it? It already feels like a miracle that you ..." Her voice faltered and she quickly stared ahead, but the sudden vivid colour of her ears revealed enough of what she couldn't finish.

Back in his apartment, he let her wait for a moment to check the corridors outside. Then he signaled to her, and together they climbed down the staircase and out of the Cayenne building.

He waved goodbye at Chloé and turned the other direction. At this moment, he noticed a colleague, Agnès something, who stood not far away. Apparently she had watched him with Chloé.

He passed her, greeting her casually, "Hi, Agnès."

Only her eyes gave answer. This answer told him that she really would like to ask him what business he had with that girl in his apartment, only she couldn't find the right opening.

Just before Agnès turned away, her eyes sent another message. *Watch your step*, it said, *because I'll watch it, too.*

* * *

Gabriel was in a creative rapture. This state, which otherwise had nasty side-effects on his performance in more conventional courses like Math or History, had started a few days ago in Dublin.

Tuesday evening, Dragonfly had found a second singer, although a very reluctant one. The next day, Gabriel visited Beauxbatons again at lunch time. He found Moira in the canteen and managed to introduce her to Sandra and vice versa. Of course Moira knew Sandra as the school champion in magical contests, and of course Sandra remembered Moira from the Dragonfly concert, but Gabriel saw reason to double-nail every social step with this girl.

After this introduction, he sat with Moira in the same cafeteria but some tables away from Sandra and Frédéric, and raised the issue he had mulled over since the previous evening.

"The last time we sat here, it was because you had lyrics for our songs. Okay - today it's the other way around, I'm here because of songs for your lyrics."

"Huh? Isn't this just the same?"

"No, I mean the lyrics you wrote without a song in mind. Yesterday you said you had some, and I'd like to give it a try." Seeing Moira's reaction, he added quickly, "I mean finding the tune for one of them - you know, I never before tried something like that, staring at words and searching for a melody."

"So you're the composer in the band?"

"Oh, not me alone - I come with an idea, and Tomas listens to it and finds something to play on the guitar, and Michel listens to it and looks where to accentuate with his drums and so, but ... yes, the first idea is usually mine."

Moira nodded. "I could give you something. Until some days ago, I looked at them as poems, but when a poem is sung, it's a song, right?"

"Yes, exactly. But ... Uhm, you know, I had the idea to scan through and start with the one that catches my attention most."

"Oh my God!"

After a moment of confusion, a blushing Moira confessed that the idea of him scanning through her most intimate literary works was enormously scaring, while the idea to be tranced just in order to pass these spiral notepads over to him seemed even worse.

"Hmm ..." Gabriel felt momentarily at a loss.

"The problem is that you're a boy," explained Moira. "It's not ... It's nothing ... I mean, don't take it personal ..."

Gabriel was reminded of scenes at the Black Sea, when trance-teaching two girls French. Next moment, he had an idea. "Would it be possible that you and Caitlin together go through these

notepads?"

Yes, that shouldn't be a problem.

"And would it work with me sitting somewhere close, and you and Caitlin together decide whether to present the first verse to me? You read it, or Caitlin reads it, something like that?"

Moira's eyes lighted up. "That sounds wonderful. You know, presenting them to someone else is quite a thrilling picture, and sometimes I could scream at myself for tensing up that much, but - "

Gabriel laughed. "Yeah, I know that feeling well."

"You?"

"Sure. With the flute I feel free, but otherwise ... Anyway, if that's okay with you, I'll make an appointment with Caitlin. What about their house in Dublin? That's far away from Beauxbatons and all the students here."

The idea had great appeal for Moira.

It had even more appeal for Caitlin, who couldn't wait for the moment when she would sing the first truly original Dragonfly song with a tune not published before and lyrics not stolen from somewhere else.

And so they sat in the dining room of the McFarlane home, the two girls at one side of the table, Gabriel at the other - after having confirmed beyond doubt that he couldn't read handwriting in headfirst position. The girls turned page after page, giggling every now and then, and occasionally Caitlin asked, "That one?" toward Moira, to earn a nod and then to declaim a few lines for Gabriel.

After the third verse, he told them to put a marker in this page. After some more scanning, Moira lost a bit of her reluctance, although some minutes later she squeaked, quickly turned the page and said, "Sorry, that wasn't intended for public."

Little by little and page by page, they found a few candidates to which Gabriel could imagine himself breeding a melody. Then suddenly there were noises from the entrance hall, and Mrs McFarlane appeared. When Caitlin introduced the new guest, she said, "So you're the one who wrote a song my daughter can't sing? When can I hear it?" as if this was the most natural thing and just a matter of time and schedules matching.

It seemed to help, or Mrs McFarlane had a way to make it simple - she sat with them for a few minutes, her daughter read the first lines of the two main candidates for her, Mrs McFarlane looked at Gabriel and said she'd favour the first but she was no composer, and shortly afterwards Mr McFarlane came home and of course Moira and Gabriel had to stay for dinner.

During dinner, Moira found herself as the topic of a round in which six people, including Mr McFarlane and Caitlin's younger sister Grania, discussed tight vocal cords, jelly legs, and a panicked brain as though it was a recipe for plum pudding that needed still some refinement. They all agreed that it was pretty normal while not worse than blocked French, that the first concert was the only serious barrier because afterwards the problem would be gone, and that Gabriel should get his sister Sandra as a nerves nurse - after all, he was the one who'd started this business.

Gabriel returned from this remarkable afternoon with three sets of lyrics and immediately started to work. He found it quite difficult - he was no professional composer, he constantly tended to make it too complicated by far, he knew that the singer should be in the center but he didn't know to handle it. So he listened to other people's songs, suddenly with a new attention and with two different ears, one for the melody and one for the accompaniment.

Some days later, Dragonfly had its next rehearsal. When Gabriel summoned Caitlin, making a mental note to get some pointers, Mrs McFarlane reminded him that it was his job to make the other girl sing. He did his job - Moira had found lyrics for an older Dragonfly song which she felt sure could be sung by Caitlin, and in order to hear it first from Moira, the girl had to be tranced again.

The result was better than expected - or worse, depending on the perspective. Caitlin listened to the recording twice, already humming along in the second repetition, and then presented her own version.

When the song ended, they beamed at each other - until Héloïse, accurate and merciless as ever, said, "You know what - I really would like to hear it sung from both of you ... Together, of course."

Under different circumstances, they might have tried it the same evening. But their time frame in the small hall was over; they had to clear out before the next people arrived. These were the members of the Beauxbatons Theatre Group, and Gabriel decided to just wait here for his sister and talk with her about the role Dragonfly would like to offer. Or ask for, which was more to the point.

He had forgotten Caitlin - someone had to take her back to Dublin. He summoned her, couldn't return immediately because Mrs McFarlane was there, and by the time he arrived at the entrance to the practising room, there were only three minutes left before the next rehearsal would start.

When he reached Sandra to fix a meeting, she said, "Why don't you stay until we're done here? Today I could do with some moral support."

Gabriel nodded in devotion. Watching a theatre rehearsal was the last thing he'd needed with all his own problems, but when Sandra asked for support ... Even without the request he had in mind, he would have known just one answer.

The group seemed complete, except for their leader and director. This man arrived some minutes later, and when he stepped forward onto the stage, Gabriel had the opportunity to learn two facts formerly unknown - the man's first name was Hayden, overheard in greetings from some group members; and the man had very little in mind with females of any kind, probably with the exception of actors on stage.

The man's searching look fell on Gabriel. "A new face in our circle? No, alas not! The deadly enemy's face stares at me and hides his evil mind in youthful *innocence!*"

Gabriel stared, yes, that much he felt ready to agree. While otherwise ...

Hayden beamed at him. "Excuse my dramatic gesture, young friend, but of course I recognized the flutist and musical brain from Dragonfly, and any band is competition for sure, especially if they play rock, still more so if they have a singer, and most of all if this singer is a *girl!*"

His overarticulated falsetto raised giggles and laughter in the circle. Even Gabriel had to smile. He had little experience with gays, but this man's light-footed self-mockery had style for sure.

Then Sandra came to help by telling Hayden that her brother was only there to hold her sweaty hands, and over the next few minutes, Gabriel realized that he would see no performance this evening; the group was still in the process of formation, discussing roles and approaches and who'd do what and who couldn't imagine himself and things like that. It was quite instructive: he could watch various people go on stage and talk to the audience, and he could register how his own uneasiness grew when the speech they'd prepared didn't work, for whatever reason.

It was about an Antigone, a name Gabriel had heard before. Other names were new to him - a Creon, a Haimon ... He felt baffled for a few seconds when they started talking about an Ismène, before the discussion revealed that this Ismène was Antigone's sister, rather than that of Héloïse.

Then Sandra stood up, walked to the stage, and said, "I want to play an Antigone who is a family girl. She's the younger sister of two dead brothers. Her own younger sister is still alive, but otherwise her family is in shatters and tatters. This is her motivation, and that's what I want to present in her character."

Sandra had fallen silent, after the shortest presentation so far. She stood there, apparently waiting for reactions.

Watching, Gabriel could see that Hayden kept waiting himself. Neither to the outside nor in his mind did he reveal his own perception of Sandra's model how to play this character.

After a moment, someone said, "But isn't that obvious? Of course it's a family matter, the entire Oedipus story is a family matter ..."

The tiny pause raised a bit of laughter, and Gabriel, though not terribly familiar with Oedipus and his family bonds, caught a hearty dislike of the speaker.

"... sounds a bit as if someone said, 'I play Antigone as Antigone.' Sorry to be so blunt, but that's what I understood." An elaborate gesture emphasized the difficult journey from Sandra's mouth to the young man's brain.

Sensing his sister's growing rage, sensing also an unfamiliar uncertainty in her, Gabriel sent a soothing wave and some encouragement, mentally pleading to keep cool and relaxed.

Sandra said, "I still have to figure it out in full detail for myself, that's one reason why I can't draw any more than just an outline today. But then, and without going into detail on anyone's capacity in understanding outlines ..."

Her own tiny pause earned her a few smiles, in Gabriel's opinion a much better score than open laughter.

"... this particular outline is, if not more, at least very sharp. My Antigone will *not be* a fighter for freedom, she *does not* consider Creon a tyrant ... Maybe she has to balance between him as a possible father-in-law and him as an outsider in the closer sense of her own scandalous family, that's one of the details I haven't made up my mind about yet." Sandra smiled broadly. "But as soon as I have my own understanding, I'll offer it to all of you ... Thank you."

Escorted by scattered applause, she marched back to her place at Gabriel's side. He grabbed her hand below the table and squeezed it, after a moment's hesitation feeling her response.

Hayden stood up, walked to the stage, and said, "Restraining yourself and your own play is usually the last hurdle an actor has to take ... All right, who's next?"

From that moment on, Gabriel paid little attention to the words and details. For a while, he dwelt on the question of whether it was only his prejudiced mind that had heard high approval in Hayden's remark. For another while, he watched styles of stage presence before he daydreamed himself away into some lyrics that were waiting to be sung. After all, the lesson he could take from here was limited - his own stage performance depended on a flute, not on words and gestures, while Caitlin had time to learn and other challenges to master before she would start to improve her style of movement on stage. Not to mention Moira and her performance.

A gentle push from his sister brought him awake. The rehearsal was over.

In the cafeteria, with a beer for Sandra and a coke for himself, he revealed his request, quoting all suggestions from the band members as well as Mrs McFarlane's remark. He ended, "I'm not sure yet how to handle it in detail, but the idea with the tambourine has some appeal. Anyway, in the worst case you could keep behind the curtain and trance Moira from there."

Sandra grinned. "High boots and hot pants, huh? Maybe I should do it, it would help me gain confidence on stage the hard way."

"Fine with me." Gabriel smiled. "Showing not so hidden qualities together with the hidden ones, that sounds right."

"This trancing - we'll manage somehow, while the details can be left open for a while. But in return, I want your help for my own performance."

"This Antigone? What does it mean? A family girl, that didn't tell me much."

Sandra gave a short summary of the Oedipus saga as the basis and of the plot in the Antigone drama, which was basically the same in Sophocles' and Anouilh's version.

Gabriel said, "So that's what's meant with the Oedipus complex, then? But somehow it's hard to imagine - I can see it as a dilemma that's worth a drama, okay, but not as a real-world situation."

"That's just the background," replied Sandra, "Antigone's story starts when her two brothers are already dead. Although - don't forget that this is the antiquity *and* a Mediterranean country, so if Iokasta married young the first time and gave birth to an Oedipus early, she might be just sixteen years older than her son. So if he's eighteen, she's thirty-four. That's not out of proportion, is it?"

With slightly coloured cheeks, Gabriel replied, "You may ask me again when I'm eighteen."

Sandra nodded. "But about the family business, I want to ask you now. What do you think about my approach?"

"Did you hear Hayden after you left the stage? About the last hurdle? To me, this sounds like high praise, especially from someone like him."

"You mean, to a girl?" Sandra's smile faded. "Don't be confused by his behaviour, he's a hundred percent pro in matters of performance. Yes, sure, he said this track is promising, provided I know where to set the accents. But where do I place them?"

Gabriel thought for a moment. "So this Antigone had two older brothers, right? And they killed each other fighting for the vacant throne. Okay ... so imagine you and me, except you're Carlos, and we kill each other. Then there's Esmeralda left, and Carlos is you, except the name's Antigone, and Esmeralda's name is Ismène. Right so far?"

Sandra's eyes had widened. "I'd never have dreamed of mapping it to our own family that way."

"Well, I just did it to get an idea how things might have looked in that family." Gabriel grinned. "Our father didn't marry his mother for sure, because she was killed long ago, and our mother is only one year older." He grew serious again. "But this grouping pattern is the same - older siblings, and I could imagine that Antigone looked up at her brothers like Esmeralda is doing toward us."

"Toward you." Sandra's smile had not a trace of jealousy.

"If you think it's only toward me, you must be blind. Anyway, try to imagine your Antigone like Esmeralda - I mean, killed parents she had enough for sure, how would she respond to someone saying, 'Your brother's corpse must rot in the sun?'"

"She would ignore it, think it was a mistake, a misunderstanding. She would take measures to put it straight."

Gabriel nodded. "Yeah, right. It's like what Esmeralda did at Hogwarts, isn't it? I mean, Dad came to help there, but if he weren't there, she would have done things herself. If Antigone is Esmeralda at Hogwarts, then Creon is the Sorting Hat. That's how I figure it."

Sandra beamed. "Creon is the Sorting Hat, yes. I just have to keep that in mind."

* * *

Cho was sitting in the Vancouver Resort at her breakfast table when the call reached her. She seized her porty and looked at the display. The caller was Clara, which told Cho that the call could have to do with MABEL as well as with the more general business of Groucho.

Clara Stein, sister of Clemens Stein, had followed her brother to join Groucho Biochemicals three years ago. Showing administrative talent, Clara had been assigned the management tasks her brother, genius Potions wizard but otherwise a bit clumsy, failed time and again to perform satisfyingly. Since then, everybody was happy - brother and sister working hand in hand and everyone else getting first rate results. The additional salary, which wasn't small by any standard, paid off tenfold.

Reuben Timball, sitting opposite Cho, rose. "It was time for me anyway," he said with an apologetic smile before leaving her alone.

As the manager in charge, Reuben had been up for hours already; he had kept her company for a cup of coffee and for reasons of affection. She returned the smile, then put the phony to her ear.

"Hello, Clara, your timing's perfect - I'm sitting here with my second cup of breakfast tea. What's up?"

"Hello, Cho, that's good to hear because - well, the issue is a bit, erm, embarrassing. But even so, there was no question what to do ... It's about the booster."

The *booster* meant the 'Magic Booster,' a potion manufactured and sold by Groucho Biochemicals, successor of the drink which, fourteen years ago, had turned Clara from Muggle woman to witch. Due to its very special nature, there was a permanent order to contact Cho whenever the booster was involved. This order bypassed any administrative hierarchy in the enterprise, which somehow was typical for Cho and her Chinese origins, but even in the Western business culture, orders from the majority stock holder had a very convincing nature.

"What about it?" asked Cho.

"Someone asked for it," replied Clara.

Usually Clara didn't need three invitations to name the issue, so her reluctance gave Cho a kind of premonition. "Who?"

"Harry."

A grim smile played around Cho's lips, and maybe also in her voice when she said, "Clara, you're the most reliable angel I know. Are you in your office?"

"Yes."

"Give me five minutes."

"I'm going to meet him here at - in twenty minutes, half past five local time."

"In this case - give me ten minutes, and we'll wait for him together, if that's fine with you."

"Er - yes, sure."

It wasn't fine with her at all, naturally so, but at least Clara had a clear perspective of her priorities, which had made her call Cho when Cho's husband came and tried to get a booster through an unofficial channel. Somehow it was a very Teutonic style from Clara's perspective, but Cho felt grateful for it.

She called the moderators of the running MABEL seminar to tell them that she couldn't join them this morning, and would be off until further notice. Then she examined her dress carefully - was it suited to meet her husband in what looked to become a very interesting discussion?

Probably so. She apparated to the Groucho Headquarters in Dublin.

Reaching Clara's office and saying hello to the woman who was four years her junior, Cho had only a few minutes left before Harry was expected. As it turned out, the story could be told in a few sentences.

Looking for a booster while avoiding the official channels, Harry had first contacted Rahewa, his goddaughter and also Clemens' wife. Of course - Rahewa would kill for Harry, or be killed. In this case, however, she had passed the request to her own husband. Clemens, who disliked *connection business* as much as he disliked administrative duties, had passed it further to his sister Clara. Clara had made an appointment with Harry, and then had called Cho, as simple as that.

"Very good," said Cho with a smile. "For once there's someone who isn't going to freeze in awe just because Harry wants something."

Clara didn't look pleased. Actually, she looked quite unhappy.

The Magic Booster was the highly concentrated version of the stuff Groucho Biochemicals had used in the last fourteen years to poison the world to a magic life. Provided a person had a magical condition, the Magic Booster was the potion to turn this person into a wizard or witch. It could not be used for the members of the MABEL seminars because they were pure Muggles, but there were enough would-be wizards and witches, and still more people who believed they were.

Groucho Biochemicals kept the potion under tight control and asked a fortune for it. A cure - normally one drink, seldom two or three - was about half as expensive as a MABEL seminar, meaning fifty grand. This pricing policy had been the topic of a long and bitter dispute between Cho and Harry, so much so that it could be rated as one of the wedges that separated them. Cho's argument was that Groucho had spent billions and billions in achieving a historical goal, and still did, so it was only justified to make a buck where you could find it - after all, they hadn't committed themselves to turn all adult Muggles into Magicals, at least not for free.

Harry's argument was that a promise didn't end only because the letters in a contract stopped. He also said that the few customers didn't make Groucho Biochemicals rich, while distributing the potion more generously wouldn't make them poor.

"If it's that important, ask your Goblin friends to buy these drinks," Cho had hissed at the last and worst discussion they'd had about this topic.

Harry had paled. "I won't do that," he'd said and left.

Cho knew that she had overshot the mark by far. If Groucho spent billions, the Goblins spent trillions, and happily so after Harry had used his Goblin Request to launch the Great Plot. The memory of this conversation went through her mind while she sat there, waiting and trying to calm down her nerves.

There was a knock at the door.

Clara cleared her throat. "Come in."

The door opened, and a smiling Harry entered the room. He came as far as saying, "Hello, Clara, how - " Then he saw Cho and froze.

Clara's embarrassment was put aside by consternation. "What happened to you?"

Harry should have been twice as consternated as Clara, and probably he was. But on the outside, he showed an almost genuine grin for Clara.

"It's a mask, Dobby and Winky did it." Then he turned and said, "Hello, Cho. Nice to meet you."

"Hello, Harry, long time no see."

Clara said, "When I heard about your request, Harry, I notified Cho because there's a permanent order to alert her for any business concerning the booster. Sorry if that's not what you had in mind ..." Her voice trailed off.

Harry made a slight bow, one of the tricks he'd learned in Japan and honed through years with the Goblins. "It's my mistake, Clara." Next moment, he chuckled. "You must have felt torn between a rock and a hard place, huh?"

Clara giggled in return and said something, and Cho watched how her husband turned an unhappy-feeling, miserable-looking creature into a beaming, attractive woman of thirty-four. It was admirable, if you felt like admiring.

She didn't. "I'd like to know a bit more about this request, though not necessarily here in this office."

Harry turned to her. "Yes, probably so." Toward Clara, he said, "See you," and next instant, Cho was sucked through nowhere to come out in the dining room of Carron Lough, the standard destination for apparitions and summons right into their home.

She exhaled deeply. Using her porty, she ordered tea from the house-elves, then sat down at the round dinner table, large but, without the ring-shaped extension, still the smaller of the two versions they owned. For two people, it looked as big as a Quidditch pitch. "Well then," she said, "tell me."

"And then?"

"Then I can tell you whether you'll get it or not."

"Hmm ... I could just buy it."

Cho grinned diabolically. "We both know that this isn't true! I don't even have to tell you that these drinks are numbered and that I could prevent you from ever receiving a delivery, because we both know what would happen with the bill, don't we?"

With gloating in her soul, she watched how her husband blushed deeply. She'd scored a first-rate hit, and he could blame it on his friends, the Goblins, who simply refused to charge Harry's account with any bill that came in. In exchange, Harry's sense of honour forbade any unmotivated or exaggerated spending, while the same sense prevented him from simply opening another account at a Muggle bank.

The tea had arrived. Cho took a gulp, then leaned back. "I'm listening."

Harry sighed deeply. "All right then. There's a girl. She's a would-be witch, as I know for sure after a test with Nagini. I'd like to make her a real witch, so I called Rahewa."

"A girl, is it? What's your concern with her? Is she good-looking?"

An almost-smile curled Harry's lips, and for a fleeting instant Cho expected him to say, 'Last question first or in the order of asking?' - a teasing joke she hadn't heard in a long time.

"Her name's Chloé. She's as old as Esmeralda while not as pretty, but maybe I'm prejudiced. I need the business with her as much as I need a third eye on the tip of my nose, but I stumbled upon her and - well, you know how it goes."

"No, I don't know. Tell me."

He looked at her, and once more Cho had a wrong premonition, by expecting to hear the words, 'You forgot to say the magic word.' Rather than this old line, she heard a story about a staircase and a sobbing girl and a wand so cheap that it hurt the eyes when looking at it.

Somehow, it was a typical Harry story. Under different circumstances, she would have loved him for that. In a better future, maybe she would make up for it. As things were currently, and perhaps also to gain time, she asked, "And how's your progress otherwise? Got some clues?"

"Mixed. I'm the talk of the school, with my methods of warming up in Sports. I let the students dance to the music from floating speakers. Two colleagues suggested performing in public and pocketing the money without telling the kids. It's a bad climate there, but nothing that explains why a boy of twelve would commit suicide. I see our children each day, and they report to me. So far, it's been the usual stuff ..."

Cho felt some relief. There was no doubt that Harry held guard over Carlos and Esmeralda with all his powers, and no sign of negligence because things looked so quiet.

"... and how's your own progress?"

The question hit her at the wrong moment, found her somewhat unprepared. "In which regard?"

Only his eyes told her how cheap an attempt at escape this had been. Aloud, he said, "Met some lumberjacks recently?"

For a terrible fraction of a second, Cho thought he'd visited Vancouver Resort again, without his facial mark and in a still better disguise. Then she realized that this question was just his way of approaching a topic in the middle of a minefield, and her initial startling changed into the forerunner of a full-grown fury.

"None I'd recognize. Why?"

"Met some men in better dresses?"

"None I hadn't met before," she snapped. "And to save you the next question, and maybe quite in contrast to some expectation, I didn't meet a third category either."

The very short widening of his eyes told her that he knew what she meant. But Harry wasn't the man to leave it at guesswork, and he wasn't the man to deny her a punch line, so he asked, "Which is?"

"The one that's missing in your list - some men that weren't dressed at all."

He exhaled. "Indeed."

She knew that this remark expressed no doubt, only surprise. Her dramatic little wisecrack had given him time to swallow the news, but she wasn't interested in scoring rhetorically, and besides, she wasn't finished yet. "Although I have to admit that I ran several attempts. Two, actually."

"But toward the same man, I suppose?"

Her grin was more teeth than humour. "How right you are! The first time it didn't work because suddenly I remembered my own rule in such matters ..."

Essentially, her rule said that sex with another partner wasn't entirely out of the question but she had to be asked first, so to speak. Literally following this rule had resulted in a few threesomes.

"... and felt restrained because - well, I didn't want to be the first to break it, which wasn't a proof of morale but of pride. I didn't exactly plan to ask you for permission, had planned more something like an announcement, but I never came that far. You were so sure to know what had happened that

you didn't let me finish my sentence before you disappeared ..."

That had been at their discussion about how to proceed with Carlos and Esmeralda. Cho knew that her argument was pretty weak, but Harry was so much looking forward to hear about the second *failure* that he didn't bother undermining her position.

"... I was so mad that I went back at the spot to do what I'd been accused of anyway." Cho snorted. "First it was the time difference that saved me - if saving's the right term. There was some mayhem in the Vancouver Resort, and it took Reuben hours before business was again running as usual. I had calmed down but I hadn't changed my mind, except that when there was the opportunity Reuben said I only wanted to punish you with him, and that he wasn't ready to play this role. If I could honestly claim that this motive no longer was predominant, he'd gladly agree - "

"Gladly agree, huh?" Harry seemed to have some trouble not laughing out loud.

"Well, to make a long story short and to stress another cliché, we ended up as good friends but not in bed. What about you?" she asked without giving him time for a reply to her own story.

"Me? I had other concerns, recently. There isn't anyone among the staff that caught my attention, but this may have to do with my preoccupation at that school. Of course - " Harry grinned, "there are enough girls in the older classes who obviously wouldn't refuse a private encounter with the new Sports teacher, but that's entirely meaningless."

Was it? For him it was, would have been even if it had been legal and in another context - young girls weren't his taste, as she knew. But for herself it was anything but meaningless, and in addition, she desperately wanted to wipe the arrogant grin from his face, and she knew already how, killing two birds with one stone.

"You can have the booster."

He was on full alert; he knew her too well. "Under what condition?"

"Fuck me."

"What?"

"You heard me all right. There's a marital right, or duty, remember? I just told you how I've been left high and dry recently, and well - you want something, and who am I to prevent a poor French girl from becoming the witch she was planned to be - but only after we've made love."

Yes, the grin was gone from his face. A moment later, though, a smile appeared, totally different. "And what if we need a second booster?"

"Guess what?"

His face showed that the answer didn't need any guessing. A second later, he asked, "Now?"

"That's what I had in mind, yes. With these time zones, it's difficult enough to meet anyway."

Following him up the staircase toward their bedroom, she knew that the time zone wasn't the real barrier, and that this forced *marital duty* didn't solve all their problems. But maybe it was a start, and for sure it would solve *one* problem.

Forced or not - she knew that, quoting a famous Muggle in the movie business by the name of Woody Allen, "there was no such thing as a bad orgasm."

13 - Pretences

Esmeralda wondered if she should feel guilty. Her own judgment said no, and what she could see from Carlos indicated the same answer, but there were more people involved. Among them were their parents, who had discussed the issue vehemently and with very different opinions. And now, after all the hassle she'd caused, she shouldn't care any longer?

The topic in question was the closeness to her brother, the same closeness which had been challenged by the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts, causing Esmeralda to raise a hellstorm in complaints. But truth be told, currently she felt farther apart from Carlos than she had ever been while at Hogwarts.

And, although she had no one to whom she could confess it, she enjoyed a feeling of freedom and easiness.

It had started with ... had it really been her dog? Or had Bolo simply accelerated a process that would have started anyway? She didn't know, but just counting the facts, she could say that the four girls in room 217 of the St.-Nazaire building had formed a group within hours, if not minutes.

Dominique Lombard, a blonde girl with curly hair from Rouen, had already been in the room when Esmeralda walked through the door. Dominique hardly found the time to send a glance toward the newcomer when Bolo entered the room, winning Dominique's heart at once.

"Oh, what a cute dog!" the girl exclaimed. Then she hurried over to bend down, hug Bolo and beam at Esmeralda for having such a cool pet.

Esmeralda wouldn't have dreamed of calling Bolo *cute*, wouldn't have thought that she could like anyone who did that either. But Dominique had a way of simplifying things. Like, she didn't ask Esmeralda for permission. She didn't ask Bolo either, she just knelt down and stroked the German shepherd and didn't stop.

Bolo found it great. Try as she might, Esmeralda couldn't detect visible objections in his stance to being called cute.

Into this harmonic scene burst Natalie, last name Bouquet, from a small town near Angers. She wasn't as crazy about dogs as Dominique but she had a strong group instinct, and where two girls were alternately cuddling a dog, a third one wouldn't hurt, would it?

They had come as far as exchanging names while kneeling more or less at eye level with Bolo when a voice from behind said, "Yeah, of course - I knew it! The last bed in the dirtiest corner is mine, and what's left of that dog is the rear end, right?"

Looking up, the three girls - plus dog - got their first impression of Odile, from the Mélichords in Paris. She was very Parisienne in her style but otherwise as magicless as the others. And when Esmeralda said that the darkest corner was fine with her because Bolo liked dark corners, Odile gave a quick smile and a shrug and said, "Well, that about saves the day, doesn't it?" before joining the group. Stroking a dog, even the rear end, was apparently better than sitting on a bedside and fighting the tears.

Bolo, as it turned out, settled for two corners. One was indeed next to Esmeralda's bed and became the place where Bolo slept. The other spot was almost in the opposite corner of the room. From there, Bolo could watch the two bunk beds as well as the door. The first time that the door opened unannounced - the concierge, an unpleasant woman, was checking the girls in their rooms - Bolo's ears went flat while his teeth became visible, emitting a low growl. After this, and after the low-voiced but nonetheless excited chat it caused across the room, their group was complete.

Of course Esmeralda introduced Carlos to her new roommates, and vice versa. They nodded, said

hello, the girls found it cool to have a brother around, but he was a boy, they had a lot of girl things to talk about, and for that nobody needed a boy, in addition to the well-known fact that boys didn't need the girl things, either.

Carlos lived up to this reputation, somewhat to Esmeralda's unspoken astonishment. From what she could judge, he witnessed his sister's emancipation from his exclusive protection with a suspicious lack of jealousy or uneasiness. True, they were sitting side by side in classes, and this wordless proximity marked one of the big differences between Hogwarts and this school. But the meals, for instance - the four girls chatted between bites, totally ignoring Carlos, who was sitting nearby.

Then he sat somewhere else, and Esmeralda still felt no urge to leave the other girls' company in favour of her brother's.

Then he found his own chat mate, as much as Esmeralda could see from far away, because when she glanced over to her brother's seat, he didn't look up, but instead continued to talk to someone opposite. And, checking at several meals, Esmeralda realized that this someone opposite not only was a girl but always the same girl.

As she became aware of this change, for a short moment she felt betrayed. But she had made the first step in this separation, hadn't she?



After a few seconds, she turned her attention back to the discourse that was running mostly between Odile and Dominique, as so often about how much things in Paris were better than anywhere else in France. Usually she listened to such a debate with a partly hidden, partly open amusement while contributing little, and mainly questions. On this occasion, though, she kept quiet, forcing herself not to check every ten seconds whether her brother was still talking with that girl.

A small thing ... Had she triggered Carlos' protection instinct, which had been a bit unemployed recently? That would be an explanation.

After lunch, Esmeralda walked over to Carlos' table. "Hi," she said, "are you going to join me and Bolo in the park? But you should come with your kitten, before Bolo starts missing her." After these words, she sent a casual glance across the table to the other girl before fixing her gaze on Carlos again.

"Yeah, sure," he said, and then, pointing, "She'll join us too - Esmeralda, this is Chloé. Chloé, this is my sister Esmeralda."

Esmeralda didn't bother with a smile. "Hello."

Chloé looked a bit awestruck, however not by Esmeralda's cool welcome, as her words made clear. "It must be great to have a brother here at the school, and even in the same class."

The longing in her voice had a disarming quality. Despite herself, Esmeralda replied, "We sit in classes side by side, like we did before." And then, with some impatience, she turned again to Carlos and asked, "Are you coming?"

"Yes. Go ahead, we'll meet you and Bolo in the park, I have to fetch Dona Gata." Carlos stood up, and as Esmeralda watched, Chloé stood up on her own side of the table and followed him as if this was the most natural thing of the world - escorting Carlos on his way to fetch his pet.

Esmeralda snorted, more to herself than to anyone not present.

Any plan to be alone with her brother and their pets wouldn't have worked anyway. Her own new friends were eager to join, for reasons in which the weather, the park, and Bolo ranked much higher than her brother and his girlfriend. Dona Gata, on the other hand, raised some squeals of delight from the three girls, in particular as they watched how the kitten was treated by the German

shepherd.

Esmeralda learned that Chloé was of the same age but in a parallel class. There were four classes with new students, called Five-One, Five-Two, Five-Three, and Five-Four. Chloé was a student in Five-One while Carlos and Esmeralda were in Five-Two.

She further learned that the other girl resided in the same building. She couldn't remember having seen her there; but then, since getting acquainted with her three roommates had kept her quite busy, this didn't mean anything. The school was large; she could be just as slow at registering other faces as she had been quick in making friends with her roommates.

The long lunch break was followed by two more classes. After the bell had signaled the end of the second class, Esmeralda was about to leave the classroom when the teacher, a Madame Coteau, stopped her.

"Our Headmaster asked me to send you over," she said. "Now should be a good time, so why don't you go to Madame Clouzot and let her announce you?"

"What is it?" asked Esmeralda with some uneasiness.

"Probably some administrative task or other." The teacher smiled. "Do you want me to escort you to that office?"

Esmeralda nodded, and a minute later, she followed Madame Coteau from Lorient, the classroom building, to Brest, the administration building.

When they reached the school secretary's office, the teacher said, "Jeannette, this girl's called for report by the Headmaster," pushed her gently inside, and left.

Madame Clouzot looked up, lacking hostility as much as friendliness. "What's your name?"

"Er - Esmeralda Garcia."

Without answering, the school secretary talked into an intercom, apparently with the Headmaster. After listening for a moment, she cancelled the connection and seized for the telephone. Her first attempt wasn't answered. Dialling another number, she got an answer almost instantly. From the few words that were exchanged, Esmeralda could only hear that she'd talked with a Marguerite and that this woman should come over.

After putting down the receiver, the school secretary looked up. "Madame Laval will be here in a minute. Why don't you sit down meanwhile?"

Esmeralda didn't know a Madame Laval. All she knew was that this couldn't be the Headmaster, who was a man and whose name was Fresnel. She would have asked, but asking the back of a woman at a desk required a bit more urgency than she felt.

Madame Laval wasn't there in a minute. She wasn't there after five minutes. The large clock at the wall told Esmeralda that it took twelve minutes before another woman entered the room with a casual, "Salut, Jeannette," toward the school secretary.

The newcomer was large, thin at both ends, but carrying a disproportional belly in the middle. She examined Esmeralda.

"So you're the Garcia girl? All right then, come on, let's get it over with this ceremony."

Her words didn't clarify things, but from her gestures, Esmeralda could deduct that she should follow the woman into the Headmaster's office. So she did.

The Headmaster greeted the woman with a smile and Esmeralda with a look she didn't see often but

could recognize without any trouble: that of a still-friendly authority at the border of impatience. "Good afternoon," he said. "So you're Esmeralda Garcia, then."

It didn't really sound like a question, but Esmeralda nodded nevertheless.

The Headmaster gave her a smile that hardly reached his eyes. "You may call me 'Monsieur le Directeur,' Esmeralda."

"Yes, Monsieur le Directeur." It crossed Esmeralda's mind how the teachers at Hogwarts, who were satisfied at being addressed with a simple 'Prof,' had called her 'Miss Garcia,' while the titles here were long and tedious but, in contrast, this woman could call her 'the Garcia girl.'

"Now, Esmeralda, this is about a formality. You're an orphan - "

Esmeralda's impulse to scream *No I'm not!* was swallowed, tasting like medicine.

" - for whom we need a kind of controlling authority. The lady who delivered you here made clear that from her side it's a mere administrative task to be responsible for you, so she shouldn't be concerned with routine matters."

Esmeralda stared at him. *The lady* had been her mother, not the biological one, granted, but her mother nonetheless and ... With more effort than required before, she settled back to her role at this school.

"So we decided to make things simple and pick someone from our own circle who can represent you in matters of parental authority. This is Madame Laval," the Headmaster's arm pointed toward the bellied woman, who nodded gravely, "and she'll take over that role as of today. I'm sure you will agree to that, won't you?"

"What does it mean - er, Monsieur le Directeur?"

A crease sprung on the Headmaster's forehead due to this unexpected delay. "She's entitled to sign papers in your name, that's all. Your daily life here won't change a bit because of that."

"Ah, yes, okay."

"Splendid." The crease disappeared.

It might have reappeared on Esmeralda's own forehead, because all she had intended to express with her remark was her understanding, not her agreement. But it would have gone unnoticed anyway; the Headmaster didn't look while busying himself to sign and exchange papers with Madame Laval.

A moment later, her new parental authority said, "That's all, Esmeralda. You may go."

"Yes, madame." Esmeralda stood up, despite her rage quite relieved to leave the uncomfortable chair, this large office, and these two people behind.

Arriving in her dormitory, of course she was asked by the other three girls about her business with the headmaster. When she told them that it was about a *parental authority* because she was an orphan, she earned an "Oh" from Dominique and only embarrassed silence from Natalie and Odile - none of them had learned yet to handle this topic with a bit casualness.

Once more, Esmeralda had to fight the temptation to shout her true family status, still more so as she realized that the other girls' embarrassment was owed mostly to her own reaction at the topic of orphans.

"Forget it," she snapped. "Let's go visit Bolo. He must be quite impatient already."

If Bolo was impatient, it had more to do with a bitch almost in heat than with his mistress held back by stupid school authorities, and to call him *distracted* was a polite understatement.

It didn't improve Esmeralda's mood either. She felt so upset that she almost forgot her daily appointment, which today was pretty early. So she had to excuse herself with an urgent demand, earning curious glances from the other girls and the distinct feeling that they hadn't bought the story. "Urgent demand" *was* true, although for unusual reasons. As soon as she pressed the button on her porty to signal she was ready, her father summoned her from a toilet stall.

"Hello, Prof," she said, her voice as gruff as she felt. Not calling him *Daddy* was an agreement they'd made to avoid being uncovered by an accidental passer-by.

"Hello, Esmeralda." Her father looked wondering. "You sound so upset today. What happened to you?"

"I met the headmaster." She looked at Carlos, who had arrived a moment ago. "Did you meet him too?"

"No, why?"

"Then am I the only one who needs that blasted parental authority? Is this because of something Mu - Madame Chang said?"

She had involuntarily raised her voice beyond the usual level of low-voiced murmur they used during their short meetings. Before she found even time to look guilty, her father had reached her. His hands cupping her cheeks, he said, "Now, now - just tell us what happened, won't you?"

She could feel the mental flow through his hands into her head. For an instant she felt like protesting - she wanted to be upset, she had reason to - then the wave took effect and calmed her down. Quieter than before, she told the other two about Madame Laval and her new function.

Her father turned to her brother. "And there wasn't anything similar with you?"

Carlos shook his head. "No. Perhaps they'll call me tomorrow."

"Could be," said Harry. "Maybe it's because they weren't built for so much hard work on the same day ..."

The remark brought a smile to Esmeralda's face, a moment later mirrored by Carlos.

But Harry didn't join them. "I don't like this news at all," he said. "I can tell you for sure that there wasn't any such remark from - from Madame Chang when she delivered you, so there's no question that the authorities here have overstepped their mark."

Esmeralda hadn't really believed that her mother had abandoned them the way the headmaster's announcement had suggested. Still, it felt good to have that confirmed. For a short moment she dwelled on an image of Cho shouting at those people, this time for real, then she remembered why they were there.

Next instant, a beaming smile started to spread across her face. "We've scored a hit, haven't we?"

"Could be," said Harry, "but I'm not sure yet. It might be just their way of dealing with stupid administrative stuff. But whatever it is, I don't want to find out by letting you stay another day longer in that authority."

Esmeralda stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's time - " Seeing his daughter's determined face, Harry interrupted himself. "At least I could notify - erm, Madam Chang that she should pay a visit to this school and tell them a few words about authorities."

Esmeralda smiled, hearing exactly the words she had thought a moment ago. Then she sobered up again. "This Madame Laval hasn't done anything yet. Let her do something first, so she's really guilty of something she wasn't supposed to do."

"That something concerns you, and we don't know what it is."

Esmeralda grinned. "Even if she's going to sell me to the slave market, that'll take a few minutes - enough time to call you."

Harry didn't smile back. "Do you remember the story of Sandra and Gabriel, how they were kidnapped?"

"Oh." Feeling less secure than she had a minute earlier, Esmeralda nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Then you know how quickly it can go." Harry's eyes fixed on her own. "Can you promise to alert me the moment this Madame Laval contacts you? For whatever it is?"

Esmeralda nodded. "Yes. I don't like her at all, so I won't forget it."

"And if, after such an alert, I don't get an all-clear within fifteen minutes, I'm going to raise hell in here." Her father looked grim. "I'll get you a signal device, maybe in the shape of a wristwatch, to make sure you have it always with you, even if your party is - well, confiscated."

Recovering in her spy role, Esmeralda said, "A new wristwatch? That could be a bit complicated, because then I have to explain it to Dominique and Natalie and Odile."

"Right - and anyone else might also have second thoughts about this watch. That's why I'll make it something you can wear around your ankles - out of everyone's sight."

It gave Esmeralda some relief in her inner thoughts, a place where she had allowed herself to be more scared than she showed to the outside. At the same time, this kind of bracelet reminded her of the story of her father's friend Tony Chee. He'd been killed when another bracelet, for comparable purposes, had sent his daughter Tanitha out of reach from some kidnappers.

One look at her father's face told her that, right at this moment, he was fighting the same memory.

* * *

Thinking about the device he had in mind for his spy daughter, Harry decided to visit Ray Purcell, his old friend with whom he had developed several new portkey techniques. In this case, however, he didn't plan more than a signal device, just something to send an alert.

He decided against a built-in portkey. He also decided against a built-in tracking device. He had his reasons, fully aware that someone else might call them superstition. But he'd learned to trust his superstition.

Six years ago, he'd used all these things. A built-in portkey for little Tanitha, with the result that his friend Tony was killed. A tracking device for Ramon Garcia on his way to some kidnappers, a way that ended abruptly at a small boat house.

The boat house had left a few fragments larger than splinters, in contrast to Ramon. True, it had been the twenty pounds of explosives that had blown up, rather than the tracking device, but since then, Harry had maintained a deep mistrust of all automatic functions that did more than send a cry for help.

Ray Purcell was no longer chief technician of Groucho Transports and Security, the job he'd held for many years. He stayed in touch with his old colleagues, occasionally played the technical consultant, and spent his time with a growing amount of hobbies and a shrinking amount of research in the tricky areas of portkeys and apparition.

But he would start working on Harry's device right on the spot. This had to do not only with their friendship but also with the fact that Harry had flatly refused to accept any of the royalties that came from Magical Tours, the payment for his and Ray's inventions to make portkey cabins work also for Muggles. That left only Ray at the receiving end, a fate the engineer carried with dignity.

Harry met him in Ray's old laboratory at Groucho. Ray had suggested this location - from Harry's call, he knew already that it was for something that couldn't be bought around the corner.

Ray asked only a few questions, another reason why Harry couldn't imagine any other person to ask for help. When Harry explained what he wanted, and that it should be shaped as something that could be worn around the ankles, Ray only wanted to know if Harry had considered additional features.

"Yes I did, and no, I don't want them. They didn't help the last time we tried, that's why."

Ray nodded, understanding Harry's remark without further explanation. Then he said, "You'll need a new phony that can receive these signals. Otherwise - give me a few days, then I'll know more. Until then, if you call me, the only answer will be, 'Not finished yet.' Just wait for my call."

Harry promised to do that, then left. Checking into Clara's office, he was told that yes, his booster was ready but no, he couldn't take it with him because it would be brought to Carron Lough by a personal messenger.

Clara, guessing the messenger right but totally unaware of the implicit meaning, smiled at these words.

Harry, fully aware of the implicit meaning, smiled back, said goodbye, and immediately started to rearrange today's schedule in his mind. He would meet this particular messenger in the evening, and this meeting would take quite a while, probably the full night. Until then, he had some more tasks to do.



One of the tasks brought him to Diagon Alley and into a shop he'd last visited with his two spy children, who couldn't benefit much from those purchases for a while.

The shop owner, Mr Ollivander, looked a bit astonished when he saw Harry and nobody else. "Good afternoon, Mr Potter," he said, "you didn't come because of your own wand, did you?"

"Oh, no, my wand is fine, thanks for asking." Harry drew his wand and passed it over to the wandmaker, knowing perfectly well that this was more an act of admiration than a necessary examination.

Mr Ollivander's fingers caressed the wand with the differently coloured tip. "Wonderful, simply wonderful," he said after a moment. Then he passed the wand back and asked, "So what can I do for you, Mr Potter?"

"There is a young girl, the same age as my daughter Esmeralda who got her wand here a few weeks ago. This girl will receive a magic booster to cure her magical handicap. The moment she recovers from that drink, her wand should be ready to be used with success."

Mr Ollivander gave an almost imperceptible smile. "You have a talent for meeting such people, Mr Potter. I remember a young lady you brought here, while not her name - "

"Clara Stein, yes." Harry smiled back. "But this case is a bit more complicated, because the girl isn't supposed to know that I'm sponsoring her. It's not even her first wand but ... Mr Ollivander, if you'd seen that wand - the thought that she had to use it with her magical power fully activated, that's just too much."

Harry described the cheapest, most pathetic wand he'd ever seen. This description and his genuine disgust won the battle; Mr Ollivander, a minute ago very reluctant to accept a customer he might never see, suddenly showed determination. "It's a shame, yes, Mr Potter. But what exactly do you have in mind?"

"Well, erm ..." After a moment's hesitation, Harry confessed that he planned to appear with a small collection of *used wands*, ahem, except that these wands weren't used at all and that, after the girl had found the wand of her choice, he would return the others and pay for the one.

The shop owner stared at him. Just when Harry asked himself where else he might get wands worth the name, Mr Ollivander started to smile broader. "A real challenge, indeed, Mr Potter. Please tell me everything you know about that girl, every word she said ... And don't stop talking if you see me rummaging through the shelves."

"Well, then ..." It took Harry a few seconds to confirm to himself that he could talk openly with the wandmaker without risking his undercover role. Then he started telling the story, leaving out only the reason why he was playing teacher at a school in the north of France.

Mr Ollivander listened for several minutes before he started to scan his shelves for wands. During this time, he interrupted Harry only once, telling him that there was no need to translate the conversations from French to English, *n'est-ce pas*.

When Harry reached the point at which he didn't know what else to tell about Chloé, the shop owner had gathered seven wands, a collection that covered Harry's expectations well. But apparently Mr Ollivander himself was not yet satisfied.

Eventually, he returned with five more of the long, narrow boxes. Depositing them on top of the other seven, he said, "It's quite unprecise in one aspect, Mr Potter, but then, my ordinary customer is much more unknown to me than this girl you've just painted for me. So I feel confident that one of these will suffice."

"Certainly, Mr Ollivander." Harry eyed the boxes. "Erm, does it matter which wand is in which box? You know, I must present them as second-hand wands."

Rather than answering, the wandmaker quickly opened one box after the other and dropped the wands in Harry's lap, obviously having more fun with this encounter by the second.

When Harry asked how they should handle the payment, the answer was, "You may leave that to me, Mr Potter. Maybe what you told me about this sponsorship was addictive ..."

With some astonishment, Harry heard the man chuckle - a sound he'd never expected to hear in this shop.

"... I made a bet with myself about which of these wands will make it. So my only request is to satisfy my curiosity and to return the other wands in due time."

"That's kind of you," replied Harry, "and with that I'm referring more to the large number of selections offered, but of course also to the wand itself. And I'll come and tell you how she looked when she created her first sparks or coloured ribbons."

Armed with a dozen wands in addition to his own, Harry left the shop and apparated home, which in this case was meant literally - to Carron Lough. When he arrived there, he found the messenger, who looked quite Chinese.

The messenger had a few questions about the wands. Then she had to wait for Harry's return because he apparated to Brest for his daily appointment with his children. Coming back to Carron Lough, he had to answer more question, this time about the children, who happened to be also the

messenger's children.

A while later, she had more non-verbal demands, and very much as expected, it took until dawn before Harry could return to the Cayenne building in Brest. This time, he apparated into the park and walked the rest, to get some fresh air as well as to give an early observer the opportunity to confirm the picture everybody had of the new Sports teacher and his social habits.

Taking advantage of his unusual awokeness at such an early morning hour, Harry decided to stress the social track a bit more and visit the Brest building for some administrative issues. Arriving there, he saw that he wasn't the first: Jeannette was already at work, and she had news for him.

Bad news, from the perspective of a normal teacher with some ambition for a private life: a colleague had called in sick, and Harry had to stand in for that woman for several more Sports classes. Still worse, rumour had it that this calling in sick was just the forerunner of an official leaving notice, due to irreparable differences between that woman and the headmaster. This would mean that Harry's new schedule would last longer than a few days or weeks.

Checking the amount of additional classes, Harry didn't waste his breath asking how the rest had been split between his remaining colleagues. There was little doubt that both the school secretary and the headmaster had done their bit to give him more than his share. True, schedules were administered by Jean-Paul and Valerie, who normally handled their difficult job well, but why shouldn't they be open to suggestions from their boss?

So what, there was a natural upper limit - he couldn't teach more than one class at a time.

Wrong. He could teach two classes at a time, as he realized when studying the lists he'd received from Jeannette. However, these were just the female parts of two classes which were put together only in Sports. First-years, in his terminology, and only when examining the lists in more detail, he became aware that he'd inherited two students in which he had a special interest: One was his own daughter, and the other, from the parallel class, was Chloé.

He would teach them that afternoon, which answered the question of how to contact Chloé and tell her about the booster - or so he thought until he tried to imagine how to make an appointment with her while thirty other girls were watching with maximum attention, among them Esmeralda.

Walking back to the Cayenne building, still with plenty of time before his first morning course was due to start, he tried to find a way to pass the information to the girl. It seemed ridiculous to fail at such minor details, but then, as he remembered, the minor details formed the traps in which spies were caught.

A good spy did it in public, so much for sure. That meant, if he wanted to pass a sheet to Chloé, he had to do it before the eyes of the entire class, which would only be possible if *every* girl received a sheet, which sounded like a very absurd idea ... And while he was pondering such thoughts, his wife Cho was still asleep in Carron Lough because she had even more time before the MABEL seminar was due, another big hoax in full public, with its seminar members who -

Harry's step almost froze in mid-air when suddenly an idea crossed his mind. As he resumed his walk, he smiled broadly because his thoughts had been correct in every detail. It seemed a bit crazy and kind of overkill, but a little boasting to an audience of eleven-year-old girls wasn't the worst method of gaining their cooperation.

He didn't know for sure who could provide him with the required items within the next hours, because he wasn't too familiar with the minutiae of the MABEL administration. But Cho would know.

From his apartment, Harry apparated to Carron Lough once more because he didn't want to ask her through the phony - not at such an early hour.

As it turned out, his personal appearance caused another complication of a delaying nature, but by reference to his first English course, due to start in half an hour, he was able to successfully suggest another time.

Shortly before lunch, he got a phony call that his order had been carried out and that the items were waiting for him at the reception desk of the Groucho Headquarters, exactly as required.

Apparating to that building and back into his apartment, he realized that such tight schedules would be impossible in a school like Hogwarts, simply because each apparition jump required a walk out of the protection field and back. The same went for Beauxbatons and other schools of that kind, but nobody felt it necessary to establish such a protection at the school here.

When he entered the gymnasium, after having waited in his cubicle for the girls to get in their sports clothes, he was ready. To the outside, however, only a class file was visible, and a slight bulge of his breast pocket which might as well have been created by a stopwatch.

Apparently, all the girls had known was that someone else would replace their normal teacher. Harry saw a lot of small 'O's - mouths slightly agape from astonishment to meet him, of all Sports teachers, with the notable exception of two girls who were almost bursting with pleasure and pride.

Grinning inwardly because the two didn't know each other, he walked to his usual place, sensing how, with each of his steps, the expectation grew. The students saw the spheres floating in the air, and obviously they knew what it meant and what was about to follow.

"Bonjour, mesdemoiselles," he began, only to pause for another moment because this salutation had raised a wave of giggles. "You were probably told that Madame Resnais couldn't come today, and probably not tomorrow, or the day after, either. That's why I took over, and so I'll be your Sports teacher for the next weeks."

So much the girls had guessed by themselves. Nonetheless, the confirmation from Harry's side caused a mix of satisfied nods and expectant looks that moved between him and the spheres in the air.

"You've probably heard that I have my own way of warming up, and that music plays a role in this method, that's why all these loudspeakers are in the air." He started the music for a few seconds, then stopped it again. "But I was told that girls your age prefer to run around and around to warm up -"

Howls of protest interrupted him, while his grin came just in time to calm down a few horrified faces who'd taken his joke literally.

"Yeah, that's what I thought; it sounded wrong from the very first word. But before we start, let's do a little ceremony, something that'll help me to memorize your names as quickly as possible."

Disappointment, because they couldn't start dancing instantly, made room for a new kind of anticipation. They simply didn't know what to expect.

Harry seized for the first piece in his breast pocket and held it up. "My name is Terry Pritchard, or Thierry Pri'chard in French, but you can just call me 'Prof,' and that's why my own nameplate shows only this word."

What he called nameplate was a foil-like item twice the size of a business card, shining silkily and showing the word 'Prof' in slightly iridescent colours.

"It can be fixed everywhere, and it can be removed equally well, but it's not sticky, because there's a bit of magic in it to make it hold and not getting lost." Harry put his nameplate at the left side of his dress and pressed for a moment. "See? That's how it's done, and that's the right place for a

nameplate. And now it's your turn. When I call your name, come to me to get your own nameplates."

He held the class file in the left hand while seizing for the next plate with the right. "Abérnard, Justine!"

A girl came forward, received her plate that showed the name 'Justine' in large letters and the name 'Abérnard' in smaller ones, and trundled back while examining the thing from all sides.

Despite his announcement, Harry had to repeat once more that no, there wasn't a foil to be removed from the sticky side - just pressing was enough.

By the time he called, "Broussard, Chloé!" the general attention had shifted to the few girls that already wore nameplates. So he could get the piece of paper he had prepared and say, "Could you please hold that for a second?" while rummaging in his pocket as if the next plate had decided to stick inside.

Chloé's eyes grew big for an instant because the paper she should hold for him showed this text:

The medicine has arrived. Meet me in my apartment after dinner.

Then she nodded in response to Harry's inquiring look, took her plate, returned the sheet, and walked back with the plate in her hand as if it was the most boring thing of the world.

Looking up, Harry could register just one face that had followed this quick exchange and that showed a bit of curiosity, and this face belonged to his own daughter. However, when he called, "Garcia, Esmeralda!" she looked normal again and was only interested in her own nameplate, beaming about this gimmick like all the other girls.

The warm-up that followed was just the introduction to more hip-hop steps, because nobody felt inclined to do somersaults or throw balls. When the double Sports was over, Madame Resnais and her conventional methods seemed gone for eons.

* * *

Sandra could hear the music through the closed door of the rehearsal space. An instant later, Caitlin's voice rose, unmistakable even through the muffling of the door. She stopped to listen. After a few seconds, she turned to Frédéric at her side and said, "Well, if the other girl has reached that point, my job here's done."

Frédéric gave no reply, though his face asked the silent question of whether the odds of that happening were really higher than those of hell freezing over.

Sandra grinned. "I'm only supposed to make her sing. Nobody asked me to hone her vocal cords."

"Oh, it's just a matter of time," predicted Frédéric gloomily.

"I don't think so, because from what I've heard, the contrast between the two voices creates a much more appealing sound than just two high sopranos."

"... said the crow to the nightingale," added Frédéric in mock agreement.

Sandra had a short fit of the chuckles. Steadying again, she said, "Don't make my job more difficult than it already is."

Frédéric looked slightly offended. "What do you take me for? I'd never say that in public."

"No, but now that you've told me, I only need to hear her singing for that remark to pop up in my mind, just when I'm busy keeping the trance ... Anyway, let's give it a try." Sandra pushed the handle.

The door refused to open. It was locked.

Sandra didn't even look to see whether there was a bell to signal their request for entering. She could have unlocked the door with the mental technique learned from her father, but there were more reasons to avoid such an act than simple politeness toward those who'd locked the door. By reflex, she avoided presenting superior magical powers in the presence of people outside her family, with Frédéric included and maybe even in first place. Instead, she simply intensified the loose mental contact to her brother that had been created by the proximity.

Moments later, the music inside stopped. A faint *Click* could be heard from the door, and Gabriel's presence in Sandra's mind told her to come in. She opened the door.

"Damn super wizards," came a low-voiced remark from her side. Frédéric's glance toward the low stage at the other end of the room made clear who he meant: Gabriel stood there waiting, grinning like a little boy at the fun of having saved a walk to the door.

Sandra grabbed Frédéric's hand and marched to the stage. "Hi, folks," she said, "I'm here to get someone singing, and to make it a real test, I've brought a mini-audience with me."

"That's just his official justification," called Héloïse from her place behind the Felison, "while in fact Frédéric came for his only chance ever to see you in high boots and hot pants ... By the way, where's your dress?"

"Yeah, right, just forget it," snorted Sandra into the general laughter, with cheeks more flushed than she would have liked. "I'm ready to play the tambourine. I'm ready to sing chorus or just to pretend singing, so that I look normal behind Moira. That's up to you - pick your choice."

"Chorus *and* tambourine," said Caitlin.

"Let's try tambourine first," said Gabriel. "Tomas had some objections, but then he's the one who brought one, so we can check whether it works." He went to a corner, came back with the instrument and gave it to Sandra. "Here. Try it."

Sandra inspected the instrument. Basically a single-sided drum with little bells around, the tambourine was played by holding it with one hand and beating it with the other in the rhythm of the music. It looked so simple - until there was a tambourine in your hand and eight people staring at you expectantly.

She looked up. "And how? Shall I just beat it?"

It was Michel who reacted first. "I'll beat my drums," he said, "just something to create a rhythm, and you beat your tambourine just where and when you think it makes sense. Okay?"

"Just a second." Sandra did a few tentative beats to get a first impression of how to hold the instrument, then she nodded. "Ready."

At this occasion, Michel played the four-bodied tubular drums. These were four wooden tubes of different sizes, the biggest of them one foot in diameter and about four feet long. They were open at both ends and floated inches above their normal rest, held in the air by a built-in spell so that no physical support would dampen the resonance.

Michel used solid steel bars as drumsticks. They were a bit too heavy for a quick drum roll, but this instrument from Miyikura wasn't intended for such percussion anyway.

For a minute or two, Sandra listened to the pounding from Michel and his four tubes, let herself be caught by the mesmerizing sounds while somewhere in the background of her mind, a presence assured her that there was no need to feel embarrassed and that music would develop from playing the tambourine. Then she started to beat the instrument.

The first dozen beats were spent getting used to it. The second dozen went for figuring out how she could vary something by beating the drum harder or more gently. Then she felt in sync with Michel's rhythms, and when the other instruments came to join - the flute first, followed by the harp, and finally Tomas with his guitar - it felt wonderful and the easiest thing of the world.

At first, it had sounded like a free improvisation in Sandra's ears. But suddenly the music around her sounded quite familiar, and a moment later, when Caitlin began to sing, Sandra realized that Dragonfly had given her a flying start into her first song on stage.

She smiled, feeling absolutely great, until Gabriel's wave in her mind and the desperate look from Moira told her that this was real, that she had to trance the second singer.

She sent the trancing wave with her free hand, still a bit clumsy and leaving much room for improvement from how it looked. But Moira started singing, and that was the purpose, wasn't it?

And Frédéric had been wrong with his remark. Yes, there was no doubt about Caitlin being the nightingale, but Moira wasn't the crow, or at least there was nothing discordant in the way how the second voice contributed to the song.

At the same time, Sandra became aware that less was more with the tambourine while the girls were singing. By the time the song ended, she had a fair guess how to handle it in the long run.

Somewhat breathlessly, she stepped forward to the border of the stage and looked down at her mini audience. "How was it?"

Frédéric stopped his applauding. "The truth or the polite version?"

"The truth!" called several voices at once.

"Well, then ..." Frédéric jumped upon the stage to be at eye level with the others. "First, I can confirm that the musical streak in the Potter family wasn't limited to Gabriel, which would have been strange anyway. The tambourine adds a nice touch, and with a bit more practising, you'll be ready for public performances."

Sandra bowed, feeling very pleased.

"Next" - Frédéric turned to Moira - "I have to take back what I said to Sandra outside, about the mix of the two voices. You two sound great together."

"What did you say?" asked Moira. "Tell me now, while the trance from Sandra still has some effect."

"It wasn't very nice, so I shouldn't - "

"Tell me!"

Frédéric would leave no such challenge unresponded. "I said something about the crow and the nightingale."

Moira waved with her arms and called, "Kraah, kraah," raising laughter from the others.

"Then where's the bitter truth?" asked Sandra.

"I was coming to that," replied Frédéric. He shifted his gaze to Tomas and Gabriel. "You need a keyboarder."

As Sandra watched, her brother bit his lips, which told her that he agreed with Frédéric. But Tomas asked, "How would you know?"

"Huh?" Frédéric looked uncomprehending. "I listened, didn't I?"

Sandra opened her mouth to explain but once more Héloïse was quicker. "He plays the piano," she

informed Tomas. "In a family such as the Pouilly's, a skill like that goes without saying."

"Whoa," said Tomas unimpressed. "Tell you what, join us!"

"Ha!" replied Frédéric.

At this moment, someone was hammering at the door.

Sandra saw - and felt - her brother's short concentration. Watching the door, unsure whether the person outside had noticed the unlocking, she saw it open.

It was Ireen, the band manager. "What's this?" she called. "Why do you lock yourself in? I come to give you the big news, and all I find is a locked door?"

"Sorry," said Gabriel when Ireen had reached the group, "but if we leave the door unlocked, there's a constant coming and going of students who think that what we're doing here's something public."

Ireen looked from one to the other, with a short appreciative smile when she noticed the tambourine still in Sandra's hands. Then she said, "Now, who's going to do me the favour and ask me what news I have?"

Some Dragonfly members looked puzzled at this unfamiliar behaviour from their band manager, but Michel simply asked, "Well, Ireen, what are the big news you have for us?"

"I've got your first real tour settled."

"What? ... When? ... Where?"

Sandra hadn't joined in the uncoordinated chorus of questions. Feeling pleased in sympathy with the band in general and her brother in particular, she watched as Ireen put a magical map on the stage floor, which was the signal for the Dragonfly people to quickly form a circle with Ireen and the map in the middle.

A magical map was the size of a large book, looked like one of these flat computer monitors but without base, and could be zoomed to any scale from a world map to a small-town street map. Ireen activated the map, which presented a world map. Then she touched a spot to zoom in.

Sandra craned her neck, but all she could see from her position was that this spot belonged to Europe, a fact she didn't count as surprising news.

Ireen touched the map again and said, "There we go ... Sweden, more exactly the south of Sweden."

"Sweden?" People stared at each other to see whether someone might know more about Sweden.

"Five cities in as many weeks," said Ireen, who hadn't noticed the helpless looks because she was busy pointing a spot in the map. "Here it starts - Joenkoeping. Then comes Linkoeeping, then Norrkoeping, then we visit Stockholm. And, finally, Uppsala for good measure."

"What names!" said Caitlin, and next moment she started to chant, "Wonkoeping, Donkoeping, Bongkoeping, Songkoeping - and what was the fifth? ... Oh yes, Uppsalabim - bam - baa - saladou - saladim."

To the amusement of several people but not including the band manager, she had fallen into the tune and the words of a well-known children's song about a cuckoo.

Ireen fixed the girl with her stare. "Listen, sweetheart, none of these cities is smaller than hundred thousand inhabitants, and there are two concerts in each of them, so you better get prepared - "

Caitlin knelt down besides Ireen and, by way of an apology, simply hugged the woman. "Bangin' cool! Awesome! Ten concerts!" She came up again, turned to Moira, grabbed her with both hands

and tried to dance a ring-a-ring-o-roses, chanting, "Ten concerts! - Ten concerts!"

Moira said, "Oh, my God!"

"Now give it a rest and let her explain!" called Héloïse, and toward Ireen, she asked, "Why just Sweden, of all places?"

Ireen came up, the precious map in her hand. "I tried here and there, and then it was one of Desmond's contacts who caught the hook, and offered a tour where the other side is in charge of most of the organization, with halls and everything."

"Which halls? What audience? Tell us more!"

Ireen explained, "The pattern is this, the first concert in each city is on Friday evening, that's when the older audience is expected. The second concert is the next day, that means on Saturday afternoon. It's planned for younger kids, but if some of the older ones didn't get tickets the day before, or if they couldn't make it, they'll get a second chance."

"Teeny-bopper disco!" called Michel, to the great amusement of those who were several years safer than Michel himself from being counted in this category.

"You're bloody ignorant," replied Ireen calmly. "You have no idea what a market's growing in that age group. And what's more, Dragonfly is a first-rate band for them - not only for your musical style, now that you have singers, but still more for family structures. Brother and sister wasn't bad before, but now we can claim brothers and sisters from two different families - "

"What?" Sandra took a step forward, incredulous.

Ireen pointed at the tambourine that rested forgotten in Sandra's hand. "You're in, aren't you? Trancing where required, and playing the tambourine otherwise."

"Hey, wait a sec!" Alarm was rapidly growing. "I hadn't planned to join a tour of ten concerts!"

Moira looked greenish. "But I need you! How else can I survive these concerts?"

"What's the problem?" asked Ireen.

"Well, I have my own schedules - the Theatre Group, in case you forgot. I'd planned to give Moira a kick start, and that was that, or so I thought."

"You can travel faster than anyone else," said Ireen, "with the exception of your brother. You can be back a minute after the curtain falls - I mean, you'd miss the best part, no denying that, but it would be possible."

"And what if - " Sandra interrupted herself. "When does this tour start?"

"In four weeks."

"That would mean the worst conflict is with some rehearsals, if any ..." Sandra felt the pleading look from Moira, the expectant look full of hope from Ireen, and the gentle mind presence of her brother, who didn't press in any way but left no doubt of his opinion.

Héloïse grabbed her by the shoulders, "Gotcha, girl."

Sandra's deep sigh drowned in the applause of the other Dragonfly members, who had registered this surrender instantly. She smiled in a mix of resignation and anticipation.

Checking for the reaction of her brother at one side and Frédéric at the other, she saw that both of them were looking thoughtful, apparently planning ahead from two different perspectives.

14 - Conflicts

Harry used the time until dinner for some grading, a task for which he still felt inadequate. The essays he'd received from his English courses were miserable in general and pathetic in detail. More than once, he felt seriously tempted to draw a big red 'X' across the sheet and write below, 'Try again.' But these were his own students, and if they couldn't write a reasonable essay, then was there anyone else but himself to blame?

Maybe not after just a few short weeks. For sure he would blame himself a few months from now, should his task keep him that long at this school. Harry was painfully aware that his capabilities for teaching Sports were considerably better than those for English. Not that anyone bothered; with the overall quality of education at this school, even his English courses ranked above average - so much he knew already. But this pitiful state wasn't extraordinary in any sense; inadequate teachers were a common problem, and he hadn't taken the job for matters of pedagogic improvement.

He hadn't taken the job to cure handicapped little witches either, but he was going to do it anyway, right after dinner. As often before, he regretted that teachers and students didn't share the same dining hall. This outdated separation prevented him from having a look at his patient, or client, or whatever was the proper term for the girl in this situation.

He wasn't that hungry, but decided to join dinner in the teachers' hall at least for a few minutes. Maybe he was watched, maybe even by Chloé; he didn't know. Sitting alone in a corner, he ate almost nothing, only made some baguette sandwiches to take with him; later in the evening, they'd be more than welcome.

Not the healthiest mode of nourishment. He was aware of it while he fixed them, remembering well that a man his age should take a bit more care, especially after having lost weight so successfully in the past weeks. But damn if he cared about that too, in addition to anything else on his agenda.

It was still five minutes to the agreed time when he heard the knock at his door.

"Come in!"

The door opened, and Chloé entered hesitantly.

Harry, who'd been sitting behind his desk, stood up to welcome her with a smile and to escort her to the only halfway convenient chair. "Sit down here," he said, pointing, "and make yourself comfortable as if you'd prepare for an evening of TV."

The girl just stared at him with confusion in her face.

"Sit down," repeated Harry. "When the booster takes effect, for a few minutes you won't be able to keep yourself upright. But we don't need a hospital bed for that; this chair will do just fine."

She sat down like the book example of the decent student after hours.

"Relax," he urged. "Your position's right if you can fall asleep without moving a muscle, not even a lolling of your head."

She tried. "How ... how does it work?"

Harry went to his desk and came back with the small bottle. "Look here, that's the booster. You'll drink it. The effect kicks in instantly, it'll feel like - " He interrupted himself. "Did you ever try liquor?"

Chloé shook her head. "I sipped some wine, once."

"Well, the booster will feel as though someone had filled you with hot liquid. It doesn't take long - like a very short but very strong fever. I'll be - "

"Fever? Like the one Carlos had?"

"Carlos?" For a second, Harry's eyes grew as big as those of Chloé a moment ago. "Carlos Garcia?"

"Yes, him. He said he lost his magic in a fever."

"Oh, did he?" Harry admonished himself and made a mental note to talk with his spy son. "Well, whatever that was, the booster effect isn't a real fever, it only feels like that for a few minutes. Say, did you ever have trouble with a weak heart?"

"No - er, I don't think so," responded Chloe timidly, "but I'm not sure. Why, is it dangerous?"

"It could cause some trouble for people with a weak heart. But if your heart was that weak, you'd know for sure because you couldn't even run more than a few steps. From what I could see earlier this afternoon, you have breath in your lungs for ten miles, right?"

A tentative smile appeared in the girl's face, only to be replaced quickly by new concern.

"If - if it works, if it makes me a real witch, how long will it take until I have magic?"

"When you come awake, everything's done - provided it works, but I have little doubt."

Obviously, Chloé had more. Then her eyes widened again. "Oh - I forgot my wand in my dormitory. Can I just go and fetch it?"

Harry smiled more broadly. "Don't you worry about your wand now, because I have a little surprise for you - that is, if the booster works, but as I said, I'm very confident."

"Yes, okay." Something in his face had calmed her down, and maybe she had an idea what kind of surprise that might be, because for the first time he could feel something akin to joyful expectation in her.

"I'll be here with you all the time. If you feel something on your shoulders, these are my hands - to support you so you won't fall to the side ... Ready?"

She inhaled deeply. "Yes."

He put a stool behind the chair, sat down, and gave her the opened bottle. "Here - drink steady; the taste's nothing spectacular."

From her movements, he could see how she tasted the first drops before dropping her reluctance and emptying the bottle.

Sitting on the stool behind her, his left hand already on her shoulder, he took the bottle from her hands to put it down at his side. "How did it taste?"

"Erm - a bit oily, like something that - "

Chloé's reply ended in a short gasp, followed by heavy breathing. Harry put his other hand on her right shoulder and made contact at mental level. He just had time to send the message, *It's all right, I'm with you*, when the booster reached its full power.

Groucho Biochemicals had done a lot since the days of the first booster. Their engineers had made sure that even a person with a weak constitution would survive the medicine. The time of uproar had been shortened to something between three and five minutes. They had, as far as they knew, even reduced the force at which the heat inside the body kicked in, something that was difficult to measure because any patient would undergo such a cure only once.

But it was still a frightening experience. Harry sent another wave of encouragement and a message that said, *Everything proceeds as expected*, although not in words, and the girl's mind responded with a message to tell him that this was far from pleasant but tolerable.

Two minutes passed. Chloé's state was stable despite the uproar in her body and mind when Harry heard a knock at the door.

He had no idea who that might be, but he didn't need anyone now, and he didn't need three more knocks, either, while holding contact with the girl. "Not now!" he called. "Come back in half an hour!"

There was no response, no sound either. But a second later, the door opened. The figure of Agnès Serafini came into view - the colleague who had seen him and Chloé leaving this building some days ago.

She looked very determined while marching straight toward Harry and the girl. And in addition to her tense expression, she had her wand ready. This wand was now pointing at Harry's head.

"What are you doing there? Stop it - *tout de suite!*"

Agnès' voice was a bit shrill but not rising; Harry could feel that she had made her decision, and taken her courage to intervene.

"Hello, Agnès," he said. "Please get yourself a chair and sit down for a moment."

"I said stop it! I'll count to three. One ..."

"You're putting the girl at risk!"

"The girl?" Agnès looked at Chloé and her closed eyes. "For all I know, she's more at risk with you than with anything else!"

Harry could hear the first doubt in the woman's accusation. "This will take still two minutes or so," he said, using the most pacifying voice he could muster, "then we can talk. So please ..."

While Agnès was busy fetching Harry's desk chair - the last one his apartment offered - and sitting down out of his reach but with her wand still at the ready, Harry had to calm down two minds. The first was Chloé's, who hadn't responded well to the short interruption in his mental support, and the other was his own, where a terrible temptation to disarm and frighten Agnès had to be fought down. He could have sent the spell with his bare hands, only it wouldn't improve matters much, aside from his own mood.

Maybe it was Chloé's natural female curiosity, which only had registered that there was something new in the room. Sooner than expected, Harry could feel that she was coming fully awake.

An instant later, she opened her eyes. "Phew, that was hot," she croaked.

Deep mistrust sprang up in Agnès eyes. Again pointing her wand at Harry, she snarled, "What was this? Did you dope her?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Harry.

"No, he didn't," said Chloé, her voice almost back to normal. "He gave me a drink - er, Madame Serafini."

The word *drink* did no good to Agnès' ease of mind. She turned to the girl. Hardly friendlier than before, she asked, "What did he give you? What are you doing here?"

Before the girl could answer, Harry said, "Chloé, Madame Serafini came in without being invited because she thought I'd do something very indecent with you."

Chloé giggled, then giggled again.

With some relief, Harry noticed that these silvery sounds calmed Agnès down much better than any short explanation he might have given. Taking his hands off the girl's shoulders, he grabbed the bottle from the floor and presented it to Agnès.

"Here, that's what she got, to make her a complete witch."

Harry watched how the label on the bottle shut up Agnès completely, in particular since she seemed to know what it meant. Then he turned to his patient.

"Can you stand?"

Chloé tried and, after a moment's staggering, steadied. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Then wait a second ..."

Harry stepped behind his desk, dived down, and came up with a cardboard box.

"Here, have a look - these are some second-hand wands, but they're still in good shape. I want you to pick the one you like best and keep it. You can try all of them; just find out which of them feels most comfortable."

Chloé's eyes lighted up. "That's what I thought a few minutes ago, when you said something about a surprise," she confessed, "only somehow I couldn't ..."

Seeing Harry's grin, she didn't bother to finish her sentence, and instead concentrated on the cardboard box and its contents.

Harry used the time to exchange a long but silent look with Agnès, then the girl straightened again. By now she held a light-coloured wand with a reddish tinge in her hand. The awe in her face, and her movements when coming up from the box, as if going through slow motion, indicated something like love at first sight.

"Try it," said Harry.

Chloé whooshed the wand through the air, leaving a sparkling ribbon of colours that faded an instant later.

"That looks to me as if witch and wand have met." Harry pointed at the box. "Do you want to try the others?"

Chloé shook her head, stared at her new wand, and looked up again, all in quick succession.

"I'm a witch? I'm really a witch who can do magic?"

"Didn't you see what just happened?" Harry smiled at her by way of reply. "Do it again."

Chloé did, and did so a third time. She stared at the colours, at the fading sparks, and seemed unsure whether to jump in the air or start crying. She looked at Harry, obviously at a loss.

"That's it," he said. "An overwhelming feeling, isn't it?"

She nodded.

Harry took a step forward. Then, unable to suppress an ironic glance to Agnès first, he said, "Since Madame Serafini is here to watch, it's okay if you want to hug me instead of all your friends who aren't here."

Yes, that was more or less what the girl had needed. She slung her arms around him and hid her face in his shirt for a long moment. Then she freed herself just enough to murmur, "Thank you," before hugging him once more.

"It was a pleasure," said Harry. "There's one duty left - if you'll let me go to my desk ..."

The girl let go of him. He felt her stare following him when he stepped around his desk to look into a list. After a short examination and a cross-check into the box, he looked up. "The wand you've chosen is birchwood, ten inches."

"And the core?"

"Unicorn hair."

"Unicorn hair ..." It was an awestruck whisper. Next moment, Chloé looked alarmed. "Do I have to leave the school now?"

"That's up to you," explained Harry. "You can stay, or you can return to the school where you were before. Whatever you do, take your time and give it a few days - and if you want to learn a spell or two, ask me, or Madame Serafini ..."

Agnès, who looked about as thunderstruck as the girl a moment ago, managed a nod.

"So, if there isn't anything else you want to know, you're done here," finished Harry.

"Erm - Prof, could you please show me the spell to make light? I think it's called *Lumos* ..."

If Chloé had planned to say something more, she forgot it at the sight of her wand, whose tip had started glowing - maybe not particularly impressive, but there was a stable glow.

Harry laughed. "See? You can practise that by yourself. All you need is the finishing spell. It's *Finite incantatem*. Say it."

Chloé had to ask again, then she was able to switch off her wand successfully. She said, "Thank you, Prof," and started toward the door.

Agnès came awake. "I think I'll accompany you to your building," she said and stood up, about to follow Chloé.

Harry took a few quick steps. "Chloé can find her way alone, but the two of us have to talk a bit." His hands pressed the woman back onto her chair, and what he sensed in this moment, as a happy witch girl waved goodbye to them, was a kind of desperate embarrassment.

When the door was closed, Harry said, "This would be the right time for offering a drink, except that I'm poorly equipped in that regard. So - "

"No, it's okay. Please - I'm awfully sorry for suspecting you - er, the way I did, and barging into your apartment. I wasn't aware of what was going on, but who'd expect something like that? This bottle - I've heard about these potions, and according to what I've heard, they're incredibly expensive. I mean - "

Harry grinned. "You're suspecting me again, except you don't know of what, and in addition, you're too embarrassed to admit it. Am I right?"

"Er - yes." Agnès looked guilty but again determined. "Where did you get it?"

"From a sponsoring organization. I can't buy that stuff, and stealing it is impossible." He grinned inwardly at these words, which were closer to the truth than Agnès would ever know.

"And why? Why for Chloé?"

"Well, I could just say what you saw some minutes ago is the best answer. But what you probably mean is, why me, and why Chloé, right? Then I can only say that I stumbled upon her in the first few days of the school year, and one thing led to another."

Judging by appearances, he had told her the truth, but Agnès still seemed dissatisfied with his explanation. She glanced at the box on Harry's desk and said, "These wands there ... second-hand wands, eh? There's no such thing as a second-hand wand. Chloé didn't know because she wasn't a witch before, but I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

Harry went to his desk and looked into the box. He shuffled playfully through the wands in it, then looked at Agnès again.

"Okay, so maybe there's no such thing as a second-hand wand, and maybe all these wands were carefully selected by a wandmaker who'll receive the others back. But for all Chloé knows, it wasn't expensive, and that's exactly how I want it to be. What's wrong with that?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe everything ... Why would you do that? What's your own profit?"

Harry remembered a scene more than twenty-five years ago, when an untidy half-giant by the name of Hagrid had pulled him into a shop with a weird wandmaker, and a while later, a stunned-looking boy had left the shop, thrilled to the hairtips at the prospect of working with the wand in his hand. But he couldn't explain that to Agnès.

"My profit? Let's say I pay back to someone who's long dead, and the beneficiary is a girl who was found crying her soul out in a dark staircase ... And besides, what's your business with this issue? How come you came storming into my office just now?"

Agnès' face coloured vividly. "I had - I had the wrong suspicion, pretty much exactly what you told the girl. I'm sorry for that, but - well, at this school you don't expect to meet someone who does what you did for Chloé. And - erm, you were the last person of whom I'd expect such altruism."

She stood up, her face dark red. "I'm very sorry, and I apologize for my bad judgment. Can I go now?"

Harry grinned. "I'm very pleased to hear that I fooled you so successfully. But I want to hear a bit more about what to expect at this school. It seems to me that you know things and stories, and I want to hear them. If you promise me not to leave, I'll go for a bottle of wine, because that talk might take a bit longer."

Agnès stared at him. "Who are you?"

"Someone who came to this school to hear the stories you obviously know."

"That's - " Agnès stepped forward, grabbed the empty booster bottle and held it up. "Where does this come from?"

"From Groucho Biochemicals, the only manufacturer."

She made another step toward the box. "And these wands?"

"From a shop that's called Ollivander's. Tomorrow I'll return the others and tell Mr Ollivander how it went. He refused to be paid, but I think he'll be very pleased because the birchwood piece was what he'd guessed."

"Mister? Is this an English shop?"

"Actually, yes. After all, I'm English."

"Are you? Then what do you have to do with a school in France where things happen that shouldn't happen?"

Harry smiled. "That's a long story, and you seem to be an expert in asking one question after the

other, but it's been your turn for quite a while already to tell a tale. But let me fetch a bottle first - is red wine okay?"

"Yes." A first smile appeared in Agnès face.

Harry apparated into Carron Lough, directly into the basement where his stock of wines could be found. For a second, he pondered the idea of summoning Agnès into the castle, but dismissed it. That would come later, when they knew a bit more about each other than a shared interest - or, more exactly, a shared disgust.

* * *

Gabriel had left the rehearsal in a mood that alterned between strong satisfaction and disquieting doubt. The news from Ireen was the satisfying part; if the band members played their cards right and delivered a reasonable performance at these ten concerts, Dragonfly would make a quantum leap in their development. But there were some nagging doubts.

Frédéric had raised them, with his remark about a keyboard player. No, that wasn't true; Frédéric had only said aloud what Gabriel had thought several times before while working on the new songs for Caitlin - wrong again, Caitlin and Moira. Gabriel had played the keyboard occasionally, but he'd never planned to give up the flute. He saw his natural expansion field in other wind instruments like harmonica, and maybe close relatives like an accordion or a concertina. Still, he knew better than anyone else in the band that they were short of the instrument which, in many other groups, created the underlying texture.

For a short moment after Frédéric's remark, Gabriel had been determined to close that gap as quickly as possible. Then Ireen had arrived and had announced her news, making it clear that Dragonfly had four weeks to complete their concert program. For that alone, the time frame was already dangerously tight, so any idea of incorporating a keyboard player could only be called madness.

But this was a crucial moment in their musical career. They had to do it right, they had to present a complete performance on stage. And the time frame was chokingly tight only for the first two concerts; after them they'd have another week.

And the keyboard wasn't needed in *every* song. Well, except that his ideas for the new songs, which placed the singer in the centre, had a tendency to demand a background that could best be provided by a keyboard.

Had his father been available, Gabriel would have presented his dilemma and asked for advice. But Harry was playing teacher in the northwest corner of France. Gabriel's mother was in Canada, and his sister - but he wouldn't ask Sandra; she was much too involved in her own things.

Alone with the house-elves in Carron Lough, he imagined what his father would have said. *I'm not a musician, son, would have been his words, so you must tell me whether it's true that Dragonfly needs a keyboard player.*

"Yes, it's true. And most of all for the new songs."

Then his father would have asked, *How short are four weeks?*

"Incredibly short." After all, they were students and had a bit more to do than rehearse day and night.

His father would have thought for a moment. Then he would have said something like, *What's worse? To be on the right track but desperately short of time? Or to be on time but incomplete? And to know it all the time, at the end of each rehearsal asking yourself whether it was really the better choice?*

That did it.

The growing calmness inside himself told Gabriel that he'd made up his mind. It was still an open question because someone else would be involved who might have the same concerns - who would have them for sure - but at least he knew what he himself wanted.

The next day, he used the first long break between classes to call Frédéric. When the expected voice in his phony asked what was the matter, he said, "Hi, Frédéric, I'd like to talk with you about what you said yesterday at the rehearsal, after the one song. Can we meet?"

"Sure, any time after classes," came the reply, slightly astonished. "Just jump to your sister, you'll find me somewhere in her trail."

Frédéric's words conjured up a picture of a horde of young men following Sandra's every step, with him being one of them. Gabriel knew for sure that this picture was wrong, but he also knew - and maybe better than the two people directly involved - why the mood of Frédéric's reply came closer to the truth than it looked. But that wasn't his problem.

"Actually, I wanted to meet you without anyone else around."

There were a few seconds pause, probably more to figure out why Gabriel didn't want witnesses rather than to find a meeting place and time. Then Frédéric said, "Four o'clock in the park in front of the school entrance? Then we can decide where to go from there."

Gabriel said that was fine with him, and for the remaining classes of the day, his concentration on the topics on the agenda was severely limited. When he reached the park, Frédéric wasn't visible yet but arrived only minutes later.

"Hi, Gabriel," he said. "Where do you want to talk?"

At this time of the day, meeting at the *Goblin Weasleys*, which meant Héloïse and Michel's parents' house in the Goblin quarter, for coffee and sweet cake would have been a common pattern. While the house was out of the question for the talk Gabriel had planned, the picture of some cake started to fill his mind quite dominantly.

"Some place where we can find something to eat," he said. "I can offer Carron Lough, but if you know a nice bistro here - it'd still be on me, I was told you've learned a lot of good places recently."

"Oh, were you?" Frédéric eyed him with some suspicion. "Well, it's true, only there isn't a place that beats Dobby and Winky when it comes to cake."

"Then let's go."

They had to walk farther through the park to leave the protection field around the school building before they could apparate. When Frédéric announced that he would apparate into the castle yard, as he'd just learned the skill and still wouldn't trust his accuracy, Gabriel followed suit out of politeness.

Even so, minutes later they were sitting in the deep armchairs of the library, each of them with a dish in hand, munching chocolate cake. Gabriel had preferred this room over the dining room with the large round table; the atmosphere in the library seemed better suited for the conversation he had in mind.

"All right," said Frédéric after the first piece was wolfed down. "You made it quite mysterious. What's up?"

"You said we need a keyboard player."

"Well, yes, it's true, especially since you started to present normal songs - I mean, don't get me wrong - "

"I know what you mean," interrupted Gabriel. "I've had the same feeling before, while working on the new songs. And now that you've said it aloud - it's like déjà-vu. Some weeks ago Alexandra said we need a singer, and now you said we need a keyboard player."

Frédéric looked as though waiting for a punch line he dreaded. "If you agree with me, I don't need to explain why I said it. Then what am I doing here?"

Gabriel could sense how Frédéric's suspicion was already following the right track. So he made it short and simple. "We're here because I want to ask you ... Would you like to join Dragonfly as our keyboardist?"

"No."

Short, clear, and precise. But it didn't solve Gabriel's problem, so he asked, "Why not?"

"My God, there are so many reasons not to do it ..." Frédéric made an angry gesture. "Isn't it enough that I've said no?"

"There's a tour four weeks from now. If we do it right, it might be a kind of breakthrough. But to do it right, we need - "

"A keyboardist, yes, I can sing that song too. But this is your problem, not mine."

"Are you afraid you won't be up to the task?"

"I didn't ask that myself because I had no reason. I have no intention of doing it. Period." Frédéric's voice had turned cool; suddenly he was a Pouilly of seventeen who refused to follow the crazy imaginations of a fourteen-year-old.

"Just long enough for us to look for a replacement! To cover the tour," Gabriel pleaded. He would swallow much worse remarks in pursuit of his goal.

However, Frédéric seemed not inclined to make remarks of that kind or any other. He stood up. "Sorry if I didn't make myself clear, but before this conversation turns really embarrassing, I guess it's better that - "

"Sandra's joined for the tour."

Frédéric stopped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that she'll be there on that tour, every single concert."

"That's not an answer to my question! I'm aware of that, so why did you tell me again?"

Not responding to the slightly menacing undertone, Gabriel said calmly, "I wasn't sure whether you were fully aware of it."

Frédéric sat down again. "Is this a very polite form of blackmailing?" he asked.

"No, it isn't." Gabriel didn't grin. "At least not in the usual sense. If there's any such element, then it's only on your own side, and - well, maybe my remark was aimed at that, but - "

"Okay, okay, we both know exactly which string you're pulling." Frédéric leaned back in the armchair - a movement that expressed more resignation than relaxing. "But why should ... you can't offer me anything to change my mind."

"Actually, I think I can," replied Gabriel.

"And what should that be?"

"I think you're not fully aware of what it means to receive applause at the end of a concert," began Gabriel, "and how it makes a bond between the group members. That's one thing. Then - you know that Sandy wants to do theatre, but your own attitude toward the stage wasn't particularly friendly so far. Now, if you join her on the - "

"Are you trying to tell me how to win her heart?" Maybe Frédéric had planned to sound threatening, but if so, with little success.

"To be honest, all I'm pointing out is a possibility because I need a keyboard player urgently, and you're the only one I know." Gabriel gave a short grin. "There isn't anything I can tell you about Sandy's feelings for you, or nothing that she didn't tell you herself already. But maybe you underestimate the constraining force of the High Priestess issue ..."

Frédéric's grimace made clear how much he liked that topic.

"... or maybe you're just ahead of her and forgot that she's basically a year younger than you and Hély and Benoît. All I can tell you is another fact you know already."

Frédéric smiled ironically. "Then please tell me. I'm sure, it'll look great in today's collection of known facts."

"There's no one else around."

Frédéric opened the mouth for a reply, and the expression in his face made clear that he'd understood Gabriel's remark as, 'There's no other keyboard player around.' But an instant later he realized what Gabriel really had said, and closed his mouth rather abruptly.

After a short silence, he said, "Yeah, could be that I didn't see the obvious. And as you said, there's no guarantee, but ..." He grinned. "Maybe I should give it a try. Where's the nearest keyboard?"

Gabriel exhaled deeply. "Upstairs," he said.

* * *

For the first time in his life, Carlos had a realistic feeling of what the word *prison* really meant. He felt trapped within the walls and fences of the Ecole des Etudiants Magiques Gênes, and this had to do with his new girlfriend.

Something had happened to Chloé. So much he knew for sure. Unfortunately, that was all he knew because she wouldn't tell him and, when asked, said there wasn't anything.

He'd noticed a change in her and had asked, "Is there something up? You're somehow different today." The furious denial, so obviously wrong, told him that the matter had to be approached more carefully.

Next he became aware that it was more than a mood, because the following day this particularly odd feeling was the same, if not worse. He could have sworn Chloé felt uneasy in his company, although that couldn't be the entire truth because she didn't show any ambition to leave him at the first opportunity.

In such a case - no, he didn't know of any comparable case, but still he would have asked one of his older siblings, Gabriel or Sandra, for advice. They weren't available, at least not for a conversation face-to-face, and discussing the matter over a phony didn't feel like an option.

He might have asked Esmeralda. She was within reach, but she wasn't a good candidate for a discussion about Chloé. It was certainly wrong to call Esmeralda jealous. It was similarly wrong to say she disliked the girl, in particular because Esmeralda herself had started the habit of making friends with other people at the school. She wouldn't be a burden concerning Chloé, but then she

wouldn't be a help either.

So Carlos would have asked his father or his mother. His mother was out of reach like Gabriel and Sandra, and his father - he could talk with his father only during those short daily meetings, when Esmeralda was around, and altogether Carlos didn't think it was a good idea to raise the issue at these occasions.

This was the situation in which he became aware that a boarding school had all qualities of a prison. But despite the last six years as a member of a family with many heads, he hadn't forgotten how it was to be left on his own. His first step, an almost natural reflex after his years with Esmeralda, was to watch still more closely for the tiniest reactions.

He scored his first hit pretty quickly. They were walking toward the park, Carlos with Dona Gata in his arms, when they passed Madame Serafini, who taught French to Carlos and Esmeralda's class. They greeted her, Chloé in a surprisingly joyful manner, with the astonishing effect that the teacher looked nearly embarrassed. And when they'd passed her, Chloé giggled.

"What's so funny?" asked Carlos, as casually as he could muster.

"Oh, that teacher," was the somewhat evasive answer.

"Funny? Madame Serafini?" In Carlos' opinion, the woman was certainly one of the nicer teachers, but trying to live off her jokes would mean starvation. "You have her for French too, don't you?"

"Yes, but it wasn't in class that she was so funny. It was something she said to our new Sports teacher."

"And what was it?"

"It - erm, I can't tell you, it's a bit embarrassing, you know."

The new Sports teacher happened to be Carlos' father. Moreover, this new class also included Carlos' sister, something Chloé seemed to have forgotten. Since Esmeralda hadn't mentioned anything out of the ordinary, Carlos could take it as a given that the funny scene hadn't happened in front of the entire class. That would mean they'd met somewhere else, and Madame Serafini had been there too, and she'd said something which made her embarrassed even in retrospect ... With some breathlessness, Carlos realised that he'd found a hook to pull and that spying wasn't that complicated after all.

They sat down on the grass in the park. In a few minutes, Esmeralda would arrive with her new friends and with Bolo, and cat and dog would play together while two parties would watch the scene from two different corners. This was the habit that they'd developed recently.

Carlos asked, "How is he, the new Sports teacher?"

"He's cool. Awfully cool."

The high praise pleased Carlos but didn't surprise him. Harry and his music from the floating loudspeakers had outperformed the rest of the faculty almost effortlessly. But even so, the dreamlike expression of adoration in Chloé's face somehow didn't fit.

Still casually, Carlos decided to test his hypothesis from a moment ago. "Have you been in his apartment?"

Chloé stared at him as if frozen in shock, while a deep blush slowly filled her face. "What ... how do you ... what makes you think I've been there?"

"Was it there that Madame Serafini said something that was funny? At least funny to you, if not to

her?"

"Er, yes ... She thought it was something else, me in his rooms, you know what I mean ..."

It seemed as if Chloé felt relieved to have an embarrassing fact she could confess in order to cover a still more embarrassing fact - a technique with which Carlos was quite familiar.

"But how do you know that? Did someone tell you?"

"No, but what you said about Madame Serafini - if it had been in Sports, Esmeralda would have told me - "

"Oh, yes, right."

"But if it wasn't what Madame Serafini had expected, what was it then?" Seeing the reaction on Chloé's face, Carlos decided to strike now. "Because I know that something happened, and I think it was there."

"Yes, you're right," replied a red-faced Chloé. "You're cleverer than I thought."

Carlos almost laughed. "Hey, stop buttering me up! Just tell me!"

"I really would like to tell you," said Chloé pleadingly, "only afterwards you'll be mad at me."

"Why should I?"

"If I tell you that, you already know."

Growing impatient, Carlos said, "I won't be mad at you. I swear by my dead mother's grave that I won't. And now tell me."

Had it really been this oath? To Carlos it felt more as if she'd been dying anyway to tell someone.

"He - he made me a witch, a real one! He had a drink, and it burned like hell but afterwards - he had wands, used ones, and I could pick one, and it worked! I could cast a spell! And since then ..."

Her voice trailed. She looked at him, apparently unable to understand why a broad grin was slowly spreading on Carlos' face.

"Why aren't you peeved now?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I can do magic and you can't! That's why."

"Oh."

Calmer than before, Chloé added, "You aren't as clever as I thought. Your guess must have been a lucky hit. Normally I should leave this school, but - uhm, I don't want to leave, but I want to learn spells, and with each spell I'll be more different from you."

"Show me your wand."

With reluctance in her face but like drawn by an inner force, Chloé pulled her wand out of its poach and offered it to Carlos.

He inspected it. "Really cool. What is it?"

"Birchwood."

"And the core?"

"Unicorn hair."

"Really?" Carlos beamed. "Mine too! Maybe it's even from the same - " He swallowed the last word, *Unicorn*, because it came close to revealing things that had to be kept confidential. Too late,

he realized that any listener would add *shop* in his mind, with an even worse effect.

But Chloé wasn't in a state to notice such details. She seemed close to tears. "What does it matter? Mine works and yours doesn't, and you must be retarded not to see the problem! And stop grinning like an idiot! You and your cat - I didn't want to leave because of you, but I must have been blind not to notice what a stupid grin you have, so maybe ..." Her voice ended in a sob.

Carlos moved to her side and put an arm on her shoulders. "So this teacher made you a real witch? Then I'll ask him to make me a real wizard."

Chloé stared at him, new hope in her face. A moment later, Carlos could watch as the hope faded when she said, "Why should he do that?"

He chuckled. "You think he does it only for girls?"

She could smile. "No, that's not the point. But this stuff is so expensive, that - " Suddenly she looked wondering. "But he managed to get it for me, didn't he? And I wouldn't have believed it before, never!"

Giving his *stupid* grin again, Carlos said, "This teacher seems to know a lot of tricks. Asking doesn't hurt - "

He was interrupted by the arrival of a dog who gave him a stormy welcome, then presented more gentleness toward Chloé before he welcomed Dona Gata with a tender care that went to work in the shape of a long, rosy tongue.

Carlos had recovered from Bolo's attack. He waited still a moment until his sister and the other three girls were out of earshot. Then, keeping his voice low, he asked, "So how did it go? If I want to become a real wizard myself, I have to know."

This argument would hardly hold under closer examination. But Chloé wasn't interested in such scrutiny. All she'd been looking for was a living soul to tell her story to; this much Carlos could read from her face before she started to talk about staircases and a strange-looking school with a woman in a white coat.

15 - Conversations

Harry greeted Sirius, then stepped aside to let his godfather and Ron shake hands and say hallo. The two men hadn't met for quite a few years, but neither of them had felt a painful gap in their lives. Today they had come together only because he had asked them.

They were in Sirius' house. Choosing this location for their meeting was perhaps an act of politeness from Harry's side, a reference to Sirius' age. Or maybe Harry had simply wanted to have the greatest distance possible between himself and Brest when discussing the only topic on the agenda. Carron Lough was still farther off, true, but that place would have felt odd because these days, Harry didn't see himself as the *host* in that castle.

They followed Sirius into the room he called his office, with a desk and with several comfortable-looking chairs around a table just big enough to deposit cups but not files. When they all had glasses of something in front of them, Sirius asked, "Okay, Harry, what's up?"

Harry had rehearsed his speech in advance, knowing that otherwise his emotions might get the better of him. So he didn't need time to select his words.

"You know that I'm playing teacher at that school in Brest for magically handicapped children. You also know that I'm doing it because we want to find out why more boys than usual committed suicide there in the last year."

Sirius nodded.

"Well, I found a lot of things that are going awfully wrong at that school, but nothing like what we're looking for. Nothing special, just bad teachers. At least that was the state until the day before yesterday."

Harry took a sip from his drink, mostly to consider one last time how to present what he'd learned. Not finding a better choice than before, he went on.

"Then I had a long conversation with a colleague of mine. A woman - her name's Agnès, and she's been teaching there for years. Erm - from what she said, I guess I have an outline of what's really going wrong there."

"And what's really going wrong there?"

While the question seemed perfectly normal, the tone of Sirius' voice made Harry look sharply at his godfather before answering.

"She's pretty sure that there's a lot of sexual assault going on."

Ron didn't react, which was understandable because he'd heard a summary from Harry the previous evening. When Sirius showed a similar lack of emotion, though, Harry said, "You seem not the least bit surprised."

"Should I?"

"What's more," said Harry by way of an answer, "you look as if that's exactly what you'd expected to hear."

"Small wonder," replied Sirius, "because that *is* exactly what I expected to hear."

Harry felt his anger rising. "I remember another conversation before I started this plot. I told you everything I knew, but I don't remember any hints in that direction from your side."

Sirius sighed. "Right, and that was fully on purpose, because I didn't want to feed your open mind with my own prejudice. Although, to be honest, it's not a prejudice but hard fact. Harry, for children

this age, sexual assault and misuse of any kind represent the majority of all troubles - from a cop's perspective, that is, but ask him" - a jerk of Sirius' head pointed to Ron - "whether it's any different from a teacher's perspective."

A faint colour rose in Ron's cheeks. "Teachers are hardly confronted with the crimes that fill the newspapers - about children that are abducted, raped, and murdered. For *compensation*, to misuse a word for a change, they learn a lot about all the crimes that never make it into criminal records."

"Which are?" asked Harry. The menace in his voice promised his friend a few unpleasant moments when they were alone again, for not telling him before this meeting.

"Sexual assault in the family," replied Ron unimpressed, "which represents about ninety-five percent of all assaults that occur. Such cases in public are a minority but make better headlines." As if in defiance to Harry's look, he added, "If you read about something like that at a school, usually it's a sports teacher."

Harry swallowed his first reply. After giving himself a few seconds to calm down, he asked Ron, "Did you have the same suspicion as Sirius from the beginning?"

Ron exhaled, which sounded more like a snort. "Yes."

"And you didn't say a word when we sent Carlos and Esmeralda to that school?"

The colour in Ron's face deepened. "It wasn't my idea! You didn't say a word about that when we discussed the plan. The first time I heard about it was much later. And when I heard how tightly supervised they are ..."

When it became obvious that Ron wouldn't finish his sentence, Harry opened his mouth to give the reply he had in mind, but just then his godfather spoke again.

"Calm down, Harry. Ron's probably at least as much an expert in such matters as I, and with respect to the typical crime profile, I'd agree with him. I mean, nobody with such knowledge would recommend sending your children to that school, but now that they're there, and you make check-ups as much as you do, there's no need to run off and rescue them."

"A-ha. So, just for my ease of mind, would you please explain to me what you're talking about?"

Sirius exchanged a glance with an unhappy-looking Ron. There was some amusement on Sirius' side, who probably hadn't expected to come to Ron's defence.

"The significant aspect in these cases," he began, "is that the crimes are committed in a climate of confidence. The victims, the children, are fed and lured into a trusting relationship, and often enough you can take the word 'fed' literally."

"You mean," asked Harry while trying to relax, "these crimes aren't committed out of the blue?"

"Right. That isn't true for a potential rapist and murderer who's fighting for control of himself all the time but will lose that fight quite suddenly due to an event or a sight or whatever. If there'd been any such case in Ron's file, the situation would be totally different. This is about perpetrators who commit their assaults after careful planning to make sure they get away with it."

Harry looked incredulous. "Are you trying to tell me I shouldn't worry about Carlos and Esmeralda?"

"Listen, Harry," said Sirius with some sharpness in his voice, "you started a plot, and somehow you managed to send your two younger children to that school while for yourself keeping a naivety that's almost unworldly, as far as I'm concerned. Don't blame us for this situation, okay? And don't accuse us of dragging your feet in any direction."

Harry stared at him with thin lips.

Calmer than before, Sirius continued, "My understanding was that you came to ask for advice so you could better plan your next steps. If there's a good opportunity to send them to another school, fine, do it. But they aren't at any immediate risk while you're sitting here. As is true so often in criminal cases, it's really helpful to stop getting upset and instead have a good look at the simple facts."

Harry turned to Ron. "And you? What's your comment?"

Ron stared back. "I'm a father as much as you are, and I have the same impulses, so I couldn't blame you if you pulled them out of a classroom there. But I'm also in charge of many more children on a professional level. If our suspicion is right, there are some children at that school who have been misused, and will be misused again. Not our children, granted, but those of other parents."

Seeing Harry's look, Ron changed his tone. "You think I sound like a politician? Then let's get to the point. I see a chance to uncover a rotten nest of pederasts, and I would bloody regret seeing that chance spoiled. Esmeralda's at that school with her dog, and that's more protection than you realise. Looking at it from the outside, Carlos is more at risk."

"Isn't he anyway? The suicides were all boys, weren't they?"

"Yes, but that shouldn't be misinterpreted in the sense that only boys are misused there. That's very unlikely. It's just that in our society girls are more drilled in the role of victims, so they're less prone to suicide, that's all."

As if regaining his administrative composure, Ron added, "At least for that reason - in the complete statistics, girl suicides rank higher."

Harry eyed his friend with renewed suspicion. "Did you get that from the same psychologist who explained all the other things? I guess I just heard about the rest much earlier?"

Ron shrugged his shoulders in a way that looked very French to Harry's eyes. "What I just said is basic knowledge for anyone in the education business, just like the statistics about sexual abuse within the family. But yes, the psychologist I consulted reminded me of these facts." Almost casually, Ron added, "I guess he wanted to make sure that I didn't follow the common pattern of public misinformation."

"Of which I'm the best example, huh?"

"Yes," confirmed Ron, "of which you're the best example. And now that you - in all your innocence - come and report that this Agnès is convinced that sexual assault is taking place in that school, we can take it as a given."

Harry fell back in his chair, suddenly feeling tired. "All right, please enlighten me. Tell me the sad facts."

"Why?" asked Sirius. "Why bother with general statistics? Why not just concentrate on the situation at hand?"

"Maybe I'm really too naive," sighed Harry, "because right now I don't know what you mean."

Sirius inched closer on his chair. "Look. If, say, there was a boy who shows signs of sexual assault, medical proof, my first suspect would be the father, and then the uncle, and then any adult male who's good friends with the family and popular with the children. That's general statistics. But in our case here, we know already that the perpetrators can be found in the school, and most likely in the faculty."

"So it wasn't the caretaker?" asked Harry in a weak attempt of joking.

"No," replied Sirius without even noticing the failed irony. "You need a certain amount of authority for that, that's why janitors or cleaning people are quite unlikely candidates."

"Okay. Based on the known facts, who would be your suspect?"

"Probably several people," replied Sirius without missing a beat. "They'll be working together, covering up for each other, and - what's quite important - they'll assure each other that what they're doing isn't as bad as it looks and that they're still human ... The scale of sexual abuse is quite large - for example, child pornography is quite common these days, except that for suicide - " He stopped because he'd seen Harry react. "What is it?"

"I might have gotten in contact with them," Harry said, then told the other two about the conversation he'd had some days ago at lunch, about making money with little girls dancing to music.

"That's a trail worth following for sure," agreed Sirius, "but be careful. A common mistake in such investigations is to suspect someone just because he's made certain remarks in public, in the presence of witnesses. On the other hand, most likely you'll find various degrees of guilt and involvement, borderline figures and those pulling the strings. So even if they aren't culprits themselves, they probably know names ... By the way, could your colleague really tell you no names or was she just not ready to give you names? What do you think?"

"I'm not sure," confessed Harry. "I came here to get advice on how to proceed. I'll talk with her again, and if we can trust each other more than we did so far - "

"Because you know," interrupted Sirius, "she could be dirty herself. A renegade, maybe, or still an active gang member who was sent out to test you and recruit you, if possible, or to see whether you were trying to establish an independent competition."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, you're right. But at least I feel competent enough to find out whether I can trust her."

Sirius smiled for the first time since the meeting had begun. "Yes, that should be possible." Then he sobered up again. "Because you can't ask the children themselves."

"Yes, I had that feeling, but I won't mind learning a bit more about the psychological background."

Ron signaled Sirius that he wanted to answer, then said, "Concerning the general reluctance of a rape or assault victim to confirm what happened, there's little difference between children and adults, and for that an old cop like Sirius is probably a better source than a psychologist. But for children in particular, there are two major barriers that prevent them from being useful witnesses, and these are the same reasons that cause such heavy traumas. First of all, those children blame themselves for what happened, or is happening again and again. It takes an awful lot of self-esteem to realize that the blame's on the other side, on the adults and persons of authority - and here comes the second trauma. In order to escape the first trap of self-guilt, those children have to admit to themselves that their authorities are rotten pederasts. Confronted with that choice, most of them fall back on their first option - if you'll pardon that expression in this context."

"Is this dilemma the reason for the suicides?" asked Harry.

Rather than answering, Ron looked at Sirius.

"Judging from my experience, suicide is atypical," said Sirius. "Actually that was another reason why I didn't want to hint at anything the first time you came to me. It can happen, yes, but normally only after years of perpetual abuse. So if you ask me for my gut feeling, I'd say there's still a factor

in the game we don't know yet."

"Yeah, sure," snorted Harry. "It would have been much too simple otherwise."

"It could be something as simple as the additional awareness of being a failure at magic," said Sirius, again not reacting to the sarcasm, which gave Harry the impression that Sirius had attended too many meetings during his active time, had heard too many similar remarks on the prospect of human misbehaviour to respond to them. "But I still think it's something else."

Harry turned to Ron. "What did the psychologist say?"

Ron smiled thinly. "He said that each case is different. Then I asked him if he could drop the professional bullshit for a second and just tell me his opinion, and then he said this number was much too high for his taste, which translates to, 'I haven't got the foggiest why they did it'."

"Okay, then." Harry used his left hand to count with the fingers of his right. "One - there's sexual abuse on a broad scale at that school. Two - there's something else, if an old cop's gut is right. Three - I can't ask the students directly. I might find a child who appears distraught, then I can try to track down recent events, but I can't ask what happened. Four - I can't ask the adults either, because they might be involved."

He rose a hand in which one finger was left for counting. "Then what's five? What can I do? How to proceed?"

Sirius raised his eyebrows as if to say, *What did you expect after such a short time?* It reminded Harry of how much regular police work was a tedious job, without the weekly miracle.

Aloud, Sirius said, "Keep your eyes out. Collect evidence or anything that might be evidence. Look for patterns, and look for the uncommon, too. Keep the practical details in mind, then you can rule out a lot."

"Practical details?"

Sirius grimaced. "If the goal is child pornography, a hidden camera in a bathroom is all you need to get into business. If the goal is a full-blown, er, penetration, you need a place and a time and nobody around - "

"Or only people with the same goal," interrupted Ron. "Or with a business interest - I remember cases where parents sold their children for hourly - "

"Okay, okay, thanks," interrupted Harry, feeling slightly sick. "I know that I have to do a little homework with reports and case studies and so, but if I feel like throwing up then, at least I'll be alone."

"Right," replied Ron, "that's number six. As good ol' Hermione used to say, 'Go to the library and look it up'."

Harry nodded, showing as little amusement at this remark as Ron. Inwardly, however, he wondered whether he shouldn't prefer a short cut and ask Hermione directly. With her laboratory work and her medical connections, she might have some recommendations of which the two men opposite him hadn't dreamed.

He hadn't told them that Hermione knew. As this conversation had shown, not telling everything was quite a habit in their small task force.

* * *

Sandra walked down the staircase and steered toward the practicing room she knew so well from two different projects, her own Theatre Group and her brother's band. She had joined them, yes, but only for a while and only for a special purpose, certainly not enough to think of Dragonfly as her

own band, which would mean considering herself a regular member.

Gabriel had increased the pace of rehearsals, so much so that only specific schedules and tasks were accepted as a reason not to have a rehearsal every day. The other band members - *the real band members*, Sandra corrected herself - didn't mind, or else complained only when joking about Gabriel the slave-driver. Her own feelings were quite mixed, or maybe not mixed at all but definitely on the less pleased side, but she'd agreed to the task, and she would keep her promise.

Reaching the room, she was greeted with a small movement of the head from Tomas, who was only gradually losing his feelings of resentment against the tambourine - at the same speed, she suspected, which she managed to play the instrument at the right times and with the proper force. Her friend Héloïse greeted her as always, with a brief smile that took place more at mental level than on the outside, and only Moira gave a beaming smile that was almost enough to compensate for the efforts. Small wonder; Moira had reached a point where Sandra's presence alone was enough to let her sing without the previous restraints.

I'm a walking placebo, Sandra thought, somewhat morosely.

Moments later, Michel and Caitlin arrived together.

Sandra spent a few seconds musing idly whether this was anything more than a coincidence, and came to the conclusion that, at least for Caitlin, the answer was no. The difference in age was too great.

Then, in rapid succession, three more figures appeared.

The first of them was Frédéric.

Sandra stared at him, her anger rising because she hadn't planned on him watching her at every rehearsal just because she had invited him to accompany her a few days ago. The look on his face, as if to say, *What can I do?* didn't improve her mood.

"Are you here to play audience?" she asked, rather unfriendly.

She didn't receive an answer because just then another shape appeared in the entrance. It was something that floated a few inches above the floor, obviously under a levitation charm.

Next instant, the one who'd cast that spell came into view. It was Gabriel, with his wand directing the thing toward the stage.

It took Sandra a moment to identify the item, and when she finally recognized it as a keyboard, she wheeled around to stare again at Frédéric, who once more responded with an expression of helplessness, except that suddenly it had a totally different meaning.

Gabriel had reached the stage. With a faint thud, the large instrument came to rest on the stage floor. While Gabriel busied himself connecting the keyboard to the amplifiers, the other band members gathered to examine the shiny piece.

White lacquer? Sandra could swear she hadn't seen it before. This was none of the instruments Gabriel had stored in his own rooms in Carron Lough. It had to be brand new; the smell and the spotless surface seemed to confirm her guess. "Yamaha" was written in gold letters that extended almost across the entire instrument. Not quite as large as a piano but with keys that looked very much the same to Sandra's unprofessional eye, it had several additional rows of switches and controls. A padded player's stool had been fixed to while Gabriel's spell carried it; now, the seat could be moved independently.

"Hi, folks," said Gabriel into the admiring silence. "This is our new keyboard."

"Now that really takes me by surprise," said Michel in mock astonishment, "because to me it looked

like a sausage grill."

Sandra couldn't muster the patience to honour this joke of immature quality. She asked, "And who's the player?"

"What a ques- " Héloïse didn't get any further with her unsolicited reply because she had automatically turned toward Gabriel and therefore could see him gesturing to the newcomer.

"Here's the one who'll play the keyboard," said Gabriel. "Frédéric Pouilly."

"*Enchanté*," said Frédéric with an ironic smile into the new silence, which could have been called baffled, or expectant, but definitely not admiring. "I'll be keeping this role till the end of your tour - oops, I mean, *our* tour in Sweden, and before you ask me why, I always wanted to see the midnight sun, and this is my chance."

Michel asked, "Does it matter much that the midnight sun can only be viewed north of the polar circle? And only earlier in the year?"

"No, it doesn't," answered his sister before Frédéric or Gabriel had a chance for a reply. "And stop showing off all that geography! Who needs precocious little brothers?"

"Not me," said Sandra, "I already have my own."

A moment later, seeing the looks from Gabriel and Frédéric, she said, "Sorry, I just couldn't resist the temptation ... But you really took me by surprise."

"Yeah, that's what we had in mind," said Gabriel. On a private channel he added, *Please, show a bit more encouragement!*

Encouragement? Trancing Moira and playing the tambourine and singing chorus, and now encouraging a seemingly inadequate keyboard player, and no doubt, next time they'd expect her to go and fetch the sandwiches!

After a few seconds, the hot eruption of fury inside her faded, but not enough to muster any encouragement for the new keyboard player.

Frédéric had difficulties, so much even Sandra knew shortly after they'd started playing. She didn't know why - maybe it was the new instrument, quite different from the Steinway grand piano in the Pouilly library, maybe the totally different style of music, hardly comparable to his usual Chopin études ... And truth be told, she didn't care. Frédéric appearing here had caught her on the wrong foot.

After a few more minutes, during which Frédéric's desperation grew visibly, Gabriel announced a break.

"Fifteen minutes minimum," he called. "If you want to go for a drink in the cafeteria, this is the right time." Then he looked at his sister, his expression blank, and only Sandra herself could recognize that he was holding the pokerface even at mental level.

It hurt a bit, such treatment from her brother so shortly after she'd agreed to join them in a ten concert tour. Growing defiant, she decided to stay and watch.

Gabriel walked to Frédéric, who was sitting like a solid piece of misery at the gleaming instrument. They talked for a moment, and as Sandra watched, Gabriel also touched him on the shoulders, which probably meant that he'd sent his own encouragement.

After a few seconds, Frédéric started to play. It wasn't Dragonfly stuff; it was Chopin or Rachmaninoff or whatever, just his usual playing but on the Yamaha keyboard rather than the

Steinway.

No doubt, he could play piano. Could he play the keyboard, too?

After several minutes of warming up, Frédéric seemed to explore techniques not available on a piano, to get an initial feeling for the nearly unlimited capabilities of the new instrument. And while Sandra watched, Caitlin walked over to tell Frédéric that she was looking forward to his playing because it could carry her singing much better than the other instruments, and maybe they should try something simple now.

Chopin or whatever came to a sudden stop. Moments later, first Caitlin and then Moira as well sang *Sur le pont d'Avignon*, accompanied by first the keyboard, then the flute, and then the other instruments shortly afterwards.

The tambourine in Sandra's hand was the last to join - out of embarrassment, rather than defiance.

"Okay, it works," said Gabriel. "Now let's try our own music."

It worked considerably better than before. Sandra guessed that Frédéric was only at the bottom end of an acceptable skill range in more than one regard, but it was a start. His tension had made room for determination, and she knew that he wouldn't stop short of being brilliant, the common Pouilly trademark.

When Gabriel called it a day, Sandra deposited the tambourine in the small storage room next door and went back. She intended to talk with Frédéric about this new development. Coming to the entrance of the practice room, however, she saw that he was still sitting at the keyboard, and that Caitlin was at his side, apparently ready for an extra rehearsal for keyboard and voice only.

Well, then ... At the sight of so much musical ambition, Sandra didn't want to disturb the harmony. And if the ambition went further from either side, that was fine with her too.

Yes, definitely so. The odd feeling in her stomach could only be hunger.

* * *

Esmeralda was sitting in Geography, listening to Madame Rappeneau but with limited attention. This changed quite suddenly when the teacher said, "Well, that's enough for today about the French coasts, because I have to tell you about our school trip, which we'll be going on in three weeks."

School trip? Esmeralda shifted a bit closer to Carlos at her side and whispered, "Do you know what she's talking about?"

A shaking head told her that Carlos wasn't any wiser.

Esmeralda glanced over to the corner where Natalie and Dominique were sitting. Natalie shrugged to indicate that she didn't know more either, then turned her attention back to the teacher.

Madame Rappeneau had walked to the large map that hung from the ceiling. "Here," she said, "that's where your camp will be ..."

The long pointer was tapping at a spot in the upper left half of France, which was all Esmeralda could see from where she was sitting.

"... in the Loire valley, such a magnificent spot, the Parc MiraLuc, and the season's just right, no longer too hot during the day and not yet really cold in the night, so you'll have fun in these tents, with campfires in the evening, and some people play guitar, and you'll sing songs ..."

Madame Rappeneau told them that this school trip was a tradition for new classes, sponsored by MiraLuc, a popular manufacturer for outdoor equipment, which explained why everything took place in a camp with tents. The Parc MiraLuc was located directly at the Loire waterfront. The next

big city was Angers.

When the teacher mentioned this, Esmeralda turned again to look at Natalie, who came from there, and who seemed to have mixed emotions about a campsite so close to her home town. But the Parc MiraLuc was between Angers and Saumur, with the small town Le Thoureil as the nearest village.

"It'll start on Thursday, in the early afternoon," said Madame Rappeneau, "and you'll be back on Sunday evening. MiraLuc takes care of everything; all you need are solid clothes - oh yes, and a permit from your parents that you are allowed to participate in this school trip."

The teacher glanced into a file, looked up again and sent a smile in the direction of Esmeralda. "For you, Esmeralda, the permission's already granted by Madame Laval. This covers you as well, Carlos."

Esmeralda turned to her brother. "Has she been announced as your - er, parental guide too?"

"No!" Carlos accompanied his response to her outraged question with an indignant look, which sufficiently replaced a longer exchange of words. She had suspected him of having omitted to tell about such a short meeting with the headmaster, and Carlos had sensed her suspicion, had interpreted it correctly, and answered with the proper reproach.

Well, this was something to discuss with their father, but for the time being, the news about this unexpected change in the school routine dominated everybody's thoughts. In the few minutes left until the break, Madame Rappeneau was faced with many questions, but in summary, her answers came always down to the point that MiraLuc was the sponsor for everything, that there would be experienced camp guides, and that probably no more than two teachers would be there to supervise the four classes together.

The excitement was addictive. The next class, which was Maths and the last one before lunch, for sure would have been a waste of time, but the teacher, a Monsieur Donlon, taught them a simple trick of triangulation to measure the approximative height of trees or towers by "folding the height" down to the ground and then measuring it with their steps.

Even better, their homework for the next day was to walk the length of the Brest building and to count their steps. Tomorrow, Monsieur Donlon would tell them the true length in meters, and with these two numbers, they would be able to determine their average step width as the basis for such measurements.

During lunch, she and her roommates had just one topic, the school trip, and what it would be like to sleep in a tent, and what it would be like in the Loire valley. Natalie had to answer questions until she grew impatient because for her, the Loire valley was quite an ordinary landscape. Forests forever, much tighter than those near Brest, and whoever wanted to know more had to wait until they would be there.

Coming out of the Brest building, they remembered their maths homework from Monsieur Donlon and went to the edge of the building to walk its front - together of course, with the unsurprising effect that they all had the same number of steps. So they had to do it again, and this time, the numbers were slightly different, with Odile, the tallest, getting the smallest answer. Not surprising either.

As they walked toward the public corral where Bolo was waiting for them, Esmeralda became aware that she didn't know whether pets were allowed in this camp, and that she'd forgotten to ask.

"Did Madame Rappeneau say anything about pets?" she asked.

"Erm ..."

Apparently not, although nobody knew for sure. The girls seemed similarly embarrassed not to have thought of this question, and hastened to assure each other that there was hardly any other possibility, what with the trip lasting more than three days.

"If we were travelling by bus or train, it might have been a problem," said Odile. "But with a portkey cabin here at the school ..."

This was a detail Esmeralda had forgotten. For a moment, she couldn't believe that something like that had slipped her attention in class, but then it became clear why: Madame Rappeneau had explained the travelling method just when Esmeralda had been busy asking Carlos about the parental guide he'd never met.

During the afternoon classes, the teachers didn't want to discuss the school trip, didn't know details of the organizations, and were determined to discuss their own course's topics, so Esmeralda had to wait until her next class with Madame Rappeneau. It was a small stain on the otherwise shiny anticipation, because she hadn't forgotten that four girls who kept assuring each other didn't make a majority if the teachers had different opinions.

Or the MiraLuc people, for that matter, because *they* were in charge of the trip according to Madame Rappeneau.

Then came the daily meeting with their father, and suddenly the question of Bolo coming along seemed rather unimportant, compared to what their father was planning.

It began as always. He summoned them and asked them what news they had.

Esmeralda and Carlos took turns delivering a report of the upcoming school trip, and how Esmeralda's *parental guide*, Madame Laval, had decided to take responsibility of Carlos without even being officially established as such.

"Hmmm ..." said their father. "A pity we can't investigate that any further, but now it's time to do what I wanted to do already before. You must leave the school."

"Now?? But why?" Esmeralda stared at her father in astonished disappointment. "Can't we wait until this school trip's over?"

"I'm sorry, no." He looked quite unhappy, though quite determined.

Esmeralda was just as determined. "Then convince us! That's what you always say - don't come shouting, 'You must!' but instead explain why it's necessary. Isn't it?"

Harry looked at her sourly, and she knew she'd quoted him correctly.

"Something has changed," he said after a moment. "I've got new information."

"Is the mystery solved?"

"No, but I have enough information to know that I don't want to expose you any day longer to the risks here."

Esmeralda could sense that there was something serious. But she wasn't ready to obey just because of some vague concerns.

"Which risks? What have you heard? Who told you?"

Harry's lips went very thin. He glared at her for a moment - a reaction that would have yielded more effect if he hadn't spent the last six years telling his children that parents weren't supposed to play dictators, in particular toward a girl who'd lost already two sets of them.

Maybe this fact had crossed his mind as Harry eventually sighed deeply, then said, "I have very good reasons to believe that children at this school are sexually mistreated. I don't know details, but my source of information has been at this school much longer than I, and she's quite reliable."

"Who is it?" asked Carlos.

Esmeralda stared at him in surprise. She hadn't expected to find an ally in her brother, not at this moment of confrontation.

If Harry was surprised too, he didn't show. "A teacher," he said. "Madame Serafini."

Sexually mistreated - this was a topic with which Esmeralda felt quite unfamiliar. A moment ago, she still had felt secure in her argumentative position because of her own past, in which sudden death had struck twice. But *sexual assault* ... She knew the official term, wondered for an instant why her father hadn't used it when -

"Chloé!"

Father and daughter stared at Carlos and asked almost in unison, "What?"

"If we're at risk, she's at risk too, isn't she? She must come with us."

Harry started, "I can't take a girl out of school - "

"My friends, too," Esmeralda interrupted him. "Dominique, and Natalie, and Odile."

"I have no authority to take anyone else out of school," repeated Harry. "So my primary concern is your security - "

"You can't take us away and leave them here! You must - "

Esmeralda stopped herself, realizing that she was about to make the same mistake her father had made a moment ago. Judging by his expression, he'd been aware of it and had been waiting for it. After a second, she knew what to say.

"Those are our friends. I wouldn't be able to stand the thought that they ... that they were ... that someone did something to them because they didn't know, but we knew - "

"If you can't send them with us, then at least you must warn them," said Carlos. "There's no reason for Chloé to stay here any longer."

Esmeralda didn't know what he was talking about, but a look at her father's face told her that Harry knew, and that somehow Carlos had scored a hit with this argument, and that she could multiply the effect still by looking confusedly from one to the other. Yet before either of them could give her an explanation, or the opposite of it, she had her own brilliant idea.

"Didn't you want to give me an ankle bracelet for alerts? We need some more for our friends, at the very least."

Harry looked a bit desperate. "That would mean telling them, making them part of the conspiracy."

Yes of course, that was exactly what Esmeralda had in mind, although there was no doubt that it was the last thing their father had in mind and that -

"But Chloé is already part of the conspiracy, isn't she?"

Again, father and daughter stared at Carlos.

Registering their stares, Carlos sent a glance to his father, then turned to Esmeralda. "He made her a witch."

"Chloé?"

Carlos nodded.

Esmeralda stared at her father, whose cheeks were colouring. It wasn't entirely clear to her why, but there was no denying that he was becoming defensive. Instinctively, she took a step, put her arms around him and said, "Then you can do the same for Dominique and Natalie and Odile, yes? And then we can all leave together, and until then, we must stay together and wear those bracelets and watch out."

For a few seconds, Harry buried his face in his hands - not for crying, but for deep concentration. Then the hands moved downward, so at least his eyes were visible again. They were sparkling.

"Your mother'll kill me when she hears about this. But she'll kill me only *after* I've taken you out of school, so suddenly it looks as if I should wait ..."

Before Esmeralda could look pleased at what felt like a successful negotiation, he let his hands drop to reveal a face that was sober and serious.

"Let me check a few more things and talk with my source again, and with your mother too. Until then, not a word to your friends, you hear me? Maybe we have to tell them, and I'll try to get those bracelets quicker, but you keep our secret until I tell you otherwise. Are we clear on that?"

Solemn nods.

He sighed. "I was blind, so blind! Worse than a mole - but that's what Sirius told me ... Well, pride cometh before a fall."

Carlos, practical as ever, asked, "What can we do to protect ourselves as much as possible? Here at school, I mean?"

"Stay with your friends," was the prompt answer. "Keep company as much as possible. Don't start solo actions of any kind. Don't trust teachers you don't know well."

Carlos nodded, then grinned. "But we can trust Madame Serafini, right?"

Harry smiled. "Yes."

With relief, Esmeralda noticed that their father's smile was genuine. Then he sent them back because today's meeting had already been much longer than planned.

16 - Female Intuition

Harry had to talk with Cho. Soon. He was certain of that, although he didn't know whether he could explain to her why he hadn't removed their children from that school instantly, after having learned what the actual risks were. He wasn't even sure for himself whether his decision - or maybe the delaying of his decision - really was the best compromise.

He knew what he was doing, so much he would grant himself. He took risks, agreed, but smaller ones than that of a lifetime memory held by children whose friends couldn't be rescued from an imminent danger, and instead were abandoned by a father who was considered the most powerful wizard alive.

But Cho - at the very least, she should have the option to jump up, travel to Brest and grab her children; otherwise he'd be facing a lifetime memory of not having told her, renewed at every bad opportunity.

First of all, though, he had to talk once more with Agnès.

He caught her at the entrance to the Brest building. It wasn't by accident; he had checked her schedule before to see when he could find her between classes.

"Agnès," he said, "I need to talk with you again. It'll take more than a few minutes, that's for sure. But I don't want the two of us be seen in public, so where - "

She interrupted him with a coquettish smile. "Why not? Afraid of rumours?"

"Actually, yes - I'm pretty sure that you have a reputation of being righteous, and that's something I can't afford."

The smile disappeared as if it had been cut. "Yes, I see."

After a few seconds, a shadow of it returned. "But we can do it secretly enough so that only my reputation is damaged, in case someone sees us together. There's a restaurant where you can get mussels as they should be. Chez Antoine, on the Rue Cape d'Antibes. Seven o'clock?"

"Yeah, okay, I'll find it. What about table reservations?"

"Shouldn't be necessary at this time of the week, and if I guessed wrong, there's a bar where we can wait."

At the last words, Agnès had accelerated her speech because a noise echoed down the hall. She had started to walk and was some steps away from him when the source of that noise came into view, another teacher on his way to the school secretary's office. Harry nodded casually when passing him on his way out.

He would have preferred for him and Agnès to meet around lunch time, or some time afterwards, anything so that he'd have his evening free to meet Cho, or to search her out on that island in Canada. On the other hand, a more relaxed atmosphere could be a benefit. He and Agnès - they weren't enemies, that was about all they knew so far. It didn't make them allies by implication.

He found it hard to concentrate during his classes. In the early afternoon, he had double Sports with another class of girls he'd inherited from Amélie Resnais. Today's girls were sixth-years in his system, eleventh-graders otherwise. He had let them play volleyball the previous time, to see what they could muster and to learn that it was pitiful. Still unsure of how long he would have them, he'd decided to work for improvement.

"Salut, mesdemoiselles," he greeted them in the gymnasium under his waiting loudspeakers. "In our

previous class, I had the opportunity to watch you play and to realize that it's fairly weak and rather limited. What's more, I could see why's that so. You're afraid to jump, and that's because you're afraid to fall, and that's because you're afraid to hurt yourself."

His words received mixed reactions. Some girls nodded, some others looked as if, for the first time, they had an inkling of why their playing was terrible, and the rest of them just stood there, looking expressionless or bored.

"I'm going to show you how to fall," he said.

"Oh yeah!" came a voice from the background. "The fallen girls from Lorient!"

Lorient was the building name for the gymnasium. In French, however, the remark was a quick-witted game of words because what the girl had said could as well be understood as *de l'orient*, meaning 'from the orient'.

Harry smiled, letting his eyes signal that he'd caught the wisecrack and appreciated it. Aloud, he said, "Falling girls, as far as I'm concerned - "

He was interrupted by sniggering, enough to realize that his attempt at clarification could easily be misunderstood again, and that there was little sense in corrections if the audience wanted to find innuendo everywhere, no matter how far-fetched.

He grinned. "I'll show you in a few minutes. But first we'll do our warm-up."

After the first song, three minutes and forty-five seconds at a moderate pace, he turned around to face the crowd. "That wasn't a warm-up," he said, "that was a kind of getting rid of the ice floes. The real warm-up comes now."

With these words, he started another song, much faster in its rhythm, no longer a step-in-place, instead a running-to-one-side, "one - two - three - four - five - and - pouuuuunce," the last word voice-painting the jump they had to do at the end of each sequence, followed by a short stretch in place before the same series of steps was made to the other side.

Of course he made the same steps and jumps as the girls. But his movements were mirror-inverted so he could face them directly, rather than through the picture in the sceptor globes. He knew that otherwise half of them would slow down to a stand-still, and the expressions in their faces told him that they knew too and that they wished he hadn't turned.

By the time the song had finished and the speakers were silent again, he was looking into flushed faces, and more than one of the thin gym outfits had large patches of sweat.

"All right! Please move to the wall! ... It doesn't matter which wall, just clear the middle of the hall."

With the floor empty, and the panting girls lining the walls all around, he drew his wand, pointed at the middle of the hall, and called, "*Mollipraturilis!*"

Next moment, a large, thin mat covered most of the visible floor.

The girls gasped at the mat, then gasped again when they realized how springy the fabric was, after they'd stepped hesitantly onto the grass-coloured stuff.

He marched to the middle of the girls' circle. "Okay now, watch me!"

After a few seconds, having gained their attention, he pressed his arms to his body, spread the hands in a mock imitation of something between a penguin and Charlie Chaplin and, stiff as a flagpole, fell to the floor.

He came up again. "The trick is to turn your momentum into something to roll and slide - and that's

what we're going to learn now."

The first of his two hours was over before they had a fair idea of what it meant to use the momentum from falling and turn it into further movement so that the shock from hitting the ground was spread across a maximum area of the body. When the majority of the girls had lost their reluctance to hit the floor at the end of a jump, he fetched a volleyball from his room and started a new mode of practicing - the ball-catching jump.

For that, the girls lined up because it was only one girl at a time. Harry threw the ball with some force while making sure that it was already low when coming within reach of a jump from the girl's position. The girl was supposed to hit the ball with fists, hands, arms, whatever, just to prevent it from hitting ground, very much like in a real game with real volleyball players. While the ball flew in a new direction, the girl had to complete her jump by hitting the floor, rolling around, and quickly coming up, all in a motion as fluid as she could muster.

The girls had expected to spend time - or rather, waste time - with some of them chasing the ball after each successful hit, and also after each unsuccessful one. They gasped and shrieked in surprise when the first ball, after bouncing off, returned into Harry's hands as if pulled from an elastic ribbon.

"It's a magic volleyball," he called.

It wasn't. The ball was an ordinary volleyball; it just followed his silent and wandless summoning charm, jumping into his pointing hands as if he were merely holding them open to catch it.

As a result, the exercise was performed with the breathtaking speed of not more than ten to fifteen seconds per girl, five girls per minute.

For him, the sequence of ball-throwing, spell-casting, ball-catching had an almost mesmerizing effect, interrupted only occasionally when his throw was off.

It was the combination of all these factors that led to the small accident toward the end of double Sports. He'd thrown the ball, maybe even a bit harder than the others, only this time his aim wasn't good - the ball flew straight toward the waiting girl, but it seemed as if the girl hadn't really been waiting, not consciously, had instead been staring at him wide-eyed, in her own way as mesmerized by his performance as Harry himself.

The ball hit her just below the ribs. With a small cough, the girl collapsed to the ground.

Coming to his senses, Harry rushed to the girl, who was gasping for air. He put his hands on her stomach and sent a wave to relax the cramped muscles, then another one. A moment later, the girl was breathing normal again.

About to come up from his kneeling, Harry heard a remark somewhere behind him. "Stupid chick, has only eyes for the teacher. And now he even touched her there, I bet she ..." The rest of the remark drowned in other noises, for which he felt grateful.

* * *

"... tents are probably the same as for the classes they had a year ago, and the mattresses too, but at least our sleeping bags should be new, what do you think?"

Before Carlos could answer this question, Chloé continued, "Of course, they could have taken the ones from last year and cleaned them, but there should be *something* that's new and only for us, and the sleeping bags are the most obvious choice for that, aren't they?"

Carlos nodded.

While Chloé continued her monologue for a single listener, Carlos briefly wondered if it would always be that way if they were together, an endless stream of words from Chloé and silent nods from himself. Esmeralda had been considerably less talkative - still was, actually, even among her new friends.

But the thought faded, pushed into the background by more important matters, like the news Carlos wasn't supposed to tell, or the older things he wasn't supposed to tell.

"The sleeping order'll be the same as in the dormitories, with four people per tent. But it's much more open, there aren't any buildings, so it's much simpler to visit each other. But then, what's so interesting in meeting my roommates? Or yours, for that matter."

Carlos could do without that. Mathieu, Roland, and Serge, his roommates, were teasing him anyway because he talked so much with girls. His sister served as a partial excuse, but only to a degree.

"I've heard our camp will be directly on the waterfront, with the river to one side and the forest on the other. Wouldn't that be a good place to watch some forest animals? They'll come to the water in the evening, to drink and to meet each other ..."

Hardly so, thought Carlos while keeping silent, not with more than hundred handicapped students crowding the plain and filling the air with their noises.

"... was told the forests there in the Loire valley are so dense that even unicorns can live in them because it gives them the cover they need. Imagine if they come to the water!"

With some effort, Carlos kept his expression amused, rather than sneering.

"Yeah, I know, they're extremely shy, but I had this picture in my head, that the two of us would walk away from the camp, to a quiet spot, and sit there, and wait - you know, because there's unicorn hair in my wand, and didn't you say in yours too? ... So that would attract them, and they'd be interested in looking at us, provided we were calm enough. If I knew where the unicorn that gave the hair in my wand lives - "

Chloé stopped, fear suddenly in her face. "Say, are those hairs taken from slaughtered unicorns?"

"What?" Carlos awoke from his reverie. "No, of course not!"

"What makes you so sure? Look at other wand cores, look at dragon heartstrings! You can't get them from a living dragon, can you?"

"No, of course not, but there are lots of differences," replied Carlos. "Dragons die for many reasons, there's no shortage of them, while unicorns - for them it's as if we'd give some of our hair, it regrows."

"How would you know?"

The flippant tone from Chloé, after he'd listened so patiently, irritated Carlos more than it probably deserved. "I know what I know," he said importantly.

"Ah yes, of course. Yours was delivered by the unicorn personally, right?"

"No, it wasn't," he snapped. "But I know enough about magical cores! I know a phoenix who gave just three feathers, for three - no, actually he gave four feathers, but for three wands - "

"That stupid bird couldn't count, huh?" Chloé's voice was full of the mockery that Carlos, for himself, had suppressed a moment ago. "Or maybe there's a spare feather for three used ones? But shouldn't it be one spare for four others, like with the tires of - "

Anger boiled up in Carlos. "No, there isn't. Each of these feathers went into a wand, but two of

them melted together, and the phoenix's name is Fawkes, he isn't the least bit stupid, and - "

Carlos had stopped himself, wishing desperately it wasn't too late. To smudge his own tracks, he added hastily, "Just because you can do magic and I can't doesn't mean I don't know about wands and cores."

"Say that name again," demanded Chloé, her voice suddenly serious.

"Forget it."

"No I won't. Say it again."

"Fawkes."

"Spell it."

"F - a - w - k - e - s. It's a typical name for phoenixes," Carlos said, trying to sound casual, at the same time waiting to be asked why, so he could tell her about Guy Fawkes the arsonist and Fawkes the self-arsonist.

"I read about a bird like that," said Chloé, "but I didn't recognize the name at the time because when I read it I was in second grade and couldn't pronounce English names. The story was about a phoenix who gave two feathers, for two wands, and these wands melted when their owners fought. And one of them was a bad wizard who was called Vol de Mort, and the other was a good wizard who was called Henri Portère. And when the fight was over, there was only one wand left, and the wand left was in the hand of the good wizard."

Carlos stared at her, feeling perplexion, pleasure, and a painful wave of guilt that he hadn't been able to keep his big mouth shut. But who would expect such a knowledge from a French girl born and raised in a small mountain village?

"Then, later, I was told that the story's true, it's not a fairy tale but something that really happened, although before I was born." Chloé's eyes were fixed on him. "But you said there were four feathers. What about the other two?"

Desperate to find an exit from this trap he'd dug for himself, Carlos remembered a lesson from his father that sometimes the truth could be used to hide your own traces.

"The story you read was probably written shortly after the fight. But later the good wizard married and had two children, and that phoenix gave two more feathers for their wands."

They were in the park, sitting on the grass and watching Bolo and Dona Gata playing together, or just lying in the last rays of the afternoon sun. But they were alone; Esmeralda and her friends had found other business, making Carlos suspicious that his sister might tell them a bit more about the school's risks than she was supposed to reveal at this point.

Chloé leaned back to stretch in the grass. "That's true?"

"I guess so, yes."

"Do you know more about them?"

"A bit, just what I read." Ever so casually, Carlos had managed his first lie: the Potter family, certainly not short on literature in various flavours, maintained just one taboo - stories about themselves, so Carlos still had to read the first line about his famous father by adoption.

Chloé smiled dreamily. "You know, that wizard is my hero. Tell me everything you know about him and his children. Do you know their names?"

"Erm ... A girl and a boy, I think it was. The girl - she was called Sandra, but then it was said that this is just a public version because her real name is Sun Dragon. She's supposed to be at least as

powerful as her father ..."

Watching the girl in the grass, who was listening with her eyes closed and a smile on her face, Carlos reminded himself to draw a line in time. This imaginary story - how much would be known? Would there be something known about the snake? About the flute? About the castle in Ireland?

He would find the line. Keeping his knowledge at bay was easier than fighting a terrible temptation to talk about two more children, quite unremarkable in their magical power, but very real and very close.

* * *

Harry was fifteen minutes early in Antoine's restaurant on the Rue Cape d'Antibes. He'd arrived that early on purpose, so he could play the host to Agnès. He'd do it anyway, but he preferred to have these minor details right.

There was no bar, contrary to what Agnès had said. He accepted the table that was offered to him, ordered a pastis, and said he was expecting a woman and would wait for the order. By the time Agnès arrived - she was ten minutes late - the pastis and the smell from the kitchen were making his mouth water.

"Didn't you say there was a bar?" he asked when she was sitting opposite, and after she'd ordered a martini.

"Yes, sure." Agnès pointed through the window to the other side of the street. "Over there." Seeing his expression and hearing his chuckle about this misunderstanding, she asked, "Oh, I see - you thought the bar was inside, right?"

"Yes."

"No. It didn't even cross my mind that you - it'd be quite unusual here, but you aren't from here. That'd fit an American restaurant ... Are you from America?"

"No, I'm British, and that combination isn't uncommon there, either. But I lived in the States for a while."

Agnès used the opportunity and continued the small talk by asking questions. He let it go - after all, talking about raped twelve-year-olds while the waiter wrote down their order - a large pot of mussels for each of them - wasn't the best entrée for sure. Also, she was quite good at it: she asked how it was there, rather than what he'd done in the States, and how the dining habits were in American restaurants, rather than where he'd lived.

Reminding himself of his official story, that of a Foreign Affairs agent for boring business, he could steer clear of things like Groucho and movie roles and family. Then their mussels came, and for a few minutes, the only sounds were occasional slurps, considered normal in a restaurant in which mussels with lots of sauce were the norm.

Just when he was about to start the evening's real - from his perspective - agenda, Agnès said, "Your little witch shows no intention whatsoever of leaving the school."

"Chloé?"

"Who else?" Agnès's smile froze a bit. "Or did you convert still more girls?"

"No, and no boys either. But the expression *your little witch* felt a bit misplaced in context."

Agnès flushed for an instant. "Yes, okay - anyway, she's seen with a boy all the time, except in classes, because he's not a classmate. Whether it's him or his kitten, or the entire group - the boy has a sister, and the sister has a dog, and after lunch you can find all of them in the park. The Garcia siblings ... It's really cute, except that sooner or later Chloé will follow magic's call, and I don't

think the Garcia children will be able to follow - "

In order not to laugh out loud, Harry escaped into a cough as if some white wine had gone down the wrong way.

Agnès eyed him with a trace of suspicion. "You look as if you already know the delivery date for two more boosters, because you can't stand the poor girl's misery at being separated from her friends."

"No, I don't have such a date, and it's another kind of misery why I'm here. I talked with some people about what you've told me, about the topic in general, and - well, I felt naive afterwards. But I'm wising up."

"Who did you talk to?"

The evening didn't go as expected. Interviewing Agnès wasn't quite as difficult as nailing quicksilver to the wall, but for sure she saw it as a mutual deal, as an exchange of information rather than a one-way street.

"One was a guy in the EMEC, the one who arranged things for my school position. The other was an ex-chief of police. They gave me a few tips."

"Such as?"

"For example, looking for places. If you - you need places, locations where you can feel safe, where you can be sure of not being interrupted. A building with apartments where someone else can see you in the staircase is *not* a good place," Harry said with a touch of irony in his voice.

"The gym would be a good place," said Agnès without any trace of humour.

Watching her face, he asked, "Is this more than a theoretical discussion?"

"It was no accusation toward you, if that's what you mean."

"Toward someone else?"

With a slightly angry tone, Agnès said, "You asked about good places, and I listed one, that's all. Aside from that, Sports teachers are natural prime suspects because they have an official excuse for touching girls, or students in general."

"That's all very nice - erm, disgusting, I mean - "

Harry's attempt on a joke didn't catch, and maybe it was best that way.

" - but it doesn't bring us any closer. We need something more specific."

Agnès played with her glass. After a short silence, she said, "I wasn't always at this school, Thierry. Before that, I was at a school where the students went home after classes. When I had a student where I knew for sure that he or she was the victim of sexual abuse at home, I wouldn't ask - neither myself nor anyone else - where it happened. This police-like approach is something totally new to me, and I don't like it much."

"If you're right, and if - "

"Oh, rest assured that I'm right. After a while, you develop a feeling for this characteristic pattern in the student's behaviour."

"But you don't seem ready to help me nail those bastards down. You told me enough to open my eyes to what's happening at the school - only when talking with the people I mentioned did I become aware how common this problem is, for cops anyway, but also for people in the educational

branch. And now that I'm a bit further, you hint at this and that but all you're doing is beating around the bush."

"Maybe I have no suspect."

"Maybe I don't believe you." Harry snorted. "You can still count the weeks that I've been here on less than two hands, but even so I could name a few."

"Then why do you ask me?" Agnès looked a bit hurt and a bit embarrassed. "Accusing a teacher of something like that ... you think twice before doing it, and then you think again. I don't know you. I don't know who you are. Maybe I know enough to trust you with the students and to drop you from the list of suspects, but otherwise? You fooled me once, you could fool me again. That mark on your face, for example - is it real?"

Harry didn't need to fake astonishment; he really hadn't expected this question. He rubbed his forehead. "Real enough for your taste?"

"Maybe I have to apologize again, but I guess you know what I mean. If you'll tell me how it happened, then I'll know it's real."

"I came to investigate some suicides," replied Harry with a bit of coolness in his voice. "I didn't come to tell the story of my life."

"The suicides, yes." She nodded thoughtfully. "That's another mystery."

"Huh? Are we still talking about the same topic? It's the only mystery I'm concerned about."

Agnès shook her head. "These are two different things - at least I believe they are. Sexual abuse hardly ever leads to suicides, that's my experience. And I've learned that most often the worst you can do is to make these cases public, for example by reporting them to the police."

Harry stared at her. "You mean a family where the daughter is abused by the father is better than no family at all?"

"Maybe not better than another family, but the first step would destroy the reputation. And in that process, the girl's reputation would be destroyed first ... or the boy's, for that matter." Agnès leaned forward. "So you learn to live with that, maybe with more than is reasonable, maybe you could accuse me of that. But at least it explains why for me, unexplained suicides and sexual abuse at that school are two different things."

"Maybe so." Harry came forward too, until their faces were pretty close. "But the perpetrators here, whoever they are, are no parents, and catching them won't destroy families."

He leaned back again, let the silence hang for a few seconds. "Aside from that, would you say that the suicides have nothing to do with any sexual assault?"

Agnès looked at the tablecloth. "No."

"So we agree at least on that."

After a moment, Harry started a new attempt. "Let's try a deal with a piece a time. I tell you something, you tell me something. My turn - yes, you were right, the discolouration isn't real, although you could scrub it forever."

"That's what I thought." Agnès looked up. "You were a bit too casual about it. But it looks awfully real for sure. How was it made?"

Harry laughed, briefly but genuinely. "Nice try, but first it's your turn."

"Oh - sorry, it wasn't ..." Agnès smiled to show that her unfinished remark wasn't entirely true.

"Well, to come back to your question from a moment ago - I'm not sure whether it makes sense to look for these places in the school itself. I guess you think of the teachers, or some of them, as those committing the assaults. That's only one option, and maybe not even a likely one."

Harry needed a few seconds to work through this statement, then he stared at Agnès in bewilderment bordering on horror. "But that would - that would mean something like, I don't know how else to call it - child prostitution?"

Agnès' face was expressionless. "Your turn, Thierry."

Hearing how she emphasized his name, Harry said, "Yes, you're right, that isn't my name either, but my real name doesn't matter for a moment. What's more important for me, are you trying to say that the school itself is a safe place? I mean, as long - "

"Didn't you hear? Your turn!"

"Okay, okay, I wasn't trying to flinch! I have spies among the students, and I'm quite concerned about their safety. I tried to send them off, but - erm, somehow it didn't work. Say, what's your opinion about Laurent Clerc and Gilles Picabault?"

"Two real assholes - why do you ask?"

Harry described the conversation he had with these two colleagues some days ago, and how they had hinted at small-scale business and large-scale business.

Agnès shrugged. "They're probably dirty, yes, but stop imagining strict boundaries between good teachers and bad teachers. I'm ready to believe any time that they'd mount a camera in the girls' showers and sell the pictures, but I'd consider them as borderline figures. By the way, your last revelation wasn't particularly impressive."

"Not impressive?" Harry snorted again. "Then let me impress you with a bit more information. There are two students who report to me. When I learned from you what direction to consider, my first idea was to send them home. But they've found friends here, and so they demanded I send their friends with them. I said that's impossible, I can't control other people's children, and ever since that moment I've been on tenterhooks. I don't know what to do."

Agnès smiled. "Yes, that was an armload of information." Her smile broadened. "Say, is your real name Garcia?"

"No." Harry smiled back. "But I knew Ramon Garcia well, and yes, you're on the right track otherwise."

Agnès looked disappointed. "I could have sworn they were your children."

"Ever heard of adoption?"

"Oh - yes, of course." Agnès looked satisfied. "Was that the reason why you picked Chloé to make her a witch?"

"Huh?" Harry didn't immediately follow her.

"With Carlos, I mean. He's certainly a wizard, and I'd like to know how - "

"Oh, now I see what you mean." Harry gave her a wry smile. "No, it was exactly as I told you, but Carlos saw me talking with her and decided to figure out what was going on, so it was just the other way around. And as for their magic, you know, where there's a booster, there's also a stopper."

"Well, that covers the ground a bit." Agnès grew serious. "Regarding their safety at the school - there are certainly better places, but I don't think the risk is such that they might be abducted as we

speak. It's not as simple and obvious as that."

"Yeah," said Harry, "that's what I was telling myself, for I can't send them - I mean, I have to find a solution to protect them and their friends together, and for the time being, the only possible place is at school. But then where does the danger come from?"

Agnès inhaled deeply. "I never said what I'm going to tell you now, Thierry, but I'm deeply suspicious regarding the school trip to the Parc MiraLuc."

"MiraLuc?"

"Yes. If you check around at our school for special factors, irregular things, you find a lot that has to do with their sponsorship. They sponsor a lot more than just this camp, and while I haven't got a single proof or shred of evidence, just by counting the unusual things I find that name a bit too often."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I know what you mean, and most often it's true. So you think I have to prevent them from going to that camp?"

"Ah, maybe not the camp itself. But if my gut feeling is anywhere close to the truth, then this camp has a function. Maybe something like" - Agnès' lips went thin, then opened again - "an exhibition of fresh meat."

* * *

Cho listened to her husband's report, beseeching herself not to explode in blind rage. It wouldn't help. It would damage the delicate plant of their revitalized relationship. It would totally ignore the fact that the man opposite her wasn't a small boy with a fate-ridden imagination, rather a skillful fighter and caring father. Maybe not the greatest plotter the world had ever seen, which was a joke because he'd launched the greatest plot ever, but he belonged to the frontline for sure; his plans were average at best.

Still, it was hard not to scream at him.

Cho poured herself another brandy, to grab something other than Harry's throat, and to fight the bitter fury in her own throat with another surge of hotness. She knew she shouldn't. She was aware of a booze consumption that needed harsh cutting, painfully aware that she could afford *not a single pound* more, yes, all true, but ...

Harry pushed his own balloon glass in her direction. "For me too, please. Stone-cold sober I can't find a solution, so if it doesn't help at least it won't hurt either."

She glared at him. "You mean there's still some doubt about what to do?"

He didn't answer immediately, instead nodded toward his glass, then looked at the bottle still in her hand. It was a clever move to take the heat off her remark, although she wasn't quite sure that he'd made it fully on purpose. She poured him a generous amount.

He tossed the golden liquid around once and took a sip, yet didn't hold it in his mouth longer than a second before swallowing it down. "I'm here to tell you everything I know," he said, "and to give you the opportunity to be in Brest first thing tomorrow morning and take our children with you. I certainly won't blame you for that - "

"No, not you," she hissed, "but them."

"Exactly. They won't forgive us ever for leaving their friends in the cold. My best idea so far is to contact the parents of Esmeralda's roommates, tell them what's going on there, and organize a solution in which they become witches first and are transferred to another school afterwards - Beauxbatons, or the Goblin school, or whatever. That is, if I can get the booster for that."

She felt a bit surprised. This solution was more reasonable than she had expected from him. "It would jeopardize most of your results, wouldn't it?"

"Depends on how you look at it. It should be possible for Ron to stop what's going on there, although we have not a single shred of evidence yet. But the assailants would get away with it, yes."

She couldn't resist. "If you hadn't had the crazy idea to use our own children as your student spies there, the problem wouldn't exist. Then you could run your undercover operation without any trouble."

"Maybe so." He took another sip.

"You mean it isn't true what I said?"

He shrugged. "I'm not good at 'ifs. 'If we had bacon, we could make bacon and eggs, if we had eggs.' That about summarizes my own notion of hypothetical statements. But even if it's true, and even if I had gotten the same results in the time so far, there's a point beyond which it wouldn't help either."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, assume that our own children were safely away. Assume that whatever friends they'd gathered were safely away too. Then I could operate freely, and then what? Sooner or later, I'd know other students well enough that the thought of them being the victims of some assault would be almost as unbearable as the - "

"Your old problem," she interrupted him. "You always wanted to save the world, while I aimed at more modest goals - saving my own ass, and those of my family, for example. That's what I'm going to do tomorrow."

She waited for his response, maybe for his disappointment or for a remark like *You can't do that!* so she could smile triumphantly and prove how wrong he was. Unfortunately, her own poker face wasn't world-class either, and of course Harry had his special senses that made it awfully difficult to really surprise him.

He watched her face. "By doing what?"

"By visiting your boss and leaving no doubt whatsoever what a terrible mistake it was to take any decision about Carlos or Esmeralda without asking me. When I'm done with him, he'll watch over their safety himself, if he thinks it's necessary. That'll burn them as bait for sure, and maybe that's a setback in your plot, but, well, you can't have everything."

Harry's eyes had widened for a moment. Then he'd looked pleased, a clear indicator that he hadn't thought of this possibility, and also that he had his priorities straight or else the damage to the bait wasn't as bad as she'd thought.

But now he looked serious again. "He's a mean bastard. I underestimated him twice, and I'm not going to do it a third time. Threatening him with lawsuits and other legal means might not be as effective as you'd expect."

"Don't you worry." Cho grinned maliciously. "I'm going to play the vindictive Chinese bitch. Brest is a harbour, as I'll tell him, and where there's a harbour there are Chinese, people who know how to hurt someone. I'll tell him that I'm just as uncivilized as he thinks of me. Trust me, I'll make an impression on that Monsieur Fresnel."

Now Harry grinned. "I do. And I'll make Ray get a move on these bracelets. I want one for each of our children's friends too."

"Are you going to tell them who you are?"

"No, not really, but I'll tell them that I'm Carlos and Esmeralda's father, or adoptive father. From then on, at least I can say hello to Bolo." Harry smiled ruefully. "That's really a factor I didn't consider in advance - a dog and its wagging tail."

Cho said, "My conversation with your headmaster, that's only the first step. There's a MABEL seminar not too far from that park near the Loire. I'll get in touch with them and look for background information. Depending on what they tell me, I might start some more investigation." She gave a beaming smile. "See, I'm going to help from the outside."

Harry's excitement was still limited. "This seminar, where is it?"

"The Chateau Saumur. It's a big castle, as I remember, dwarfing our little hole in the ground here but otherwise similar, that's why I wasn't inclined to spend much time there - "

They exchanged a knowing smile, leaving it to anybody's guess whether it was for her calling Carron Lough a *hole in the ground* or for her unbalanced interests regarding the various MABEL seminars.

" - but they're locals, they should know a bit more. Then there's someone else I might ask for help, but I don't know if what I have in mind's possible, so let me check it first before I tell you more."

"For the school or for the camp?"

"The camp. Inside the school you're on your own."

He nodded, and the way he looked told her that he'd guessed who she would ask - an old friend for her, a sister in spirit for Harry, and an animagus who could be a falcon in the day and an owl at night to watch their children at camp. Almyra. If she found the time -

"Are you going to ask Paul?" interrupted Harry her thoughts.

"No, that's a line I leave to you to follow."

He nodded, then smiled at her. "The longer I think about your plan with Fresnel, the more I like it. For me there's little doubt that he's dirty, at least knows what's going on at his school. I'm looking forward to hearing how it goes."

Cho for herself had been more looking forward to this evening, more exactly to this night, which was planned as another step to get rid of the deficit they'd piled up over the past months in their lovemaking. They slept together, yes, but - was it the topic of misused children? Probably so, more than the brandy too much; at any rate they didn't push it, and found each other awake the next morning after having fallen asleep before either one had mustered the energy to get things going.

Harry apparated off after the better half of a shower and the lesser half of a breakfast; he had an early English class. Cho took her time at the breakfast table, then in her dressing room to select the proper pieces for the impression she wanted to make - as much businesslike as Oriental, and definitely feminine, not this androgynous crap some famous women in high ranks of business or politics had favoured, stuff just good for making a dyke envious. She came up with a black skirt, a light blue blouse of oriental cut, and a feather-light jacket of darker blue, both blouse and jacket made of silk, probably the only acceptable fabric for a wealthy Chinese.

Her bag, in contrast, emphasized her connection to Western business. It was black leather, square, thin, a shape that might as well host the latest laptop computer.

Armed with these accessories, she apparated to downtown Brest, to the same car leasing company she'd visited the last time. Half an hour later, the most expensive limousine money could lease in this city went uphill, a uniformed chauffeur behind the wheel. He looked even Chinese - to the

careless French eye, that was; while his true nationality was Korean.

Entering the school secretary's office, she came across the first barrier, implemented to scare off less determined people. The woman asked, "Do you have an appointment with the headmaster?"

"I have a complaint."

"Well, yes, even so, you need an appointment with - "

"He's in, isn't he?" Cho's head jerked toward the door she knew only from Harry's descriptions.

"Then would you please have the decency to make an appointment for me in, say, two minutes?"

Jeannette Clouzot, a name Cho also knew only from Harry's reports because the school didn't bother with name tags at the door or somewhere else, made a last attempt to regain some dignity. "About which topic would you like to have the appointment with Monsieur le Directeur - "

"About my complaint, what else? I didn't come here to discuss the autumn collection with him."

The temperature in Cho's voice had dropped quite a few degrees, enough to let the secretary give up any attempt to discipline this unpleasant visitor with bureaucratic obstacles. She stood up and, after a short knock at the door, disappeared in the adjacent room.

It struck Cho as weird. She knew about the intercom from Harry's description, she could see it on the woman's desk, so why hadn't it been used to announce her visit? Did the woman need a closed door to tell her boss about "that bloody bitch?"

Less than a minute later, the door opened again, and the woman reappeared. Judging from how she looked, she seemed tempted to march just to her place, leaving the door ajar, and to snarl, "Your turn." But she just stepped aside and stood there waiting for Cho to enter - maybe she'd realized just in time that the visitor would have left the door equally ajar.

The headmaster was all smile and sovereign serenity. "My dear Madam Chang, please sit down. Jeannette said that you have a complaint? I'm sure we can resolve any misunderstanding quickly. What is it that has raised your displeasure?"

Cho remembered Harry's warning not to be fooled by the man's looks, or by his words. She had been expectant to see Fresnel - with her own experience in negotiations at corporate level, she wouldn't fall easily for the mistake of underestimating her opponent, and she was much better than Harry in this kind of fight. Listening to every nuance in the well-oiled machinery of the headmaster's words, she registered the arrogance, the hidden contempt for her - some student's mother, fussing about something entirely meaningless, from the perspective you had when sitting behind that large desk.

She looked at the visitor's chair, of which Harry had warned her as well. "You cannot possibly mean this thing," she said, then took the high back rest and tilted it forward until she felt the chair's weight pulling rather than pushing. Then she let go.

The chair, slowly in the first inches then accelerating, fell to the rug-covered floor with a soft thud.

"I'll get you another chair," promised Fresnel, after having spent one second to glance at the toppled-over chair and another one to stare at his visitor. He bent over what looked like the other end of the intercom.

"No you won't. You claimed parental authority over Esmeralda Garcia - without even asking me. Then you did the same with Carlos Garcia, this time without even bothering to feign an official assignment. Or was it that miserable woman you had for the task?"

Cho didn't look at the headmaster while speaking. She pretended to inspect the rows of books in the

shelves that covered the entire wall. Her voice sounded quiet and a bit monotonous, though matter-of-fact, avoiding lightness and sarcasm altogether.

"That must have been a misunderstanding. We just tried to avoid unnecessary hassle for matters of minor importance, in particular since you, when you delivered the children here, pointed out that they're your wards and that the administrative tasks should be - er, minimized."

Cho turned around to look at Fresnel.

"You need something, or someone, to show you your limits, Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel. Minimized - even if what you understood was true - isn't annihilated. I'm just wondering which way to go to make the clarification stick with you."

Fresnel seemed to think the time was right for a bit heavy artillery from his side. "I would appreciate," he said, "if you could temper your wild accusations and your hazy threats down to a more reasonable style of conversation. After all, no harm has been done yet - "

"You declared permission for them to join this camp."

"Er, yes, that must have been Madame Laval, but then, that's just the same as with all the other children for whom the parents gave permission, or will in the days to come. So what's the problem with that?"

"You made me lose face."

A moment ago, Cho had resumed her examination of the magnificent woodwork that held the books. Now she turned again to face the headmaster.

"I could call my lawyer, to make hell break loose over you and turn this chair you're sitting in as upside down as the one you wanted me to squeeze in." A contemptuous smile crept onto her face. "But that man is bound by Western conventions as much as you and the entire system that runs this school, so in the end, after a lot of loud noise, the result would be nil ..."

Fresnel's face, which had come to full alert when she had talked about losing face a moment ago, revealed enough satisfaction to tell her that this estimation was realistic.

"... that's why I feel more drawn to the second alternative. There are several Chinese triads represented here in Brest, which is inevitable in any major harbour around the world. These people have a much clearer view of what it means to lose face. More importantly, they have a well established system of measures, depending on the severity of the case." Cho's smile thinned. "I can assure you that a visit from their messengers would stick in your memory dramatically better than that from my lawyer. Painfully so, I might add."

"I know you're upset," said Fresnel, "but you can't possibly mean what you're saying."

Due to her performance as an admirer of book shelves, Cho had only the sound of his voice for measuring the impact she'd made so far, lacking the direct control of an observed expression. She'd made a dent in his self-assured armour, yes, though a minor one.

She stared at him. "You're right. What I'll do instead is send the triads first and my lawyer afterwards. At that time, he'll have your full attention."

The headmaster tried a polite chuckle. "He'll have it even so, Madame Chang. Probably even better than that with these unreasonable threats."

"Threats?" Her voice had grown contemptuous. "I wasn't threatening you, Monsieur Fresnel. I was merely making an announcement - a necessary part of the Chinese tradition of punishments. Goodbye."

She had turned, had made several steps toward the door, when he called, "Please, Madame Chang, just one more minute."

She stopped and turned. "Yes?"

He rose from behind his desk, then came forward to the front of the large piece to sit halfway on the desk's corner, a picture of well-rehearsed nonchalance, but a man driven out of his nest nonetheless.

"Fascinating as this particular Chinese tradition might be, I'm not overly interested in learning its details, while you gave me reason to believe that you're serious."

She just stood waiting.

"So let me ask you - is there a way to handle this privately? To repair the damage and the loss of face without involving outsiders?"

She made her voice sound hesitant. "There certainly is, which is one of the advantages in a well-established system of traditions and rituals. Unfortunately, my experience with Western people - especially institution representatives - is that they just aren't ready to believe without proof. They say so, but - "

"Please excuse my interrupting you, but it's part of my job to believe things without being given proof. To show you my seriousness, let me just call Madame Laval and - "

Driven by Cho's slight movement with a raised hand, the headmaster had stopped himself. Now he just stood at attention to what she was going to say.

"This would be the typical Western method," she said, "which means it would damage things even worse. Calling this woman would do nothing but solidify my own loss of face and make yours public."

"Oh." Suddenly he looked curious. "I wasn't aware of that. So what would be the proper way to keep this - ah, misfortune to a minimum?"

She told him. It was a chain reaction down the hierarchy: he would inform Madame Laval about a misunderstanding due to a letter delayed by the incompetent French postal services. This woman would inform the girl that the claimed parental authority was a mistake and never had really existed, and that the extension to include Carlos had been the result of a confusion in the paperwork.

"Should they ask," finished Cho, "she may tell them that the misunderstanding was resolved when my letter arrived in which I give my consent to them participating in the camp weekend."

"You mean you're not telling them directly yourself?" asked Fresnel.

He had recovered quickly, if there had been any such demand at all. Between the lines, his question was asking for the channels through which Cho had gotten wind of the developments.

"I haven't been in contact with the children since I delivered them here," she answered. "My sources of information are not recognizable as such. This will make sure that they perform their duty as smoothly and efficiently as before."

She gave a thin smile. "Don't go searching for them. That would be another breach of protocol, an indicator that your ability to believe without proof is insufficient."

Yes, he'd gotten the message, and he was chewing on it as he escorted her to the door.

He wouldn't chew for long, she thought while walking toward the car plus chauffeur who waited outside the old fence. Maybe she should send someone a few days from now - a smiling, bowing, impenetrable Chinese face with a message that was meaningless by itself, just to remind Fresnel of belief without proof. Not a letter, a present ... A Chinese dagger of considerable value, with a blade

to cut snowflakes in half.

Yes, that would be proof enough to seal Fresnel's belief, enough to send him into a burning hall to save Carlos and Esmeralda. And not even dream of setting them up in any way common to less protected students.

Maybe this wasn't exactly what Harry had planned when putting them at this school. But these hadn't ever been Cho's goals, and besides, Harry had lost control of the situation. If he'd ever held it.

17 - Gathering Help

Ray Purcell had finally delivered. Harry came to Ray's old laboratory in order to collect the bracelets as well as the new phony that could receive their calls. Arriving there, he found something he hadn't been prepared for.

But first he just stood there, admiring the bracelets with their smooth surfaces. Slightly more than an inch wide, with a dark-golden plating that could be anything from metal, over plastic, to factory-grown crystals with a lacquer coating, they had delicately rounded edges all over so that it was literally impossible to get hurt when wearing them around the ankles.

Ray showed him how to remove segments from a bracelet. This would be necessary when fitting the bracelets to legs of different sizes. It was the same principle as used for wristwatches, except that, where the watch would have been, a larger segment showed a dark-coloured rectangle. Pressing this part would raise the alarm.

"And here's the receiver for them," said the old engineer, a chuckling in his throat. "Who'd ever thought to see you walking around with a porty? Not me for sure."

"What?"

When Ray just looked blank, seemingly unable to understand his question, Harry examined the replacement for his old phony with more attention. There was a new row of small buttons, labeled [1] to [6] from left to right. Staring at them, he suddenly became aware what Ray had done, and why it had taken much longer than he'd expected in his ignorance.

"These are portkey buttons, right?"

"Yes."

"One for each of the six bracelets."

"Sure, what else?" Ray's voice sounded patient and slightly careful, as if trying to avoid a more drastic answer to a question that could only be considered unnecessary, if not downright stupid.

"And they'll carry me to where the respective bracelet is, at that moment? Is that right?"

"Yes, Harry. Wasn't that what you had in mind?"

A dynamic portkey with transmitter function, neatly packed into a device which otherwise served as an ordinary phony. Pressing the dark rectangle on a bracelet would raise the alarm on his phony, and he could respond by pressing the equally numbered button, thus apparating himself to the actual location of the bracelet's bearer. And all he'd imagined was a kind of bellboard ...

Harry looked up. "No, I didn't have that in mind, but only because I didn't think it through. Your solution solves the problem I hadn't properly taken into account."

"Well, yes, after all, how would you know where to find the people wearing the pieces?"

When the idea with the bracelets had sprung into his mind, Harry had imagined an area no larger than the school grounds in Brest, although even this restricted space was too large by far to find someone quickly. Ray, on the other hand, hadn't known any detail about Harry's whereabouts, had only grasped the idea, and had built a solution that worked no matter which distance had to be crossed in the apparition jump.

Fully awake now from his sloppy thinking, Harry said, "Unless I missed a recent step in portkey development, this principle is a bit more advanced than anything that's currently available for money. Am I right?"

"Yeah, that's about right. But first I want to hear your report of how it worked, before this jewelry's ready for any kind of public market." Ray smiled. "You know, what's technically feasible isn't always desirable."

"Do they work all the time or only after raising alarm?"

"Only when activated, that means when the buttons are down. Actually, the alarm is just an activation report, or deactivation report, in a way."

Harry made the same test Ray had probably made before: he put the six bracelets in six corners of the laboratory and the adjacent floors, after having activated them. Then, pressing the six buttons in rapid succession, he zoomed through the building like a magic rubber ball.

After collecting the pieces again, he thanked the man who had taught him his first portkey lessons twenty years ago, and who would not accept more reward for the bracelets than a free ticket for a Dragonfly concert. Then he apparated to Hogwarts, in search for a conversation with Hermione. For what he had in mind, she was the only one qualified.

He had to wait a little while, then Hermione called him in as if he was the next patient in the waiting room. Well, maybe he was, although it wasn't a cold he suffered from.

In her office, sitting in a chair that was comfortable enough for a longer talk, he said, "I'd planned to come for something to ask you. But then, a while ago, I realized that there's something else to ask you. Maybe I should invite you to the Three Broomsticks, only I want to be sure as hell about who's listening - more exactly, that nobody else is listening."

"I feel just fine in my own office, as you can imagine." Hermione leaned back with an expectant look in her face. "And this mysterious announcement is certainly more appealing than the stuff they sell there. Besides, we ain't resourceless here." She pointed in the general direction of some cabinets.

"Well, maybe later. For the next minutes, I prefer to be as sober as the devil after Lord's Supper."

"That sounds even more thrilling. What's up?"

"It's about sexual assault on children."

Without surprise, Harry watched the almost complete absence of surprise on Hermione's side. Then he brought her up to date on the latest developments since his last conversation with her. To illustrate his explanations and to let her admire good craftsmanship, he placed the six bracelets on her desk, one beside the other.

"Don't they look just wonderful?" he asked.

"They surely do. And who'll be the six bearers, exactly?"

"Esmeralda and her three roommates. Carlos, and Chloé."

Hermione smiled. "Quite a collection."

"Yeah, quite a collection." Harry snorted. "Except I mean something else, but I'll come to that in a second. Basically I had in mind to ask you how much I should reveal to those girls, and then, after you gave me the only answer I can think of, which is, 'The full truth,' I wanted to ask you how to talk to girls of that age about sexual assault. I'm going to ask you that, but only as the number two on my agenda."

"So what's the shooting star of question that made it to the front lobe of your brain?"

Harry wasn't sure whether there was such a thing as a front lobe in the human brain, but then, his

mood offered little space for discussing surgeons' jokes.

"That question is, how come I fucked up so completely?"

"Ah, yes." Hermione's eyebrows had arched for a short moment. "And what's the answer?"

"Huh? I wanted to hear it from you!"

"Is that right? And I was so sure this was meant as a rhetorical question. Strange, isn't it, how you're sometimes fooled into an imagination that looks perfectly reasonable, while at closer inspection it's utter nonsense."

He stared at her. "Hermione, I was serious. Please stop making fun of me."

"Do I?" She smiled lightly. "But what if I claim that this remark has already been the first half of my answer?"

"Then I'd say it isn't true. Your voice sounds different when you're lecturing someone. And you don't stop after just one sentence."

"Oh."

When Hermione didn't say more, when the silence hanging in the office started to grow unpleasant, Harry rehearsed the last remarks in his mind. This done, he sighed.

"All right, I crowned my performance with this messed-up entrance to our discussion. I'll apologize in due time, but, please, for now, just tell me in simple words and without surprising change of rhetorics where I took the wrong turn, or turns."

A smile crawled back on Hermione's face. "Well, maybe it really wasn't my best idea to sugarcoat the truth so suddenly. But it's still the first half of my answer. In more plain words, it goes like, get the fuck down from your high horse and come in touch with reality. Is that simple enough?"

He swallowed. "Yes."

"You're spoilt, Harry. You fought your fights at a time when fate used to serve the dangers on a silver tray, with compliments from a well-known foe. You were brilliant, and for me there's no doubt - if you'll ever come as far as knowing who is your enemy, you'll be brilliant again. But unfortunately they decided to ignore the knight in his shiny armour and resorted to simply sidestepping his gesticulating with the magic sword."

Hermione let her words hang in the air. After a short pause, she added in a voice as though reading from a diagnostic report, "You're not patient enough. You're not diligent enough, and as soon as you see an opportunity to play the magnificent hero, you fall for it."

"Do I?"

"Sure. A similarly spoiled eleven-year-old has a tantrum about an administrative decision, and you come hurrying to put her at that school. Another eleven-year-old is found sobbing in a staircase, and you have nothing better to do than play the hero for that girl. With these six bracelets, you're going to extend the circle of admirers to a total of six."

He swallowed again. "Does it have any relevance that the story with Chloé at least brought me in touch with Agnès? That without her information, I still might sense around in the mist?"

"It certainly has relevance for your task, but not for what you asked me to point out."

"And is there any alternative to handing out the bracelets to the six kids and tell them where to watch out, and what for?"

"Probably not."

"Then ... sorry, I didn't get the point yet."

Sharper than before, and with more impatience in her voice, Hermione said, "It's your attitude. Your expectation. Because I didn't switch on the sonorous charm, you weren't listening to what I said. Because the big black sex offender didn't send you a postcard that says, 'Come and get me,' you come to the conclusion that you fucked up completely. Harry, you're an unsufferable boast-it-all."

Hermione smiled at these words. Even so, he knew that she meant what she'd said.

Worse, probably she was right.

"You fucked up in just one decision, and that was to get your kids with you. Okay, they brought you in touch with some other students there, but from a professional point of view, they're counterproductive."

"Counterproductive?"

"Yes, sure. You're working your ass off to protect them while instead you should hang around, encouraging people to perform some sexual assaults in your presence."

"Uargh."

"See what I mean? If you can't stand the heat, why did you walk into the kitchen in first place?"

Harry nodded to indicate how he was asking that himself. "Maybe I didn't know how hot it would be," he said after a few seconds.

"How right you are. You thought, for someone who fought Voldemort, anything else is easy stuff, just good to shake off boredom."

Watching Hermione's smile, three parts sympathy with five parts reproach, Harry nodded again. "At least true enough to stop me from calling it wrong."

Hermione leaned back. "As I said, Harry, often enough it's just a matter of the right attitude, rather than a totally different approach. But you really should try and socialize more with the assholes there."

"I'll try. But for the time being, I'm stuck with protecting a bunch of six students. And that brings us back to my initial question number one, unless you know another method."

Hermione shook her head. "No. Tell them what's up, and try not to appear as the knight in shining armour."

"And how?"

"You mean, how not to appear as a hero?" She grinned. "Just don't tell them who you are."

He didn't need her grin to know that for once, Hermione had managed to make total fun of him by telling the truth. Swallowing his pride, he replied, "No, I mean how to tell them what's up?"

Serious again, Hermione said, "Girls of eleven going twelve know about sexual assault, Harry, don't you worry about that. There's no need to draw a diagram. Give them the general direction, and while doing that, make sure not to wisecrack, not to joke, and not to sweet-talk." She showed another smile, this time a placatory one. "I guess you're very good at that, Harry - I mean, it's so much simpler for you not to fall in this lecturing tone, and to stop after not more than two sentences or so."

He grinned ruefully. "I asked for it, and now I get it three-fold."

"Definitely so. As you know, I go for opportunities." Hermione started to laugh.

It took him a second or two before he could join her laughter. This remark had hinted at certain events for which the term *sexual assault* was certainly wrong but not totally inadequate, and one of those events had involved Harry, as well as some drugs.

For a while, they talked about other things - not exactly small talk, but not touching the old stories either. Then he left her, with another thanks and with the hint that there was still someone else in Hogwarts he wanted to visit.

Some minutes later, he sat in the office of Almyra Lupin, his sister in spirit. They weren't alone; Almyra's husband Remus, Harry's old teacher, was present as well. Harry wasn't sure whether he'd preferred to first talk with Almyra alone, but the question was pointless anyway, so he dropped it quickly.

"Did Cho get in touch with you?" he asked.

Almyra and Remus looked at each other, turned back to Harry. "No, why?"

"Then maybe I should wait and let her do the first step, but since I'm here anyway, and since this story includes a lot of background information, it might be justified when I do the opening."

Almyra said, "It certainly does, because after this mysterious remark, there might be a strangling accident if you don't tell us in a hurry."

"Uh-oh." He grinned. "Not so long ago, I followed a similar prompting, also with the argument that there was no other choice, and - "

"Harry ..." Almyra, head ducked, her hands clawed like for a strangling, approached him slowly and threateningly, while Remus didn't show any intention of coming to help.

"Okay, okay - well, the headline is, would you like to play all your animagus shapes for an extended weekend?"

"All?" asked Almyra incredulously.

"Yes, all - wolf, falcon, eagle, owl, what you can muster. There's a camp with tents, it's at the Loire ..."

* * *

Esmeralda closed the door of her dormitory and headed toward the toilets. She intended to phone her father from inside a stall to be summoned for the daily report.

She had nothing to report, maybe except for the ever increasing difficulty of leaving her friends for the few minutes during which she pretended to sit on a toilet seat. The other girls believed her less from one day to the next.

Strange, somehow - unless you'd explain it with the fact that also once per day, she *really* had to visit the toilets.

Checking along the row of stalls, she saw that she was alone in the room. That made it a lot simpler. She went into the last stall, got her phony out, and pressed the short-key button that sent the signal to her father.

The response was instantaneous, however not as expected. Rather than being sucked through the void into his apartment, she heard her father's muffled voice saying, "Esmeralda? You alone?"

"Yes," she whispered back.

"Go to the door and check the corridor. Tell me when it's empty."

She did as ordered. The phony tightly to her mouth, she whispered, "It's empty."

Next instant, her father stood in front of her, just beyond arm's reach. He sent her a smile, then he made a few quick steps to the staircase. This way, as she realized, he was out of sight from the corridor.

He waved at her to come closer.

She suppressed the urge for tiptoeing; it would have looked pretty weird if someone had opened a door just at this moment. Even so, she didn't think that her steps looked normal.

He grabbed her and gave her something like a short hug. "Are all of your friends in your dormitory?" he asked.

"Er - yes."

"Good. Go back and tell them they'll see an unexpected visitor in a moment. Tell them they shouldn't be louder than usual, so we can talk just there. Okay?"

"Did you get the - "

A gentle hand on her mouth told her to shut up, and her father's expression told her she would hear it in a moment.

She nodded and walked back.

Having entered the room and about to close the door, she heard Odile's voice in her back saying, "Hey, that's been a quick one, eh? Kind of a quickie, one might say."

Natalie and Dominique, not looking up, shared a giggle.

"I don't know what you're talking about," replied Esmeralda with dignity in her voice and gratitude for the circumstances in her mind. "But I know that we'll have a visitor in a few moments, who wants to tell you something. He said we shouldn't talk louder than normal while he's here."

"A visitor ... Who? ... Telling us? And you know already?"

She didn't answer, instead just looked very pleased and very expectant at the same time.

Natalie glanced to the corner where Bolo was lying. "This visitor, he'll be in trouble the moment he comes through the door. Didn't you tell him that?"

It was Esmeralda's own turn to giggle, actually with her own head as lowered as those of the other two girls a moment earlier.

There was a knock at the door.

Before any of the girls could respond, the door opened and Esmeralda's father came in. He wore his usual sports dress and looked exactly like Monsieur le Professeur Pri'chard.

Bolo's low growl, which had started from the knocking at the door, died and gave way to a single whimpering. Then the German shepherd shot forward to reach the teacher, who had knelt down, obviously fully aware of what to expect. Before the eyes of the four girls, three of them staring with their mouths agape, man and dog were busy to cuddle together and to issue sounds of reunion that weren't too different.

Odile said, "Hey, Prof, I'd say you know that dog, don't you?"

Dominique said, "Prof, for an instant, I thought you'd be red meat. That's no dog to joke with."

"No, he's not, as I know quite well. Hello, girls, good evening. Hello, Natalie, if you don't close your mouth quickly, you're going to swallow a fly."

Natalie, not caring to take offence, said, "Prof, I know a bit about dogs."

"That's good for you."

"Yes, and from what I can see here, I know that you and Bolo, you've been living together."

"Really?" The teacher grinned. "You mean, it can't be the result of me bribing him with tidbits?"

"No, he'd behave quite differently."

Bolo, meanwhile, had stretched on the floor, all four legs in the air, exposing his belly while his front paws looked as if folded around Harry's forearm.

Harry smiled. "You've got a sharp eye for such details. That's good, too, and in a moment, I'm going to tell you why." He stood up and reached the table where the four girls were sitting, to grab one of the remaining two chairs and sit down himself.

Natalie said, "But then, that'd mean that you and Esmeralda have been living together too, Prof."

Harry nodded.

Odile was the first to try the jump from a formal to a personal level. "Are you her father, Prof?"

"Esmeralda's father was Ramon Garcia. He was a good friend of mine."

"Oh."

Esmeralda watched the quick glances from Odile as well as from the other girls to check her reaction on this supposed stepping into the greasepot. But since she couldn't help but beaming from ear to ear, they relaxed at once and turned back to the Sports teacher, ready to drill more question holes.

He stopped them with his next remarks. While caressing the German shepherd, who had followed him, he said, "Let me explain to you what this is all about, rather than answering your quiz, because that'd take more time than we have. Actually, not all parts of that story are as funny as it looks."

Once more, Esmeralda felt the girls' scrutinizing stare; apparently they tried to get a clue from her own expression as to how to respond to this announcement. Unfortunately, and despite the seriousness of the matter, she could barely restrain herself from laughing out loud.

Her father turned to Odile. "But you were right. Esmeralda and I, we're daughter and father by adoption."

"Well, then ... I knew it! ... Oh that's wy," were the replies of the other three girls, while Esmeralda calmed down to a broad grin.

Next moment, the grin faded, because her father said, "I made a big mistake. I brought them to this school, Esmeralda and Carlos, and now I have to face the consequences. That's why am here."

Another moment passed in which the other three girls nodded to each other at registering that at least this part of her story was true.

Esmeralda, meanwhile, sobered up quickly because her father's expression was unreadable - maybe except for the slight satisfaction to have stuffed her grin down her throat, and the greater satisfaction from cuddling Bolo.

"I came for a reason," continued Harry when the girls' attention was back on him. "There are strange things happening at this school, and my job was to investigate them in the role of a teacher. For some reason, my two children got the bee up their backs that they had to join me in this task, as students with magical handicaps. Somehow, I fell for the stupid idea that this was actually a clever

move, and supported them. So we sent them through a cure that made them lose their magic, if only temporarily, and registered them as students here."

"Esmeralda can do magic?"

Odile had asked the question, and the look she'd given Esmeralda before turning back to Esmeralda's father showed a barely hidden trace of hostility.

"Not currently. Hear me to the end, then you can ask questions."

When the girls nodded, Harry continued, "I found out what's wrong at this school. Besides a bunch of teachers not worth the name, because they don't give a damn for their students' care, there's obviously a lot of maltreatment and misuse, what's legally called *sexual assault*. I don't know details yet, but I know that it's true and that it applies to girls and boys alike."

The smiles were gone.

Into the silence, Harry said, "Before coming here, I talked with a friend of mine, a woman my age and also a teacher, about how to explain that to girls like you. She said you'd know what I mean, and there would be no need to go into details. Was she right?"

Nods from silent heads with flushed cheeks gave the answers. Esmeralda herself didn't score much differently.

"Not that I'd know details yet, maybe aside from everybody telling me that normally, with such a suspicion, a Sports teacher would be a prime suspect."

With satisfaction, Esmeralda noticed the quick smiles from the other girls, telling her father that he was beyond suspicion.

"So as you might easily imagine, I was in a hurry to get my two children off this school, so I'd know them safe and could concentrate on my original task. Well, as if that was so simple! To make a longer conversation short, they demanded of me to get their friends off that school, too. In Esmeralda's case, the friends are you - Dominique, Natalie, Odile."

With more satisfaction, Esmeralda noticed that the not so hidden hostility had given way to joyful bafflement.

"Problem is, I don't have the authority, because I'm not your parents. I think I'll get in touch with them within the next days or weeks, but in the meantime we need a system of protection. Probably the best protection is that you know what to be aware of, and that the four of you always stick together, with Bolo in addition. But even so, you need a method to call for help at once, and I'm here to provide you with this method."

Watched by eight eyes growing bigger and bigger, Esmeralda's father shifted the sleeve of his light sports jacket upward, to reveal four strange looking bracelets. He unclipped one after the other and put it on the table.

"Here - one for each of you. Wear them around the ankles, so they're out of sight."

"But not in - " Odile stopped herself, to slap her own forehead in the next second. "Okay, forget it, I didn't say anything."

Harry didn't smile. "Even if I'm your Sports teacher, there are lots of other students who shouldn't ask questions. It's mandatory to keep a low profile, not to appear conspicuous, not to cause attention. If everything goes well, I can promise you that all of you'll be witches. Now's the time to ask questions; only someone who's informed knows how to keep a secret."

Esmeralda thought that the first questions would refer to the shiny bracelets, which somehow looked too good to be kept hidden. But she had judged from her own priorities and her own state of information.

Dominique was the quickest. "How can you make us witches, Prof? How can you be sure?"

"It has to do with a potion," said Harry. "It works guaranteed, I know that it works, and this is a topic at which you just have to take my word for it. The moment I'm out this door, you'll ask Esmeralda a million more questions, but this topic is off limits. Can we agree on that?"

Hesitant nods.

"You'll learn more in due time, but not now. Esmeralda knows more, and she can tell you that you can trust my guarantee, but that's all."

Esmeralda knew what he meant. His guarantee wasn't really based on the booster from Groucho Biochemicals; his guarantee had the name Aram'chee and was the High Priestess. She knew it, he trusted her, and pride filled her heart for that. As she'd understood it, he also didn't want to reveal his true identity. Not yet. So she'd be Esmeralda Chang, for the time being.

The next questions really were about the bracelets. Harry explained how they worked, what happened when the black rectangles were pressed down, and what it meant to keep them downpressed.

At this occasion, he said, "Test them now, while I'm here. Once I'm out of this room, the alarm system is activated. That simply means, if you press the button, I'll appear as quickly as I can, wherever you are."

Then they asked who had sent him, and he said he had a friend who worked for the European school administration and who had worried about this school. They wanted to know whether he was alone, and he said of course not, there were people for his support, but he was the only teacher with this task, so if someone else would claim some authority, that'd be a fake and maybe one of these attempts he wanted to uncover and for sure a reason to notify him.

"How can we notify you, Prof?" asked Natalie. "I mean, just telling you but not as an alarm call?"

"Esmeralda's my agent in your group," was Harry's answer. "She has a phony to call me." He looked at her. "By the way, our daily meetings are cancelled. We'll meet only on demand."

That was the moment when Esmeralda had to explain how they'd organized these meetings, thereby finally revealing the true reason for these weird and untimely visits of the washing room or whatever. It was enormously relieving to have this burden off her shoulders, in particular after the insinuations just before this meeting had started, although she had no intention to report those remarks to her father.

After some more questions, her father reminded them again to stay together. Then he told Bolo to be a good boy and guard the girls. Then he said goodbye, and just when Esmeralda thought he would disappear, he bent down to her, kissed her on the cheek and said, "I love you, sweetie."

While these words, spoken loud enough for the other girls to hear, still echoed in her mind, he made a few quick steps and was out of the door. The only sound that could be heard from outside told her that he'd apparated right from the spot in the corridor.

Seeing the stares of the other three on her, she said, "He didn't apparate from inside because of Bolo. He can't stand it if people just evaporate."

"Oh, really? What a delicate dog." Odile snorted. "Esmeralda, the orphan, eh? Orphan, my ass."

Then, in high falsetto, she chirped, *"I love you, sweetie'."*

Natalie looked nervous, but Esmeralda just smiled, knowing full well that this was Odile's way of commenting on something for which the word 'cool' just wouldn't fit.

And right, Odile returned the smile. "So you didn't want to leave without us, eh?"

"No."

"That's straight of you. How did they make you lose your magic?"

Esmeralda could avoid this little trap easily. "With a drink. We got very high fever, Carlos and I, for several days, and then it was gone. That was also the official reason for us to leave the other school."

"Where was it?"

"In England."

None of the other girls knew details about British schools, and none of them wanted to know. "How did it start? Did you just tell your father you wanted to join?"

"No, it was because ..." Esmeralda realized that, at least for this evening, the usual roles in their group were switched. She would have to answer a zillion questions, and this one alone, which could only be answered by describing a crazy system of houses, would take half an hour at the minimum.

Not that she felt any complaint. Far from it.

* * *

Carlos closed the door behind him and turned to follow Chloé down the staircase. It was funny; he'd never before walked the staircase in the Cayenne building, because so far he'd reached the building only via summoning, to leave via portkey, and all he'd seen of the building had been his father's apartment from inside.

He'd just left that apartment, together with Chloé, after a remarkable conversation.

Expecting to meet his sister, when being summoned by his father, he'd met Chloé instead. His father had given both of them bracelets, to be worn around the ankles, as alarm signal system. Then his father had blown most of their cover, except for his real name and any closer detail on the Great Plot, at the same time signaling to Carlos that the latter wasn't to be disclosed under any circumstances and that the former was preferred to be kept a secret ... for a while.

At the same time, he'd made it clear that there were still lots of details worth a question from Chloé and an answer from Carlos, reason enough to send them off together and on a very conventional route: out the door, down the staircase, and into the evening.

In the course of his revelations, Harry had pointed out that this school was dangerous ground, the playfield of evil-minded people, so they should guard each other without making a show of it.

Having reached the outside, Chloé grabbed Carlos' hand and started walking as if she had a clear destination, which she probably had - a place to squeeze him.

However, after a few steps, apparently she couldn't restrain herself any longer and blurted out, "You must have been laughing your butt off, haven't you?"

"No, why?"

"About me and my concerns for your lack of magic. I feel so stupid."

He said, "You shouldn't. Your worries were accurate, from what you knew. But then, remember how I tried to tell you there'd be a way?"

"Yes, and that's your good luck, that you didn't tease me. Although, I'm so pleased to know about your magic, I couldn't be mad at you, not now, anyway."

For a few steps, it looked as though Chloé would start the joy-jumping walk of a six-year-old, feeling secured at the hand of an older brother.

Careful not to start laughing, which could have happened easily due to his own relief and joy, Carlos said, "My magic isn't back yet. It will, eventually, but for now, you still could spell me."

"Yes I could, couldn't I? Except I don't know how."

"Yes, and that's my good luck."

They laughed, much more than this little joke quotation deserved. They were heading toward the park. It had been quite a while since the last time that Carlos was walking hand in hand with a girl, and at earlier occasions, the girl had invariably been his sister Esmeralda.

Reaching the park, they looked for a good place to sit and talk. There were benches, but that would mean to expose themselves to some passing teacher - it was quite late actually; they should have been in their houses at this time of the day becoming night.

Sitting in the grass was no option either; the evening dew had rendered the lawn wet and cold. It crossed Carlos' mind that the camp weekend that was due soon might turn out as something similarly unpleasant, only longer.

Then he knew. "Come under the bushes, the ground's dry under them."

Chloé looked sceptical. "Are you a boy scout?"

But she followed anyway, and moments later, they were sitting reasonably dry, with their backs to some twigs that started growing leaves just above their heads.

"No, I'm not," he said, in answer to her half-forgotten question. "But when I was younger, I used to hide in the bushes, to watch people pass by. I always thought all children would do that."

Chloé shrugged. "Maybe, if there are bushes around. In Nohanent, there aren't any. Too dry, or the ground's too rocky, I don't know."

She glanced up from drawing lines on the ground without leaving any traces. "Are there many bushes, where you come from?"

She couldn't care less for bushes, so much was clear.

"I told you the truth," he said after a second. "We live in Ireland, and there are lots of bushes. But it rains a lot, too, and then the bushes are no shelter either. Before that, we lived in California. There are bushes too, but only in the gardens of rich people."

"Was your father rich?"

"No, I don't think so. We had enough, though, but rich is something else. In California, you can see rich people, and the places they live, that's how I know that we weren't."

"And in Ireland?"

Carlos hesitated. He didn't think Chloé meant the country, not really. Neither by nature nor by education was he inclined to boast about his adoptive parents' wealth, even less so toward a girl with parents as poor as the Broussards. It might have looked like something to balance for the recent difference in magical abilities, but only to the outside.

Eventually, he said, "There aren't many people rich there. My mother told me that in the past it was

one of the poorest countries around. She said today it's a lot better, with employment. She ... she knows, because she has a factory there."

"Really? What for?"

"Stuff." Carlos extracted his phony, held it up for a moment. "Like this one."

"Cool. We can't afford stuff like that. Well, it's not so bad, really, because I wouldn't know who to call anyway because no one of my friends has a phone either."

Chloé's voice sounded light, conversational.

Carlos, not trusting this apparent ease of mind about poverty, kept silent.

"The only thing that was bad was my father's mood, sometimes. When he came back after having tried to get some job, you better stayed off for a while. He'd shout at me, and if I didn't watch out and be careful for what I said I could get me a smack one."

Carlos stared, suppressing a gasp. Never having suffered similar symptoms, he knew nonetheless that other children were less lucky. But that didn't help much, he couldn't really imagine how it was to live with such parents.

"Afterwards, he'd kind of make a joke about it and say that he didn't mean it. It wasn't that bad, though; he never gave me a second blow and he didn't use things other than his hands, so ... I guess the only time when I really was embarrassed about our family not having money was with the wand. But since I got the wand from the Prof - er, I mean, your father" - Chloé giggled about her confusion with the terms - "that doesn't bother me any longer. I know that it's second-hand, but I don't care. For me it's as good as new."

For others too, thought Carlos. Aloud, he said, "Say, would you want to have a second-hand phony? I guess I could get one from the factory."

"That's sweet of you, but no thanks. My father told me that the expensive part isn't the phone but the payments afterwards."

Carlos laughed. "I heard about that. But he was talking about Muggle phones, cellular phones. A phony is a magical phone, and there isn't anything to pay to anyone, once you own it."

Chloé eyed him with some expression he couldn't see well in the darkness, but her voice made clear that it was suspicion. "Is that really true?"

"Yes it is." Carlos hurried to prove his knowledge about the reasons, little as it was. "Because it's magic, they don't need satellites and other stuff, that's why. And no real operator and no books, you can just ask the magic to find someone for you."

"Oh." After a few seconds, a thoughtful Chloé asked, "But then, why would anyone ever need another phony? Except when it's broken."

"They don't break!" replied Carlos with emphasis, indignant about this implicit offence toward his mother's factory, and this moment of outrage made him careless. "Why would anyone ever need another wand? Except when it's broken."

It could have been a rhetorical masterpiece of argument. Unfortunately, it backfired instantly.

Rather than agreeing to this logic, Chloé said, "Yes, come to think of it, you're right ... But wands can break."

"Yes."

"Then maybe mine was broken and then repaired, and the owner didn't want ... But I couldn't detect any sign of repair on it."

Carlos, fully aware of a story about his Uncle Ron, who'd broken his wand and never again had been able to perform any reasonable spell with that piece, kept silent, wishing desperately this silence of his had started two remarks earlier.

Chloé pulled her wand out of its poach. "Can't see anything ... *Lumos!*"

A glow like from a small light bulb illuminated their spot.

Chloé giggled. "Look there! With a glowing wand you can inspect anything save for the wand itself. If you had your magic back and your wand at hand, we could have a closer look at - "

A harsh light shot into their faces. A voice from the path called, "Hey, what's this? Who are you? What are you doing there?"

Carlos tried to shield his eyes, and to have a look who that might be. All he could recognize were two legs in trousers - a man, but he'd known that already from the voice.

At his side, meanwhile, Chloé was in a hurry to switch off the wand and store it in its poach.

"You deaf, or what? Come out!"

Carlos' mind was racing. Most likely this was a teacher, or some park guard, only that the voice sounded more rude than authoritative, more hateful than curious, and his father's warning grew louder in Carlos' mind with every second.

The light came closer, the legs too. An arm appeared in the beam, and next moment the hand at that arm grabbed Carlos' leg and pulled him out of the bush cover.

Before he had time for any reaction, the hand let go to drop his leg - only to grab his ear and to pull sharply. "I'll give you deaf - get up!"

He groaned in pain, barely avoiding a louder yelp. The water shot into his eyes - not from crying, an involuntary reaction of his body. He was in a great haste to follow the sharp pull and to support it with his own muscles.

When he stood upright, the hand at his ear pinched even harder, finally raising the yelp from Carlos's mouth.

The hand let go.

About to rub his tortured ear, Carlos stopped in mid movement. The figure had made a step toward the bush. Now it grabbed another leg, which belonged to Chloé, and pulled again.

In the beam, Carlos could see how the leg grew to a longer leg, how a skirt was moving upward. In a second, Chloé's knickers would become visible, but still worse, a second later, that hand would drop the exposed leg and go for Chloé's ear.

Carlos hand flew from his forgotten ear to the bracelet, his fingers touching, finding the rectangle ... the only rough touch on an otherwise smooth surface, that's how his father had shown them ... pressing the button.

The hand let go of Chloé's leg, which dropped to the ground. But the hand didn't go for the ear, as Carlos had expected. Instead, it took the flashlight from the other hand, put it at something on the man's clothes, maybe a loop, at any rate so that the the man had both hands free and still light.

"Deaf, huh? Then let's see whether you're mute too."

The two arms went down. The two hands grabbed one of Chloé's legs each, pulling them up again.

The beam wasn't properly directed; even so, Carlos saw how the girl's knickers came into view. In

the semidarkness, they looked white with dark patterns.

Ladybirds, crossed it Carlos' mind. He could remember such panties from his sister - white with red ladybirds painted all over.

The man braced himself, lifted Chloé down a bit. It looked as though he was trying to hold the girl's full weight with one arm, so the other would come free, whether to take the flashlight or for some other action.

His right arm let go. His left arm couldn't hold the weight, but the moment Chloé's arms touched the ground, they started to give herself support, and suddenly the sculpture of man and dangling girl was steady.

Before the free arm could manage anything, the group had grown by another shadow, another man. This one stood behind the man with the flashlight and raised both his arms - from Carlos' position, in the scarce light, it looked as if he was going for the other man's ears, something Carlos wasn't ready to believe. Then he saw that the newcomer's hands went for the spot behind the ears, at the throat.

A gasp came from the first man. His arms slackened, let go of Chloé, who keeled over with the second half of a somersault, landing in the soft grass and getting up pretty quickly.

Maybe it was just because the grass was as wet and cold as before. But in Carlos' eyes, it looked as if Chloé had been in a hurry to make room for the first man's body, which was coming down, falling in the grass like the girl a moment earlier, except that it didn't show another move, once it had completed its slow fall.

An instant later, the flashlight was off. Next moment, a new light illuminated the scene - a light Carlos knew well, because it came from a powerful wizard's wand, a wand that belonged to his father, who was the shadow man.

Harry lowered his wand, obviously to illuminate his own face, thus making sure that both Carlos and Chloé knew his identity. Then he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," replied Carlos. "Only my ear hurts."

Chloé had come up. "I'm okay too," she said with a trembling voice. "He didn't even pull me at the ears ..." Her voice broke, and her body took over the trembling. A single, dry sob came out of her throat.

Carlos, by the time he reached her, found himself beaten by his father for the fraction of a second. But he was the one to hold her, to hug her, his father's arms resting on both of them, sending a light wave of calming nature.

Quickly, in broken sentences, Carlos told his father what had happened since the flashlight had blinded their eyes for the first time, only minutes earlier, although they already felt like hours.

When Chloé had calmed sufficiently so that she no longer was trembling, Harry let go of them and knelt down besides the unconscious man.

Carlos watched him. "What did you do to him?"

"Blocked the blood support to his brain. He'll be unconscious for still some more minutes, but not long."

"Who is it?"

"A teacher. Jacques is his first name ... In a moment, I'll remember his family name. Teaches Math,

I think, and one of the environmental courses - could be Biology - "

"Monsieur Deray?" It came from Chloé.

"Yes, that's him. Jacques Deray. I knew him as a mean old bastard, but I wouldn't have expected him to do something like that."

Carlos felt excited. His father saying *mean old bastard*, in his own presence and still more that of Chloé, was proof that Harry had to be in a hell of a mood.

"He's one of our teachers," said Chloé. "Just those courses - Math and Biology. *And* he's one of the two teachers who'll escort us to the camp. I can't ..."

She didn't continue, and Carlos hugged her stronger to choke the new fit of trembling in her body.

Harry stood up and reached them with a step.

"Don't you worry," he said with a voice that seemed hardly able to keep a growl at bay. "He won't be in classes tomorrow, and he won't escort you to the camp. I'm going to make sure of that. And now it's time for both of you to find back into your dormitories."

He turned to Carlos. "Son, you'll escort her back to her door, okay?"

"Yes, Dad." Carlos nodded toward the figure on the ground. "What are you going to do with him?"

"I don't know yet, and basically that's none of your business. But let me tell you so much - I'll use an Obliviatu charm, so he won't remember anything of what happened here."

"An Obliviatu ... That's cool." Despite his words, Carlos felt a kind of disappointment, but also some relief to hear that his father wouldn't make this man disappear by whichever method. He knew that his father had been mad enough for any response to the attack against his son and his son's girlfriend - at least a moment earlier.

"Cool, yes, and now get going."

A gentle push from his father sent Carlos forward, and with him Chloé.

They shuffled in the direction of the St.-Nazaire building, taking their time, steadying their breath, their pulse, their nerves. Carlos' right arm rested on Chloé's shoulders; his other hand had grabbed her left arm to hold it against his chest.

Close to the building, she asked, "How's your ear?"

"Still a bit sensitive, and I guess I won't be able to lie on that side, but it doesn't hurt any longer. And you?"

"I'm better. He didn't hurt me at all, actually, but I was so scared hanging there ... Stupid, isn't it?"

"No, it's not. I know what you mean. I saw it."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"You saved us. You alarmed your father. I should have done it, still under the bush."

"No - then, it still looked pretty normal, like a teacher catching students in the park."

He could feel her embarrassment, and knew that it wasn't because she hadn't sent the alarm. It had to do with him having seen her, and his last remark couldn't be counted as a masterpiece either, because *catching students* meant older students, in couples, and the park was the preferred area for hunter and prey.

Almost at the entrance to the St-Nazaire building, desperate to find a remark that would relax the tension, he decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Are these ladybirds?"

"What??"

"The patterns on - on your pants. I couldn't really see them, and it didn't really look like ladybirds, but I remembered them from something Esmeralda wore, years ago. Er, you know, at such a moment, you think funny thoughts."

She stared at him for a long moment.

Then, with a quick smile as if telling him that she'd understood his attempt, she said, "Not ladybirds. Snoopies - and if you ever mention them again, I'll kill you."

With a quick movement, her cheek touched his own. Then she hurried inside.

He stood there until the sounds of her steps in the staircase had died away. Then, strolling toward the Toulon building, he wondered what was so scandalous about Snoopy prints on undies, realizing that this was another question he couldn't ask anyone close in space or time.

* * *

The next morning, when Chloé walked toward the classroom in which they would have Math, she tensed inwardly so much that for a few seconds she nearly felt unable to move on. Then she saw a teacher she didn't know, while the expected teacher was nowhere seen.

The unknown teacher introduced himself as Monsieur Donlon, Math teacher for the parallel classes, who would handle their class after stepping in at short notice, and only by giving them tasks because he had his own class at the same time.

It took till lunch, and after lunch, before Chloé had the full story as it went through the school. Monsieur Deray, for reasons nobody knew but everybody put in connection to his oncoming task as one of the camp teachers, had climbed a tree in the park - in the darkness, mind, and quite unsuccessfully so because apparently he slipped and crashed through the branches from high above. The respective tree, and the traces in the shape of freshly cut twigs, were the destination of many pilgrimages during the lunch break.

Exchanging glances with Carlos, Chloé knew that their shared experience and better knowledge would be sealed for quite a while, if not forever.

Because Monsieur Deray had encountered a severe concussion of the head, so he couldn't remember anything. He'd also encountered fractures in his leg and his pelvis. They would take months to heal, if not longer, and for a teacher his age, that probably meant early retirement.

His replacement as escort teacher for the camp wasn't known yet.

Chloé said to Carlos, "I hope it'll be your father."

Don't call him 'your father'," replied Carlos in a low-voiced hiss. "Call him Prof! ... And you're wrong, I hope they'll nominate someone else."

"Why?"

"Because he'll be there anyway, but hidden; we won't see him, though. But if he's the official escort, he's too busy with other things."

"Oh."

Chloé realized once more that she wasn't up to speed in terms of spying and undercover work. But she'd never claimed to be, and secretly, she hoped that this time would be over soon.

Of course, always assuming that she and Carlos would stick together. Only she couldn't seriously expect this, with him being at home in Ireland and herself in Nohanent near Clermont-Ferrand.

18 - Preparations

Having his lunch tray loaded, Harry walked to the table where he could see Laurent Clerc and Gilles Picabault sitting opposite each other. He steered to the head seat, so that he would have one of them to each side. Reaching the table, he deposited his tray and sat down.

"Hello," he said.

Laurent, the older one, stared at him with undisguised hostility. "Was this the only empty seat you could find?"

"Actually no, but the last time we talked, you had a few suggestions I'd like to discuss a bit more."

Hostility made room for unwillingness.

"You picked a bad time for that," replied Laurent after a moment's hesitation. "And besides, if you think here's a good place for discussions of that kind, you're still more stupid than you look."

It had taken Harry some willpower to go searching for this conversation, but Hermione's remarks were a strong motivation. Now that he'd managed, the result was somewhat surprising. He had expected a bit more enthusiasm from the other side.

Still more difficult was the question how to respond to Laurent's rude rebuke. Appearing submissive didn't look promising. In addition, Harry had a more general problem with this approach: he didn't feel submissive at all, especially not after having taken care of Jacques Deray.

Something as simple as, 'Fuck yourself' might be the proper reply, except that, in Harry's eyes, this answer felt as submissive as before, only with more noise.

That left just one approach, which had the advantage to match the fake stories in his personal file.

"It might not be the best start for a business partnership to break your nose, but you seem to be begging for it." He arched his eyebrows. "But then, maybe I didn't notice something of importance."

While Laurent again took his time, Gilles quickly glanced from one to the other. He looked concerned.

It was meaningless. Gilles was a follower, a weakling, not even a useful adjutant, for all Harry could sense. He remembered his suspicion from the previous encounter, that Gilles' affair with Jeannette gave them access to official files, and wondered if Gilles still had another purpose in the circles to which Harry would count the older one.

"Don't be so touchy," Laurent said eventually. "You want some business? Okay, but as I said, right now's a bad time. Wait for me getting in touch with you."

"Why's it a bad time now?"

Impatience flashed up in Laurent's face. But apparently, Harry's remark in combination with the reports in his personal file, no doubt fully known to these two cronies, had tempered his style.

"Because of Jacques' accident," he said, "and the mess he's left behind."

Harry managed a look of which he hoped it passed for incredulous. "If an old fool climbing trees in the night has a saying in that business, I might reconsider my plans, or look elsewhere."

"Looking elsewhere, yeah, that'll do you a great deal of good," said Gilles importantly.

Laurent sent his junior partner a murderous stare, then turned to Harry.

"Jacques has contacts, that was his job. And he'd been scheduled for that trip of the new classes. Things need to be rearranged."

"Well," replied Harry, "it shouldn't be the most difficult task to find someone else to escort the kids on that trip, should it? And with the - "

"Gilles was right in one regard," interrupted Laurent. "You don't know zilch about which strings to pull. So don't push it, okay?" He gave a smile that was probably meant conciliatory but just looked filthy. "The market's not going to disappear within the next days, early retirement or not."

Harry nodded his agreement and took a few bites.

Then, by way of small talk, he said, "Still I wonder what Jacques' been doing in that tree. It's such a weird accident."

"Accident, my ass." Laurent lowered his voice. "He's been set up."

"You think so?"

"I can tell you for a given that Jacques didn't show the habit of climbing trees, not in the night and not in full daylight either. And the concussion he's supposed to have - about the only proof of that is his failure at remembering anything, but that can be achieved with something else, is all I'm saying."

"You mean an Obliviate?"

Laurent showed another smile, thin but no doubt appreciative. "Quite a handy tool, isn't it? But who'd thought that old Jacques would be beaten with his own - "

He stopped, for a fleeting instant looking like Gilles after his remark a moment ago. "Anyway, that's just rumour what I said."

It took Harry a few seconds to have a guess why Laurent, midway through his own remark, had lost courage and suddenly started backpedaling. That short moment came to his benefit since he showed neither widened eyes nor signs of disgust when the older teacher sent him a quick glance to check his reaction.

"A set-up needs someone to be set up and someone to set up," Harry said after another bite, keeping his voice non-committal.

"Jacques had contacts, as I said. He used them well, and he made sure there wasn't a kind of monopoly."

Laurent grabbed his tray, about to rise. "Keep that in mind, and show a little patience while things are being reorganized. Train your troupe."

Harry watched the unalike couple leave. His mining had yielded two nuggets, both of them unexpected in their particular shape and size. They gave him something to mull over, to evaluate their consequences.

By the end of his lunch, he knew that he'd struck gold rather than pyrite. He also knew that he needed the help of someone who'd done similar tasks for him in the past.

After getting out of the Brest building, in safe distance from any accidental audience, he took his phony out and pressed the 'Call' button.

"Paul Sillitoe, please."

There was a moment of silence, then the still-familiar voice said, "Hello Harry, long no hear. How are you?"

"Urgent, as always. Hello, Paul. I need some research."

"What else." Paul chuckled. "Would yesterday still be in time?"

"Not quite. Has this been a yes?"

"This has been a joke, but of course wasted on you. What kind of research?"

"Not over the phone. Where can we meet, and when?"

"Well, I was about ready for my lunch. You know, I never deny an invitation." Paul had another chuckle.

"I just finished my own, but you can chew while listening, and I can talk. Where are you?"

"Still in my old office."

"Just a second."

Paul's office was in London. Harry apparated from where he stood, for once not caring about anyone watching him disappear.

A moment later, he said hello to Paul personally, and after a few more minutes, they were sitting in an Indian restaurant, Paul chewing and wiping his eyes from the spicy food, and Harry talking.

Paul Sillitoe was a freelance researcher with a journalist's background. Harry had met him in his sixth year at Hogwarts, when Paul had been working for the Daily Prophet in a team with Deborah Beckett, who became Deborah Black a while later. Harry hired Paul for the first time in his seventh year, to look for Voldemort's whereabouts, and Paul had proved his qualities as someone who could find meaning in a maze of facts.

Harry sized his story so that it came to an end around the time Paul finished his *Bombay Plate*. He'd left out only a few details of personal interest when he finished, "There are two things about which I want you to collect all information you can get."

"Well, the first is an easy guess. It's MiraLuc, right?"

"Yes. You might need support from local French people for that. Cho said there's a MABEL seminar close, in Saumur - er, no, in the Chateau Saumur, anyway, you might get in touch with her for that, unless you prefer your own contacts."

"I'll use everything," replied Paul. "Is it bad if the people behind get wind of our interest?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know if it's dangerous to stir up some dirt - provided there is some dirt."

"There is, trust my word. That remark about a monopoly was more informative than the guy had in mind, probably, and that company - I mean, certain people in that company - would be the natural candidates."

Paul started to unwrap a toothpick. "But I still can't see your second topic for which you want me to research."

"No? I thought it was obvious," replied Harry. "It's the Obliviatius."

Paul looked uncomprehending. "What about it? Isn't it common knowledge?"

"Sure - as common as the principles of current and volt and watt, or those of a computer."

Paul grinned. "I've got my lesson about bits and bytes. But yes, I see what you mean. Still, as far as I know, the most interesting aspect is still unchanged."

It was Harry's turn to look blank. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought you were interested in detecting traces of an Obliviate in some students. That's as impossible as ten years ago. You can interview people and let them tell about a faked or hidden memory, and with a lie detector, you can see that there's something wrong although the people look perfectly calm. But the questions must be quite specific for that."

"I didn't know that. But" - Harry shook his head - "that's not my primary goal, to prove the application of some Obliviates."

"Then what else?"

"Somehow it doesn't fit together. It took me until hearing the remarks from that guy to notice the likelihood of an Obliviate as a tool in the - in the process of committing the crimes. But - "

Paul interrupted him. "Come on, Harry, give me a break! That accident with the guy crashing through a tree, that's a signature I can recognize even from the distance."

"You think so?"

Paul grinned humourlessly. "It was a faked accident, and I know who faked it because, if the other side had had their fingers in that play, the guy would be dead."

The grin faded. "Sexual assault can take place at many levels, Harry. Social levels, I mean. It's a game played by white trash - or coloured trash, for that matter - and also by top ranks. And if top ranks are involved, a killing's as likely as if we'd talk about the cocaine business."

"Whatever. But to come back to Obliviates, my mental track always stops at the same spot," said Harry. "Imagine someone raping a child, and afterwards cursing it with an Obliviatum. So far, so bad. The child is back in school and doesn't remember anything. Does the scenario sound okay to you?"

"I could imagine some physical pain," said Paul with a grimace, "but I'm no physiologist. So let's assume okay."

"Then why did some of them commit suicide?"

"Hmmm ..."

Harry watched the visual signs of Paul scanning his memory for something that might shed a light on this mystery, a process Harry himself had gone through often enough, not getting any wiser.

Nor did Paul.

"Harry," he said after a while, "if you can drain that pool of pederasts, I'm sure as hell that the suicides will be a problem of the past, but at least I know what you're after. Okay, I'll check around."

"About your payment - "

Harry didn't come further because Paul interrupted him.

"Not this time, Harry. Expenses yes, of course, and I might call you back to ask for your agreement to a hefty bribe, but my own part - let it be my contribution to this particular kind of drainage."

"Unless it turns out a long-runner for some reason; then we'll address the issue again ... Thank you, Paul."

It struck Harry how people refused to accept money in this context. Like Mr Ollivander before, and Harry hadn't even told Paul about the second-hand wands.

He wondered how it was among the people opposite in the plot, those who - with some exceptions - were still faceless. Which of them were driven by simple greed to the dirtiest business he could imagine, and which of them were unaware of the money, taken or earned, by their desires?

In press articles, headlines would use the term *inhuman* to describe such desires. This was a cruel joke; no other species on earth raped their sexually immature offsprings in whichever conceivable way. Such behaviour was a specialty of mankind, monstrously human.

* * *

Gabriel watched as Ireen, Dragonfly's manager, came walking toward the low stage. For the first time since she'd arrived in the same room to announce their Sweden tour, he felt more expectation than anxiousness at the thought of what news she might have this time. Pleasure was about to replace pressure when looking forward to the events ahead, and this change had to do with their rehearsals and what could be heard there.

Like, a growing number of songs sung. Like, a shrinking amount of passages played badly, or not at all because the player just gave up, saying, "Oh, shit!" It was still a hell of work to do, but they were coming round the bend. Just barely so, but they would; Gabriel could feel it.

They'd stopped playing a moment ago. Ireen entering the room just after they'd finished a song was hardly a coincidence. She'd been waiting outside for the break, had played her game of *not being there* to prevent Gabriel from sensing her. The correct name for this technique was *yaho*, the art of hiding your intentions, which meant something like emptying your mind of any purpose until it was time to strike. *Yaho* originated in Japan, as did Ireen's family. For Gabriel, this parallel was no coincidence either.

Ireen had found the door open. A little while ago, they'd stopped locking it during their rehearsals. Their playing, and the girls' singing, could gather a few students as audience any time, but those were polite people, just eager to listen, or maybe even simpler: to have a rest from hard learning with background music. When asked, they would leave at once to let Dragonfly have their privacy for discussions. Or arguments.

Time to ask them now. Gabriel stepped to the edge of the stage. "Hey folks, let's have a break, okay? If you hear us playing again, you'll know that the break's over."

A smile, a wave, and a nod from the three figures who'd been sitting near the exit, while they stood up good-naturedly to file out and let them alone.

A fourth figure who'd been sitting not quite as far off the stage showed no intention to leave, instead came up to join the group of the others. This was okay; anything else would have been a reason to investigate, because the figure was Benoît, their newest acquisition, so to speak.

Benoît's presence was the result of some gentle pressure from Frédéric. When the keyboard player had joined them and started attending their rehearsals, suddenly Benoît, Frédéric's friend and Héloïse's slave and part-time boyfriend, was the only one left out of the group of four. Then Frédéric had come and reported that Benoît would be ready to work as a roadie. But, as the name indicated, a roadie made only sense on the road, that meant while on tour. What to do with a roadie during rehearsals?

The answer was: let him do sound checks, to listen and to judge the audio impression from the mixing in the amplifiers. Benoît was no Desmond, but he might grow to the task that kept him busy in the meantime, happily so near Héloïse.

Héloïse's excitement was about as overwhelming as that of Sandra during Frédéric's first session. One difference, though - Sandra gradually turned friendlier while Héloïse could fall back to her snappish responses any time. It was the Veela privilege, as Michel had explained; anyone falling in love with a Veela did so at his own risk, and no mercy be granted if it wasn't mutual at full scale.

He'd explained that to Gabriel, not to Benoît. Even so, Gabriel doubted that it would have made any difference.

"You sound great," said Ireen, having reached them. "You know, I'm not the expert to tell you how much you've improved in the last five days, or where, and what still needs practising. But I can tell you something that matters, and that is, you sound attractive. You make people want to listen to you."

The others looked pleased. Gabriel beamed.

This was Ireen's artistry: to give them the feeling of being unique, incredible, the band everybody had been waiting for. She would do it anyway, as Gabriel knew for sure, and still he took her words for real, and somehow they were, or would be soon.

"I'm here to coordinate some arrangements with you," she said.

As if she'd cast a gathering spell, the Dragonfly members left their instruments, or put them down before forming a semicircle in front of Ireen. Only Frédéric stayed on his seat, simply because Ireen used the keyboard in place of a table to put down her papers and shuffle through them, so he was already as close as he could go.

Seeing the others hurrying over, Gabriel was reminded of a scene he'd watched at the Delacour farm, on a weekend he'd spent together with Michel, following an invitation of his friend's grandparents. There was a yard behind the barn with chicken moving everywhere. You could walk through and shy them off your path or chase them for fun; it would raise a short complaint of outraged cackle, then the scene would fall quiet again. But in the late afternoon, when the stable boy appeared with a bucket dangling from his arm, the same chicken would come running from all directions, anxious to come close, pushing each other but too excited to start a peckfight, waiting the short moment until the food was ladled out of the bucket and spread on the ground.

Ireen said, "The promoters want to know what reservations they have to make regarding hotel rooms. I told them that we'll arrive Friday afternoon and that we'll need the rooms till Saturday after the second concert. Normally this would mean that the rooms are booked till Sunday morning, but for some reason they'd like to know whether we'll really stay overnight from Saturday to Sunday. So that's one of the open questions."

Some Dragonfly members looked at each other, while some others did just the opposite - they desperately avoided meeting certain eyes.

To get things going, Gabriel said tentatively, "Do we need hotel rooms at all?"

It earned him angry looks from several of his teammates. Before they found the the words - or the courage - to complain, Ireen took care of that.

"Yes, we do," she said to Gabriel. "I know that you and your sister could summon all of us over, and the luggage too, but we need a little bit of presence there. To some degree, we have to play this according to conventional rules."

"Conventional?"

"Muggle rules. If you have one concert in the evening and another one the next afternoon, you stay overnight; it's as simple as that. In the evening, the local press has the opportunity to ask you some questions, and of course they expect to be invited to a drink or five at the bar.

"That's how it's played in general, and for Swedish local press, the drinks are still more important because you won't believe what they take for a single drink in Scandinavian bars. Actually the same's true for food, but all of that's on the promotor's expense, and they consider these exorbitant prices normal."

Ireen scanned the faces looking at her. "So what about the second night?"

When nobody answered at first, she said, "After the second concert, you're free, so that would give you the opportunity for some sightseeing. You can think it over, and if someone's homesick, returning home earlier shouldn't be a problem, but I'll claim the rooms till Sunday morning, to be at the safe side."

Moira said, "I wonder what my Dad's going to say when he hears about that. More to the point, I wonder whether I'm allowed at all to stay overnight."

Gabriel was hardly surprised to hear about such concerns. Moira was the youngest - of course with the exception of himself and Michel, but their parents wouldn't be worried about two nights in a Swedish hotel room.

Ireen said, "That man can be helped. We can offer him a hotel room for himself, so he can be around." She smiled at Moira. "You're under age, that's why the promoters won't even blink at hearing that we need another room for some parents - "

"As if I wanted my father there," muttered Moira.

"Ask him," replied Ireen, "and tell me. So far I came to fourteen rooms when counting all people ..."

Fourteen! For an instant, it felt like a blow in Gabriel's mind to hear that Dragonfly had so many people to its name. Eight band members, plus Ireen and Desmond, then Rebecca, and finally Benoît, Matthew, and Tobin as their roadies. But why -

"... which is a trick number," added Ireen with a grin, "because I counted Desmond and myself for two rooms just in order to have a spare room if the need arises."

"Hotel room math," said Héloïse to no one in particular, "doesn't necessarily follow the rules of algebra ... Says my Mum; I'm just quoting her."

"What a clever Mum of yours." Ireen held her expression forcibly neutral. "I'm your band manager, that's all; my duty ends in the hotel lobby ... Oh, right, the promoters wanted to know how much security people we need. I said we'll need the normal quota during the concerts, but that's all. We aren't famous enough to need security in the hotel."

Frédéric chuckled. "Well, you never know. Fans, stalkers, trophy hunters - "

"Let them come," said Sandra with some menace in her voice, "and we'll let them go. When we're done with them, that is."

Frédéric chuckled more, but stopped abruptly when Sandra sent him a glare.

"That's pretty unlikely," said Gabriel. "But otherwise, Sandy's right; we can take care of ourselves in such a case."

Ireen closed her file and took it from the keyboard. "Okay, then. Make up your mind about the Saturday evenings, and" - she turned to Moira - "you ask your father whether he wants to join us. Anything else?"

Caitlin said, "My family wants to come to one concert. We agreed that Stockholm would be best; by then we'll have more experience, and the city should be the most attractive of all five." She turned to Moira. "I could ask them to give your Dad a call; maybe that's all we need to let your Dad calm down."

"Yes, please, that'd be great." Moira looked hopeful.

Ireen had opened her file once more to write a line or two. Now she closed it again.

"All right, folks, that's it from my side. Keep playing; the future looks bright for all of us."

Some laughter followed her while she walked toward the exit, waving a last time without looking

back.

Gabriel hadn't laughed, had only smiled. True, the remark had been another one of Ireen's encouragement lines, but wasn't she right? Nobody would call Jonkoeping the center of the world - or any of the other cities, including Stockholm - but success stories could start anywhere. Some decades ago, a band had arrived from Sweden to conquer the world of popular music.

Gabriel felt driven by curiosity and a sense of adventure more than by a longing for fame or money. Something had started, and he was going to see where it might end.

He noticed how his sister was staring at Frédéric, apparently lost in thought. She could do it without the risk of being caught because Frédéric had his back to her, was staring at the keys in front of him, his mind similarly adrift, as far as Gabriel could judge.

Indeed, something had started. Some other people might also be looking forward, although with their minds set to different goals.

* * *

Cho watched as the waiter fixed her dish. Grilled fish and rice, and a green salad. She wouldn't object grilled fish and rice seven days a week; it reminded her of the time before her parents had moved to England. Only the salad didn't fit to the picture, but this enhancement of the Western cuisine was welcome.

It was lunchtime - for the locals, including the man sitting opposite her, who was served now by the waiter. For herself, running on European time and therefore being ahead by eight hours, it was dinnertime.

"Enjoy your meal, madam, sir." The waiter gave them a short but pleased smile that signaled satisfaction at a perfect moment, with magnificent guests and excellent food on a table in the best spot of the restaurant, then he left them alone.

Cho smiled at Reuben Timball. "He doesn't sound like a well-oiled machine any longer. He sounds human, at a very personal level. Great work!"

The resort manager chuckled briefly. "Thanks, but that's a honour I have to share. You see, the simple truth is, they really *like* having you as a guest for lunch, still more so for dinner."

She ate a few bites, then said, "I won't be around for a little while. Maybe just for a few days, I don't know yet, but most likely it'll take a bit longer. I didn't look forward to it, but it's nothing I can leave to anyone else."

"I'm sorry to hear that, in particular since you don't seem to enjoy it."

Checking his face, she saw that the man she liked had disappeared behind a professional mask of politeness, as if temporarily hidden behind a cloud. It was certainly not uncommon among hotel managers, but she suspected that something in her own words had caused him to shield his true emotions.

After a moment of recollecting what she'd said, she felt certain that she knew.

"You think I'm a case of business deprivation, right? You think I need a shot of million dollar deal negotiations, that I'm one of those who believe the world will come tumbling down if they don't take control all the time?"

"Do I?" But the sparkling in his eyes was answer enough.

"Wrong. Maybe not in general, but in this case for sure. It has nothing to do with business. I'm going to visit another MABEL resort, but only because they're in the right place and because they might be able to help. My husband has messed up, and I have to come for rescue."

"Really?"

Again she examined his face. What could easily have been confused for the listener's normal reaction, for the rhetorical equivalent of *Tell me more, as much and as fast as you can*, had come suspiciously close to the question of true disbelief. And in that case, another suspicion followed in the wake of the first because her husband, according to what she'd told Reuben, was a former movie star who had found a taste in raising their children but now was facing his mid-life crisis, including two bare misses in being cuckolded - altogether not the figure you'd doubt messing up.

"Yes he did, thoroughly so. He manoeuvred himself into a trap from which there's no safe escape, and now his only chance is to have someone like me making sure that the trap's teeth don't bite him when they snap shut."

Reuben laughed pleasedly. "What a wonderful picture! I just can see him before my eyes, his leg in mid-step aimed right between the claws, and now slow motion kicks in while you come hurrying to file away at the teeth."

He laughed more. "Must be super slow motion, actually, because you're still sitting here, not showing untidy haste."

Despite herself, Cho felt addicted from Reuben's laughing. "You're making fun of me, okay, but you have no idea what you're joking about."

He grew serious, except for a little smile not leaving his face. "I'm sorry, my dear Cho, but you have no idea of exactly how much I know what I'm joking about."

She stared at him, her fork with the next bite temporarily forgotten.

"Several times already, I was looking for a good opportunity to tell you, but there wasn't any, and so far, the need to let you know wasn't exactly desperate. But now - it would be dishonest to let you rant about your husband with me sitting there and pretending to be ignorant about the issue at hand. So - "

"What do you know?"

Cho could have bitten her tongue. She had interrupted him, her voice almost shrill, to ask him for what he would have explained next second, hadn't she cut him off. It was hardly excusable toward Harry, and not at all toward Reuben.

Who paid back by saying, "I know that your husband is famous for his clumsiness." Inaudible laughter seemed to shake him.

"What else do you know?"

Reuben's expression changed as if a boy migrated to a man, while his voice took on a flat, military-like tone.

"Cho Chang, operates under that name, which is her maiden name, to avoid unwanted publicity. Owns the majority on the Groucho Industries corporation. Full name Chang-Potter, married to Harry Potter, about whom she told a very selective part of the truth. Two own children, two more adopted."

"Since when do you know?"

"A hotel manager has the same instincts as a casino owner: he needs to know about his regulars. In your case - let's say the genuine impulse was increased by a personal interest shortly after we met."

"Did you know that when ... when we established our current state of relationship"

"What a wonderful phrase!"

Reuben was grinning openly. "You want to know whether I refused to follow your suggestion because I had found out about your husband? No, this particular information came to my knowledge only afterwards, but I don't think it would have changed anything. Also, according to my sources, said Harry Potter isn't known for bullying other people, no matter which reason."

"Maybe so," she snapped, angry at Reuben for his spying behind her back, and at herself for bickering like a fishwoman, "but it doesn't mean he's unable to mess up thoroughly. By the way, do you know that he's been here? He saw us together."

"Really? But then, doesn't it prove my point?" Reuben looked wondering. "I don't remember anyone storming at me and telling me not to mess with his wife."

Cho's look was telling him that - certain past attempts notwithstanding - even the assumption of such behaviour from her husband was an insult toward herself.

Having paused long enough to know that his remorse wouldn't grow more, she said, "He sat at the bar. Dressed like a wood cutter. Beard, short hair, and a large discolouration across his face. He - "

"Yes, I remember him. That was your husband?"

"Wearing a mask, and as you certainly remember, he fooled me too."

"Are you trying to tell me that he disguised himself that way just to spy on you?" Reuben frowned. "That's hard to believe."

Cho snorted. "That's what I've been looking for! My almost-lover defending my husband. Really, some women just have no luck with men."

With satisfaction, she watched as Reuben simultaneously laughed and blushed.

Then, showing amusement herself, she said, "No, he was testing his mask without second thoughts. Seeing us together made him cancel the task."

With some of the fury the scene had raised in her, although much later, she added, "But then, having fooled me, what else could he score?"

Reuben didn't answer, didn't even arch his eyebrows to hint that another husband might well have seen a reason to stay and watch. Instead, he asked, "Why does he wear that mask?"

"Because he's working undercover."

Having come that far, feeling the secret in safe hands and sufficiently far away from France, she sketched out Harry's task at the school in Brest, how he'd managed to get their younger children there, and how he'd trapped himself because their children had found friends there.

Then she summarized what she'd done so far by planting the fear of God - or, failing that, the fear of Chinese triads - in a French headmaster, and what she was going to do by joining the MABEL people at the Chateau Saumur as her home base for the next days, or maybe weeks.

By then, they'd finished eating and had reached the state of after dinner drinks, which was coffee for Reuben and tea for herself. In a few minutes, she would have to fight the temptation of a million-calories dessert, still more so as her good conscience - no booze after food, just tea - tended to undermine her good intentions.

Reuben sipped from his coffee, looking thoughtful. Eventually, he said, "I wouldn't call it a mess. A bit of a trap, yes, but - "

"If you can't just take your children and leave? Not without damaging their faith forever? A bit of a trap? It's a bit of a disaster, as far as I'm concerned, and no way to sweet-talk it."

Again, he kept silent for a few seconds. Then he said, "Since I have no children, I might be the wrong person to judge the dimensions of Harry's wrongdoing - I was never introduced to him but I use this name anyway because all the time saying *your husband* sounds so stiff ... But there's something else in this situation that touches a nerve in me, a kind of sensitive spot in my memory. Say, does it make a difference whether the children are adopted or your own?"

"What?" She stared at him, unable to see where he was aiming at. "Not the least bit. Maybe in the first months after adoption, but not after so many years. Why do you ask?"

"So we can exclude the possibility that Harry considers them dispensible in any way?"

For an instant, she felt like slapped in the face. With difficulty, she kept her voice quiet. "Reuben, what's wrong with you? Do you know what you just asked?"

"I guess I do, yes. Please forgive me, because it was a test question, but I had to ask it for my own peace of mind. Now I have my answer, so I'm ready to wait for the triads."

He looked surprisingly solemn for this joke that bore a small core of truth inside. Examining his face, reconsidering what had been said recently by either of them, Cho became aware that, some sentences earlier, he'd thrown a signal that there was something about himself, rather than about her own ego, which liked to dominate topics and agendas and conversations. She was spoiled in this regard, was used to men who liked to spoil her, but even they had something on their minds, every now and then.

She presented a placatory smile. "I know something better than that. You have to tell me what's on your mind, that you ask such a question. How did you say - it touches a nerve? Which one?"

"Ah, it's not important, and probably it sounds stupid when told, especially compared to your stories. So - "

"Please."

To her relief, the word's magic didn't fail, although it took another moment until Reuben started to speak, so it had been more than a bit of sulking.

"The way you describe your - er, I mean Harry, that strikes me as familiar, somehow. It looks to me as if, once he concluded that something needs to be done, he's going to do it without so much as a second look at the consequences. Is this description halfway accurate?"

"Halfway? It's pinpoint!"

"Yes, I thought as much. I have a similar approach, that's why your Harry suddenly feels like a soulmate to me, although I never met him, not directly, that is. I mean, my life is eventless, compared to his, past and present, that's why this comparison sounds a bit ridiculous, but there was one event in my life where I did something similar - not spectacular at all, not really comparable to what Harry's doing, no bad guys involved, and no children either, maybe except for one, but - "

"The king's daughter."

He looked pleased. "Right, the hotel king's daughter, when I said to hell with the king's throne that was waiting for me in fifteen year's time, and even then her father would be still lurking behind the curtains. Since you could guess at once what I was talking about, maybe I'm not entirely wrong, and this side-by-side comparison isn't too far-fetched. But can you see the big difference, too?"

She could see lots of differences, at the same time knowing full well that these were minor details, and with every second not finding the answer to this riddle, she could watch the beaming grow in

his face.

"I hate to admit it, as you certainly know, but I can't."

He laughed like a boy who'd found the expected toy in the wrapping. "You. You're the big difference."

"Me?" She tried to joke it off. "I'm not that big."

"Not physically, no. Helen wasn't either. Helen could scream and complain and make hell break loose just like you, but that's where the similarity ends. Because you leave me, your almost-lover, without the slightest sign of remorse to build up the second front in Harry's battle, using whatever tool comes your way, and - "

"A MABEL seminar isn't a tool that comes your way."

"No, it's the other way around, you go there. And you should have seen your face a little while ago, when I hinted the possibility that the one who messed up so thoroughly, according to your words, might be a tiny bit less caring than yourself. For a second or so, it looked as if next moment I'd have to pick the tableware out of my face."

"Well ..."

After a few seconds of shared silence, out of curiosity and probably also to overcome the slight embarrassment Reuben's words had left on her, she asked, "Does it still hurt, this particular memory?"

"That she didn't come to help like you do for Harry? Usually not, and besides, give me some more years, then I might have started my own hotel chain."

His ironic smile made it clear that he was exaggerating, while at the same time there was little doubt about his ambition to *own* a place like the Vancouver Resort, rather than just running it for a salary, no matter how high.

But she thought she could see, or hear, something else, and the moment struck her as one of those when it was okay to put the finger on it.

"Maybe I didn't refer to the helping aspect so much. Maybe I meant something else. And what's more, I wonder whether this something else has to be held responsible for the two of us not making out at two occasions."

His smile was guarded. "Who knows? At any rate, that's a topic I shouldn't comment on; rejecting a woman's offer is normally a dangerous thing to do and a shortcut to a deadly enemy."

"Normally, yes." Her own smile was compassionate. "Although there's an excuse that would be accepted by such a woman. Just one, actually."

"Oh, would she? Always?"

His smile turned ironic. "Listen, this is pretty much like a nigger telling a nigger that he's black, if you get my drift. Let's concentrate on something more solid, like a dessert. Mousse au chocolat, with advocaat on top."

Yes, she knew what he meant, couldn't deny it. The question was, whether she could deny the dessert. Or, failing that, at least the liquor on top.

19 - Valley Trips

The long expected Thursday had arrived. When gathering after the lunch break, the students of the four new classes would not file into their classrooms as usual. Instead, they would join in front of the administration building, right across the lawn on which people from MiraLuc were busy assembling a small arc that showed the company logo. When activated, the arc would serve as the portkey gate to the campsite in the Loire valley.

From his seat in class, Carlos had no chance of looking out the window. It didn't matter; they were in the Cherbourg building, and this building's window front was at the wrong side for watching the construction crew. But Carlos had watched them in the previous break, together with Chloé, and the picture that was stored in his mind slowly changed to a scene in which they walked through the gate side by side, to come out on the campsite.

Due to lack of better knowledge, the campsite in Carlos' mind strongly resembled the park around Groucho Headquarters in Dublin, only with a tree line where the Groucho Park was bordered by buildings. Like the Parc MiraLuc, the Groucho Park was ruled by a company rather than public authorities. Moreover, it was the only park of that kind Carlos had heard about, so for him this picture was a natural choice when imagining the unknown.

The teacher's words were lost on Carlos. He kept creating scenes of camp life in his mind, balancing out his lack of experience with fantasy supported by pictures he'd seen on TV - campfires, for example. He knew the smell of burning wood from the fireplace in Carron Lough. Would the smell be the same when sitting in open air under a nightly sky?

Reconsidering the starting scene, with himself and Chloé walking through the portkey gate, Carlos suddenly became aware that this wasn't going to happen anywhere outside his fantasy: the students were told to do the transit in the dormitory groups, who were also the groups sharing a tent. So he would pass the gate in the company of Mathieu, Roland, and Serge, while Chloé would be with her own roommates.

Carlos didn't even know their names.

He wasn't interested to meet them. But he had to, if he wanted to be together with Chloé, because the usual meeting habits didn't work in the camp.

Unless there was a more direct channel.

A phony! The solution was so simple, but stupid him hadn't thought of it before, in time to get a phony for Chloé. They'd talked about it, and Chloé had said she didn't need one because there wasn't anyone among her friends with whom she could talk on the phone.

At that point he'd dropped the idea, careful to avoid the embarrassment that was so common between the poor and the privileged. But he hadn't thought it through, and now ... Was it really too late?

Two hours, a little more than that, until the gate would open. Twenty minutes until the end of the class.

Carlos suddenly sat on tenterhooks. Had he been alone, he would have asked Madame Rappeneau, the teacher, for an early leave due to urgent family business before the journey, but there was Esmeralda sitting next to him, and her astonishment would have easily outperformed that of the teacher.

He knew - coming out the classroom door, it would take him less than five minutes to lay hands on a phony, simply because his porty would carry him to Carron Lough, and to Groucho Industries, and from there back to the castle.

But not back to Brest, because nobody had felt it important to program a portkey jump *to* the school. So how to return, once he'd found a phony?

Carlos knew that right now his father had a tight schedule, and it would remain that way all through the journey, in particular because Harry would have to hide himself while travelling. Aside from that, the idea of asking his father felt quite embarrassing to Carlos: Harry's first reply would be something like, "I should have thought of that myself," a result of the Japanese influence in his education, and such a remark was somehow worse than a simple, impatient, "Damn you! Couldn't you think of it earlier?"

But Carlos knew someone who would grant him this kind of straightforwardness: his mother.

Five minutes later, Madame Rappeneau won his heart forever when she said, "I don't know what else to tell you about the Loire valley, and I can save my breath about anything else, so - out with you, but quietly!"

The class barely managed to suppress their shouts of approval but was unable to keep entirely quiet. Excited murmurs and whispers went through the rows while the students collected their things and stormed out.

Right outside the classroom, Carlos and Esmeralda nodded to each other, then went different ways. For the next hours, and probably days as well, the bonds of dormitories and tents would hold tighter than those of family.

Carlos left the Cherbourg building still in Esmeralda's trail but then, quickly before any of his roommates could see him, he walked behind the building. The underbrush there was a good place for a phone call and a portkey jump. He took out his porty and pressed the shortcut button to call his mother.

The response was almost immediate. "Carlos?" said his mother's voice. "What's up, my dear?"

"Hi Mum - I'm really glad to catch you without waking you up. So you aren't in Canada, are you?"

For him like for anyone else in the Potter family, time zones - especially the six to eight hours between Europe and America - were factors as common as darkness in the night and low temperatures in the winter.

"No, I'm not. I'm in the Chateau Saumur; it's a MABEL seminar not far from the campsite you'll reach in a while. Is everything ready at your side?"

"No, that's why I'm calling. I need a phony, Mum. I thought about how to get one, and I could get home and to Groucho Headquarters with my porty but not back to the school. Dad's busy for his own trip, so I called you."

"You need a phony? For what? Or should I ask, for whom?"

"Erm ... There's a girl, she's got one of the bracelets from Dad, like Esmeralda and I and Esmeralda's three - "

"You mean Chloé?"

"Yes, right, that's her."

With some relief, Carlos waited through the short moment of silence that followed. He wasn't really surprised to hear that his mother knew about the bracelets and about Chloé. The communication between his parents seemed to work better than for quite a while, and this thought, together with the knowledge of his mother being in a castle near the Parc MiraLuc, made the coming adventure shine in a totally different light.

His mother's voice came through the porty again. "I'll meet you at home in a minute." It was followed by the short, vibrating sound that signaled a disconnection.

Without hesitation, Carlos pressed the portkey button for Carron Lough, and an immeasurable second later, the underbrush behind the Cherbourg building had given way to the dinner room in the south tower of Carron Lough, their family's common destination for apparition and portkey jumps straight into the castle.

He had to wait about ten minutes, rather than one, before his mother arrived. But then, he hadn't interpreted her remark in a literal sense.

She appeared several feet away and lost no time to reach him and give him a hug, which he heartily returned. Then she said, "Don't chide me for being late - I already talked with Ray; he should be here any moment now. After all, we need something better than the next best phony for that girl of yours, don't we?"

Carlos blushed. "I wasn't going to chide you - "

Another gentle push of compressed air stopped his reply: Ray Purcell stood in the entrance to the dinner room.

The old engineer took Carlos' porty, not wasting more than a few words and an equal amount of grunts for affirmative replies, then he disappeared again - with the promise of being back half an hour later.

Carlos' mother used her own porty to call the house-elves Dobby and Winky and ask them for something to eat - "anything that's ready within five minutes will be fine" - then she turned to Carlos again.

"So you've got yourself a girlfriend, haven't you?"

Carlos just nodded.

"And she's a witch, more than you're a wizard at the moment, thanks to your father's plotting."

Noticing how his mother had fun at her remark, Carlos said, "Yes, and she was quite concerned until she found out that we'll get our magic back in due time. She said it was my good luck that I hadn't teased her as long as I knew but she didn't. And" - he beamed at his mother - "she once read about a wizard by the name of Henri Portère, but in that story, the wizard has just two children, because her storybook is too old to know more. They're rather poor ..." His voice trailed off.

"And in all that excitement, you forgot to think of a phony for her?" His mother looked wondering. "Sweetie, that's quite uncharacteristical of you."

"Erm - somehow, the bracelets looked as if we'd be all together and that they're all we need," explained Carlos. "And - I thought about it, and asked Chloé whether she would accept a - a used porty, that's how I called it, but then she said she wouldn't know what for, and I didn't know what to reply, and before I could find something, there was the scene with that old bloke ..."

Carlos' voice trailed off once more, although way too late. He didn't think his mother knew about a teacher named Jacques Deray, and he hadn't planned to close this gap in her knowledge.

Right at this moment, their food appeared, by no means giving the impression of something fixed in five minutes' time.

They settled for their lunch and filled their dishes. Just when Carlos thought he'd escaped his slip of the tongue by sheer luck, his mother, not bothering to empty her mouth first, said, "Okay, so what about that scene with an old bloke?"

Carlos knew when he was defeated. Between bites, he told his mother the story in a compressed yet complete form. The only detail he left out had to do with Snoopy-printed panties.

Hearing about Monsieur Deray's mysterious accident, his mother's murderous glare changed to an expression of deep satisfaction. "You can say a lot against your father and his methods," she said, "but when he strikes, he strikes hard."

Carlos, who couldn't say much against his father's methods, more the opposite, nodded with shining eyes. "Chloé was so relieved! She hoped Dad would be the replacement escort teacher, until I told her that he'd be around on his own - "

Carlos stopped in mid-sentence because there was a new rush of compressed air, which announced Ray's return.

"Sit down, Ray," said Carlos' mother. Then she used her porty to order another dish from the house-elves. Looking up again, she said, "Your bracelets work fine, as I just heard."

"Good to know that," replied the engineer. "But let me finish with the two porties first, to have that out of the way." He dropped Carlos' porty and another one, looking similar, on the table, then he explained that the two porties had phony shortcuts to each other, and that the new one also had shortcuts to the porties of Harry and Esmeralda. The new porty further had portkey buttons for Carron Lough and the school in Brest - the same target which now could be reached with a previously unused button on Carlos' own porty.

"Hey, that's cool. Thank you," Carlos said to Ray, then reached his mother and hugged her quickly. "Thanks, Mum, that was great. I have to go - I must catch Chloé alone."

"Watch your back, Sonny - and hers too."

Carlos nodded. Ray's gesture of goodbye was the last view in the castle before he pressed the new button, to find himself at a spot which looked very much like somewhere at the Brest school, except that, for a few seconds, he didn't know where he was.

After walking a few steps, he saw that the portkey had carried him behind the Cayenne building, the one in which his father had his apartment. Apparently, Ray had used a target specification Harry had stored in the Groucho database. Carlos started to walk to the administration building.

Entering the canteen, he looked around for Chloé, but couldn't find her. Someone else was waving at him - Mathieu, one of his roommates, with the other two, Roland and Serge, sitting next to him.

Carlos grabbed a tray and started loading it with food. At Carron Lough, he hadn't spent enough time to still his hunger completely. Having gathered a fair amount, he joined his roommates.

"Where have you been?" asked Mathieu. "There isn't much time left, and I haven't seen you packing."

Mathieu had a tendency to fuss about every detail, and Carlos' habit of being anywhere but with his roommates was a constant source of concern for him.

"Don't you worry about that," replied Carlos, and before Mathieu had a chance to repeat his original question, he added, "That bloody bag is big enough for all of my possessions, that's about the only benefit it has."

The *bloody bag* was a delivery from MiraLuc - one for each student in the four classes bound for the camp. Basically a simple sports utilities bag as used by tennis players and other athletes, it had two handles that were large enough to go through with the arms and carry the bag as if it was a rucksack - the utensil they had expected from MiraLuc, at least hoped for.

"The bag's okay, and they had to provide one for each participant. Do you know how expensive rucksacks are? You can't expect ..."

Mathieu's voice didn't really fade, it only felt that way because Carlos had stopped paying attention and instead glanced around while eating.

"Shut up, Mathieu," said Serge. "Those bags will hardly survive till Sunday. And you" - he turned to Carlos - "get a grip on your food and your schedule. Your girl isn't around, and for once you really could give it a rest. Say, is that what it means to be Spanish? Always after the girls?"

Carlos stared at him, momentarily speechless. Even his chewing had stopped.

"He isn't always after the girls," said Roland before Carlos had recovered. "It's only one, and always the same." Toward Carlos, Roland added, "She's been here until a few minutes ago, and she seemed on the lookout for you."

Carlos nodded and smiled. "Thanks, Rol."

Serge only snorted. He would have been a prime candidate for bullying his roommates, had they let him do so. But Roland - thin and no challenge for anyone - had a mouth that didn't know how to be scared, and Carlos was just too busy somewhere else to serve for the purpose. This left Mathieu - but even Serge was bored after half an hour of bullying Mathieu.

"You're welcome," replied Roland. "In exchange, you can tell me where you really have been, after all. You went out the classroom with your sister, and next moment, you had disappeared."

"He's been downtown to get some rubbers," explained Serge with a nasty look. "That's his preparation for the trip - after all, you can't get them here in the school, and not in the Loire valley either."

Mathieu gasped and flushed, quicker than Carlos himself.

"But he couldn't find any," continued Serge, "because they don't manufacture sizes that small."

"I wish you had a rubber," said Roland in a quick attempt of interfering in the confrontation, "as big as you need it - around your brain, to stop it from spilling that crap."

But Serge wasn't brought off track. He kept staring at Carlos and waited for his reply, a strange smile playing on his face.

According to the established conventions, Serge's insult could only be washed off with blood - Serge's own or that of Carlos, should he turn out second winner in the seemingly inevitable fight in which a nosebleed or a broken lip would be the most likely source of that precious liquid.

"I'll come back to that at the camp," said Carlos quietly to Serge, "when we have the time for it and a place for it. In the meantime" - he hesitated a short moment, totally unaware of the dramatic effect it had on the others - "you should guard your own ass from people with or without a rubber, if you know what I mean."

Roland responded to the statement with an admiring smile, but Serge turned dark red and snarled, "You follow me outside! Now!"

"Stop shouting!" hissed Carlos low-voiced. Toward Roland and Mathieu, he added, "Actually the same goes for you; it isn't something that would only apply to Serge." Turning again to his red-faced opponent, he said, "I mean it. It's a warning, not an insult. Got me now?"

Roland was quicker than the baffled-looking Serge. "What do you know?" he asked Carlos, looking a bit paler than usual.

"I ... what do *you* know?"

"Nothing specific, and until your remark, I'd thought my fantasy was playing tricks with me." Roland gave an apologetic smile. "You know that I see and hear things nobody would think possible, and I've heard a few remarks that made me wondering, that's all. And you?"

"Nothing specific either - a bit more than you, but don't ask me. All I can say is, stick together and trust no one." Carlos looked at Serge. "I was supposed to keep my mouth shut, but you ... Anyway, you should be grateful."

Roland said, "You have someone you trust, I can see it."

"Yes - my sister, and her friends, and her dog, and the girl I'm going to look for now, because I have something to protect her, but not a rubber ..." He smirked toward Serge. "This evening in our tent, I might be ready to answer the question - provided you didn't spill the news all through the school."

Watched by his three roommates, he stood up to carry his tray to the transport belt. He might have eaten a bit more under different circumstances, but together with what he'd gotten at home, he would make it to supper before starving, while his sense of rhetorics forbade him to spoil the moment.

* * *

Esmeralda shouldered the large bag. Next moment, she wondered whether she really needed all the stuff she'd packed in there. But she consoled herself quickly; after all, they just had to carry their luggage to the small arc in front of the Brest building.

Bolo was dancing around her; the dog's excitement had grown all through the last hour of packing, and had reached a peak when Esmeralda had put the collar around his neck. She rarely used a leash and didn't plan to keep it longer than necessary, but for the short moment of public appearance, it just looked better.

Glancing around, she saw that her roommates would need another minute or so, and a few more in the case of Odile, who was physically unable to be in time. She hooked the leash to the collar.

"I'll wait downstairs. Let's go, Bolo."

In the staircase, the dog's pulling, in combination with the unfamiliar weight on her back, almost made her fall and sprain her ankle. "Hold it!" she shouted at the dog, achieving a limited impact on Bolo's excitement.

Sitting down on the steps outside, she had a moment of recollection, although it wasn't welcome at all. She wanted to storm to the temporary linkport and finally find out whether she would be able to take Bolo to the camp. She wasn't sure, because she hadn't asked.

And if not ...

Dominique's voice could be heard in the staircase. A moment later, the girl stepped out, immediately followed by Natalie. Before Esmeralda could ask when they might expect Odile, she heard a clank upstairs and something that sounded like a short obscenity, and probably had been.

Odile almost in time - should she take it as an omen? Or was it the other way around and this miracle had used up today's quota?

They walked toward the meeting point, exchanging remarks about heavy bags and resuming the discussion that had been running for days: whether a camp was extra cool or totally outdated. It didn't matter; their own excitement grew with every step.

The place in front of the Brest building looked crowded. Esmeralda saw two men in the MiraLuc dress - light-grey shirts with neckties in yellow and blue, making them look like a cross between boy scout and flight attendant. They stood close to the linkport arc and seemed to be the only calm

people around.

Monsieur Jeunet and Madame Verneuil, the two escorting teachers, stood there with clipboards in their hands. From their behaviour, you could think the four classes were about to enter a transatlantic clipper, rather than just walk through the linkport gate. The two teachers were looking and counting and checking off groups; just as Esmeralda with her group arrived, another group took formation in front of the gate and then disappeared in it.

The two MiraLuc guides had watched them step through. Now they turned around, apparently waiting for the next group. One of them looked at Esmeralda, then at Bolo, something like disbelief in his face. Next moment, he said something to Monsieur Jeunet.

The teacher turned around, looked at Bolo, then at Esmeralda, then turned to the MiraLuc employee to give an answer. After another response, he came to their group.

"I'm sorry, but the dog can't come with you. Take him back to the public corral; the people there will take care of him until Sunday."

Odile said, "The dog sleeps in our dormitory, so he's part of our dormitory group, isn't he?"

"Erm ..." Monsieur Jeunet looked uneasy; quite obviously it hadn't been his own decision. He glanced toward the MiraLuc employee, apparently in search of support.

The linkport guide came closer. "I'm sorry, young lady - no dogs in the linkport. Only students."

"Why not? The dog can travel other linkports, too."

"Maybe so, but this linkport is only built for humans."

Esmeralda stared at him, looking calmer to the outside than she really felt. "That's a lie. There aren't any linkports with such a limitation."

The guide's face darkened. He looked scowling at Esmeralda, then opened his mouth, but swallowed his remark at the last instant. Quickly regaining his expressionless stare, he just said, "Only students," before turning around and stepping back to the small arc. There he stood, arms crossed over his chest.

"You might be right or not," said Madame Verneuil after a moment of silence to Esmeralda, "but you see, it won't help you. So please take the dog back. Leave your bag here; your roommates can have an eye on it."

Not bothering to drop her bag first, Esmeralda took her porty out and pressed the button for her father. His reply came almost instantly. "Yes?"

"Prof - this is Esmeralda Chang calling. We're at the linkport arc. Those people say my dog can't come with us because he can't go through the gate. Could you please come and take care of him?"

"Comin'!" The connection closed.

Madame Verneuil asked, "Who did you call?"

"Monsieur le Professeur Pri'chard. He's got a liking for the dog, and the dog for him. He'll help us."

Monsieur Jeunet looked relieved, Madame Verneuil looked appreciative, and Esmeralda wondered what exactly would happen.

A pull at Bolo's leash made her look up. Her father was approaching them. Considering the few moments since her call, and the direction where he came from, he seemed to have apparated behind the Brest building and walked only the last steps.

Reaching their group, he gave his two colleagues a wave and a smile, then turned to Esmeralda. "Now what's the matter?"

She pointed to the MiraLuc guide. "This man says the linkport is only for students, not for dogs. I said there aren't any such linkports, but he wouldn't let us through."

"Well, if he's right, I'll keep the dog until Sunday, but maybe it's a misunderstanding. Let's see." Monsieur Pri'chard motioned them to follow and walked to the gate.

Bolo followed him so instantly that Esmeralda was in a hurry to follow herself, hoping it looked normal. Behind her, she could hear noises of excitement from the other three girls.

The MiraLuc guide watched the procession come closer. He made a single step, then he stood blocking the entrance to the linkport gate.

"Good afternoon," said Monsieur Pri'chard to him. "You think there's a problem with a dog passing through this gate?"

"No problem at all, because he won't pass. Only students."

"Well, if you're right, he will fail, since that's how linkports respond to unsupported bodies. So why not just give it a try, then we know for sure?"

"I know for sure, that's enough."

The guide stared at Monsieur Pri'chard with open hostility, and it seemed as if only the reputation of the company he represented kept him from telling the unwelcome teacher to get lost.

"There's nothing as convincing as proof," said Monsieur Pri'chard with a cheer that sounded terribly wrong in Esmeralda's ears. He made a movement toward the guide, who responded by opening his folded arms - maybe to push him away, or pull him still closer to explain in full detail what he'd meant. At any rate, for an instant the two men looked as if getting ready to dance, then somehow the guide stumbled with a short cough against his fellow guide, who grabbed him for support, only to realize that his colleague was momentarily unable to stand on his own feet.

"Sorry!" called Monsieur Pri'chard and bent down to have a look at the guide, who started looking bluish-pale in the face. From there, he turned to Esmeralda. "Just try it - hurry."

Esmeralda, old hand in portkey travelling of all kinds, pulled on the leash, said, "C'mon, Bolo," and stepped forward.

A second later, she stood on a large meadow: the school buildings were gone, and just in time, she remembered to step forward, so her friends would not stumble into her when coming through.

* * *

When Carlos arrived at the meeting point together with his roommates, he still had the new party in his pockets. There hadn't been an opportunity to meet with Chloé, short of entering the St.-Nazaire building and knocking at her door - a thought he'd dropped at once. Now, looking around, he couldn't detect the girl either.

Instead, he could watch the scene with his father and the man from MiraLuc.

From his position, Carlos couldn't see details, and altogether the scene didn't strike much attention, in particular since his father, still bent low besides the MiraLuc man, urged Monsieur Jeunet and Madame Verneuil to continue sending groups through the portkey gate. But Carlos felt little doubt that something had happened between his father and that man, and from past experiences, some disagreement about the dog was his first guess.

He stepped forward. "Monsieur! Monsieur le Professeur Jeunet! Can we go through?"

"No, you wait till it's your turn!"

"And when - "

Carlos made no attempt to finish his question. What he saw in Monsieur Jeunet's face, and what he saw in Madame Verneuil's face looking at her colleague, told him that the male teacher was a nitpicker, fussing around inefficiently, and only patience could improve things.

Carlos returned to the rest of his group. "We have to wait until he manages - and for all I can see here, dusk might fall before he gets a handle on things."

He retreated a few steps more, took out his party, and called his sister to hear more about the little incident.

Esmeralda confirmed both of his assumptions, that the man from MiraLuc had made trouble because of the dog, that he'd lied, actually, and that their father had solved the problem in his own, unceremonial way.

"Can you see - "

Carlos had meant to ask his sister about Chloé, but a wave from Roland made him cancel the connection and join the other boys.

Roland, simultaneously bypassing machismo and male incompetence, had simply asked Madame Verneuil which tent was waiting for the students from Room 214 in the Toulon building. After getting the answer - twenty-one - he'd asked whether they could move on, and earned a nod.

Passing a sour-looking MiraLuc guide, who avoided glancing over to Carlos' father as much as Carlos himself, the four boys went through the gate in rapid succession, either because they were experienced linkport travellers or pretended to be.

Another MiraLuc guide, at this side of the gate a young woman who welcomed them with a smile, gently pushed them forward to make room for the next students. Carlos made a few steps to be out of the way, then stopped to look around.

They stood on a meadow which was almost plain, only slightly sloped upward to the borderline of a forest. To the right, more trees formed another borderline, although that part of the forest seemed lighter, and the light gray of a building shimmered through. To the left, the grass stretched farther, and only after some seconds, Carlos noticed the river right behind.

Within their view, tents stood everywhere and in all degrees of completion. They showed all colours of the rainbow and all shapes, with the only common factor that four people plus luggage had to fit in. Apparently, MiraLuc had decided to use the camp for something like a tent exhibition.

Wandering along, noticing a variety of formats, from a simple roof-shaped tent over trekking iglus to the typical high-walled camping site tent, it took them a little while to realize that the tents stood in small groups, forming islands in the surrounding grass.

There was a campsite chart not far from the entry gate. Studying it, they found the spot that was marked as "21" in a group close to the tree line. When they reached it, they saw that hers was a dome-shaped trekking tent which sported a long and spacious porch. The tent itself was built up completely, while the porch still needed some work to appear properly stretched and fixed.

Glancing inside, they agreed that the tent offered enough room for them but only for sleeping, not for anything else. This sleeping, though, needed some more preparations because there were neither sleeping bags nor air mattresses.

Carlos had dumped his bag in the porch. "Let's go get our sleeping stuff," he called.

"And where?"

"See that huge white thing down there? There are lots of people, and those who leave are carrying stuff."

"We need more things," said Mathieu importantly. He was the only one who had some camping experience.

Serge stared at him. "Like what?"

"Lights. Water in a can. Plastic cups to drink."

"Wiseass. If you're so clever, why don't you go and fetch it?"

In an instant of premonition, Carlos saw three days ahead in which he'd try to meet Chloé as often as possible, with the consequence that he'd be absent as often as possible, with the result that Serge would behave as if in Bully Heaven. He turned to face him.

"Asshole. If you're so stupid, why don't you go and shut up?"

Serge stared at him, astonishment giving way to disbelief, then to a nasty anticipation. "That was a bad mistake you made, Latino. A very bad mistake." He made a step.

Carlos wondered himself what had made him start the confrontation right now. A fight had been hanging in the air for a little while, although he'd thought he'd have other things on his mind in the camp. Maybe his father's example had made him act on impulse.

He said, "You think you're stronger than me, don't you?"

"Course I am. In a moment you'll - "

"Course you are. But I'm obliged to tell you that I'm an aikido adept."

"What?"

"I know aikido - what you might call kung fu. And people who know that have promised to warn their opponents because that's like having a hidden weapon, you know."

Serge stared; uncertainty had mixed into his expectant beaming. In the corner of his eyes, Carlos could see the wide-eyed face of Roland.

"I kid you not," assured Carlos. "So maybe we should do it tomorrow, in the grass, and now go and fetch our stuff. And since you're the strongest, you should be the one who carries the water."

Serge still stared at moment, suspicion on his face. When Carlos didn't grin, he seemed to drop the thought of being teased. Then, as if caught by a formerly hidden honour, he said, "All right, I'll do it. I'll be the one who carries our water - even for you, Latino."

Carlos nodded, thinking by himself that it was more of a formerly hidden stupidity that manifested itself here, although it wasn't impossible that Roland had known it all the time and only he, Carlos, had failed to notice because his interest was somewhere else.

Walking toward the crowded place, he wondered briefly which outcome of the fight would be better. It wasn't impossible that a barely winning Serge might be more tolerable than a second winner. Next moment, he remembered his father's admonition to start a fight only with the intention of coming out first. He had a few moments to ponder this thought, then the issues at hand shifted other topics to the background of his mind.

What he had called *huge white thing* was a tent that looked as if all hundred-and-twenty or so students might find room inside, and probably this was true, once the tent's current purpose of a

hardware store was fulfilled. The walls were rolled up at all sides, opening the view to a ring-shaped desk in the center, where some MiraLuc people were handing out bundles that had to be sleeping bags, air mattresses, and other stuff. Inside the ring, there was something like a double door, and only after a moment, Carlos became aware that these doors had to be linkport gates to a real store, which could be located anywhere.

Watching, they noticed that the students gave small pieces of something in exchange for the bundles they received. Stepping around under the tent's roof, they found a kind of a cash register where a woman in the MiraLuc costume asked for their tent number. When Roland answered, "Twenty-one," she looked in a list, checked them off, and handed each of them a plastic ring with a small pile of tags on it, and a booklet entitled "Camp MiraLuc - What You Have to Know."

The tags had different colours. As they learned from the booklet, the two white ones had to be delivered when receiving the sleeping bag and the air mattress. Yellow tags were for other materials including lights, cans of water, or tent nails, hammers, and axes when it came to preparing campfires. Green tags were exchanged for food, red ones for sweets, and blue ones for stuff like shampoo, toothpaste, but also if a student needed clothes as replacement for something lost or damaged.

Roland, who apparently could read twice as fast as his roommates, said, "You can win more of them - especially red ones. They offer it for all kinds of services. They call it the 'social impulse'."

He looked up and stared at Carlos. "You can win some by playing servant for a tent of girls - bringing them water, collecting their garbage and so."

"I guess we should settle our own tent first," replied Carlos and walked to the desk where they could trade tags for bundles.

During the next hour, they fitted their tent out with the equipment they would need for living there in the three days ahead. The MiraLuc people had everything, for example cartridges of compressed air to inflate the air mattresses within seconds and without getting dizzy from doing it with the mouth and the own breath. One cartridge was enough for their group - and it took a yellow tag, which meant one of them had to *pay* for it.

Carlos did it. Mathieu paid for a light that would hang in the tent, Serge paid for the water he carried up to their spot, and Roland paid for the parts that were required to complete the build-up of the porch. By then, they had caught the principle - tent groups had to develop their internal *social impulse* to handle the everyday chores, a fact they all registered with mixed feelings.

By then, they'd also noticed that the next-tent neighbors weren't those they could find next door at their own floor in the Toulon building. No doubt, MiraLuc wrote SOCIALIZING with large capitals.

On the other hand, they didn't go as far as mixing boys and girls in the same island of tents. There were only boys around them - sixteen altogether, in four tents.

They had another hour to make themselves familiar with the surroundings before the first official meeting would take place. Carlos decided to go looking for Chloé.

Camp charts could be found at several places, but they only showed tent numbers, no identification of the inhabitants. There were about thirty tents altogether, arranged in six islands - certainly not too much to scan all of them, but seeing the tents didn't mean seeing the people inside, and poking his head into every tent was an idea Carlos abandoned at once.

He found the tent with Esmeralda and her friends easily, because there was a dog lying in the

entrance who looked as if coming closer was a big mistake. But of course the dog was extremely pleased to see Carlos, and next moment, Esmeralda's head poked out of the tent, in which Carlos could hear giggling voices.

"Oh - it's you," Esmeralda said. "What tent are you in?"

"Twenty-one."

"Ah, okay. This one's eleven, in case you didn't notice, and if you want to know where to find Chloé, hers is seventeen." Esmeralda pointed toward another island closer to the side with the buildings. "Over there."

"Great ... Thanks."

Esmeralda's expression told him that they were still almost-twins, knowing each other well enough to answer questions not yet asked, and that this case was special anyway, and that - aside from anything else - the bearers of six bracelets had to stick together. All those messages were sent without a word, and next moment, Esmeralda disappeared again inside the tent, which was of the luxury camping variety.

Carlos walked to the island Esmeralda had indicated, and found the tent number seventeen all right. It looked empty; no sound was coming from inside. After standing there for two minutes, Carlos knew that it was indeed empty. Being among the first to arrive, the four girls had probably started their own excursion.

What now? Waiting here seemed stupid; there wasn't any indication that the girls would return sooner than required for the meeting. On the other hand, walking around might just guarantee that he and Chloé would continue missing each other until -

"Carlos! Here!"

Glancing up, he saw the familiar figure at some distance, waving and almost running toward him. A moment later, Chloé had reached him.

"I'm glad to find you," she said. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the riverbanks - my roommates and I, we've been there already, so we'll be to ourselves."

"Mind if I fetch Bolo to come with us?"

"Of course not. A propos - how did Dona Gata take it that she had to stay back?"

A fine sting of guilt ran through Carlos. In the frenzy of the morning, hurrying to get the phony for Chloé, he hadn't found any time to pity his pet. But then, you couldn't take cats with you, like you could with dogs.

"The concierge promised me to look after her."

They reached the tent number eleven. After a hesitant "Hello" from Carlos, Dominique's head peeked out, and after a few sentences of negotiation, Bolo followed them toward the Loire riverbanks - hesitantly first, because guarding a tent was a dream job, but the dog quickly relaxed and had started sniffing everywhere long before they reached the water.

The water looked reasonably clean, so Carlos took a stick off the ground and threw it in the river, the signal for Bolo to catch it.

The dog jumped in eagerly. Living at the shore of the Irish Sea, Bolo knew the difference between saltwater and sweetwater. Coming out for the first time, he looked delighted and dropped the stick to Carlos' feet, almost yipping in expectation.

Watching Bolo's next turn, Chloé said, "Your sister mightn't be too enthusiastic about a wet dog in the tent lobby."

"He'll be dry again in no time - " Carlos stopped himself, then started again. "You can ask her yourself."

"Sure I can, but why should I?" Chloé apparently didn't know what he was trying to say, about two hundred yards away from Esmeralda's tent.

Carlos grabbed in his pockets and came up with the new porty on his palm. "Here - call her and ask her."

Chloé stared at him, at the porty, back at him. He could read in her face that she knew what the porty was supposed to mean; even so, she had to ask.

"Is this yours?"

"No." He gave her the new porty so he could fetch his own. "See, that's mine. Now call her."

"That's ... how do I call her?"

"The green button there - press it, and when you're asked, say who you want to talk to."

"That's all?"

"There are shortcut buttons, too, and before we walk back I'll show you on mine when setting a button to yours, but the normal way is just as I said. Try it."

Reluctantly, Chloé pressed the button, and almost jumped when a friendly voice asked her whom she wanted to call.

"Er ... Esmeralda, er ..."

"Chang," seconded Carlos.

"Yes, right, Esmeralda Chang."

"You are a new member in the Groucho phony network. Please identify yourself," said the voice.

"Er ..." Seeing Carlos' confirming nod, Chloé said, "My name's Chloé Broussard."

"Thank you, Chloé Broussard. Just a second, please."

"Sorry," whispered Carlos. "It's been so long, I've totally forgotten about this first-time registration."

Next second, Esmeralda's voice was heard. "Chloé, you? So did my brother finally have the - well, never mind. What's up?"

"Er - it's basically a test, but I'm supposed to ask you what you think of Bolo jumping in and out of the water."

"Ew ... Do you know a drying spell?"

"No, sorry."

"Pity ... Then hang him on the clothesline." Next instant, giggling of other voices could be heard through the speaker.

Chloé chuckled. "Will do." She glanced at Carlos. "How do I cancel the connection?"

"Same button."

Before Chloé could do it, a vibrating sound told Carlos that Esmeralda had disconnected from the other side. He explained what the sound meant; then, watched by Chloé, he programmed a shortcut

button on his own party for hers, and then tutored her steps as she did the inverse on her device.

Having finished the task, she looked up. "Why did you do that?"

"Because - when I noticed that you can contact my - erm, I mean, Monsieur Pri'chard any time but only as an alarm, and we had no way of talking to each other when separated, it was almost too late. And here, these buttons - er, did I tell you that this is a party, not a phony?"

"Did you?"

"You know what a party is, don't you? You have to press two buttons for a jump, to avoid a jump by accident. The red one here activates the target buttons - here, look, you can press the target buttons alone, and then the display tells you their destinations. Here, that's the one for the school, and this one here's for - erm, where we live, in case you must escape - "

"Where you live? You mean in Ireland?"

"Yes, right, but we can't test it now, because the camp here isn't programmed in as any target, so we'd have no way of coming back."

Chloé stared at the display as if transfixed. Carlos couldn't see it, but he knew that the words "Carron Lough" would be visible. After a few seconds, Chloé looked up again.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Er ... which one?"

"The one about - " She stopped herself and shook her head. "Never mind that now. Do you think we could call - er, Monsieur Pri'chard and ask him for a drying spell?"

20 - Campfire Concerts

Maybe it had been the air inside the tent, which accumulated the heat more than a room. Or maybe it had been the stressful work of lying there, exchanging foolish remarks, and giggling about such nonsense - whatever the reason, Esmeralda as well as her three friends had fallen asleep.

Esmeralda came awake with a jolt because someone was playing a banjo in their dormitory. After a second of disorientation, she corrected a few mistakes in her impression: they weren't in their dormitory, rather they were in a tent, and the banjo player wasn't inside, which solved the puzzle how he might have come past Bolo. She hadn't known how incredibly loud a banjo could be when heard through the thin layer of tent fabric.

Putting her head outside, she startled again because Bolo was nowhere seen. About to jump out and search for him, she remembered just in time that Carlos had taken the dog for a walk - and that it might be advisable to put on her jeans again before letting the rest of her body follow the head outside. While testing the new equipment and fooling around with sleeping bags and air mattresses, they'd taken off the heavier pieces of their clothes.

Hastily, she went into her jeans and her shoes, then climbed out of the tent.

The banjo player - a young man wearing civilian clothes rather than the MiraLuc costume - had stopped his play and his walk, and now was shouting the message that in ten minutes' time the big meeting would start - right in the middle of the place that was formed by the tent islands at all sides. Then he started playing again and walked toward the islands closer to the forest.

A town crier ... Esmeralda had read about such people once, hadn't fully understood the purpose then. Here in the camp, suddenly it seemed the most natural way of communication.

She saw her brother and his girl return from their walk, Bolo with them. The dog closed the last fifty yards in running; when he'd reached her, she could feel that his fur was dry again.

Dominique, Natalie, and Odile had left the tent, fully dressed again. They hurried for the closest set of toilets - small cabins they'd seen before only at construction sites or roads under work, with a half-height fence around that was made of canvas and hung at eye level, just enough to keep the people anonymous who had to visit the toilets.

After having returned the dog, Carlos and Chloé hurried off in different directions. It seemed as if, at least for the first official meeting, they felt it mandatory to join their own tent groups.

Thinking it over, Esmeralda decided to leave the dog at the tent. After their *unauthorized* transit through the portkey arc, she wasn't sure to which degree Bolo's presence was a breach of rules, and had no intention to stress the issue or provoke a reaction.

"All right, Bolo," she said, pointing at a spot in the entrance, "you watch this tent, hear me, my boy? Guard it well! We'll be back in a while."

Bolo wasn't excited to be left alone, although the guarding job seemed a lot of compensation. Esmeralda followed her friends to find a place on the meeting ground.

They hadn't reached their place long when a man stepped into the middle. After a moment, he was joined by a woman. Both of them wore the MiraLuc costumes, and both looked younger than most teachers, definitely younger than Esmeralda's own father.

The man introduced himself as Alain, not bothering with a family name, and said he was one of two camp managers. He had increased his voice with a Sonorus charm, which told everyone in the audience that he was a wizard.

Then the woman introduced herself as Juliette, the other camp manager. She continued by

welcoming everybody and expressing the hope they'd have a great time in the next three days. There were only a few rules, she said, but one of them was about swimming in the river: it wasn't allowed for security reasons, which shouldn't be a problem because there was a pool - actually an artificial extension of the river - in the opposite direction of the buildings, and this pool would be open all day, with a MiraLuc pool guard for the students' safety.

They had a programme for the three days, Juliette said then, but not too much; the next item after their meeting would be the first meal, and the same tent which had served as a store would serve as a canteen then, while the students might pick their own choice of spots, seats, or tables when eating.

Then Alain took over and said that today's evening was dedicated to learning to know each other, that this worked best when sitting around a campfire, and with music. For this reason, they had prepared three circles. Each of them would offer a fire and one or two people with a guitar or banjo, who knew a lot of songs and the students would learn a new song in no time when it was sung at such an occasion.

The announcement had reminded Esmeralda that she was the younger sister of a band leader. When Alain paused for a moment, she said to her friends, "We ought to pick the circle with the banjo player."

Odile grinned. "Was he that cute?"

Esmeralda snorted. "I didn't see him that well, but a banjo's just too loud; the other circles with guitars will have trouble."

Before Odile could reply to that, Juliette started another announcement. The buildings, she said, belonged to the Castle MiraLuc, which would offer building-based faculties as the need might arise, for example if someone got hurt. Aside from that, the students were entitled to a sightseeing tour through the castle, which had more things to offer than old furniture and dusty paintings.

Waiting out the wave of laughter, Juliette finished, "There are guides who will escort you inside. The guides will take only one tent group at a time, so this sightseeing will probably run from today till the end of the camp. There's a list in the big white tent where you can book a time slot for your own tent - whenever you think it suitable. But don't miss to visit our Castle MiraLuc! ... And that's it for now. The canteen service will start in the white tent any minute now, while Alain and I will be here to answer your questions."

Into the growing murmurs around, Natalie said, "A castle! Who needs a castle? I bet it's just more advertisements of MiraLuc stuff."

Odile said, "Only one tent group at a time, what's that supposed to mean? Okay, not all students at once, but - "

"Whatever," interrupted Dominique. "Let's have something to eat first - I'm starving, the fresh air raises my hunger so much, you won't believe."

Esmeralda would. First food and then music, and the dubious castle could wait forever.

Her phony buzzed.

She took it out and looked at the display. Looking up again, meeting the expectant stares of the other three girls, she said, "It's my - erm, I mean, our sports teacher." Only then did she press the answering button.

"Yes?"

She listened and, fully aware of her audience, pouted after a few seconds as the only hint on the

conversation. Then she asked, "Where are you?"

She listened again and then breathed noisily, unaware of a remarkable resemblance with her dog in moments of serious dislike, for example when someone apparated off right before the dog's eyes.

"Can we eat first? We're hungry."

Esmeralda nodded and said, "Yes, okay, we'll take the earliest shift we can find, after supper. See you ... Yes, we will." She closed the connection, for an instant smiling despite herself.

"What does he want us to do?"

"Did he agree? Can we eat first?"

"Where is he?"

Esmeralda decided to answer the last question first. "Somewhere around here - he could listen to that speech just like we did. He says we should sign for the earliest visit in the castle we can catch, but" - she looked at Dominique - "we can eat first; he doesn't think the time slots start *that* early, and besides, you're not the only one who's starving."

She stood up. "Let's go getting food - I don't want to miss the campfire, so the sooner we're done with that bloody castle visit, the better."

"Why so early?" asked Natalie. "What does he think is better now than later? And why at all? I could have done without that visit."

Before Esmeralda could answer, Odile snorted and gave Natalie the kind of contemptuous glance she always used when someone was slower in grasping a fact she considered obvious, something of which she was in no risk of losing practice.

Natalie took the wordless remark with equally practised composure.

"He thinks it's fishy," answered Esmeralda. "He doesn't trust them farther than he can kick them, and that's why ..."

She glanced around to make sure that only the three girls would listen to her next words, with the effect that the three heads came as close as possible while they were walking toward the white tent.

"... that's why he wants us to go inside, find a good place, and call him with a bracelet. He wasn't sure whether he would be able to follow us under his Invisibility Cloak, but at least it would give him a place he knows, so he can apparate inside by himself."

Dominique giggled. "The girls' toilets are not a good place for that."

"Oh, really?"

Esmeralda stared at Dominique, her mind searching for a remark that would let Odile's replies pale in comparison. Next moment, she realized that the girl had confused her summoning routine which, until a few days ago, had taken place in the toilets of the St.-Nazaire building, with her father's visit in the same building.

"He apparated into the hall when he visited us," she snarled. "And he wants us to find something similar - a dark corner or whatever; he said that shouldn't be a problem in such a castle."

They stopped the discussion about this topic because they had reached the white tent, and other students kept pushing too close.

The fresh air's impact on appetite was apparently the same for all hundred-and-twenty students, so they had to stand in line for a little while. However, the desk service worked so fast that there was

hardly a moment at which the line would reach a stand-still.

Arriving at the top, they saw one reason why the MiraLuc people could manage at such a speed: the food they received - baguette, cheese, sausage, butter, etc. - came in packed junks rather than in slices ready to be put on a sandwich. Here again, MiraLuc emphasized the prospect of camping life and the need for doing things by yourself.

Odile stared at a large chunk of cheese in Esmeralda's hand. "By the time we're finished with the supper, there'll be a dozen fingers cut off in the camp."

"Then they'll sew them back on," replied Esmeralda unimpressed. "My father says, only a knife that isn't sharp is dangerous; if it's sharp enough it won't slip."

"So, says he? Seems as if he's got a reply on every question, eh? Or does it just appear that way when you're quoting him?"

Into Esmeralda's gasp, Dominique said, "A reply on every question isn't the worst. I know someone who has a reply to everything even though nobody had asked a question."

"Strange people you know, by all means."

Odile had given the response, reason enough for Esmeralda to lose her outrage at once and to chuckle. And besides, the smell from the food in their hands started to make their mouths watering.

Bolo's reaction was pretty much the same, but before they could start cutting pieces off the chunks of bread, cheese, or salami they had to invest a few more minutes into another visit to the white tent, and a few more yellow tags into camping furniture and tableware.

It was a feast for Bolo. Never before had the other three girls had the opportunity to feed the dog right during supper, and they took turns to let small - and not so small - pieces of food disappear in the dog's large mouth. Bolo could hardly cope with looking for the next tidbit, but at least he knew that expecting it from Esmeralda was a waste of time, because her donation would come at the end of the meal. She didn't stop the other girls; there was little risk that the bad habits from an open air supper on a campsite would swap into daily routine.

Right into her second baguette sandwich, she became aware that they hadn't signed a castle visit yet - when leaving the white tent, their minds had been too preoccupied with the food. After a moment in which a bad conscience was fighting greed and laziness, she stood up for another walk to the "mess tent," a name no one would use during the few days.

Bolo didn't even ask whether he could accompany her, a fact she registered with amused contempt.

She was too late for signing the first slot, as she noticed with slight surprise and a not-so-slight sting of guilt, in particular as the team who had signed first was neither the number twenty-one - her brother's tent - nor seventeen, which would have meant Chloé and her roommates.

She entered the number eleven in the second slot, which started a full hour after the first. Checking the time, she saw that the first shift was already running, and that the one she'd signed would give them enough time to finish their supper leisurely and then start a digestion walk to the castle. With this schedule, their participation in the campfire circle would not be at risk.

The signing trip to the white tent wasn't Esmeralda's last: when storing the food away, she noticed that they were short of a large, dog-proof box. Bolo had good manners and a good education, but certain temptations were just too much, among them sausage that was only protected by paper. Since it was her dog, Esmeralda was considered the natural candidate to march down again and trade another yellow tag for something better.

This settled, they told the dog to be a good boy and guard the tent until their return, then they wandered to the castle.

Being located in a river valley, the Castle MiraLuc had not been built as a natural stronghold, not like Carron Lough, for example, but the current owners had extended the former architecture by a moat that went around the entire complex, with just two drawbridges, a narrow one for pedestrians and a large one that looked strong enough to carry trucks. Cardboard signs in vivid colours directed the visitors from the camp across the large bridge into a castle yard and to a side entrance.

Entering a room that looked almost like a waiting room in a doctor's office, the girls found another sign telling them to wait until their guide would arrive. According to the scheduled time, this would be in less than five minutes.

Odile used the time to learn that the door which led inside was locked.

Less than a minute later, the door was opened from the other side, and a woman entered the room. She wore the same MiraLuc dress as all the other people in the camp, and a tag on her bosom revealed her name - Simone. Esmeralda guessed her at a few years younger than her parents.

"Hello, mesdemoiselles, my name is Simone, and I'm your guide in the next hour on your tour through the Castle MiraLuc. Please follow me inside."

They did. The woman locked the door behind them and guided them across a hall into another room.

Looking around, Esmeralda was reminded of a dressing room in a theater: there were four seats in front of four large mirrors, each of them illuminated by a modern replica of candlelights around the borderline of the mirror. On four desks before the mirrors were four piles of clothes.

"We want to do it in style," said the woman, "and this includes dressing the way young ladies in the seventeenth century would have been dressed" - she smiled - "except that these clothes match today's standards of hygiene, which means they're freshly cleaned."

Esmeralda stepped to one of the four desks and examined the pile more closely. She found a bulky dress in bottle green, a white shirt with a lace collar - and some more garments that could only be underwear, although of a style totally unfamiliar to Esmeralda.

"If you need a helping hand with these clothes - "

"No thanks," interrupted Odile coolly and to Esmeralda's deep relief. "We'll manage by ourselves."

"Then I'll expect you in five minutes' time outside." The woman stepped out and closed the door behind her.

"Blue? I'm not going to wear a blue dress!" Odile held up a piece from her own pile. "Who wants blue and can trade something that goes with my hair?"

Odile had freckles and a reddish hue in her hair, so her remark was understandable. But still more significant was a dramatic tone in her voice, and the fact that her behaviour didn't match her complaint, because she quickly hurried to the door and pressed her ear to it.

Looking around, Esmeralda noticed that the other two dresses were pink and cream-coloured. Probably the green one was best suited for Odile, and the blue one best matched Dominique's blonde hair, while her own dark hair would go along with nearly everything.

Odile looked up. "Sounds as if she's gone, but I don't trust these mirrors. Let's call him now - this room isn't a dark corner for sure, but who knows whether there's another chance soon, and besides ..."

Esmeralda stared at the mirrors. Yes, she'd heard about mirrors which looked like tinted but otherwise transparent glass panes from the other side. And this was a dressing room, and the

garments on the desk made clear what they were expected to do.

She reached to her ankle, under her socks, and pressed the button.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then, while Esmeralda expected any instant to see the familiar figure of her father, her phony buzzed.

She fetched it. "Yes?"

It was her father. "Esmeralda," he said, "the castle is protected against apparition, probably by one of our own Groucho devices. That means, I can't reach you just so. Where are you?"

"We're in a dressing room. There are clothes like in old times, and ..." Esmeralda explained what they were supposed to do, and then described the path they'd taken to that room.

She was still talking when the door opened and Simone, their guide, came in.

"Contemporary technology is of course off limits on our tour." The woman smiled. "This includes cellular phones of all kinds. Please finish your call and leave the thing here. And would you please now get dressed for the tour?"

* * *

When Harry pressed the button for the activated alarm on his new party without getting any effect, it took him only an instant to figure out why. Not for a moment did he think Ray's manufacturing had failed, and this left just one possible explanation: an apparition lock from Groucho Transports and Security.

The irony of the situation never reached his conscious mind. He wasted a few precious seconds on bitter frustration - about himself, not having foreseen this effect. Now, staring at a building whose massive doors were locked for him like for anyone else, he wondered how he could have forgotten such a possibility. He should have expected this kind of protection. He'd messed up again.

Then he came awake from the short reverie in missed opportunities and realized that he was fighting a battle, and that the enemy had scored a hit. It was all his instincts had needed to take over control.

He apparated home to Carron Lough from where he stood, hidden under his Invisibility Cloak. Reaching the storage room with his combat broomstick, the Steel Wing, took him another ten seconds. He wouldn't be able to cover himself *and* the full length of that broomstick with his Invisibility Cloak, but the light-eating surface of the broomstick's tail end was hard to notice, and could easily be confused with a bird.

He apparated back to the same spot from where he could watch the entrance through which the girls had entered the building. Then, with his voice fully under control and himself ready to jump in any direction, he called Esmeralda and told her why he was still outside.

He heard the MiraLuc woman's remark about *contemporary technology*, just before the connection was cancelled. Her voice had sounded friendly but determined, and in a different context, Harry would have smiled about this costume obsession driven to the extreme. In the current situation, though, and thanks to his newly acquired experience as a Sports teacher, the words "Get dressed" reached his mind as a message that said, "Get undressed first."

For a moment, he considered breaking in through the same door the girls had used; opening the lock should not be a problem for him - what he lacked in practice would be more than compensated by the glow of rage inside him. Then he saw a way how to do it without the risk of being detected instantly.

He accelerated the Steel Wing for the short flight to the windows in the building front, about as high

on the wall as would fit a first floor in a more modern building. Peeking in, it took him a moment to accommodate his eyes to the dim light inside, then he felt pretty sure that the hall he saw was just the one the girls had crossed on their way from the waiting room to the dressing room.

Balancing on his Steel Wing, keeping the unhidden tail to the building wall so that it would look like armouring, he had to wait. How long did it take a few girls to get into dresses of the seventeenth century?

It took long ... too long, he was watching the wrong spot inside. He decided to give it thirty more seconds and started to count down. There were twelve counts left when the right of the two doors in his view opened.

The girls came out first, followed by the woman. She closed and locked the door, then said something to the girls, and finally marched toward a staircase with the girls in her trail.

Harry could watch them climb the first steps before they disappeared from his view. Their clothes looked splendid and matched the environment, yes, but the movements he'd seen were still those of young girls from the twentieth century, slightly subdued by the unfamiliar surroundings.

He had to give them sufficient time to walk out of earshot; opening a lock with mental power wasn't as noiseless as he wished, not with his lack of practice. He used the time to touch down, dismount, and hide his Steel Wing by simply let it sink into the moat's muddy water. A single *Accio* spell would bring it back, and Harry felt grateful for the hourly roster, which had rendered this spot deserted now, at the beginning of the girls' tour.

Then, impatience getting the better over careful measuring of seconds, he went to the door and concentrated on the lock. It was state of the art, which meant there were only a few grams of metal to move, and the faint *Click* an instant later told him that he could enter.

Should he lock the door after him? He decided against it - in case of an emergency, the time required to open it again might make the difference between escape and detection.

In the hall, he listened for a moment. From somewhere upstairs, a voice could be heard. Then a sound from a door closing, and then it was quiet.

While waiting outside, Harry had already decided against following the group of girls plus guide while hiding under his Invisibility Cloak. He didn't consider them in immediate danger of being assaulted, and in addition, an Invisibility Cloak was a tricky tool not really suited for a pursuit under these conditions: an enemy who used apparition locks might as well use infrared detectors, and for them, body heat was the same with or without an Invisibility Cloak.

So he was more interested in an investigation of the room where the girls had changed clothes. The woman had locked it, but probably just for the girls' ease of mind, since they had to leave their belongings there. Opening this lock wasn't any different from opening the previous one.

About to pull down the handle, Harry stopped. If the room was what he expected it to be, there was a camera inside, and this camera would record the picture of a door opening and closing without someone coming into view. For anyone with magical skill, this picture would scream "Invisibility Cloak" too loud to be missed.

He went to the second door he'd seen while floating outside the window. An adjacent room might reveal a bit more. A short check at mental and acoustic level told him that there was no living soul inside. The door was locked as well, yet by now he felt truly fluent in the mental art of breaking locks. The fact that this lock also was state of the art struck him as a promising sign: who would waste money for that on a storage room?

It was pitch black inside. Just in time, Harry suppressed his initial impulse to feel for the switch on the wall to light the room. He wasn't used to what he was doing here, he was no burglar, should leave such tasks to people like Sirius ...

"*Lumos.*"

He'd whispered the spell, creating hardly more glow at the tip of his wand than from lighting a match, except that it was steady. He inched forward.

A tripod came into view. Stepping closer, moving his wand tip back and forth, Harry could recognize a box-like thing on top of the tripod. He made another step, then he saw the thinner tube with the lens at the end.

A camera.

In the first instant, it still looked as though the camera had been deposited there, in particular because the objective was directed toward a wall. A moment later, having examined a bit more of the room, Harry knew that this wall was made of glass and that the camera was one of several - in the dim light from his wand, he could recognize the outlines of two more tripods.

Then he detected the cable that went from the closest camera to the wall. Examining the plug, he knew - these cameras were connected to a computer-based network, what was called LAN for Local Area Network, and this meant that they transmitted their signal, rather than recording it inside the camera box.

And he'd made light in the coverage of these lenses. Either he didn't have to worry, because the signal was not recorded between visits to the adjacent dressing room, or his intruding was irrevocably recorded on some disk somewhere in this chateau.

Or, just like in the MABEL seminars, the signal was transmitted to a monitor, and someone was sitting there ...

The cameras wouldn't tell him. Suddenly, speed was all that mattered.

Harry went out of the room, back to the other door, and opened it. Sensing on the wall for a second or two, he found the switch and lighted the room. Then, with hardly more than a short glance at the dressing tables in front of mirrors, and the small piles of girls' clothes, he stepped back to the camera room, where he could see the same from the perspective and under the conditions of the cameras.

The glass wall had changed to a large pane of tinted glass. The room that was visible through it, now that he'd switched on the lights, looked a bit bluish, but otherwise clear and nearly undimmed. The view was unremarkable - until you remembered that the desk-like shapes in the foreground were dressing tables, and until you imagined the room full of girls undressing and donning costumes from a time when camcorders were not even imaginable.

Quite in contrast to one-way mirrors. The concept of Peeping Toms wasn't particularly new.

Harry fought a wave of nausea at the thought of the cameras and their purpose. In his Sports classes, three times a day he could have watched what they'd been recording; in a way it was harmless enough - until you remembered the intention.

Agnès' remark about the *meat exhibition* crossed his mind. Here, before his eyes was proof that she'd been right.

What else did it prove?

Was it enough? What would happen if he took his phony out and called the police to report a case

of child pornography?

They'd arrest himself in first place, and charge him for burglary. In the course of this investigation, all traces of child pornography would disappear, get lost, never having existed except in the fantasy of an unlawful intruder. Harry remembered too well how scandals with a seemingly waterproof collection of evidence and witnesses faded - first from the press, then from the public memory, and finally from the agenda of courts and prosecutors.

And besides, it didn't explain the suicides.

But he'd be damned if he just tiptoed out of the door he'd opened so unlawfully. These camcorders had recorded their last pictures, as far as he was concerned.

He pointed his wand at the innermost camera in the small room, sent a heating spell, and kept it working while he moved his wand up and down to hit all four cameras simultaneously. If there was really someone sitting at a monitor, the failure had to hit all devices at once.

The smell of burning plastics was the first sign. Shortly afterwards, smoke curled up, then small flames appeared on the cables that went into the cameras, while droplets of melting metal and cable fell to the floor, instantly raising more spots of smouldering fire.

The smell was almost unbearable. But it was the smoke that chased Harry out of the room. After a last glance to what minutes before had been masterpieces of microelectronics craftsmanship, he closed the door. After all, the girls should be able to use the room next door once more, and the smell in the hall was enough to raise alarm - if someone passed by, that was.

Nobody came downstairs. So the imagined person in front of a monitor didn't exist.

Harry wasn't electronics expert enough to estimate whether the damage he'd caused could have been the result of normal technical failure. He didn't think so, and even if it was possible, he didn't think the people in charge would believe that all four cameras had suffered from the same fault. This left ... what? Sabotage from outside?

The idea seemed equally unlikely, but perhaps only in Harry's eyes. And who knew, wasn't it possible that these still faceless people counted an accident with a teacher in a tree and an accident with pornographic equipment as two and two?

As long as they only suspected competition, Harry's own investigation was safe from being uncovered. He went outside without bothering to lock the door again.

A moment later, though, he returned to the outer door and locked it. It was a minor detail, but it would direct the suspicion toward the staff in the chateau - an effect that might be helpful in the next three days, during which he would guard the camp - more precisely, the chateau - as tightly as he could.

He got his Steel Wing out of the moat. Then he retreated to the tree line to watch the next events hidden as before, and to take action in the unlikely event that the fire he'd ignited would start spreading.

* * *

Cho leaned back in the fauteuil and let the brandy swirl in the balloon glass. It was no cognac, no armagnac either. It was a local product of which her hostess had said it could stand any competition except for the fame, and she'd been right.

The armchair in which Cho sat, her shoes stripped off and her short legs curled under herself, stood in the library of the wing in the Chateau Saumur that served as MABEL residence. *Local*, therefore, meant Saumur, a wine region not as famous as Beaujolais or Bordeaux but not totally unknown either. Well, and all you needed to cross the distance from wine to brandy was a distillery.

Her hostess knew one. This came as no surprise from a person known as Marie-Claire Comtesse de Varanier, the resort manager of the Saumur seminar in the MABEL organisation. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Cho had tried to address her as "Comtesse," only to receive a reply like "Madame le Directeur General." Since then, they called each other by first names.

Marie-Claire was an ex-Muggle, a nouveau-Magical. Although not an alumnus of a MABEL seminar, had she nonetheless been converted by the same force as any successful seminar member: the High Priestess. It was better that way for a MABEL resort manager.

She had achieved this position almost by coincidence, driven by an ambition not unlike that of Reuben Timball, except that in her case the goal had been the location rather than the purpose. The story had taken place in the early days of the MABEL organization.

Cho, at that time in search of places not quite as secluded as in later years but in any case separated, had seen pictures of the Chateau Saumur. The impressive building struck a chord in her, and she investigated a bit in that direction, only to learn that the chateau was public property and used for a few small museums. This wasn't exactly what she'd been looking for, and so it seemed as if the idea could be checked off the list.

However, in the course of her investigation, Cho had come in touch with a Comtesse de Varanier, for whom the Chateau Saumur was not an idea but an obsession. Coming from a considerably smaller chateau, the comtesse had dreamed of reigning the once most luxurious chateau in France, owned by the Ducs d'Anjou. Part of her dream had been the rebuilding of the wings that had collapsed centuries ago, with the effect that the former owners abandoned the chateau to let it rot away and be used in the remaining part as prison, barracks, fortress, and finally as a tourist attraction that held a museum for decorative arts and another one for horsemanship in its walls.

The two women, comparable in age, had met. The comtesse - a title which translated to countess in English - had told Cho a bit about her dreams, speaking lightly and with enough self-mockery to make such ridiculous ideas entertaining. This changed abruptly when Cho offered her the reign of a freshly built and financed wing, perhaps not quite as big as what had collapsed in the seventeenth century, but large enough to accommodate a MABEL seminar. In return, the comtesse had to get the permission - for the rebuilding as well as for the ownership being kept in the hands of the MABEL organization.

The house of Varanier had connections, no question. Even so, Comtesse Marie-Claire had to stress them *and* bribe a few people before she came back to Cho with the best she could offer: an agreement under the condition that the ruling power in the new walls had to be a French person. And besides, these new walls had to match the style and material of the old ones as much as feasible, which would make the project about three times as expensive as estimated.

What were a few millions, seen in the light of the *Great Plot*? Cho didn't ask the question aloud, and someone as obsessed as Marie-Claire wouldn't waste a second on a closer examination of Cho's motives.

Within the record time of two years, the first step in the rebuilding project delivered a habitable building. Currently the project went through its third step - at a lower pace than before, but as far as the Comtesse de Varanier was concerned, it could go on until the complete north-east wing was rebuilt to its original state. The chateau had been originally built as a fortress in the Hundred Years' War, so in her eyes there was nothing wrong in rebuilding it for another hundred years - this time with the former enemy, the English, as the financier.

"... didn't know him before he'd earned his *de* in front of the family name. I'm pretty sure he got his title the same way we got our permission for this building here - with the right amount of money to

the right amount of people."

Marie-Claire, Comtesse de Varanier, laughed at her words, while her face showed an expression only high nobility could manage: light self-mockery, for the need to use such questionable methods, disrespect for ordinary people who'd managed to accumulate money, and utter contempt for those who spent said money on buying into the lower ranks of aristocracy.

"His father was a small merchant - ran a shop for something or other, as I've heard. Lucien showed a sense for business, very much so, actually; just look at how he used his own name for the company. So it's first-generation wealth, and they still have way to go before they'll manage the most important quality of a pure-blood French aristocrat, which is wasting money in large quantities ..."

Marie-Claire smiled at these words, at the same time not leaving any doubt that this was exactly her own goal in life.

"... but he's truly *nouveau-riche*, showing bad taste whenever you offer him an opportunity ... Agreed, not in his company's collection, and not in his personal appearance either, so much I'll grant him, but in other details. This moat around their residence, for example, I mean, really!"

What Marie-Claire called *residence* was otherwise known as the Chateau MiraLuc, and the man she was talking about was publicly known as Lucien de Mirault, head of the Mirault family, founder of MiraLuc, and baron since recently.

"So you've met him?" asked Cho.

"It's unavoidable." Marie-Claire wrinkled her delicate nose. "Several times a year there are public events where you have no other choice than to appear and sing your song. But to give you another example of his attitude - when he was awarded his title, he celebrated the appellation with a glamorous ball, and he really had the cheek to send me an invitation."

A chuckle came from the armchair with the third person present in the room. It was Remus Lupin, currently human and basically waiting for his guard shift at the Chateau MiraLuc, which he would start later in the night and in his wolf shape.

Marie-Claire turned to him. In a totally different tone, as if confessing a silliness, she explained, "I would have liked to come, really; I'm not quite the snob I try to present. But there are certain traditions and certain rules that ought to be kept. In his case," she added at noticing Remus' questioning look, "he should have sent a letter from his *maître d'affaires* to my *maître d'affaires*, asking whether it was advisable to send such an invitation."

"I wouldn't dream of inviting you, but even less I'd dare ignoring you," said Remus in mock quotation.

"Exactly." Marie-Claire sent him a smile of seemingly borderless admiration for having found such a short expression for such a complex issue.

"What's your impression of him personally?" asked Cho, who knew from experience that she had to put conversations with the comtesse on a short leash, unless she had all day long for digressing in any direction.

"Not my taste," replied Marie-Claire. Men, as she had explained to Cho at a previous occasion, could well have a place in her bed though not in her life. "But then," she added as if in an afterthought, "he wasn't interested anyway, so we parted in mutual disregard."

"Is he gay?"

The question had come from Remus, in a tone as though hinting that there could hardly be any other explanation. To some degree, it was the continuation of the noncommittal flirtplay from some

moments ago, but his question bore a nucleus of truth: while the comtesse wasn't as generously gifted with genuine beauty as Cho, she could play her cards extremely well, and she had something to make Cho envious any time of the day: longer legs.

"He isn't your run-of-the-mill fairy for sure. But I wouldn't exclude it altogether - if you aren't older than sixteen, you have his full attention, and I couldn't figure out to which side he's inclined more, neither from hearsay nor from my own observations."

When arriving in the Chateau Saumur, Cho hadn't explained her issue in words as clear as those. On the other hand, she had told Marie-Claire that it had to do with the school in Brest and the camp in the Loire valley, so the topic hadn't been touched out of the blue. Still, hearing Marie-Claire's description, Cho inhaled audibly, and from Remus' chair came a similar sound of confirmed suspicion.

"Yes," said Marie-Claire into the moment of silence, "he's a pedophile no doubt, but here again he's not the average pederast - and there are a few in French aristocracy, so trust my judgement." She grimaced briefly. "He's obsessed ... the annual camp for the newcomers in the Brest school is the best example. He does everything for them - yes, of course it's good advertising for his outdoor stuff, but you should listen to the children's tales afterwards, then you know that it's more than a marketing gag. In his case - "

Cho interrupted her, driven by the question as much as by the bad habit. "Is he a pederast at all?"

Marie-Claire arched her perfectly painted eyebrows. "How should I know? I'd guess so, but only because it's what you have to expect in such a case. Although, in his case there's this special element which might change the common habit to anything you can imagine, or nothing at all. You could ask psychoanalysts, but they'd tell you the same, only in more words and worse truisms, which I try to avoid."

Cho had spent a lot of energy in the past seconds to hold her temper, fully aware that this was Marie-Claire's revenge for having been interrupted in mid-sentence. Now, noticing the break in the tale - a signal that the punishment had been short - Cho didn't waste any time on being grateful.

"What special element?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Marie-Claire's smiled in mock surprise. "Lucien Mirault had two children, a boy and a girl. At the age of sixteen or so, the boy cut off from home, never to be seen again." She paused, giving the opportunity for comments, or waiting for the obvious question.

Remus asked it. "And the girl?"

"The world collapsed for her, or so they said. Maybe she got a letter from her brother - at any rate, some weeks afterwards, when it was clear that he wouldn't return, she committed suicide ... An overdose of sleeping pills, and that was that."

21 - Confrontations

Carlos had earned his first reward for services provided to a girls tent. Naturally, his choice had fallen on tent number seventeen, and so he'd finally met Chloé's roommates - Aimée, Fabienne, and Ariane, an indistinguishable bunch of giggleheads, as far as Carlos was concerned. Even so, he'd have carried their water anyway - and truth be told, Chloé with her family background would have had no trouble carrying it by herself - but he saw no reason to reject the payment when it was offered: a black tag, something that was only found on tag rings for girls. In the big white tent, he could trade it for two red ones, meaning two sweets.

Or he could keep it and pay someone else for some other services, although he wouldn't know which. Sweets sounded just right, and the exchange ratio too.

Carrying the water had only been a minor part of his service work. He'd spent quite some time in fetching and delivering the tent's daily quota in firewood for today's campfire, which would take place in the evening. For Carlos, who considered the products and services of Groucho Transports and Security as part of everyday life, there was no question that two adults with a portable portkey gate would have finished the task in hardly more than five minutes, but he agreed with the way it was done here. Watching students handle the three feet long pieces was fun, and having them on his own shoulder, smelling the sun-soaked wood, feeling the cracked bark cut softly into his skin, was even more fun.

Arriving at his own tent, he found Serge moving outside. The bulky figure looked as sweaty as Carlos felt.

Serge stopped in his track and stared at him. "Where have you been?"

"I've been doing social work, and now I could do with a swim. What about you?"

"Social work, huh?" Serge seemed not having heard the question at all. "Must have been the tent your girl is in, I bet it was."

"Yep, and it earned me a black tag. Ever seen any of them? It gets you two red ones."

"Black tag? There aren't any black ones."

"Yes, there are, but only girls have got them. Look here!" Carlos held his reward up, careful to keep out of Serge's reach. He already regretted having mentioned his payment, but at least he wasn't stupid enough to give it out of his hands, not to Serge.

For an instant, it looked as if next moment Serge was going to try and take it by force, but they both knew that Carlos was too fast to let it happen that way.

"What a crap - two red ones for a black one." Serge almost spat the words out. "Why don't they use two red ones in first place?"

"Because anyone could get sweets with red ones, even the girls themselves. But boys haven't got black ones of their own, and girls can't trade them. So it needs a cooperation, working for them, and that's what I did. And now I'm going for a swim."

Carlos wanted to go inside the tent to change into his swimsuit, but Serge blocked the entrance - fully on purpose, as it seemed.

Carlos said, "Let me go inside."

"I've been working four *our* tent."

"So?" Carlos looked uncomprehending, which wasn't really true. "Then why don't you join me swimming?"

"I did as much as you did, or maybe even more, but nobody offered me a tag. One of the two red ones you got is rightfully mine."

Carlos shook his head. "No way. If you worked for our tent today, tomorrow it'll be me or Mathieu or Roland, and you can go and earn your own black tag, and keep it all to yourself."

"Tomorrow, yes - tomorrow's another day, isn't that a Spanish proverb?" Serge gave him a sneer. "But now it's today, and if you want to go inside, first you have to pay me a red one."

Carlos sighed. "You've been looking for a fight all the time, haven't you? This story about half of my reward being yours is just pretense."

"No pretense. The fight was due anyway; this is something else. It's about payment for my work." Serge's smirk changed to an expression of righteousness. "I didn't say I want it all, only half of it, just what's my share."

"Your share?" Carlos held his temper and swallowed the remark about the share he thought appropriate for this bonehead in front of him. "Listen, let's go to the swimming pool, there's room enough for the fight you need so urgently, and if you win, you get the full tag - what about that?"

"No. We'll see what I get after I've won the fight, but for now, it'll cost you a red one to get inside ... And if I have to tell you again, it'll cost you two red ones."

Carlos felt trapped. Giving in would mean being bullied all the time and at every opportunity, a prospect he wasn't ready to accept. Fighting and losing meant pretty much the same, except that it would hurt more. Fighting and winning - a goal within reach, for all Carlos knew about the skill he'd achieved from his father - added the need to watch his back not only from some unknown, evil people but also from his stupid and dangerous roommate.

The last alternative, avoiding the confrontation now and waiting for another opportunity to reach his swimsuit, was dismissed at once; Carlos' own pride forbade such a cheap escape. Besides, probably Serge was stubborn enough to guard the entrance all day long.

"Now?"

Carlos' father had told him the two golden rules about fights. The first was, don't start a fight if you aren't willing to come out winner. The second rule said that, contrary to what you could watch in the movies, the first real hit settled the fight in favour of the one who'd scored. Aside from that, Harry had taught his son mostly defense, but that was enough, for Serge would be the attacker anyway.

Carlos stepped forward.

Serge had the presence of mind not to try any wrestling grips, or the typical pushing and pulling a boy his size would normally use against someone like Carlos with his slim build. Apparently, Carlos' warning about his aikido skill had been taken seriously. Serge's stance and his balled fists made clear: he saw his chance in boxing.

The idea was correct, and in an infight, Carlos would have been in trouble, provided Serge took care of his cover. But Serge couldn't wait for his first strike any more than he'd been able to wait for a better place.

The straight punch from Serge's right fist would have done the job, had Carlos' head still been where it was an instant earlier. Hitting empty air pulled Serge's body forward and opened his wide open cover still more, at least where it mattered.

Carlos made his right hand a spade and drove it into Serge's solar plexus.

The boy coughed. Then, opening and closing his mouth like a fish on dry ground, he sank down on his knees. With his hands pressing his stomach, he tried to catch breath. After a few seconds, short moaning sounds indicated that he was making progress.

The entrance to the tent came open, and Carlos could see two faces - Mathieu looking scared, and Roland showing a mix of satisfaction and worry.

"Wait ..." Serge could only whisper. "Till I ... can ... move again."

That was exactly what Carlos had feared - the larger boy looking for revenge, a time bomb right next to him in the tent. He had to settle the issue now, while he was still in the lead.

A scene resurfaced in his memory, a scene that had taken place in the school park, between his father and a mean old teacher who was out of combat since then.

With two steps, Carlos stood behind Serge. He bent forward and pressed his fingertips into the slight encaving behind Serge's earlobes. "Want me to make your lights go out?"

"What - "

"If I press hard enough, you're unconscious in five seconds. Want me to do it?"

"No!"

From his position, Carlos couldn't see his opponent's face, but the fearful tone in Serge's voice told him that his threat had been acknowledged. This was just good, because Carlos didn't think he knew where exactly his pressing would block the blood support to Serge's brain.

He stepped back and then around to stand in front of Serge. "I've warned you, wiseass. But some people prefer to learn the hard way. Well, there's another proverb: pain is a good teacher."

"Yes, but I still think half of your black tag should be rightfully mine."

Carlos felt amazed at the sight of stubbornness in grand style, or was it stupidity?

"If I give you the full tag, will you do the work tomorrow too?"

"Er ... yes."

There was undeniably relief in Serge's voice, and Carlos had a fair guess what it meant. Afraid or not, beaten or not, this boy saw a chance to keep his face in an acceptable way, and would hopefully give it a rest.

Carlos fished in his pocket for the black tag and offered it to his opponent. "Here - we have a deal."

* * *

Esmeralda sat in the grass, legs crossed, Bolo to her side, and watched the scene in front of her. A boy had just finished his work for their tent and now got his reward, a black tag, from Odile. He also got a beaming smile from her, apparently inspiring him as much as the tag. Esmeralda, in sharp contrast, had a scowl on her face, a scowl on her soul, and little inclination to change either.

The boy wasn't to blame. His name was Olivier so-and-so; he belonged to a tent in the neighbor island and had been talked into delivering the wood quota for their own tent by Odile - after Esmeralda's brother had failed to show up for this task. The neglect from Carlos was one of the reasons for Esmeralda's bad mood, so watching the boy did nothing to improve matters.

But it had started earlier - the evening before, to be precise, resembling very much a chain reaction in which the effect grew stronger from one step to the next.

Her father's inability to reach them inside the Chateau MiraLuc had been the launching event. Already feeling disappointed, and humiliated in front of her friends, hearing the authoritative tone

from that MiraLuc woman during their tour had struck the wrong chord in Esmeralda. Lacking the nerve for open rebellion, she had sulked silently, only to feel humiliated by herself too.

The tour had been boring, absolutely boring. Who cared for ancient furniture ... ancient carpets ... ancient pictures ... ancient silverware? The only part that might have been interesting, an exercise in menuet dancing, was cancelled when some uproar rose in the chateau, apparently because of something that had started burning in the basement, close to where they'd changed dresses. The stink had been so bad, they'd wanted to change clothes in their tent, only the woman hadn't allowed them to leave with the ancient dresses still on.

Afterwards, Esmeralda had gotten her share of remarks from the other girls, of course with Odile orchestrating the chorus. Almost too late, Esmeralda had remembered that a detailed knowledge about apparition locks, manufactured exclusively by Groucho Transports and Security, was totally out of place for the girl she was supposed to be, and her suspicion that the fire and the damage in the chateau were the results of her father's work had met sneering replies from Odile - especially after her father had called Esmeralda to ask about the tour while not losing a single word about what he'd done instead during that time.

The singing in the circle around the campfire should have eased Esmeralda's mood. But she'd still been mad, which cast a shadow over the first songs, which heated up her anger toward herself, which spoiled the next songs ... Returning to their tent, she'd felt like crying. Only a walk to the riverbanks, with Bolo and no one else, sitting there for a quarter of an hour, had restored her self-esteem sufficiently.

This morning, when Carlos didn't show up and Odile had said, "Your family's just good for a bunch of empty promises, eh?" Esmeralda had kept her mouth shut. Silence was her only weapon, rather second-rated, in her opinion - except that it seemed to bother the other girl more than any reply.

Well, yes, keeping her mouth shut was about the only thing Odile couldn't manage, and she knew it. But it wasn't enough to draw a smile from Esmeralda.

The boy named Olivier strolled off. Odile watched him leave for a second, then turned and walked toward the spot where Esmeralda and Bolo were resting. Seeing her come closer, Esmeralda stiffened inwardly while anticipating the next round of snide remarks.

"Olivier's willing to do the woodwork for us tomorrow too."

"Okay."

Only after a second, in which she could note a flash of barely suppressed impatience crossing Odile's face, and listen to the brief snort that seemed a specialty of Paris-bred people in moments of anger, Esmeralda became aware that this remark had been the unspoken question whether they should accept the offer, for example because chances were little that a certain Carlos might do it, and perhaps for free.

"But tomorrow's payment won't come from my tag ring. Someone else has to pay him for a change - you, for instance."

"Okay."

"Maybe you should let me do the transfer. If Olivier has to see your face, he might ask for two tags."

Esmeralda saved any reply even as short as the previous ones. She fumbled a black tag from her own ring and held it up.

Odile took it. "There are people easier to insult than you. You can thank your dog - if it wasn't for

Bolo here, I would have added a kick or two, just to get something I'd call a response from you."

Esmeralda, who already felt her strained neck from looking upward to the girl in front of her, lowered her head and looked at the German shepherd. "Thanks, Bolo."

Odile threw her arms up as if in desperation. Noticing Bolo's watchful stare at this movement, obviously unaware that Bolo was only on the lookout for tennis balls thrown, Odile dropped on her knees and took the dog's head in both hands.

"No, no, I won't do it, I won't touch your girl, but maybe I can coax you into biting her for me, what do you think? Would you consider this? There's a nice piece of sausage in store for you. No need to cut deep, just so that she squeaks."

Bolo rolled onto his back and drew all four legs into the air, thereby exposing his belly for a fondling. This had to be done with care, especially around his prominent genitals. Avoiding a painful push was easy, avoiding an untimely arousal a bit more difficult.

"That's what I needed," muttered Odile, although not hesitating to fondle the dog. "I ask you to do a bit of shepherding, and what happens? You show me your privates. Somehow that just fits into the pattern of that family lately, although this special offer - "

Odile stopped in her speech as well as in her movements, because Bolo had turned around to lie on his legs, ears erect, ready to sit or stand or jump.

An instant later, both girls could see - and hear - the reason for the dog's sudden alertness. A group of four adults was coming around the corner. One of them was Alain, the young man who ran the camp together with Juliette. The other three were two men and a woman, all of them unknown to Esmeralda.

When the four people noticed the dog, they stopped in their tracks for a moment, with signs of astonishment on their faces. The only exception was Alain; he'd seen the dog before, and now he seemed a bit uneasy, as if he'd preferred Bolo were hidden in the tent.

Then one of the two men stepped forward.

For Esmeralda, who watched them with the same unblinking stare as her dog, except for reasons of guilt rather than guard, there was no doubt that this man had the saying. Maybe not officially, maybe he'd leave it to Alain to give orders here in the camp, but Esmeralda had had enough opportunities to watch people in the Groucho Enterprise when her mother was around - how they trailed a step behind, how they almost imperceptibly related every movement to the leader.

The man stopped at a distance that hinted experience with dogs, or simply respect, at any rate outside the invisible line at which an intruder would make Bolo's ears go flat.

"What dog is this?" the man asked quietly and to no one in particular.

"He's mine," answered Esmeralda.

Her reply instantly put her into the focus of the other two adults. For a very short moment, the woman looked as if she was going to tell Esmeralda something about how to answer a bit more politely, by standing up and adding a "Monsieur" at the end. But it didn't happen, no more than anyone in Groucho would interrupt a conversation of Esmeralda's mother without being asked for.

"That much I might have figured out by myself," said the man, "just from looking at how close you two are sitting together. How did he come here?"

"Through the gate, together with us."

Esmeralda would have liked to add, "how else?" Failing that, she would have liked to give the answer with an expression that hinted on a stupid question about the obvious. But she couldn't, and the fact that perhaps it wasn't obvious at all was only part of the reasons. The man didn't sound threatening, but then, his remark hadn't been an attempt of joking either, because there was no smile anywhere close to his face. He didn't even look directly at Esmeralda, or so it felt - yes, he looked at her, but he seemed not to register what his eyes were telling him, as if the picture of her sitting in the grass reached his mind as something totally different. It gave Esmeralda an uneasy feeling. She wished her hand were close enough to the bracelet that she could have pressed the alarm button any time.

"That's strange. I had expected the gates being open only for you, the students. Wasn't there a guide at the gate that told you so?"

Esmeralda nodded. "Yes, there was. But it wasn't true, Bolo went through just like us."

"So Bolo is the name of this dog, who can't be stopped from escorting his young lady. And your name?"

"Esmeralda, Monsieur ... Esmeralda Chang."

At these words, the second man in the group looked at a clipboard, obviously checking her name in a list. He seemed to have found it, because next moment, he leaned close to the other man and murmured something Esmeralda couldn't understand.

The man in charge listened, then said, "So you're well protected here, Esmeralda, and in more than one regard, as it seems. And your brother, does he protect you too?"

Esmeralda stared in bafflement, not knowing what to answer.

"Somehow, that rings a bell, a very distant one. I wonder ... is all this protection healthy?" The man had continued speaking without waiting for an answer from Esmeralda; he seemed almost absent-minded, using her only as something on which a memory condensed to a picture like steam to a drop of water.

Suddenly he looked directly at her, for the first time in this conversation. "But then, you seem to have a firm grasp on reality, so there's little risk, I'd guess." He almost smiled. "I'm sure you told me the truth about how you and the dog arrived here, but I'm equally sure you left out a few details of how this took place. This tells me that your head isn't lost in the clouds. Am I right, Esmeralda?"

"Erm, yes, Monsieur."

"In this case, did you already think about how you and the dog might return?"

Into Esmeralda's flabbergasted stare, he added, "Only joking. Enjoy your stay in this camp, and let me assure you, the guide who told you this particular non-truth won't be there when you arrive at the return gate."

Then man turned and walked in the direction of the next tent, the other two unknown people in his trail. Alain lingered still a moment to give Esmeralda a smile and the thumbs-up sign before he turned to follow them.

Esmeralda watched the group leave. She hadn't returned Alain's smile, still busy recovering from the encounter and not prone to automatic smiles anyway, but mostly because Alain's own smile had been rather unconvincing.

A second later, Natalie and Dominique came out of the tent. Apparently they'd waited inside, staying hidden as long as this embarrassing interrogation about the scene at the portkey gate went

on.

"Who was this?" asked Natalie.

"Monsieur MiraLuc personally, I guess." Odile snorted. "He didn't bother to introduce himself. So either he's an asshole with bad manners, or he's so important that he thinks everybody should know who he is - "

"Or he's a coward," finished Dominique the sentence. "He didn't come within reach of Bolo, did he?"

"No," replied Esmeralda. "But that's just common sense, especially if he knows a bit about dogs, and I'm sure he does. I don't think he's a coward."

"Me neither," confirmed Odile. Then, with a look at Esmeralda, she added, "And here's someone else who meets the qualification as badly as you can imagine. The way she stood his questions - rather cool, really! A few minutes ago, I wanted to kill her, but now I can see, this would have been a mistake - aside from the question how far I'd come, of course."

Natalie and Dominique rewarded the joke with the expected laughter, while Esmeralda just stared, still suspicious of how Odile might continue.

"So after all, maybe this family's really more than hot steam and thin air." Odile's inviting smile seemed to signal that her last remark was supposed to take back a previous one about the same topic, only from a different opinion.

"We can find out together," replied Esmeralda and reached for her party. "I'm going to call my - erm, I mean, someone who'll be quite interested in hearing about this man and what he said."

She gestured to Odile. "Let's do it together. He'll ask me for a verbal report, and I'm not sure if I can remember all the man said."

She pressed a button and held the party to her ear. Looking at the other girls, she said, "Except for what he said about the guide. There I can quote him literally, and I don't think I will forget it soon."

* * *

If you want to hide something, place it where everybody can see it. The advice from Poe's story about the purloined letter was well known to Harry, and he'd followed it more than once with great success. Yet he still felt astonished at the extent to which the statement was true, especially when using the method with a dash of imagination - yes, and magic.

The object to hide was he himself, during his guard at the Chateau MiraLuc. He didn't trust his Invisibility Cloak any longer, not after the people inside had encountered something they'd call sabotage, the same people who'd given proof that they employed state-of-the-art technology as needed. And so Harry had decided to use an ability he'd acquired when his children were small.

He was a pony, calmly standing under a single tree in the middle of the small meadow behind the chateau. Everybody could see him, even now, after dusk had fallen. He calculated that anyone in the chateau who might wonder where this pony came from would attribute it to the camp, while someone from the camp wouldn't know better anyway.

From his position, he could see every person walking from the chateau to the camp, or vice versa. A pony was no cat, but he could see much better than in his human shape, while the loss of colours after sundown didn't matter at all: ponies weren't good at recognizing colours. In contrast, their ears were excellent.

All these measures were of course relative. His fellow guard could probably outperform him in both vision and hearing. It was Almyra, currently in her shape as an owl. This night bird was simply

perfect for the task - considerably better than the dog Almyra could offer as well. People noticed dogs, for example because they moved at the same level, rather than twenty yards above their heads.

Later in the course of Harry's shift, Almyra would be replaced by Rahewa, Harry's goddaughter just five years his junior. Rahewa could only be a dog, and the same was true for Remus, Harry's old teacher and friend and Almyra's husband, who would take over after Harry's shift. They ran their guards in overlapping patterns, thereby avoiding the short periods of inattention during the changes of a complete team, with four hours per shift in favour of some decent sleep. None of them could have slept soundly with a duty roster of two hour shifts.

From the camp, Harry could hear the sound of singing voices. The camp fires were burning, three circles of singing students just like the evening before, but today the songs sounded better, and more vivid. It had taken them one evening to learn a few songs and shake off the hesitancy when asked to sing really loud. Today, they adapted new songs as presented by the lead singer, the same who played the guitar or banjo, with amazing speed.

There was no coming and going from the circles. The visiting tours to the castle had been completely cancelled, officially with respect to the damage from the fire and for reasons of security. Harry wondered what the true reason might be. Did these people think the next act of sabotage would occur otherwise? Did they feel uncovered? Or was it simply impossible to get a quick replacement for the damaged cameras? Because so much was certain, nobody in the castle needed visiting students if not for the recordings.

Since his discovery, Harry felt every hour that the camp went on like a pain that could only be sustained by keeping the castle under a tight watch around the clock. He wasn't ready to believe that the recordings were the only hidden purpose - there had to be more, there had to be something which eventually led to a boy committing suicide.

The exact cause-and-effect sequence was as unknown to him as on the day he'd agreed to his undercover task. But it didn't matter much; as Paul Sillitoe had said, once this nest was smoked out, the suicides would stop.

Concerning the way how to catch the people who'd installed the cameras, Harry had already developed a general idea. This idea, extremely promising otherwise, had one shortcoming: he had to avoid any sign that the people inside were under surveillance.

But then, Harry wasn't ready to avoid attention *at any cost*. Unfortunately he had no clear idea of how to steer a course between these two conflicting goals. What if it looked as if one or several students were lured inside?

A single voice could be heard in the camp, speaking rather than singing. Even with his current set of large ears, Harry was unable to understand the words, but he knew what it meant. The three circles would gather to sing a last song, or maybe two, and this would mark the end of the evening for the students. Probably it was close to midnight; in his pony shape, Harry had little sense of the passing of time.

A sound from the chateau made him turn his ears and concentrate his listening toward the building. Someone closed a door and started to walk along the path to the camp. Moments later, this someone came into view.

It was a woman. She walked with a determined stride.

Harry wasn't sure whether she'd glanced in his direction, and if so, whether she'd noticed him, the pony under the tree. At any rate, she didn't stop, didn't even stare at this unexpected animal. Perhaps it meant that she was no member of the household and stable staff in the chateau.

In this case ... Harry's instincts, unchanged even in his four-legged shape, told him that a few minutes from now he'd be forced to answer the question that had not been asked yet: how far to go in avoiding attention.

As soon as the woman was out of sight, Harry changed back into his human shape. He had to strike alarm by calling Remus, and as a pony, he was unable to make a phone call with his porty. But first he had to send Almyra the owl as his airborne spy on that woman.

He walked a few steps toward the tree in which he knew Almyra sitting high on a branch. When he was sure she'd seen him coming closer, he apparated onto another branch in the same tree, lower because the branches at Almyra's level wouldn't carry his weight.

In a voice little more than a whisper, he asked, "Almyra, can you hear me?"

A brief low-key hooting was the answer. As long as he didn't ask for it, Almyra wasn't going to change her shape just for receiving an instruction, because it would have meant changing her position as well - to a branch strong enough for her human body.

"Please follow that woman and watch from above what she's doing. I'm not sure yet what I'll do if she really goes into the camp, but I'm going to call Remus so he can position himself somewhere close, probably just inside the tree line. Okay?"

The only answer was an almost inaudible swoosh; then, for a short moment, Harry saw a black shadow against the sky that shimmered through the twigs: the owl was gaining height.

He pulled his porty out of his pocket and pressed the button for Remus, who was in the Chateau Saumur. Around midnight, he still should be awake, enjoying the company of two women in addition to Rahewa, his adopted daughter.

"Yes?"

"Remus, it's me; I'm okay, and Almyra too. I just sent her on air patrol to follow a woman that left the chateau in the direction of the camp a few minutes ago. I'm not sure yet how to respond, but I'd like you being close to the camp."

"Doing what?"

Remus' voice indicated neither protest nor unwillingness; his question simply meant he wasn't any wiser, not right after having heard the news, and wanted to know what ideas Harry could offer.

"Staying hidden, and be ready to answer the phone."

Which meant, Remus had to keep his human shape, rather than being a dog, which he preferred in such situations. Thinking about a dog at the camp reminded Harry of a real dog, and at this instant, the forerunners of an idea crept into his mind. He was about to end the conversation when Remus' voice stopped him.

"Rahewa wants to know what she's supposed to do."

Wait in the wings, was the answer Harry had on his lips, but he dismissed it at once. Rahewa wasn't the teammate to wait patiently and feel glad for not being called. And besides, he might be forced to leave his position at the chateau any time.

"Be ready to take over guard duty here any time. She can do it ready on call where she's now, or she can come here, except that she has to do it now, while it's still - "

"Save your breath, Harry." A chuckle came through the speaker. "She's gone off right from the chair. I'll take the time and empty my glass first; anything else would be a crime. Expect me to be in

position two minutes from now ... Over."

Any moment now, Harry would see a black-coloured dog strolling on the ground, sniffing here and there, waiting for a sign from him that revealed his position. But he hadn't even these few seconds to waste - the idea had formed in his mind, and the distance from the Chateau MiraLuc to the camp was too short for any further delay. He pressed the button for Esmeralda's party.

"Yes?"

"Hi, sweetie, it's me. Are you and your friends still awake?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone? Can we talk?"

"Yes, we'd just reached the tent after coming from the camp fire. Why?"

"Can you go inside and then switch on the loudspeaker so your friends can listen to what I'm saying without anyone else listening?"

"Er, yes ... Just a second."

Harry could hear the noises of four girls entering a tent, while a dog was eager to join, causing half-suppressed shouts to get out of someone's feet. Already in Esmeralda's last words, he'd heard the excitement and anticipation of what he might say.

Meanwhile, the expected black dog had reached the spot at the foot of Harry's tree and, after a short glance upward, had sat down there.

"Ssssst! ... Up with you."

The hissed whisper had been enough. The dog moved further into the underbrush, obviously to be hidden from view when changing shape. Seconds later, Rahewa stood on a branch almost at level with his own, only at the other side of the tree trunk. He just had time to greet her with a hand raised briefly, then Esmeralda could be heard again.

"Okay, we're inside. What's up?"

"Speaker on?"

"Yes, all four of us can hear you. Five, with Bolo."

"Good. Hello, girls, there isn't much time, so listen carefully. A woman's on her way from the Chateau MiraLuc to the camp. I don't know what it is, but I don't like it, not that late. I want all of you to be around the corner where the path from the chateau reaches the camp - together with Bolo and just as though you'd walk the dog before going to sleep. But you should do it with the party in your hand, Esmeralda. It might look as if you were sent on a last patrol by the teacher - or maybe the other way around, you were allowed to walk the dog. All right so far?"

"Uhm, yes."

"When the woman arrives, you say hello and ask whether you can help, and you look as curious as four girls who want to know what this woman is doing late in the night. I guess Odile's best for this role."

"Me too," said a voice that had to be the girl from Paris.

"Keep the connection open, so I can listen to what's going on. If you talk with me in the woman's presence, address me as Monsieur Jeunet. And now get out and start your dog walk, so you're in place when the woman arrives."

While noises in the earpiece were telling Harry about four girls plus dog on their way, Rahewa

leaned closer and whispered, "Not bad. Now that Bolo is publicly noticed, we can let him get in the way whenever it suits us."

"Yeah, maybe so," replied Harry. "But this was just the only idea I could manage in such a short time."

"I like your ideas best if you had no time at all to think them through." After a second, Rahewa added, "And none to inform Cho either."

Harry shrugged, a reaction invisible to Rahewa. "That reminds me," he said then, "can you call Remus and tell him what's going on? If I can say I was in phony touch with the girls for every single second of the stunt, I might get away with it unhurt."

For a short while, Harry could hear in his party the murmurs of the four girls, as well as the sounds of other students on their way to the tents. His motionless waiting was interrupted by Rahewa's request to reach a branch where both of them could stand side by side and listen to the party. Then Esmeralda's voice could be heard saying, "We can see someone coming that way."

"Start behaving as if you were reporting to Monsieur Jeunet."

With a slight change in tone, Esmeralda said, "Monsieur Jeunet? There's someone coming from the chateau."

"Who? A man? A woman? A student?"

"No, not a student ... Looks like a woman."

"Ask her what she wants - er, I mean, ask her whether you can help her."

Harry could hear Esmeralda saying something to Odile, then she called, "Bolo! Sit!" and an instant later, the other girl said, "Good evening, madam. Can we help you?"

"Are you the camp guards?"

The female voice revealed a mix of surprise, amusement at the edge of teasing, and displeasure from being bothered.

"Not officially." Odile was the one answering. "But when we walk the dog a last time before going to sleep, we do it in patrol style, and Esmeralda here" - a brief pause indicated some pointing - "is in contact with our teacher. He's the one who said we should ask you."

"I see." Another pause, similarly brief to the one in Odile's reply, except that the changed tone in the next words revealed a severe re-alignment in the woman's approach.

"Well," she continued, "I'm looking for a student who's got a phone call from home in the chateau. Something urgent, apparently."

"Did you hear, Monsieur?" asked Esmeralda into the party. After listening to Harry's reply, she asked the woman, "Which student, madam?"

"It's - maybe it's simpler if I talk directly with - hey!"

A dog's growl, brief but unmistakably a last warning before an attack, told Harry what had happened. The woman, obviously pissed off from being interrogated by a few eleven-year-olds, had tried to cut corners and speak with the teacher personally - had it really been Monsieur Jeunet on the phone, she might have shut him up with just a few reassuring words. Yet Bolo, friendly to the bone but equipped with a shepherd's fine sense for threats against the herd, had told her how much she would regret any further step toward Esmeralda.

"It's Robert Morneau, in tent nine," said the woman, suppressed fury in her voice. "And now either you let me do my errand, or I want to talk with your teacher."

"Er, Monsieur, could you listen?" asked Esmeralda.

"Yes," replied Harry. "You can tell her, a teacher is coming."

While Esmeralda was busy passing the message to the woman, Harry signaled to Rahewa to call Remus on her own phony.

Only seconds later, Rahewa handed him the device.

"Remus? It's about a Robert Morneau, tent nine. Go to them as a teacher who helps Monsieur Jeunet - er, Philippe's his first name. Our strategy is that we give Robert a phony so he can call back by himself - you could send Esmeralda directly to him. There's no time for more preparation. Over."

"On my way. Keep the line open."

Harry exhaled. Doing things through the phone and from the distance was an awful way of fighting the enemy, at least in his opinion, but since he knew his old friend on the way he felt better. Even in his human shape, Remus could appear out of the darkness quite unexpectedly.

"That was a brilliant idea," whispered Rahewa. "I mean, letting the boy call back by himself."

"Brilliant? If you forget for a second what this is all about, you can see that it's the most obvious response. I mean, why didn't the woman arrive with a portable by herself?"

"We know why."

"I wonder - do they know that the boy is poor and can't afford a portable? In a moment we'll know more, and how she responds to that."

A noise from Rahewa and the way how she held her party told Harry that Remus had had the presence of mind to keep his connection to Rahewa open, so they could follow in listening. Seconds later, almost in a stereo effect from both connections being open, Remus' voice could be heard.

"Good evening, madam. How can I help you?"

"Who are you?" Almost too late, in particular after her harsh question, the woman added, "You aren't Monsieur Jeunet."

"No, I'm not. My name's Rémy Lupin, I'm a colleague of Philippe who helps him take care of this camp. And who are you?"

A wave of relief washed through Harry's mind. Remus had mastered hundred encounters like that, and much worse, during the war against the Dark Forces; he could tune his play as helpful and as uncompromising as he wanted, and his French was beyond suspicion.

"Madeleine Vasseur, from the MiraLuc Public Relations group, good evening, Monsieur. We've got a call for Robert Morneau in the castle, and I came over to fetch him so he can return the call. Seems to be something urgent."

"Well, in this case there's an even faster way." A slight pause after Remus' reply let Harry imagine how he was turning toward the group of girls plus dog. "Girls, can you go to Robert? Lend him your phony and tell him to call home."

"Yes, Monsieur."

Before any of the girls could have made the first step, the woman said with considerably more nervousness than before, "Er, wait a second! They didn't call from home, Robert's parents. I don't

know if they mentioned vacation or a visit or whatever, at any rate they're somewhere on the road."

"Then what's the number?" asked Remus.

"Erm - I'm sorry, I didn't take it with me." The woman sounded more relieved than apologetic. "I didn't expect this kind of - er, support here," she added with the kind of brief giggle many women consider necessary for reasons of politeness.

"No problem. You can - "

Suddenly the connection on Rahewa's porty was dead, but Harry's own, much quieter, reported the rest of Remus' remark.

"... this one and ask someone in the castle for the number."

"Oh ... Erm, sorry again, but there isn't anyone I can ask at this time of the day. Now, can we just - "

Remus' quiet but authoritative voice, still heard only through the connection with Esmeralda, interrupted the woman. "In this case, madam, I suggest to return to the castle and wait for my call in, say, fifteen minutes? You'll give me the number to call back, and I'll be the one to inform Robert and lend him my porty."

"Monsieur, please!" Suddenly the woman sounded desperate. "I'm supposed to fetch the boy, and such orders aren't taken carelessly in our company. If you see reason to worry, you might escort us to the chateau, although I really feel competent enough to do it myself."

"Just a second, please."

Harry knew what was coming a fraction of a second before his porty buzzed. He pressed the Answer button.

"Philippe? It's me. Listen, MiraLuc seems unable to let that boy do his call from any place other than the chateau, so the lady and I'll accompany him there. I'll be back in a while. Okay?"

"Erm ... hold on a second." Harry's thoughts were racing - not for any idea what to do, only for the side-effects of what he had in mind since the conversation had shown that this woman wouldn't ease off without her prey. He couldn't foresee, not in such a short time, but it didn't matter.

"Esmeralda," he said into his own porty after activating the transmission from his side, "press the bracelet, will you?"

"Yes."

Next second, her alarm appeared on his porty, and an immeasurable instant later, he stood somewhere close to the camp, four girls and a dog in front of him and two adults to the left.

"You go to sleep," he told the girls, then turned to the woman. "Good evening, madam. We'll go to the chateau, except it's a tiny bit bigger, and the owner's different, too."

"What?"

Not bothering with an answer, Harry nodded toward Remus to confirm that his friend should follow. Then he apparated into the Chateau Saumur and immediately summoned the woman after him.

They stood in the hall before the library where Harry expected to find Cho and the Comtesse Marie-Claire. Still before the woman from MiraLuc had found the time to recover from her shock, Remus appeared a few feet away.

"All right," said Harry, "let's find a place to sit. Gently pushing the woman forward, he made a step toward the library, opened the door, and walked in, together with his involuntary guest.

The two women were sitting exactly where Harry had expected. They had stopped their conversation to look at the newcomers, curiosity in their faces.

"Good evening, myladies," he said. "We've got someone here I'd like to ask a few questions, and I thought, before using the thumbscrews, a chair and a glass of brandy might be a better start." He turned to the woman. "Because I'm not quite sure whether you're guilty or just stupid."

The woman looked seriously frightened. "Where ... where are we?"

Harry nodded toward the comtesse, who answered, "This is the Chateau Saumur, the new wing that's not public property but private - you won't believe how private we can be here. Please, have a seat."

The woman named Madeleine Vasseur sat heavily down, still trying to come to terms with her environment, a task to which Marie-Claire's insinuation hadn't helped.

"What happened?" asked Cho.

"This lady came to the camp, supposedly to fetch a boy who'd gotten a call from his parents to the chateau - MiraLuc, I mean. But when we offered phones plenty for all kinds of calling back, suddenly they weren't appropriate." Harry turned to the woman. "Was there ever a call?"

Rather than answering, Madeleine Vasseur buried her face in her hands and started to cry - almost silently; only the shaking of her shoulders revealed that a mental breakdown was taking place before their eyes.

* * *

Carlos threw a last tennis ball into the river and watched as Bolo swam out to fetch it. When the dog stood in front of him again, ball in his mouth and an expectant look in his eyes, Carlos said, "Now give it a rest! Lay down and get dry. You're so worn out, the next time we'd have to pull you out of the water."

It was true. The only tireless part of the dog was his mind, stubbornly set on fetching tennis balls. However, after another shaking that sent water spray everywhere, the German shepherd sat down. In a minute or so, he would lie down on all four legs.

Chloé said, "He'll miss the water, won't he?"

It was Sunday afternoon. An hour from now, the MiraLuc people would place the portkey gate at the riverbanks, not far from where Carlos and Chloé were savouring the last sun rays and the last minutes of this camp, and soon afterwards they'd be back in Brest.

When Carlos gave no reply, Chloé asked, "Is there much water where you come from? Bolo didn't swim here for the first time, so much's for sure."

"Course not. We live right at the sea shore - er, I mean that's where we're at home. But it's saltwater there; Bolo loves rivers and lakes where he can slurp water any time he wants."

"There's a small river at Nohanent - well, it's just a creek most of the time, but in spring during the snowmelt, it grows wild and dangerous. And it's cold as ice all year long."

Carlos felt tempted to talk about a lake in the Camargue, or a lake that looked dark, never heated up much, and was found right next to Hogwarts. But all these tales would lead into driftsand within seconds, metaphorically speaking. A slip of his tongue would be unavoidable, once he'd started any of these tales.

Chloé seemed to feel it, although she probably related his silence to her mentioning of Nohanent, as Carlos could see in her face when he quickly glanced up before lowering his look once more to the surface of the Loire.

After a few seconds of uneasiness, in what sounded like a forced attempt on changing the subject, Chloé asked, "Did you spend all your earnings?"

"You bet!" Carlos had a short laugh. "And all the same way."

"It didn't ever cross your mind to share, eh?" Chloé pouted, and it was hard to tell whether she faked or not.

"You think I ate all of them myself? Do you want to know what happened to the three black tags I earned with all this hard work? They went to Serge! I didn't want to tell you, but - "

"All three of them?"

Carlos grinned. "Yes, and that's the best I could do with them."

"But why? Did he bully you? Do you have to pay him to live in peace?"

Carlos grinned more, seeing an opportunity to ask a question he'd heard several times from his parents. "Last question first or in the order of asking?"

But Chloé was the wrong person, or in the wrong mood, for such rhetorical games. With concern in her voice, she said, "You don't have to be ashamed of that. It's quite common, and he's so much stronger ..."

She came to a halt in her speech for his defense because of his expression, and the ripples of laughter that went through his body. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"You aren't far off the track," he said, growing serious again. "When I came from your tent with my first tag, he really tried to bully me. Said half of it was rightfully his, and didn't let me go inside to change into my swimsuit. He'd been looking for a fight for a while already, so we did it right there and then."

"And?"

"And I won, but Serge's just too stupid to know when he's beaten. So I offered a deal - the entire tag if he'd do the work for our own tent the next day as well. And he agreed. At least he keeps to his promises."

"Hm."

"I gave him the second tag for doing the necessary work today as well, and the third and last one for taking over my share of the cleaning-up chores. It works great! He's hot for sweets, and since then all three of his brain cells are busy looking for other work he can do for me in exchange for something to eat."

"Hm."

Carlos stared at Chloé. "What are you humming? Do you think I wasted the rewards?"

"No, not exactly. It just - well, I'm trying to figure out whether I like it if someone is as clever as that just to avoid a fight. And, erm, to be honest, I'm hot for sweets too."

"Like those?" Carlos' hand went into his pocket and came up with a candy bar, the equivalent of a red tag's value.

About to take it, Chloé hesitated. "And you?"

Instead of a reply, Carlos passed the candy bar over to her, so his hand was free to get the second one out - and a chewing stick for Bolo, because sweets as sticky as candy bars were taboo for the dog, while Carlos couldn't stand being stared at with such sad eyes when eating it by himself.

"I don't like to fight," he said after a first bite. "I'm not afraid, if that's what you mean. The fight

with Serge took only seconds, then he was kneeling there and gasping for air. I'd warned him in advance that I know aikido, but as I said, he's too stupid to lose. Maybe that's what bothers me most. I mean, if it was a fight against evil, like the one your hero fought, I could imagine taking part, but what's the sense in fighting someone just because he's stupid?"

"My father says, stupid people are dangerous."

"Mine says the same, but he also says that dangerous and evil aren't the same."

"And what if this Serge were going to hurt someone?"

Carlos looked triumphant. "He tried to offer me his services as a bodyguard - for you, or Esmeralda. I told him there are other girls less protected, or boys, and that he could earn himself a lot of sweets *and* respect from people when working as bodyguard for them."

Chloé eyed him from the side. "I always guess you wrong. When I think you were clever, you just knew something I didn't know. When I think you cheated your way out of a tough corner, you tell me how you put a blockhead on the right track - and when I complain about wasted tags, you come up with a candy bar."

"It might have to do with this school - I mean, that we arrived under false pretense, and that we still can't play open, and that we still have to be careful."

"Could be." Chloé fumbled at her ankles and pulled her socks down to have a look at her bracelet. "But we didn't need them once here in the camp." She looked up. "Are we going to keep them?"

Carlos nodded. "All the time, until this thing is over."

There was a minor temptation in him to tell her about what he'd heard from Esmeralda, regardless of the fact that even his sister knew little about what really had taken place. But this temptation was easier to fight than the one concerning his true identity.

22 - Places of Nowhere

Gabriel blew the last tunes of *Funky Hero*, his glance locked at Michel with his drums. Their eye contact was no longer necessary to finish in sync with the others, not after all their rehearsals, but it was good to support each other with these looks. And besides, looking at Michel to his right or Tomas to his left meant showing the audience his profile, which had been one of the tips from Dan.

Dan was Dan Gallagher, an Irish musician and acquaintance of Desmond. He'd given Gabriel a few tips for their concerts in Sweden. "You need to crack an audience like a nut," Dan had said, and when he'd heard the tour was in Sweden he'd given Gabriel a look. "The Swedish aren't the worst," he'd said then, "not after you've played for a Finnish audience. But to make them catch fire - well, it's a challenge."

He also had said not to waste any second between the first four songs or so - good advice fore every concert and most of all for an audience who took forever to thaw. So, after Caitlin's bowing, after her "Thank you" into the microphone, Gabriel made eye contact with Tomas and nodded, the signal to start with the first chords of *Share My Music*.

It was Friday evening. They were on stage in the City Hall of Joenkoeping, their first stop on a tour through five Swedish cities in as many weeks. This was the first concert; tomorrow afternoon would be the second, also in this city, which needed little more than eighty thousand citizens to rank in the top ten of Sweden. It was a town, compared to Paris or London - even Stockholm, the biggest and number four in their list, couldn't call more than eight hundred thousand people to its name.

It didn't matter; the hall was full. A solid, silent mass of faces staring up at them. Gabriel was grateful for Sandra being with them on stage: in addition to his sister singing chorus, in addition to her playing the tambourine for the music and the mother hen for Moira, Sandra sent her soul and heart and spirit in mental dashes that sprayed over all members of Dragonfly, giving encouragement in these most critical minutes of their musical career.

The song ended; Caitlin bowed again. She was their front woman, a natural choice for the lead singer, regardless of the fact that Gabriel, perhaps together with Michel, was the controlling power in the band. "Make it simple for them," Dan had said, meaning the audience. "Present yourself in well-defined roles, and keep to them." It seemed obvious now, standing here, but without Dan's experience they might have made beginner's mistakes by the dozen.

"The next song," said Caitlin at this moment, "is about the difficult task of getting started, getting in motion. Seeing you sitting there, it's my impression you know what I mean. The song's called 'Sunrise'." Caitlin clicked her fingers, and at the third time, Michel and Frédéric started playing.

In the few seconds until then, Gabriel had heard a first audible reaction from the audience as a whole, and it could only be a sign of agreement, the Swedish equivalent of what in the Great Hall of Beauxbatons would have raised a wave of laughter. Caitlin's remark hadn't been planned; in their consultation right before the concert, they'd agreed to play four songs before announcing single titles. But she'd been right, and Gabriel felt admiration for this Irish hothead who most often kept hidden behind a rich soprano.

Right now this soprano circled around Moira's alto - *Sunrise* was basically Moira's song, and its placement as number three in their list of twenty-four songs was intended to introduct Moira, their second singer.

The applause at the end was stronger, although Gabriel didn't know whether it was the response to Caitlin's remark or the two voices which combined to something quite remarkable by any standard, as both Dan and Desmond had assured them. From the left corner came even wild applause, but these people were a kind of fake audience, at least in Gabriel's eyes: fifty-something students from

Beauxbatons and Hogwarts, sitting here only because they'd won a free ticket in Ireen's kick-off lottery. Officially these tickets were sponsored by the families of the Dragonfly members, while the simple truth was that Ireen had made sure the hall would be full *and* there would be some people showing a little enthusiasm.

Well, there were just fifty of them. Ireen had been ready to hire two hundred, with portkey travelling to and from the Jonkoeing City Hall, but then just a few dozen tickets were returned by the Swedish dealers, a fact that had amazed Gabriel considerably.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Caitlin smiled at the audience. "So you're awake after all - that's just in time, because our next song is 'Listen To The Teacher'."

As a joke it was rather poor, only it didn't matter; little by little they could feel the cracking-open of the audience. Moira's lyrics helped a lot - she had written about things a teenager cared about, Gabriel had put them into music, and their audience were mostly young people. Sixteen and upward, to be precise; people of Gabriel's own age and younger were expected at tomorrow's afternoon concert.

Their timing worked. The next two songs were quieter, more thoughtful, touching the heart. *You Don't Know Me* was the classical shy girl's theme, hiding in the shadows while adoring a boy from the distance. The second, *Serpent Dreamer*, was Gabriel's secret favourite, or perhaps not so secret because at least the Dragonfly members knew that these lyrics were his own contribution, inspired by his father's first encounters with Nagini.

After listening to a rehearsal recording of this song, Dan had said, "If I didn't know better, I'd swear this song was written after returning from an LSD trip." Then, noticing Gabriel's blank stare, he'd explained that LSD was a synthetic drug of the seventies and eighties that had made its mark in music history.

Where's That Gonna Stop came next, followed by *While On The Subject*, a mock version of what every teenager liked best: to be reprimanded for something new first, only to receive a longer sermon about well-known behavioural deficits then. With these two songs, Dragonfly came closer to hard rock than with anything else in their repertoire.

Ireen was determined to cut a double CD album from their program on the Sweden tour, and during the past weeks, there had been several short discussions about whether this album should be mixed in the studio or appear as a live recording. At these occasions, the discussions had almost felt like a joke to Gabriel, of the kind "Let's play adults and behave as if." But now it was reality and someone had to make a decision.

Gabriel knew one thing for sure: this concert wasn't going to be a likely candidate. Not because of the quality in their playing and singing, no, it was just - the response from the audience after each song was too thin. A live album needed tumultuous applause; otherwise there was no excuse for the lack of accuracy as offered by a studio recording.

"Thank you, thank you!" Caitlin sounded breathless and excited. "The next song's about the challenges us girls have to master every day - which make-up to use, whom to tell the deepest secret, things like that. It's called 'I'm Not That Stupid' - here we go."

This was just the first out of several songs concentrating on girlish topics. *Always Second Choice* would come next, and the last two songs before the break would be *If I Were A Boy* and *He Must Be An Alien*. What Caitlin had omitted to announce, and fully on purpose, was a temporary change of the lead singer role from her to Moira. During the rehearsals, they'd found out that such an announcement wasn't suited to improve Moira's performance, regardless of Sandra's support. And

besides, as Dan had made clear, such remarks were just good to confuse the audience.

Now Gabriel listened to Moira's staccato in the verses of the song before she reached the chorus that said, "I'm not that stupid, well, not anymore," and in which Caitlin could score again with her soprano. It took Moira the first verse before getting steady; without Caitlin's contribution in the chorus, it would have been much worse.

After this first song with herself in the lead, Moira had to be the one who bowed, simply because anything else would have looked strange. She did, and she was the one who announced the next song, and - miracle - she'd gotten the kick from this exposure to the full public: her performance rose to the level they knew.

If I Were A Boy was a duet in which Moira had the *male* voice. Then Caitlin took over again, and when the applause after *He Must Be An Alien* had faded, she announced the break.

Coming into the backstage room as the last of the Dragonfly members, Gabriel was welcomed by Ireen with a hug and the words, "I wish we had the album already cut."

"Why?"

"Because we could sell hundreds of them in the foyer. People ask us for albums, and all we can offer is an announcement and the address of our home page."

Gabriel just nodded. Right now, he couldn't care less - the break had come too late, or maybe it felt that way because this was their first *big* concert, and he needed to recover before they continued. Yes, Ireen was right, but there had barely been time for getting ready, and none for studio sessions. The two CDs from the times when Dragonfly had performed without singers - and without keyboard and tambourine - had been banned unanimously by the whole crew.

Matthew appeared out of nowhere, a bottle in his hand. "Have a seat, Gabriel. Take that, and drink."

Gabriel nodded, then obeyed. The bottle contained water - just tap water, because Gabriel wouldn't risk any other drink during performances, least of all sugared soda. But it was Irish tap water; they'd been warned of the water in Sweden as something that couldn't take the soap from the skin.

His glance idly following Matthew, Gabriel saw that the boy said something to Rebecca, who nodded and briefly looked in Gabriel's direction before putting her attention on the next issue. No doubt, Rebecca the backstage manager was running in high gear, and her boyfriend Matthew, enlisted as roadie on the Dragonfly payroll, had been hired as assistant manager.

The setup for the concert had started in the early afternoon. Originally they'd planned to use two portable portkey gates, one at each end of the transport route from the storage room in the basement of Beauxbatons to the City Hall of Jonkoeping. Then Matthew and Tobin had reported problems with bulkier equipment, which seemed too voluminous for the thin portkey zone of the portable gates. In the end, Gabriel and Sandra had summoned everything larger than what a single person could carry.

Sandra came over. Being short of a seat for herself, she simply crouched down and put her arms on his knee for stabilization. "How do you feel?"

"Why, is my guard up? I wasn't aware."

Under normal circumstances, Gabriel and Sandra didn't need to ask each other how they felt, because they could sense it more accurately than any remark could describe. That was, unless they'd activated their mental lock, which only happened when they had one of their rare quarrels.

Sandra smiled. "No, not quite, but you aren't entirely open either, and besides, sometimes a simple

question is the best choice."

"I'm in stasis, that's why. I don't dare to relax - in a few minutes the break's over, and we're on stage again."

"No need to worry, though. It's going great, just great."

Seeing - and sensing - Gabriel's unspoken question, Sandra added, "It's true. Despite my triple role, I have less to do than anyone else on stage, so I can find the time and check around on all channels ..."

It was their private code for spying out people at mental level.

"... and what I feel is a growing level of appreciation."

"Growing, yeah, it's unbelievable how much room they've left for that." Gabriel grimaced. "It took them forever to get going."

"But they're steady. The attention doesn't waver - and remember, they were on time. This isn't France, it's as simple as that."

About to get upright, Sandra leaned closer and whispered, "And now I have to look for my object of despair." Before Gabriel found the time to look concerned, she corrected herself. "Only joking - at least it's a joke now. I guess you could hear it when she came round the bend."

Gabriel nodded, remembering well the moment when Moira's singing started to sound like something someone would buy a ticket for.

Rebecca's voice broke through the level of noise. "Five minutes till we resume. Anyone not being stage performer - out with you."

Gabriel closed his eyes and started a mental scan through the songs they were going to play now. Twelve played, twelve to go - eleven and an encore. When Rebecca's hand touched his shoulder because it was time, he felt ready and almost stormed onto the stage.

The Girl Over There came first after the break, followed by *Outdoor Love* - both songs very ambitious musically as well as in their lyrics. Altogether, the concert's second part was an inverse of the first: gentle where the other was loud, demanding where the other was straight-forward, complex rather than simple.

This didn't mean low-key music all the time. *Detention* and *Horror Movie Number Three*, the next two songs, were anything but quiet, especially in the third chorus, when Caitlin and Sandra issued a scream in the best *Scary Movie* tradition.

The next three songs were Moira's second turn as lead singer. *Someone So Tidy* was a teaser about a classmate always being orderly and obedient. *Birthday, Bloody Birthday* expressed the deep feelings of disgust a teenager could develop at the prospect of her own birthday, just because it caught her in the wrong mood. *No Need To Shout At Me* completed the sequence of angry songs in which Moira excelled.

By now, the applause after each song was a steady and solid matter - not overboarding, not too long, revealing expectancy of the next song to come. And Sandra had been right - the audience was fully awake, savouring the long program without tiring.

Dealing Food, Dealing Cards was a song about a waitress moonlighting as croupier in a casino, comparing her clientele of the day with that of the night. *By Midnight I'll Be Ready* might have been song number two about the same person, but in fact it was a love song for a ghost. Then came *Mine Is The Blame, Yours The Glory*, a slightly fatalistic contemplation of fate striking in everybody's

life, before they started the last song of their regular program: *There's No Room Under The Horizon*, which was about looking for a goal in life and had the advantage of a chorus that could be extended into a fifth and sixth and seventh repetition before Michel's steel drum sticks fell for the last time onto his tubular drums, creating a sound that was still ringing in the air when the final, tumultuous applause rose, to last longer than expected before it turned to the well-known chanting rhythm which demanded an encore.

Caitlin was ready. "Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "our encore has a special meaning for some of us because it marks the time when Dragonfly met with the cast it has now. For you, the song might be called special because these are the only lyrics not being our own. We used an old Gaelic song for that, but the music's Dragonfly's own, oldest and finest - 'Seagulls in the Wind!'"

From the corner with the guests from Beauxbatons came shouts and catcalls. Héloïse had the presence of mind to wait until silence had settled again, then she began to play her Felison - and Gabriel felt like in a *déjà-vu* when Caitlin let her play for more than a minute before she started singing.

In this song, she was the only singer, always would be. Héloïse's harp wasn't the only instrument, but the others contributed only for brief passages, as if paying a visit, to leave soon: Tomas, playing his guitar while the harp paused, Frédéric, playing his keyboard while Caitlin paused, Gabriel, playing his flute together with harp and voice, and only Michel's regular drums were allowed to accentuate the song to the end.

When the last chord of the Felison had faded, it took the audience a moment to register that it was over, to wake from their trance and give their acclaim. For Gabriel, these few seconds of silence were the memory he would keep of this concert, their first that mattered.

* * *

Harry met Paul Sillitoe in the same Indian restaurant where they'd met the last time. Today, Harry's timing was the nutrient notch better that allowed him to order a *Bombay plate* for himself too. For a while they kept eating silently - not counting Harry's gasps when he became fully aware of what the host considered medium spicy und acceptable for westerners.

When his thinking no longer was run over by a burning palate, Harry asked, "Did you find something?"

"Well, this and that. Nothing to shout bingo, but there are a few things I want to tell you. And you? Any discovery?"

"Cameras."

"Recording what?"

"Little girls while changing dresses." Harry told Paul what he'd found, and done, in the Chateau MiraLuc. His report ended with the cancellation of the visiting tours, leaving out the events of the following night.

Paul said, "The picture's getting contours. From what you told me, I'd say they just cover their own demand, meaning for themselves and perhaps some special guests at special occasions."

"So?" Harry didn't like the 'just' in Paul's remark, as if such a restriction made these crimes somehow marginal, hardly worth prosecution. But he knew that Paul could have drowned him in statistics, so he avoided remarks that would let him look as ignorant as self-righteous shortly afterwards.

Paul's half smile made it clear that he had a fair guess of what was going on in Harry's mind, a result of their friendship as much as Paul's unforgotten skill in interviews.

"So we can exclude a child porn factory," he said then. "It doesn't matter much for our case, although I can tell you, it's a different level of brutality. People doing it for their own desires, no matter how sickening and twisted they appear to us, are usually considerably more merciful. The better they're organized, the less reason they have to exert more cruelty than necessary - of course always with two notable exceptions. Fear of exposure is the first, actually the reason for most killings with a sexual background."

"And the other?"

"True sadism. It's extremely rare in paedophiles, mostly because the raping alone - or let's say the sexual act, because it can be wrapped in many ways - is already an implicit act of sadism. From what you told me, we can exclude physical violence because that would have left marks. But there were no conspicuous marks on the suicide victims."

"So let's come to mental violence."

Paul arched his eyebrows. "Why so narrow-minded? And why so angry?"

"Because ..." Harry exhaled deeply. "Maybe I'm too much personally involved. Maybe I'm too close to the potential victims. Maybe I can't muster the clinical perspective, and talk about it matter-of-factly. And maybe it's just my attitude. But what - "

"Your attitude?" interrupted Paul, an event so rare for him that it had to be on purpose. "Are you the Bearer of the Holy Triangle in the Order of the Jeremiahs? I must have missed your nomination."

He responded to Harry's shocked silence with a thin smile. "You should have read a few of the reports I came across during my research. It was about victims too, except they weren't potential, they were real. So please stop your fucking attitude, okay?"

Harry swallowed. "Okay."

"You wanted to ask what I meant by calling you narrow-minded, am I right?" Paul's smile broadened again. "You only mentioned violence. Why exclude persuasion, seduction, misleading, and other kinds of mental influence?"

"Because ..." Harry smiled ruefully. "It was supposed to be a figure of speech. It was an effect of my attitude, so just forget it. Go ahead, please."

Paul leaned back, apparently in a similar need of relaxing as Harry. After a moment, he asked, "What do you know about hypnotism?"

"Little. It's an exogenic kind of trance, and my own experience - why are you laughing?" Harry stared at Paul in astonishment.

"About your choice of words. *Exogenic*, no less, huh? Someone with a less clinical perspective simply would have said, 'A trance induced by someone else'."

Harry watched Paul's amusement for another second, then said, "You know about my experiences, at least you know the facts. And as much as it's true that they provided me with invaluable information at that time, and laid the basic of my friendship with Nagini, I can't say that I miss them. Not the least bit."

"Well, other people have less dramatic experiences. They don't travel through a void to meet a talking serpent - erm, sorry, yes, I know, all serpents can talk - but coming back to my point, other people simply sit in a chair in their psychoanalyst's office and have a good time. Some of them, at least. And what do you know about post-hypnotic commands?"

"Nothing." Harry eyed Paul suspiciously. "Truth be told, I don't believe in them. I think it's bullshit."

"Well, not quite, and under certain conditions - " Paul interrupted himself and looked around. "I'd prefer another environment to go into the details. Your castle would be just right, but first I'd like to have a longer walk - along the Thames, perhaps? I like looking at water."

"Then why not the sea shore near the castle? The Irish Sea has considerably more water than the Thames."

Paul's snort indicated that he'd totally forgotten about this alternative. A few minutes later, they were walking on the strip of sand near the shore line where walking was easy because the ground was hard but dry enough for normal street shoes.

"Before coming back to hypnotism and post-hypnotic tricks," began Paul, "let me remind you of a certain aspect of the Obliviatu spell. We say the Obliviatu erases a certain memory and replaces it by something else, right?"

"Right," replied Harry, "except that your question already tells me it's wrong."

"Right." Paul acknowledged the play of words with a brief twisting of his lips. "There's no spell on earth that can erase a memory - of a living person, I mean. What really happens is that the replacement memory is offered as a bypass, and the effect from the Obliviatu is that the bypass is installed even though the original memory might be quite pleasant. The mechanism altogether isn't extraordinary in any regard; we all encapsulate memories in bypasses, sometimes on purpose, sometimes inadvertently, and for many traumatic experiences this is the only method of survival, of getting along without seeing suicide as the only escape."

"I wasn't aware." After a moment of thinking about Paul's explanation, Harry asked, "Does the mentioning of suicide right now have a special meaning?"

"I'm not sure myself," replied Paul. "Let me put the other facts on the table we'll have between us in a while, and then we can come back to the question. So, in summary, the Obliviatu is a cheap trick and a misuse of the mind's own weaponry, while only the replacement memory is a true outside element. Now, coming back to the topic of post-hypnotic commands, you were right in the normal sense of the term: any attempt of implanting a command during a hypnosis and let it be carried out afterwards fails miserably. It doesn't even matter whether the effect from following such an order would be agreeable, unpleasant, or just meaningless."

"But," said Harry.

"Yes, but, and you'll be amazed at the extent of this but. The misleading element is the term. *Post-hypnotic* is simply wrong; if instead you place a command that works from one hypnosis to another, you'll be quite successful. The effect altogether is that the sequence of hypnotic sessions establishes something like a second layer of existence." Paul grinned. "It's almost like having an affair that takes place in hotel rooms. Escapes from reality with their own codex of behaviour."

Harry walked silently; he had to digest what he'd heard, in particular since Paul's body language told him that there was more.

"But as everybody knows, hypnotism is used to peek into pots we keep closed in our wake world, and for good reason. Psychoanalysts use this technique to uncover hidden memories, or to check whether a certain memory is ready to be faced in wake state. From there it's just a small step to the idea to bypass the bypass of an Obliviate during a hypnotic session, right?"

This time Harry's silence was expectant.

"A few people made a research study. First they trained their patients to respond to certain triggers - it's basically the Pawlow reflex, and nothing new even in hypnotism." Paul's voice turned artificially pompous. "And when I snap my fingers, you'll awake from your trance at once, all right?" In his normal voice, he added, "The response to triggering events is a very strong reflex, virtually

uncontrollable - as long as you're hypnotized, that is. And now, if you look at such conditioning to triggering events, suddenly your post-hypnotic command has a totally different quality, right?"

"Yes, indeed."

Paul glanced over to Harry walking at his side. "Now comes the stuff I didn't want to mention in the restaurant. When the patients were trained well enough, the scientists first implanted an Oblivatus and then ordered the patients in hypnotic session A to respond to a trigger by peeking into the hidden memory, and this trigger occurred in hypnotic session B."

"And what happened?"

"They obeyed, and they could describe the real memory in all details."

"Did they remember after the hypnosis?"

Paul nodded in appreciation of Harry having found the essential question. "It depended on what they were ordered in session B, after having found out what really happened to them. But don't forget - these memories were reasonably normal, nothing of extreme nature."

"Hm."

"The same scientists then gathered a few patients with buried traumatic memories. Being buried means the memory is encapsulated as well but there is no bypass, as if a road is completely blocked. These patients were trained and prepared the same way, until finally they received the order in session A to look into their own abyss in session B."

"And the results?"

"The results were such that this line of research was cancelled at once. The protocols were closed away - they couldn't be published, but being what they are, the scientists couldn't overcome themselves and throw the results away, and that's why I found out. Harry, they ran three patients through the mill before they came to their senses. The first tried to climb the walls, screaming, the second went catatonic, and the third tried to commit suicide without even bothering to scream first."

Calmer, Paul added, "The conclusion was that only the patient himself should be the one trying to look into the dark pit - during a single session and with a chance of refusal. And if he refuses, obviously it's too early."

After a short silence, Harry said, "My understanding of this story is that you can send someone into suicide with a very traumatic experience and a very nasty kind of mental trap. Would you agree?"

"Yes. Provided there's a motive."

"About motive ..." Harry stopped walking. "Let me summon you into the library, and offer a glass of brandy, and tell you a story about a father with a son who disappeared and a daughter who committed suicide, all within two or three weeks."

Paul stared at him. "Incest?"

Sounds like that, doesn't it?" Harry grinned humourlessly. "Question is, who with whom?"

Although, if this past was the reason for a present in which children were first abused and then sent into suicide, suddenly the question seemed to answer itself, as well as the speculation about motives.

* * *

Sandra blinked into the sunlight. She needed a second to adapt her eyes, after the semi-darkness of the backstage rooms inside. When she could discern the details within her view, she stepped down

the short staircase.

It was Saturday afternoon; the second Dragonfly concert, also in Joenkoeping, had ended a few minutes ago. Sandra had finished the concert together with the other band members, but then she'd used a short moment of being unwatched to escape. From the mob that was howling inside.

Well, okay, a very nice mob, as she had to admit - kids of any age between five and fifteen, plus a few grown-ups of whom Sandra could only guess if they were older audience, older siblings, or parents of the youngest. But there'd been a moment in which she felt truly fed up, done her duty for the weekend, and anyway, the kids were swarming around Caitlin and Moira and Gabriel and Michel in first place, so Sandra had decided to be on her own for a little while.

She would meet the rest of the band later in the day; there was no way of avoiding each other for a longer period in this small city. That was okay; all she needed was a time-out from Dragonfly.

The evening before, they'd seen little of the city. Now, walking along a street which softly sloped downward, Sandra noticed that Joenkoeping looked nice. Coming around a corner farther down, for an instant she stared in disbelief: in front of her was a sandy beach, literally in the middle of the city, and for an instant it felt as though a mediterranean city had somehow been repainted in a more Scandinavian style. Then she was back in reality; the panorama could still catch her breath, but the sandy beach belonged to the Lake Vaettern, a millionaire's yacht was nowhere in sight, and it was too late in the year to go swimming.

At the same moment, Sandra knew how she could spend the next two hours in a perfect alternative to friends and family in Dragonfly. Still more, showing this totally unexpected touristic attraction to the person she had in mind would be fun, because this person was the truest member of mediterranean culture Sandra could imagine: Aram'chee, the High Priestess.

She apparated to the old Crusader castle near the Lake Tiberias in Israel, where the High Priestess kept herself in a lifetime-preserving stasis. She had to wait a few minutes - her presence was enough; she didn't need to call - then Aram'chee stood before her.

"Hello, little one," the High Priestess said, addressing Sandra the way she'd done at their first encounter fourteen years ago, "your visit is a pleasant surprise."

"*Visit* doesn't quite fit," replied Sandra, totally unaware that she smiled at hearing a salutation which, used by anyone else, would have launched a lesson in naming her properly, "because I want to take you with me to a place I just found. When you see it, you'll know why." Then she inspected Aram'chee's clothes from the viewpoint of a Scandinavian climate and said, "You want to wear a tiny bit more where we're heading, and I'm not sure if the local shops meet our taste."

Aram'chee laughed. "Is there really a place in modern civilization where women can't find the clothes they want?" But she disappeared and was back shortly afterwards with a cardigan in her hand.

Sandra apparated to the spot in Joenkoeping from where she'd arrived, knowing that the High Priestess would follow via pursuit. She could have summoned her, yet somehow this would have felt wrong, as if trying to help a healthy woman of medium age cross a street. Although, Gabriel had no such concerns; he'd summoned Aram'chee before, but perhaps it had to do with his unique ability of apparating and summoning in perfect synchronization. The difference was a fraction of a second, but it weighed an eternity.

In practical terms, the effect was the same this way or the other. They appeared in the city with the sandy beach below them, and Sandra turned to Aram'chee, happy as a child for the riddle to be solved. "Guess where we are."

Aram'chee examined the scene with the beach, then her attention was caught by the architecture of

the buildings in sight. "It's not the mediterranean," she said, "that's for sure. The way the houses are built tells me, cold weather isn't uncommon here." She looked at Sandra. "I'm not half the world traveller you've been with your father, but I remember a time when the mediterranean was the centre of the world, with visitors from everywhere."

Glancing down at the water and the sailing boats near the shoreline, she said, "These modern tourist boats all look the same, but still I think we are in the homeland of the people I know as Vikings."

"Vikings? I should have paid more attention in History," Sandra replied without showing any trace of embarrassment, "but I guess you're right on track. This is Sweden, the middle of Scandinavia, and the water down there is the Lake Vaettern."

"It's beautiful. How did you find it?"

Sandra smiled archly. "The same way I found you."

"The same ..." Aram'chee's eyes lighted up. "Music! So if it was Music that brought you here, then - yes, it can only be your brother's band, Dragonfly. Why, do they have a concert here?"

Sandra half-faked a pout. "Asking you riddles is no fun; you're just too clever. But otherwise you're a little behind. My brother's band, huh? It's my band too, now. I sing and play the tambourine and take the stage fright from another girl - I've got so many jobs there, next time they'll send me emptying the trash can on my way out and come back with an armload of drinks."

Aram'chee put an arm on her shoulder and started to walk toward the beach. "A drink, that's the right word at the right time. Let's find a nice place to sit" - she lifted the cardigan - "which can be outside, thanks to your foresight, and then you'll tell me what happened recently, and why you are in the band, rather than in the theatre group, and why you're so upset."

They found seats at a table in front of a beach café. They ordered drinks and, in case of Aram'chee, a small selection of the sweets that were offered here. Sandra didn't want any of them; in the short time Dragonfly had been here she'd found out that the Swedes had strange opinions about where to put salt and where to put sugar into their pastries.

While Aram'chee ate, and occasionally was looking with astonishment at her cakes, Sandra brought her up-to-date on the developments since the last time they'd met, which had been quite a while ago. Having reached the previous day in her report, she started to go into more detail and spent several minutes in describing their Friday evening concert.

"Today we had our second concert here," she finished. "The afternoon concerts are intended for a younger audience. And when we were done and the kids stormed the stage and were backstage and everywhere, I stole away. Then I called you, and here we are."

Aram'chee had finished eating. She used her napkin and then, as if trying to complete the picture Sandra had drawn, asked, "How was it yesterday after the concert? What happened then?"

"Oh, we went to our hotel to shower and change clothes - it's incredible how sticky you feel after two hours on stage and under these spotlights. In the meantime, Ireen filled up the local press at the bar. When we gathered in the lobby, there was a short interview. The press guy held a recorder into the middle of our group and asked a question, and someone answered, mostly Gabriel or Caitlin as the lead singer. Then we went to a restaurant - we hadn't eaten yet, because you can't do that right before a concert." Sandra grinned. "Ireen invited the press guy for lunch today, which meant he should get lost then, and so we were to ourselves."

"And then?"

"Then we ate. Mostly fish, which they can handle better than cakes." Sandra nodded toward the

empty plate in front of Aram'chee.

"And then?"

"Then most of us were at risk of falling asleep in our seats, so we called it a day."

"And today?"

Sandra stared at the older woman. "What do you mean, today? We slept late, had breakfast, had a short walk through the shopping mile in the city, and started getting prepared for the concert. Does it answer your question?"

"No, it doesn't, as you know perfectly well." Aram'chee smiled. "You should be with your friends, rather than with me, and - "

"I will," interrupted Sandra somewhat irritably, "later in the evening, or maybe they find us here. But I had the urge of talking with you. About ..."

After Sandra had fallen silent, Aram'chee waited a moment, then said, "About your career as a Dragonfly member?"

"Yes, that too."

"About the options how to spend an evening, or maybe a night, in a hotel in a city far away from home?"

"Maybe. I mean - yes, I think about it quite a lot, and did so before we arrived here." Sandra shrugged helplessly. "I just couldn't decide whether I want to talk with you about it."

"I'm second choice anyway." Seeing Sandra's look, Aram'chee laughed. "I better not ask what you just thought. What I meant was, there's a perfect candidate with whom you could talk about this topic, and his name is Frédéric."

"He's biased, to say the least." Sandra could laugh by herself.

"There is no such thing as an objective advisor in matters of love and passion," replied Aram'chee. "Let me tell you that much, don't make it more complicated than it is, because it's complicated enough anyway ..."

Sandra nodded with a heavy sigh.

"... while on the other hand don't let yourself be forced into something just because there's the place and the time and the expectation."

"Yeah, that's about what I've been telling myself," admitted Sandra. "Either ... you know, there'll be four more weekends like this one, and if I don't make it clear today what to expect on these weekends, the tension will grow infinitely, and that's still worse."

"So that's why you escaped," said Aram'chee. When Sandra nodded, she added, "But that's not the reason for your edginess, is it?"

"A little bit, perhaps. No, you're right, what bothers me more, or on a more fundamental level, is the recent development." Sandra snorted. "The pressure from the rehearsals was so high, there was no chance to work in the theatre group as well. And now that the first two concerts are over, the first city checked off with success, I don't feel any impulse to go back to them. It's a kind of laziness, which makes me angry at myself, and next moment I'm angry because I'm angry. I'm looking forward to the next weekend, and I know I'll enjoy every day of the week at the thought of performing again, next Friday in Linkoepping, but somehow it's ... the thought of me singing and playing the tambourine doesn't give me a kick, so that can't be it. Working together is part of it, yes, but there's - I don't know how to pinpoint it."

"So you aren't a stage artist in first place?"

"No, definitely not, and I guess that's also the reason why I can't bring myself to join the theatre group again. Being on stage is great, but somehow it's different for me. I wouldn't want to have Hély's skill, or Caitlin's voice, or Gabriel's musical passion."

"Ask yourself, my little one." Aram'chee's hands moved through the air as though following an imaginary timeline. "At which point during yesterday evening's concert did you feel the most satisfaction?"

"That's simple," replied Sandra without even thinking. "It was the moment when Moira had found her voice."

"There's your answer - and mine too, because that's what I felt fourteen years ago, except that it would be hubris to pretend I was as certain as I can be now." The High Priestess' eyes were sparkling. "You made her perform. You put things right. You were in control."

"Me in control? I'm not the power behind the curtain, I don't have any ambition to become the spiritual leader. That's Gabriel."

"So you aren't power hungry?"

"Why should I?" Sandra shrugged once more. "I know I'm powerful, isn't that enough?"

"Certainly, and it perfectly describes the role that's waiting for you, even if it's just for the act of ending this role once and forever."

Aram'chee grabbed Sandra's hands. "My dear, you just gave an example of the difference between the *ruling* power - which is Gabriel - and the *controlling* power, which is you. I have to admit that confusing these two roles is not a specialty of today's society, mankind liked to mix them up for eons. But these are two different roles, and a High Priestess who wants to become a ruling power is the worst nightmare I can imagine. You gave me the last proof that you won't fall for greed. So as far as I'm concerned, we can perform the transit any time."

Sandra stared at her. "Just so, huh? In a beachside café in the middle of nowhere."

The current High Priestess smiled. "You won't grow a gloriole, so why not? But of course, we can do perform a small ceremony, I might even know a musical group who'd accompany us."

"And I know a keyboard player who'd not," snapped Sandra. Then she giggled nervously. "No, not now. I feel ready myself too, yes, but I'd like to have a few days to *think* it through. Knowing that I could ... any time I want, that's something new."

She inched a bit closer to the older woman. "And besides, I swore to myself that I'm not going to become High Priestess while still being a virgin." She grinned. "I'm not saying it'll happen tonight, but what you just said for sure was a great help in making up my mind."

"Excellent. Then we're done here?"

When Sandra nodded, the High Priestess stood up. Then, after another smile and a gentle touch on Sandra's nose, she disappeared.

* * *

Cho guided the woman into the lobby of the Vancouver Resort. Inside, she steered toward a group of chairs and stopped there.

"Wait here. I'm going to talk to the manager. He'll give you a suite. When you're settled there, you'll find me at the bar. Then we'll have dinner and the opportunity to discuss a few details, and then you'll be on your own."

The woman sat down.

Cho marched in the direction of Reuben's office, asking herself how she would have reacted to such an unfriendly dispatching. She didn't know, because she couldn't imagine being in the woman's situation, but for sure she'd have made more of a ruckus than this silent obeying. It didn't matter; in a little while her task was done and she was no longer in charge. Afterwards, the woman could flush herself down the toilet or down the Queen Charlotte Strait, with the latter needing a short walk through the wilderness first.

Reuben had been notified of her coming only minutes ago. He stood up from behind his desk to come around and greet her in French style, with kisses on both cheeks. "My dear Cho, I'm extremely pleased to see you again - much earlier than planned, isn't it? You look as upset as you sounded on the phone. It isn't because of Harry, by any chance?"

It was a bit of a joke, as if, in this case, they'd catch up on what they'd missed - or failed - to do together at the last occasion. They would not, but at least Reuben's question fulfilled its purpose: Cho had a laugh.

"Actually it is, except that it's not what he did himself but what he left to me. Reuben, there's a woman that came with me; right now she's in the lobby. Her name's Madeleine Vasseur, and she needs a suite for a while."

"A French woman?"

"A French piece of shit!" Cho snorted, already feeling better. "But otherwise, the answer is yes."

"This place is about as far away from the French-speaking part of Canada as you can manage without leaving the country. Does she speak English?"

"I guess so, but frankly, I just don't care, and even if not and if there wasn't anyone here who'd be able to speak French with her, this resort is the only option we have. She's in a kind of custody."

"Hiding from what? Police? Mob? Lover? Family?"

"Her former employer. He sent her for fresh supply from the children's camp, around midnight and under the pretense of a phone call from home. Harry and his guarding crew tried to stop her without revealing too much, but it didn't work; she wouldn't listen. So he summoned her to the Chateau Saumur, our operation base during the camp weekend. There she had a kind of breakdown, and since then we have an eyewitness who needs something similar to the witness-protection programme."

"A fascinating story, and I'm dying to learn more about it. Let me take care of the lady first, then perhaps we have a few more minutes."

This was exactly what Cho had had in mind herself. She felt grateful for a host who took care of his guests in first place, no matter if saint, sadist, or satyr, leaving the bad manners to her. But the short talk with Reuben had eased her mind sufficiently to muster the decency and escort him into the lobby where she introduced the woman to her host for the days to come, maybe weeks.

Then she went to the bar. Kenny, the bartender, welcomed her with a smile and had her first drink ready when she arrived at the barstool.

"Thank you, Kenny. You're the well in the desert for me." She knocked back the first half at once, taking a bit more time for the second half.

She was in the middle of her second drink when Reuben returned to the bar. He took the stool next to her and nodded as Kenny pointed at the soda fountain. "She didn't have much of baggage," he said. "Is it okay if she wants to go shopping in the city?"

In the city meant Vancouver, to which the resort had a permanent portkey connection. But Reuben's question implied more, and Cho responded to it.

"You're not supposed to be her guardian - well, let's say no more than checking whether she's seen around once a day or so. You can offer her all luxury, selections from all shops brought to her suite, so she can pick what she wants. But if she wants to go shopping by herself, let her."

"What about visitors?"

"There won't be any. She's out of the game, and it's fresh, so a few days rest in the middle of nowhere is pretty much what she wanted. And if the next seminar starts, she'll have people to watch or talk to, whatever. All we ask from you in addition to your normal services is a phone call if something unexpected happens."

"Is she suicidal?"

"No. She's ready to give testimony, if this story ever goes to trial, which I doubt, knowing my husband and his methods, and afterwards she'll be looking for a new start and a new life, at least that was my impression."

Reuben's expression left no doubt that he would have liked to know a bit more about what they'd found out by interrogating the woman, more exactly by listening while she talked and talked. But he had too much tactfulness to ask her now, in the few minutes until Madeleine Vasseur would come downstairs. Instead, he asked, "If she's an eyewitness, what else does Harry need?"

"He wants to catch the others who were customers to a supply line of fresh, young meat whenever the guy in the centre felt like throwing another party. This woman can nail her employer, but about the others it'd be hearsay from her." Cho shook her head. "It doesn't matter legally; she told us enough to know what was going on and to put Harry in a position where he can strike."

"How?"

"He'll use our children, what else?"

Seeing Reuben's careful look, after her tone had failed to identify the remark as bitter sarcasm, Cho grinned. "The older ones, Sandra and Gabriel. If they use their full power - Reuben, believe me, the people in that castle will ask themselves how the sky could crash down so suddenly."

"So this time Harry has your consent?"

"Well, I can't say I like it, and as their mother I can't stop worrying, although it's nonsense, the magical power they can muster could scare the bejesus out of you, as the word goes where we lived before coming to Ireland."

Reuben stood up, rather suddenly. "See you later," he said and walked off.

Cho hadn't heard anything. Seconds later, when she saw Madeleine Vasseur coming from the elevators, she knew that there had to be a signaling system somewhere in Reuben's view that told him about people's movements, or at least the up and down of the elevators. She would have liked to look around, but the woman had reached her; Cho would die curious before craning her neck in all directions while being watched by that woman.

She made a half-hearted attempt to look friendly. "Shall we sit down for dinner?"

Madeleine Vasseur nodded and stood waiting while Cho climbed from her barstool to march ahead.

After a few steps, Reuben appeared again and guided his two guests to a dinner table. They were early due to the time difference, and the Vancouver Resort was going through the quiet phase

between seminars, to the effect that their table was the only one set for dinner.

If the woman wondered about this kind of exclusivity, she kept it to herself. There was no question she asked, not even a wondering in her face.

Reuben took their orders for drinks and disappeared.

"All right," began Cho, "let's settle a few details, then we're done with the business part - "

A single snort from the woman, or perhaps a dry laugh, choked immediately, made her stop.

"What's so funny?"

"What else is there besides the business part? You could have told me at the bar. Why do we sit here for dinner? You can't stand me."

"I took over the job to take you here to the place where you'll stay for the next days, or maybe weeks. Yes, you're right, I don't deny it, and I don't see reason to apologize," replied Cho with more embarrassment than she'd thought possible toward the Vasseur woman, "but I also want something to eat - the food here's too good to be missed, and sitting at another table would have been a bit more ridiculous than I was ready to accept."

"I'm past such concerns." Madeleine Vasseur shrugged. "But I don't blame you. You're a mother, you have children, you must wish me killed slowly and painfully. That's understandable."

"Is it? Then why - "

The woman continued, cutting Cho short as though she hadn't heard the attempt of a reply. "I have no children of my own. But once I had some, although even then they weren't my own. Not quite, that is."

Cho stared at her. "The Mirault children?"

"Zoé and Patrice, yes. Patrice was the older one, I should have named him first, but I couldn't then and I can't now. Zoé was always my darling." The woman had a laugh as brief as bitter. "Though not mine alone, and if I could drive Patrice crazy with me favouring Zoé, I didn't fare any better, I had to pay with the same coin. One was more jealous than the other in that house."

A waiter arrived with their drinks. Madeleine Vasseur had ordered red wine, "Just vin de table," apparently not inclined to change her dinner habits only because she could get whatever she wanted. She emptied the glass the waiter had filled half, then refilled it while speaking.

"With one exception, of course, and I guess that's where the disaster started. Madame Mirault - la grande dame, busy to make her appearance in the society. She bore the two children with two years in-between, and with that she'd done her duty. She spent most of her time in Paris - she has an apartment there, although she always complained it were too small for the afternoon and evening parties she wanted to give. Anyway."

Madeleine Vasseur drank again. She didn't sip; her gulps were deep and greedy.

"So the children grew up with a very limited amount of affection. It glued them still closer together as they already were, which was incredibly close. Then Monsieur Mirault became aware that his wife had stopped contributing any measurable amount to their education, so he hired a - a surrogate mother, it's the only term fitting. That was me."

Cho hadn't interrupted the flow of words before. Now, while the woman seemed lost in memories for a few moments, she simply waited, noticing by herself that she seemed unable to do the same with people she liked better.

Just when the Vasseur woman came awake from her reverie, the waiter appeared with their hors d'oeuvres, so it took another few seconds before the story continued.

"Perhaps it was too late - Patrice was ten when I came into the chateau, Zoé eight. Or it was just that I was the wrong person. I fell in love with the girl instantly. I liked Patrice too, but the difference was obvious, and this conflict between receiving attention and affection from outside, while the same person was driving wedges between him and his sister, drove him crazy."

"These wedges." Cho couldn't suppress her question. "Were they real or imagined?"

"More real than otherwise, which doesn't mean I did it on purpose." The woman somehow managed to eat between the sentences. "Zoé responded to the love I gave her like the petals of a flower. She loved her brother, but she couldn't resist the spoiling, no more than I could resist her charme ... Maybe if I'd been the only one." Madeleine Vasseur grimaced. "But I wasn't."

She ate a few spoonfuls. "It was a steeplechase into disaster. A morbid competition of who could offer more affection, or raise more jealousy. I should have seen it coming, and maybe I did, but I couldn't stop."

For a moment the woman seemed close to tears. Then she took another gulp, looked up. "I know pretty well what's my share of the blame. I'm not alone, not by far, but I did my part to drive my girl into suicide. In the light of that, what do you think I cared about what I did afterwards? Not the black under the nails. I was caught in a trance, then in a shock, and it lasted until a few days ago when I was brought to that castle and your husband asked me what the hell was going on. I welcome the loneliness here. Maybe I'll come to my senses a bit. And don't you worry; I won't try to disappear. There's no reason for me."

There was another question Cho couldn't suppress any longer. "Could you be a bit more specific about what was coming?"

"Specific?" Madeleine Vasseur looked uncomprehending. "What do you want? Quotes, who said what to whom?"

"No, what ... " Cho inhaled. "The picture you draw smells of sex. But with whom exactly did Zoé have sex?"

"I thought I had made it clear." The woman looked apologetic. "With all three of us, that was the fiasco. I never found out if Patrice disappeared because he became aware what he was doing with his sister, or because he found out that he wasn't the only one, actually only third in line."

"And Zoé?"

"Retreated into herself. She hadn't realized beforehand how much she'd hurt her brother. Then came the letter - we only found the envelope, but not what he'd written. It was stamped in Paris."

"And then?"

"Then? Nothing ... for a while, the world stopped to exist for me. I turned mad, literally. I broke into pieces. Part of me was sitting there and thinking about what might have been written in that letter - as if only the letter was to blame for Zoé killing herself. Part of me walked around, ate, slept, and waited for being fired, because there weren't any more children to be surrogate-mothered. Part of me waited to be accused, punished, beaten ... It never took place. Another part waited to receive new orders from Monsieur Mirault, orders that would be more on the adult side."

Madeleine Vasseur took this point in her tale to shovel a few spoonfuls of food into her mouth, in a way that suggested simple hunger, rather than another reverie or even an attempt on increased suspense.

Nonetheless, it had just this effect on Cho. Despite herself, she asked, "And? Did these *orders* ever arrive?"

Madeleine Vasseur shook her head; she had to swallow before she could give a more detailed answer. "No. He'd gone crazy too, but in contrast to me, he never returned. He'd passed the point of no return, although it took me quite a while to notice. Well, it took me a while to notice anything outside myself, but even then - he functioned well to the outside, MiraLuc was thriving; at the beginning the signs were almost hidden."

The woman shook her head again, this time in wondering, apparently about herself.

"How stupid can one be? Little by little, I was again lured into a trap, didn't realize what was going on, until your husband really stopped me cold." Her head came around to stare at Cho in an abrupt movement. "Don't get me wrong - I'm not looking for any excuse. It's just ... you asked me, and that's the way it was."

"What were the first signs you called hidden?"

"It started with him telling me that he had no intention whatsoever to dismiss me. At first I thought I was planned to serve as a convenient sperm management facility. When these advances didn't come, I started to wonder. He created an aura as though the children weren't gone, or just temporarily abroad. Then he intensified his contacts to the school in Brest, and I got tasks to do in these matters. At the beginning, I thought it was a way of balancing out, getting back a grip on reality, especially since it was so perfectly wrapped into his MiraLuc business. Then he started to invite children. And since these invitations often fell together with invitations of other people, and because he quickly perfected his technique and invited complete teams of roommates, these visits looked harmless."

Madeleine Vasseur sent a quick glance to Cho, looked away, took her glass. "To the outside, that was. Not to me." Then she emptied the glass and grabbed the bottle to for a refill, and perhaps for something that justified looking elsewhere.

"Wasn't there anyone in the school who found it strange? Did no one get suspicious?"

"No, why? Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel took care to find an explanation for whatever looked strange."

Cho leaned forward. "How much does he know?"

Madeleine Vasseur shrugged. "Ask him. Monsieur Mirault provided him with an entry into the society, expenses paid, including bills from a tailor, as I know for a given because these things were part of my new job profile. For someone like Fresnel - no money, no family, no charm, no spirit, and no doubt a bad fuck too ..."

Cho had to keep to herself not to nod and grin.

"... it was an offer he couldn't resist, not with his ambitions, his craving for being someone important. And he hasn't the excuse of being stupid." Almost thoughtful, the woman added, "Actually, the same goes for me."

Cho wondered to which degree the woman really had arrived in reality. All through her story, her former employer had been 'Monsieur Mirault,' and probably would keep this title in her mind no matter what happened. Wasn't this a sign that the calamitous connection was still as strong as on the evening she'd been sent into the camp?

As if sensing Cho's thoughts, Madeleine Vasseur said, "Not that it means anything. My brain's just good to watch; if I were back in the Chateau MiraLuc, I guess I'd resume my work exactly where it stopped. So even if it might not look that way, I'm grateful that your husband pulled me out of this maelstrom."

Cho said, "So don't disappoint him by getting lost or making the wrong phone call to the wrong

person, that's about the shortest formula of what I have to tell you about the rules for your stay here."

The woman eyed her thoughtfully. "Or else? You'd be the one to punish me, right?"

"Yes."

"That'd be a new experience. Not that I have any reason to talk with any of them, but considering the prospect ..."

It took a few seconds until Cho became aware of what was going on, then she almost gasped of surprise. "Listen," she said, "if you're looking for someone to make a move, look elsewhere. I'm not available."

The woman shrugged almost imperceptibly. "I wouldn't be competition."

Cho had to fight a wave of disbelief. Eventually she said, "You gave me information about my special friend Fresnel, and for that I owe you good manners, if nothing else. So let me tell you, I'm not shocked, and not disgusted, at least not because of this offer, and most of all it isn't anything new for me, so - no thanks."

The woman's reply still was resounding in Cho's mind when she had arrived home, fifteen minutes later.

"I didn't think it was anything new to you," Madeleine Vasseur had said. "Otherwise I would have kept silent."

23 - Siren Songs

Gabriel was in the middle of a complicated phrase on his flute when the door opened and someone entered the rehearsal room. The person closed the door and chose a seat near the entrance to sit down, not making any attempt to close the distance to the stage on which Gabriel stood.

Such a scene took place a dozen times in a rehearsal session of two hours. Therefore, Gabriel was taken quite by surprise when he almost blew a false note and needed a few seconds to regain perfect sync with Michel's drums.

A moment later, while his flute paused in the song, he replayed his memory of the short event, and then he knew why. Someone entering the room triggered an automatic sequence in his mind: in addition to sending a glance to the newcomer like anyone else who noticed the opening and closing of the door, Gabriel did a brief and almost unconscious mental scan. Most patterns were as unfamiliar as the faces, although recognizing a face near the entrance was difficult, while sensing the mental pattern worked the same as if the person stood next to him. But the person who just had entered did not deliver any pattern, which had caused the short irritation.

Halfways blinded by the lights, Gabriel was unable to see the person on the seat more clearly. Then, with his attention back on the band, he saw how a smile started to grow in Sandra's face. In a reflex, he tried another mental scan on the unknown person, this time with a bit more force, and when his attempt was deflected like a searchlight in a mirror, he knew who it was.

And with this knowledge, even across the distance he could recognize the large discolouration in the man's face. His father.

Feeling pleased about his visit, though not knowing why Harry kept sitting there almost incognito, Gabriel only exchanged a glance with his sister while Dragonfly finished the current song and started the next. Toward the end of this song, Gabriel saw how his father stood up and came to the stage with quick steps.

Instead of a greeting, he asked, "Can we have a bit more privacy?" A nod over his shoulder hinted at the few students who'd found their way into the rehearsal.

Gabriel took the microphone and said, "Hey folks, music's over for today. See you the next time, okay?"

Someone waved a goodbye, another one made a remark about Dragonfly being seen more often in Sweden than in Beauxbatons, where they belonged, and a minute later Harry and the Dragonfly members were alone in the room.

Harry entered the stage, hugged first Sandra and then Gabriel, and said hello to the other Dragonfly members he knew, and who knew him in return, but only with his normal face. As Gabriel could watch, the reactions were quite different. Héloïse stared in fascination, Michel admiringly, Tomas looked as always, and Frédéric's eyes were growing in astonishment.

Then Harry turned to Gabriel and said, "Would you please introduce me to your new singers?"

"Yes, sure." Gabriel pointed, "Dad, please meet Caitlin McFarlane, lead singer, and" - he pointed again - "Moirira Wootton, second singer and provider of most of our lyrics." He turned. "Caitlin, Moirira, this is Harry Potter."

Then he watched as his father and the girls shook hands and said to each other, "Nice to meet you," which, from the girls' side, seemed not quite true.

Then Harry pointed at his forehead and said, "What you see in my face is a mask I need in my current task, of which you'll hear a bit more in a moment, and afterwards you'll know why this

information isn't intended for any public."

Gabriel listened to these words with astonishment; he hadn't expected his father to reveal himself in his current shape, or anything of his task. In the seconds after Harry's announcement, Gabriel listened with some amusement to the sounds of relief that could be heard, mostly from the two girls, at realizing that the discolouration was as artificial as temporary and thus removable. But his curiosity grew by the second.

"First," said Harry when the noise had died and people were looking at him expectantly, "I have to apologize that I couldn't come to your first concert in Sweden. There's a band on the cusp of fame, two of my own children among the members, and I can't attend? I know there's a video recording, but a video is no replacement for the real thing."

It was also true the other way around, Gabriel thought. Of course the Dragonfly members had used the first opportunity to watch their own video, and in a sense it had been a totally different experience - more, it had been the most thrilling concert Gabriel had ever heard.

"I had to guard and protect a camp with children," said Harry into the expectant silence.

"Against the big bad wolf?" asked Frédéric. As much as his question sounded like a joke, there was little joking in his voice, more a kind of disbelief, and when Gabriel glanced over, he saw a watchful stare in Frédéric's face, and appreciation in that of his sister.

"No," replied Harry, "the big bad wolf was a member of the guarding team. Actually, there were three of them, and together we protected the camp against - humans, at least to the outside, and what they had in mind had little to do with kidnapping and ransom. Besides, most of the kid's parents are rather poor."

The chuckle after Harry's first words, raised by a remark that could easily have been misunderstood as a wisecrack countering a wisecrack, had quickly died after his next words. There was no mistaking of what he'd paraphrased.

"Well," said Harry, "we were successful. We caught a person who tried to lure a kid away under a false pretense. But the weirdest part comes now. First, I need an audio recording of your concert."

Feeling his father's look, Gabriel said, "No problem, Dad. I can give it to you on a CD."

"Very good. I'm acting as a sports teacher on a school, where I started using songs from the charts as music for warming-up. This quickly developed into a hip-hop course. I'm talking about fifth-grade girls, what I would have called first-years."

"Hey, cool." Caitlin looked admiringly at Harry.

"What I have in mind is to let the girls perform on stage, in public, and now guess where?"

"In the lion's den."

Frédéric had given the answer. His face was shining in excitement and anticipation.

Gabriel nodded involuntarily. He could follow Frédéric's thought, but then, he'd known considerably more, and much earlier too.

"Right, in the lion's den, which in this case is a chateau in a ten minutes distance from that camp." Harry met Frédéric's stare. "And since you could follow so quickly, you probably can guess why I want an audio recording from the Dragonfly concert."

"You need the audio recording because the album isn't available yet," replied Frédéric. "So far, it's obvious. You want to use it for your hip-hop course, that's not exactly a riddle either. And this, in

turn ..."

When he hesitated, his eyes growing, Harry nodded encouragingly.

"... means that you want Dragonfly to perform on the same stage," finished Frédéric, sounding almost breathless.

"Correct. You're really up to your reputation, Frédéric." Harry smiled, though somewhat grimly. "And why do I want to provide Dragonfly a gig in a chateau? In this particular chateau?"

"There are two reasons that come to my mind. One of them's called Sandra" - Frédéric turned to said reason - "and the other's the bandleader, although that might not be the quality you wanted to have at hand there."

"No. The chateau is covered by an apparition lock - from Groucho, isn't this irony? And Sandra and Gabriel together can break the lock."

Gabriel exchanged the mental equivalent of a knowing look with his sister, at the same time noticing the uncomprehending stares from Caitlin and Moira. They weren't around long enough to have heard the story how he and his sister had escaped an abduction by breaking such a lock for the first time.

"My plan," explained Harry, "is to use my hip-hop course as bait for those people who were invited into the chateau at earlier occasions. With the confessions from the person we caught there, we can nail the owner of the chateau, but no one else. If the - let's say, *usual* guests are invited by the owner, I'm confident to nail them, or if not or not all of them, at least to blow their public reputation to pieces. You, the band Dragonfly, are planned as the Trojan horse Frédéric just described, but don't be mistaken: you're bait too." Harry looked first at Moira, then at Caitlin. "And that's why I tell you all this. You need to know what you'll be involved into. I'm not going to trick you into a situation that bears a certain risk." Toward Caitlin, he added, "So much for cool."

"Do the girls know?" Michel had asked the question.

"A few of them, yes. Those who know wear a bracelet that's part of an alarm system. I have the receiver, and I can apparate to the spot where an alarm was raised - but only if the apparition lock is broken, and preferably without the other side knowing. Now you see why I come to you with an idea most people would just call madness."

"I still think it's cool." Caitlin swallowed. "Although, to be honest, I'd like to know how much risk we take when we go there."

"If you go there," corrected Harry. "I don't want to put pressure on anyone, neither my own nor that of the group. That's why I don't want an answer today - you need time to think it through, but please discuss it only within your own circle. The risk? These people aren't murderers and the victims of earlier cases of misuse look unhurt to the outside; these people operate more with seduction and false pretense."

Gabriel could sense a mix of emotions. Aside from himself and his sister, there was only Frédéric who welcomed such an opportunity. Being part of a task force that included Harry *and* Sandra was more than he'd expected in his wildest dreams. While the girls ...

"That's it," said Harry into the silence. "If you join, everyone of you will wear such a bracelet, as well as a party for escape, except that this escape will be open only after the lock is broken. And *if* you join" - he looked at the two singer girls - "you'll be more than just camouflage for Sandra and Gabriel. I need every hand I can trust - if things go awry, someone has to take care of my girl troupe so I'm free for other things."

He turned to Gabriel. "Where can I get the recording? Independently of anything else, I want to start

using your music in my course."

Gabriel thought for a second. "This evening I can have a CD ready for you. In the castle?"

"Sounds good." His father grinned at him. "Castle means Carron Lough, right?"

Gabriel just nodded. Yes, he knew that there was also the Chateau Saumur, which still served as the local operation base and these days the most likely place when trying to reach their mother, but as a joke spanning two languages it was a bit prim.

Only when his father had already disappeared, after saying goodbye to everyone and to his children in particular, Gabriel became aware that his father might not have excluded a short visit of Gabriel in the hostile territory from the list of possibilities.

* * *

Sandra's gaze kept fixed on her father while he left the rehearsal room. Only then did she look up, to meet Frédéric's stare similarly fixed on herself. She smiled. "Hey, genius. I'm proud of you."

He bowed elegantly. "Any time, mademoiselle."

Caitlin looked at Gabriel, then at Sandra. "Your father's awfully cool. Comes in, scares me shitless, says, 'Think about it,' and leaves. Wow!"

Into the chuckle, Moira said, "I agree with the middle part, the one about the scaring. Otherwise ..."

The laughter was more than the joke deserved, especially since Moira meant it in earnest, but she'd found the right valve to vent some of the excitement that had built up in the Dragonfly team since Harry's announcement.

Caitlin, about to ask her next question, was stopped by Gabriel's raised hand. "Listen, folks," he said, "let's go to a place where we can talk and shout without being concerned about who might listen."

Sandra had thought the same but hadn't felt inclined to take the initiative: she and her brother thought along the same lines, and Dragonfly, including rehearsals as well as their cancelling for special reasons, were his command. She knew that he meant Carron Lough, but here she was ahead of him because she'd sensed her friend waking up from her trance. And here it came.

"You're totally right," said Héloïse, "and this place is our home in the Goblin quarter."

Gabriel stared at her. "You just want to let your mother in on this plot."

"She knows anyway."

"Anyway, huh? This particular twist will be new to her, and you can't await telling her the news."

Héloïse made no attempt to deny. Instead, she said, "Birdy's got the cake recipe from Dobby, but of course he had to modify it to meet his standards. Isn't this reason enough?"

Birdy was the house-elf in the Weasley household of Heloise and Michel's parents, Fleur and Bill. He'd arrived there in the aftermath of the same events in which Sandra and Gabriel, helped by these two friends, had broken another apparition lock to escape a dungeon.

Moira said, "Yes, please - I mean, if it's true that Héloïse's allowed to tell her mother."

Moira had opened toward Fleur from the first moment they'd met. Moira's own mother, separated from her diplomat husband as far as Sandra knew, was a topic to be avoided, but even if Moira couldn't be called motherless, Fleur's attitude - as cordial as straight - had won her the girl's heart in a blink. Taking into account Moira's anxiousness, suggesting the house in the Goblin quarter was much better a choice than Carron Lough, and Sandra wondered if Héloïse had been aware of this. It wasn't unlikely; the Veela girl could play on the social scale as excellently as on her Felison harp.

"All right," said Gabriel. "Take care of your instruments, and meet me outside so I can summon you."

Sandra suppressed a smile. Her brother was a sensible boy; he'd no doubt drawn the same conclusions, but it was also a fact that he would paint his flute fire engine red, should Moira ever express any such desire.

A few minutes later they were sitting in the dinner room of the house Bill Weasley had earned with his undercover work for the Goblins during the war against the Dark Forces. Using the dinner room was the only choice - the kitchen, normally the room for social events of non-formal nature in this household, simply offered not enough space for all people.

Fleur was pleased to have such a collection of *famous* guests. Eight-year-old Ismène was excited to have all of Dragonfly in her home, after she'd last seen a much smaller crew at the Black Sea. Someone else was even more thrilled, though mainly of Sandra and the opportunity to present his newest creation to her: Birdy, who'd been freed by Sandra eight years ago.

After he'd left the dinner room, in a hurry to get enough cake ready for so large a number of guests, Fleur bent toward Sandra and whispered, "He's going to marry soon."

"Oh, really?"

"Unless he manages to spoil it again, which I hope he can avoid because afterwards the two of them would work here. His girl's free too, but only since recently, and the prospect of being hired at once, coming out of the church, so-to-speak, has improved Birdy's chances considerably." Fleur chuckled. "He isn't exactly a women's elf, from what I've heard."

Birdy and his social life was something of a running gag, though not always funny. At the beginning of his employment by Fleur, he'd been obliged to pass his salary over to Carlos and Esmeralda, as a compensation for Birdy's involvement - no matter how involuntary - in the plot that killed their parents. But the true reason for this punishment had been Birdy's own mental health, and this was why at the end of the first year, when Sandra had signaled that Carlos and Esmeralda were sufficiently compensated, the house-elf had flatly refused to be released. So he'd paid another year, before the two children themselves could convince him that any more month with this "undeserved pocket money" would make them so unhappy that it had to stop at once.

It had taken Birdy another two years to get used to spending his income for himself, rather than more or less worthy causes like the foundation that ran the treatment center for traumatized house-elves. The breakthrough had been Fleur's suggestion to "save the money and buy yourself a wife, once it's enough." Since then, three quarters of Birdy's income went into a savings account.

Sandra asked, "Where did he meet her?"

Before Fleur could answer, Héloïse cut in. "Is this the most important topic to discuss now? Birdy and his marriage plans?"

Fleur shot her a glance. "Why, do you have news that can't wait to be told?"

Maybe it was planned as a reprimand, but anyone listening could only hear genuine curiosity, and eagerness to be told. So Sandra quickly nodded toward the youngest girl in the room, at this moment busy to learn everything about the two singers in the band, and said, "It has to wait, with this audience."

Héloïse exploded. "Don't tell me what I can tell and when just because my little sister is present. She's as much Veela as I and won't choke on a lewd phrase." Toward her mother, she said, "Harry came to visit. He wanted a CD with our new music, to let his fifth-grade girls dance to that music."

When they're ready, he wants to let them perform on stage, in front of a very special audience. And guess what: he wants to do it with live music."

While Fleur was still busy to digest this information a fact a time, Héloïse stared at Sandra and said, "See, it works just fine if you know how to spell it."

At this moment, Ismène said, "I want to dance to your music too. Do you think Uncle Harry lets me join his girls?"

Héloïse inhaled to give a reply but closed her mouth again as Michel quickly said, "Let me answer."

With some satisfaction, Sandra watched the short instant of non-verbal communication between sister and brother, Veela both of them. There had been some steel in Michel's voice; he knew how merciless the older sister could treat the younger one, but today he wouldn't let it happen, and while Héloïse never hesitated to quarrel with her brother about a personal issue, she knew better than coming cross when he protected his precious little sister.

Michel turned to Ismène, "I guess he will, but only if you have exercised as much as these girls do. How about that?"

"Oh."

"C'mon, let's have a test of your dancing. In the music room." Michel, who had no qualms from Harry's plan, was apparently ready to open the way for the discussion his older sister had in mind.

"Not now," replied Ismène. "The cake'll be there any second now. We can do it later." Next moment, she turned around and watched with some astonishment as Frédéric lost a fight against a burst of laughter, which finally erupted. When he'd halfways managed to calm down, he looked up, but seeing Ismène's beaming face sent him into another fit.

Birdy's cake appearing on the table probably saved him from Héloïse's accumulated fury. For a few minutes, small talk was the only alternative to chewing and swallowing; Fleur, in contrast to her first daughter, found no taste in giving any comment to Harry's idea in the presence of her second daughter. Instead, she turned to Gabriel and said, "I guess you're the best connoisseur of the original recipe for this cake. What do think of Birdy's variation?"

"Well ..."

"He Frenchised it," answered Frédéric into Gabriel's hesitation, earning a few smiles for his game of words. "Sweeter than Dobby's version, and some fruits which we better not talk about in Dobby's presence."

"Pineapple," murmured Gabriel with all signs of disbelief. "He put pineapple into this cake."

"Well, you know, it's a matter of taste," replied Fleur. "This version was a big success on a society meeting where he worked as freelancer." She turned to Sandra. "That's where he met his Salimée, to answer your question from a minute ago. A friend of mine had asked me whether she could borrow him for that occasion, and I said he's free and I wouldn't object such a chance to earn some extra money with his skill - well, in the end I did the negotiations because this friend of mine's incredibly penurious; without my intervention she'd have talked the poor thing into doing it for free."

"While on the subject of talking into," said Héloïse, "Caitlin and Moira aren't the least bit enthusiastic about us having a gig in this particular place. That's one reason why we came here; if you talk with them, they might have a better idea of what it means."

"I guess I have an idea why Harry wants his girl troupe perform there," said Fleur, "but why does he need Dragonfly for that?"

"There's an apparition lock in the castle," replied Sandra. "He wants us to break it."

"And that's how he can sell your presence to - oh, okay, I see." Fleur turned to Caitlin and Moira. "That's so typical of Harry. I feel flattered to be your counselor in this matter, but frankly, I'm not really objective and probably tend to judge in his favour. He's absolutely reckless, and over the years, it has rubbed off on myself."

Moira said, "With Sandra and Gabriel, it's understandable, I mean with their power, but eleven-year-old girls?"

"I'm not going as far as to say he's got a blind spot in this regard" - Fleur sent a quick pacifying smile to Sandra while almost criticizing her father - "but for sure Harry has a different perspective than most other people. He was eleven when he had his first conscious fight with Voldemort, you should keep that in mind. He doesn't expect the same from anyone; he simply refuses to exclude children from the list of people who can be sent into a challenge."

Caitlin turned to Sandra. "This apparition lock thing - he seems absolutely sure that you and Gabriel together can break it, just so. I thought these locks were unbreakable."

"Normally yes, but we aren't normal," replied Sandra nonchalantly. Then she told Caitlin and Moira the story of how she and Gabriel had mastered their first lock-breaking with the help of Héloïse and Michel, who'd been held prisoners in the same dungeon. Her own tale was complemented by comments from Gabriel and Héloïse; only Michel had little to add because he still tried to coax his younger sister out of the dinner room.

When the team had finished with their story, Caitlin asked, "How do you know you aren't out of practice? That's been eight years ago, right?"

Sandra exchanged a glance with her brother, then said, "Since then, Gabriel has trained his summoning to perfection, because this would have simplified the escape considerably. I'm not quite as studious as he in such regards, but guess what I have practiced over the years?"

"Breaking apparition locks." Moira looked admiring.

Sandra grinned at her. "How did you know?"

It wasn't a lie, not the real truth either. Yes, Sandra *had* practiced focussing her full force on such targets from time to time, but she was by no means as fluent as Gabriel with his synchronized apparating and chain-summoning. In that castle, though, she would be ready. She was going to join her father in this combat, and she had made up her mind: Dragonfly would be there; she was going to make sure of that - together with her brother, as far as she could sense Gabriel's own vote in the matter.

She would practice in the days to come, and in addition, she had an idea how she could multiply her own power - provided it was possible and no violation of rules she was only dimly aware of, but knew they existed and had to be kept. Killing several birds with the same stone, there was nothing wrong in that.

* * *

After he'd received the double CD with the Dragonfly music from his son, Harry instantly returned to the school in Brest. As much as he would have liked to stay, perhaps for a longer conversation with his older children, perhaps also for a night with his wife, he just had no time - not now, when the steps to take were so obvious, and the sooner he took them the better.

His joyless two-room suite in the Cayenne building offered none of the equipment he needed to get prepared for his next sports classes. A player on which he could quickly skip forward or backward was only found in the gymnasium, where he practiced with his hip-hop troupe. This place was just

fine: listening to and selecting from the music on the CD was only the first step; creating a choreography came next.

Normally he would have apparated into the gymnasium from where he stood, this way saving the efforts of opening the locked doors and locking them again. But he saw reason to play as openly as possible, which included letting the lights from the gymnasium tell everyone that he was busy there so late in the evening, and letting the doors unlocked so anyone interested might enter.

After all, he'd been told, he should appear as inviting as possible to the people he was hunting.

So he walked, used conventional keys, and busied himself by sitting at his control center and listen through earphones, as if in consideration of the noise in the night. To any intruder, he would appear unaware, even vulnerable.

He wasn't. A small portion of his mental capacity kept on guard to any change his senses would notice. The rest listened with pleasure and admiration to what his children and their friends had achieved in the past weeks.

He was in the fourth song, *Listen to the teacher*, and smiled at the lyrics when he became aware that he just hadn't time enough for the complete concert. Two hours - it would be past midnight before he'd even found the song of his choice. So he took to playing only the first half minute of each song before he skipped to the next, writing the titles of the good candidates on a notepad.

Thirty minutes later he was through with the double album and knew that his candidate would be in the part before the break. The songs afterwards were wonderful and he was looking forward to hearing them in full length, but they were too complex for what he needed.

After a second round in which he re-played short pieces, his list had shrunk down to two candidates, *Sunrise* and *I'm Not That Stupid*. Both had the rhythm and the beat he'd been looking for, both offered lyrics that could be accentuated or illustrated with gestures by eleven-year-olds - Harry already saw some of these movements before his inner eye.

By the time he'd heard both songs in full length, he knew that it had to be *Sunrise*. The singers were the reason. *Sunrise*, quite in contrast to the other song, in which almost only the darker voice could be heard, offered both voices in an interesting anthem that would splendidly support his choreography.

He only had to find one. Fast.

In the past weeks, Harry had learned a lot about choreography, of course only within the very limited scope of hip-hop. He'd bought the one for the song his troupe had trained until now, and just by bringing to life a step sequence an expert had created, he'd learned enough about the key elements to be able to create another one for *Sunrise*.

He hadn't started at zero. His aikido provided a good basis, although a choreography for two aikido fighters had to emphasize quite different elements than a choreography for two dozen girls all making the same steps.

All the same? What if the new program broke this habit at once, and his troupe split into the two forces that were clashing in this song, early birds vs. late risers?

That'd be it! Of course he would copy elements of the already known choreography, if only to save time in the practising, but with the two antagonistic roles expressed by the girls in the two groups, the music and the lyrics alone were almost writing the choreography by themselves.

Harry grabbed the remote control and walked to the middle of the hall. Playing the song back and forth, he tried out step combinations - for the active half, the early risers; they would approach their counterparts who would be lying on the floor, faking sleep, during the first beats.

Well, he had to be careful with his space consumption. The gymnasium offered enough room, but a performance in the building he had in mind would -

Someone had entered the gymnasium. This someone came closer now, either very hesitantly or very carefully; Harry couldn't decipher more at mental level.

He forced himself to keep his back to the entrance for the next seconds, and to continue his try-and-error work while the intruder was making his own tentative steps.

The unknown person came to a halt, in a position of which Harry was sure he could be watched from. When nothing else happened, when he knew the person was standing there and just kept watching him, he turned around.

It was Agnès. She said something Harry couldn't hear.

He took his earphones off. "Hello, Agnès. What did you say?"

"I said, good evening, Thierry. What are you doing here so late in the evening? Is this school work or private?"

"Somewhere in the middle. I've got a new song for my hip-hop course, and this time it's me who has to find the proper steps."

"What's the name of that song? Can I hear it?"

True to her reputation, Agnès was curious as a cat and would duplicate her list of questions with each asking back. Harry already regretted having left the door open, but now it was too late; after her key role in the previous stages of Harry's investigation, Agnès deserved courtesy at the minimum.

Rather than answering, Harry pressed the button on his remote that switched the speakers on, then let *Sunrise* start again. When the music played, he repeated the step sequence he'd found so far, now under Agnès' eyes.

He ran out of steps after a minute or so, but for the sake of Agnès' listening, he played the full four minutes twelve seconds the song lasted; then he stopped the music.

"What band is this?" Agnès looked wondering. "I've never heard that song before."

"Small wonder; it's not even available as album. The band's called Dragonfly, and the recording I got is a pre-pressing."

"Dragonfly? What a strange name for a band. But the music is strange too, somehow. Although - these two voices in the song, they've got a future waiting for them. Where did you meet them?"

"I know their sound engineer; like myself he comes from the great kingdom across the small water." Harry looked at his wristwatch. "Can we continue this conversation another time, Agnès? I have to find the steps till tomorrow."

"What's the hurry?"

He could see it in her face: this stubbornness bordering on impertinence was fed by suspicion. Unfortunately, she was totally right. The only way out - for sure the fastest way out - was the unvarnished truth.

"Tomorrow my hip-hop course is due, and I want to get them ready to appear in public, actually in a special kind of public, even though the invitation hasn't arrived yet. But I'm confident it will, and in time - an invitation to perform during a festivity at the Chateau MiraLuc."

Agnès stared at him. "Somehow I'm not the least bit surprised. I had - as if I'd known, as if a voice had called me to pass the gymnasium at this time of the day. You're mad, did you know that? Besides, what makes you think you'll get an invitation?"

"Because I'll make sure of it."

"Ah, of course."

"It shouldn't be a problem. The prospect of twenty-something little girls throwing their legs, perhaps in tight suits? It'll be *that* event in the chateau, only in more ways than they might expect." Harry grinned thinly.

"You're crazy. Someone has to stop you, and it looks as if I'm this someone. A word from me, and this goat-for-the-tiger play's over before it ever happened."

Harry made a step toward Agnès. "Would you?"

She looked anxious but stood her ground. "Are you trying to frighten me? Tell me what you have in mind! That's the only way to keep my mouth shut."

Harry made another step. Now he stood right in front of Agnès. His smile was stronger than before, for her as for anyone else not knowing him better an extremely misleading sign.

"There's a woman in far-off Canada," he said. "She's got a hotel suite for the next weeks, the ultimate luxury, everything she wants, perhaps except the company and the homeground she's missing. And you know why? To make sure she doesn't raise an alarm signal, be it on purpose or by accident. Do you want to keep her company?"

"A woman from the chateau?"

Harry lost patience with this damned question for an answer game. "Agnès, I trust your word, so please trust mine: either you promise me now and here not to spoil the plot, or you'll learn to know a very deserted spot of Canada."

"You ..." She examined his face. "Yes, you would. Why? Why can't you tell me more? Why do you have to threaten me?"

"Because I don't have the time. Because you didn't strike me as the fearless fighter earlier in our acquaintance. Because I want to hammer it into this nosy head of yours: Agnès, I'm serious. I mean it."

He hadn't raised his voice, was even calmer when he asked for her choice. "So?"

She still hesitated, maybe just from not being used to find herself stonewalled like that. "You would? Right now?"

"It's late afternoon in Canada. Want to see it? It's beautiful."

She raised her both hands in surrender. "No! No thanks, not now. Yes, I believe you. I promise, I won't tell."

"Very good." Harry's smile grew warmer. "As a reward, I have an invitation for you. Next Friday evening, to Sweden."

"Sweden?" For an instant, she looked as if she'd liked to test his mental health. "What's so much better in Sweden than in Canada?"

"There's a Dragonfly concert there."

"Ah, yes, the band I always wanted to hear. Well, why not? Does this have anything to do with your plot?"

"Of course." He grinned. "It's their music to which the girls will dance."

"How stupid of me, not to have thought of that." Agnès had sufficiently recovered to give him a glare. "What's so special about them? And if you don't want to tell, please have the courtesy not to feed me with speech bubbles."

He grinned broader. "You didn't listen. I said, it's their music to which the girls will dance." Seeing the understanding grow in Agnès' widening eyes, Harry added, "Actually, they're very young. The chateau people will be delighted."

"And you didn't answer. What's so special about them?"

"They can do more than play music." Harry's grin had faded. "They're my ticket to survival in this plot."

Next morning, Harry hadn't come anywhere close to finishing his choreography, but what he'd found was enough for a head start. He used the regular Sports course to announce that he had new music, that an appearance on stage was within reach if they learned the new steps quickly enough, and they should think about a costume for this occasion. Then, smiling into faces that were gasping or just speechless, he said, "We'll start right here. What we've learned so far was a warming-up and our encore if it comes to that. Now listen!"

He started *Sunrise* and let the music play to the end, time enough for the excited moods to calm down. Then he said, "At the beginning, one half of your lot is lying asleep on the floor, at least it'll look like that, then the other half comes storming to get you up and moving. Now: those who want to lie asleep walk to the right, and those who want to come storming to the left. Take your choice!"

He was too fast for them. "What group is this?" someone asked.

"A new teenie band. You'll meet them, if everything works as planned. They call themselves Dragonfly."

"What? Who's that? Never heard of that." Most girls looked either uncomprehending or didn't care much - with one exception. A group to Harry's left, initially consisting of just one girl but quickly growing to four of them, seemed thrilled to their hairpins from this prospect.

Harry sent a glance to this one girl, his daughter Esmeralda. For an instant, he put his index finger over his lips. For anyone else, it looked as though he was sorting his thoughts before starting the exercises. But it was enough: Esmeralda nodded, and apparently told her roommates that they had to wait until they were alone before she could spill more news.

Coming to lunch, Harry lost no time. With his food tray in hand, he steered toward the table with Laurent Clerc and Gilles Picabault. Their faces weren't exactly welcoming, but it didn't matter. Wouldn't matter.

He put his tray on the table, then sat down. "Salut. I've got news. My girl troupe's ready to perform, or they will three weeks from now. So what about the places where a girls formation dancing hip-hop would be appreciated?"

Gilles stared at him, a forgotten forkful of mashed potatoes stuck halfway between plate and mouth. But Gilles was just an accessory part.

Laurent groaned. "Your timing's incredible. Really, it couldn't be worse."

"What do you mean, timing? It took them a while, but now they've got the motion, and I've got it too, if you know what I mean."

"You don't understand. The channels are clogged, communication's stuck at the moment - if you know what I mean," Laurent added with an undertone as though talking with someone slow of mind.

"No, I don't know. If you have any contacts, it can't be so difficult to ask whether my formation is welcome, can it?"

Laurent put his fork down, anger in his face which he tried to control, perhaps with respect to Harry's reputation of having a loose pair of fists.

"Listen. Old Jacques was the channel from our side; I would have come to him first with your request. Now that Jacques is gone under dubious circumstances, people tried to rearrange and were almost done, but then guess what? The channel from the other side disappeared, which is maybe even weirder than what happened to Jacques. And if a line's broken, you have to splice it first before you can talk business again. Even you should be able to understand that."

At the mentioning of a disappeared channel from the other side, Harry had put his moment of surprise into something that could go as indignant wondering. Now, showing a mix of disappointment and contempt, he said, "That's what you call contacts? Knowing someone who knows someone who knows where the wind goes when he falls asleep? Let me tell you what contacts you have. There's a close contact to a lot of hot air, and that's your mouth, with the hot air inside you but in your head, rather than at the other end - if you know what I mean."

Laurent had paled. "You bloody Brit," he hissed, "you're too stupid to drop a stone on your own foot! Why don't you shut up, asshole? You haven't got the least idea of what you're talking about."

Harry rose from his seat in a gracious movement, his left hand lifting his food tray. "Looks as if I'm unwelcome," he said, almost nonchalantly, "so I'll leave you alone. But I clearly remember having warned you before that I don't take well to aggressive remarks, so I guess I should emphasize my point."

At his last word, his left hand had started to accelerate the food tray, and to turn it. When it reached Laurent's face, it was flat, hitting the man's forehead not particularly hard, but the mashed potatoes with gravy were driven all over his face, his hair, and into his collar.

Harry let the empty tray drop on the table and walked away from the scene.

He didn't even need his special senses to know what was going on in his back, and to set his timing right. Laurent's outcry at being hit by the hot smear was followed by a brief pause, then the sound of a chair dropping to the floor reached Harry's ear, and an instant later the almost inaudible hiss of a shoe.

Harry bent down, folding himself as close to the ground as he could manage without losing his balance, at the same time making a hundred-and-eighty degree turn. From this position, Laurent - Laurent's legs - were prominently in his vision while the man was already falling over him, moving too fast to stop or sidestep.

Harry grabbed one ankle in each hand and came up in a single push, almost like a weight-lifter, this way converting and accelerating Laurent's free fall into a toppling-over.

The man was still sliding over the floor when Harry reached him. He grabbed a fistful of Laurent's hair, pulled his head slightly upward, and pushed it full-force down. The short thud from the impact ended in a crunching sound, too hard to be attributed to the spilled food.

"You need to wash your face," Harry said. Then he walked out, through an audience frozen in horrified silence, staring at him but looking the other way when he passed them.

He didn't have to wait long. The call to "appear in front of Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel," routed through by a Jeannette sounding as sniffy as gloating, reached him still before his first afternoon course.

After all, Harry thought while calmly walking the distance from the Cayenne to the Brest building, there was something to be said for the endless lunch breaks at French schools. You could eat, shit, beat up your fellow teacher, and get your punishment all between two courses.

The door to the school secretary's office was ajar as always. Harry stepped in and found Jeannette sitting behind her desk as always, except that the look in her eyes told him that he had it coming, and today it was finally due.

"Hi Jeannette. You probably got a first-hand description of the events from Gilles, isn't it?"

Surprise. Guilt, replaced by an almost pleased look, and suddenly something like - well, admiration was too strong a word for Jeannette's quickly changing expression.

Being in high mental gear anyway, in preparation for his encounter with Fresnel, Harry couldn't help thinking that Laurent had it even longer coming - seen from Jeannette's perspective. Maybe less for his attitude toward the children he should protect, and more for his bullying of Gilles.

It didn't matter. Harry knocked at the door and entered without waiting for the call.

Fresnel sat behind his desk, looking expectant, which was the first element out of the ordinary since Harry had crossed the entrance of the administration building.

He sat down in front of Fresnel's desk. "You had me called, Monsieur le Directeur?"

"Yes indeed, Monsieur Pri'chard. Would you, by any chance, have an inkling why?"

"I would."

"Of course, and perhaps you also have an idea what's about to happen now. But if not: you've been a teacher at this school for the longest time. That's the short version. The long - "

"Let's stick to the short one for a moment, if you don't mind. To make it even shorter: I don't think so."

"You will call me by my title, Pri'chard!"

"You will call me by mine, Fresnel!" Calmer, Harry added, "That is, if you want to fuss with titles; I don't really care, actually."

"*Monsieur* Pri'chard, I have hundred-and-something eyewitnesses who can attest that you attacked your colleague Monsieur Clerc. Poor Laurent has a broken nose and a concussion of the head; he's in medical care right now. That should be enough, no matter what you think."

"Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel, you should leave interrogations of eyewitnesses to people who know how to handle them. Isn't there anyone who really told you what happened? Laurent attacked me - from behind, not to forget. It was purely self-defense."

"Self-defense?" For an instant, Fresnel's voice was at the verge of tilting. "You took him by the hair when he was lying on the floor and knocked his head down!"

"So?" Harry gave Fresnel a humourless grin. "Self-defense, my dear Monsieur le Directeur, is a bit more than side-stepping an uppercut, let me tell you from my vast experience. It also means making sure that the attack is *over*. His nose was the smallest bone I could break."

"How extraordinary considerate of you. Did it play the tiniest role in your calculations that it's also the most painful?"

"Ahhh!" Harry beamed at Fresnel. "After all, you know a bit more about brawls than you let show."

Yes, that might be an integral part of my reflexes, while I can honestly claim not to have consciously chosen this bone or another."

"Self-defense, Monsieur Pri'chard, should be a defense in first place, wouldn't you agree? But my witnesses report that it started with you throwing your lunch into Laurent's face."

"Correct at the end, Monsieur le Directeur, while not at the beginning."

"What? Speak comprehensibly, Pri'chard - and call me Sylvain, for god's sake, we won't ever confuse it for a sign of friendship, will we?"

A crack in the headmaster's armour! Harry hadn't ever taken him as stupid enough to really depend on being properly addressed by his title; still, it came somewhat unexpected.

"The end was 'throwing my lunch into Laurent's face,' and this is correct, I have to admit. The beginning was, 'It started with,' and this is not correct."

"So how did it start?"

"He called me a bloody Brit. And an asshole."

Fresnel was fighting to keep his expression serious. "Harsh words, indeed. But you aren't going to tell me this is how it started, Pri - Thierry."

"No, Sylvain, it was only the start of the rougher part. I had joined these two - er, I mean Laurent and Gilles, because Laurent had told me a while ago that he has contacts in case my hip-hop girls are ever ready to appear in public, and that he can help me get a little extra to cover my expenses. Well, they're close to that point, so I sat down there to get the thing going."

No doubt, Harry had Fresnel's full attention.

"So I asked him, but all I got was some bullshit about clogged communication channels - on both ends, whatever that means. When I insisted, he said that normally he would have taken my request to Jacques, but Jacques isn't available now. That was when I finally realized that I'd listened to a blithering idiot, which can happen to the best of us, right? And - well, I told him so. That's been the moment when we started to develop our disagreement."

"Disagreement, eh?" But Fresnel had somehow lost his outrage about poor Laurent's fate. "Your girls, as you said ..."

"The fifth-graders, yes. A formation of two dozen girls."

"And you really think they could perform before the eyes of an audience?"

"Definitely, eh, Sylvain. And what's more, they're dancing to a song from a teenie group, kids barely older - okay, fourteen to sixteen, but kids no doubt, and my idea was to get a gig for both of them together, music group and girls group."

"You should have come to me first with this idea, Thierry. Laurent is a - well, let's say he was correct in the sense that he hasn't really first-rate contacts. But there are more channels, and at least one isn't clogged the least bit."

"Really? That'd be great, Monsieur le - Sylvain, I mean."

"Let me have a look. A bit more practising won't hurt, right? But I'm quite confident to know a place, actually well suited for a first appearance, but not the last, right?"

"And where, if I may ask?"

"It's - well, my first idea is obvious: our generous sponsor, who's famous for the festivities on his chateau. MiraLuc, I mean. I'm telling you now because you should keep your expectations within bounds - after all, this, er, company donates a lot to our school, so maybe they consider it as a

simple payback."

Harry tried to look disappointed, which was the hardest task in quite a while.

"Hmm - but there's still this music group, and for them the situation's different. They're in an early stage of their career, so-to-speak, but they won't come for free."

"Let me have a talk with our sponsor, Thierry, then I'll tell you what's within reach, and then you can filter the news through to that group in the proper form." Fresnel showed a knowing smile.

"How does someone like you get in touch with a music group? And such a young one?"

"Their sound engineer's a friend of mine, an old buddy. When we were sitting together, it turned out I have girls to dance to music, and he has girls and boys to make the music. The age - I don't know what else he works for, but that's the band he suggested. Dragonfly, they call themselves. A crazy name, but they can play."

"This sound engineer ..."

Harry grinned, rejoicing inwardly that Fresnel showed the amount of insistence which made the plotting realistic, and his announcement trustworthy.

"He isn't French, if that's what you wanted to know, but he works in Paris, and the kids are students on French schools, as he said."

"Is he a fellow countryman of you, then?"

"A bloody Brit?" Harry laughed. "He's an Irishman, that's where you can find drinking buddies and sound experts."

Harry stood up to indicate that the conversation was over, or if not, that at least he'd given all information he thought necessary.

As if in an afterthought, he turned once more to Fresnel. "His name is Desmond, and if anyone ever called him British, the proverbial matter would hit the fan much harder than what happened today, Sylvain. Trust my word."

* * *

Carlos listened to the twitter between the girls. It had taken him a moment to get a grasp on what they were talking about, and now that he knew he didn't like it at all. Maybe it was simple jealousy, maybe he just felt as the odd one out, but he didn't think so.

They were in the park behind the school buildings, not quite sitting in the grass, as close to the Atlantic as here in Brest it was too late in the year for that, but still relishing the warm sun rays of a late afternoon, with Bolo and Dona Gata enjoying the presence of what the two pets considered the complete pack: Esmeralda and her roommates, Chloé, and Carlos himself.

But even though the persons were the same, something was uncommon in their gathering. What formerly had been two and four today appeared as one and five - one Carlos listening to five girls chatting animatedly about dancing.

Hip-hop. In public.

Worse, in the Chateau MiraLuc. Yes, Carlos knew that it was just a plot to have an easy entry into the chateau at a time when all suspects were invited. Yes, he knew that Dragonfly would play their music live on stage, which meant his older siblings would be present - actually a fact known to just two out of the six people here on the grass. So he could have stopped worrying; with Sandra and Gabriel around, they could feel safe.

But he should be the only one excluded?

He watched the girls doing dance steps on the grass. Now Dominique laid down, faking sleep, and Esmeralda took position as if next moment she were going to run to the spot where Dominique was lying and pull her awake or whatever, but Bolo used the opportunity to wash Dominique's face with his tongue, and the scene broke into fragments with a shrieking girl here, a jumping dog there, and Esmeralda trying to calm down both of them.

Odile turned to Carlos. "Do something useful. Hold that dog while we practise."

Something clicked in Carlos' mind. Odile's snappish command had sealed his decision.

"I can't," he said. "I need to practise myself."

"What?"

The girls stared at him. Meeting Esmeralda's look, Carlos saw that at least his sister knew what he meant. There was compassion in her eyes, but disbelief also.

He stood up. "I'm going to join you."

"Yeah, sure." Odile examined him. "You look so incredibly girlish, that's why."

"You think you know everything, huh? I'm going to join you just as I am."

"A boy? But the others are all girls!" Natalie, obviously trying to understand his idea, couldn't follow.

"So I'll be the only boy. Maybe there's something where a boy fits in, or I'm just the one who's different in the group, but I'll come with you. I'll ask him - Monsieur Pri'chard, I mean."

"You can as well call him - " Just in time, Odile interrupted herself, to look guilty and check around with a hand on her mouth.

"Maybe she doesn't know everything, but for sure she knows more than what's good for her," said Dominique.

"Do I?" Odile looked challenged. "And for sure I know more than what's good for Carlos, and that's called hip-hop. We've practised for weeks and weeks, and still have to work hard to get it done in time." She looked at Carlos. "How do you want to join? Even if your - even if the teacher wants to agree, he can't because you don't know what to dance. If you join us, then only as a flagpole, but you're too short for that."

She stood there, arms akimbo, perhaps waiting for the macho attack one had to expect from such a hot-headed Spaniard after calling him too short for playing a flagpole.

But Carlos just said, "Of course I have to practise, day and night if necessary. And I need help from you, because I don't know the steps, but before I ask - er, him, I must be ready. I know what he's going to say first, and then I must be able to say, 'No, I know the steps.' So who's going to help me?"

Chloé made a step forward. "I will."

Several heads turned to Esmeralda, apparently wondering why she hadn't been first.

Before the moment of silence could grow unpleasant, she said, "I knew that Chloé would say that, and she can remember the steps better than I, can't she? But I'm going to help him too. They need a place for practising, and the music. I know a place, and I can get the music."

"Where?"

Carlos hadn't come that far in his planning; a few moments ago, his decision still had been wishful thinking. A place - Carron Lough would have come to his mind first, naturally so, with a party that carried him back and forth in a second, except that it might have raised a conflict with a few truths

that were still confidential. So he looked at Esmeralda as expectant as Chloé, who had asked the question.

"In the Chateau Saumur. It's where the people who guarded the camp were staying, I mean besides him. It's what they call operation base, and now it'll be Carlos' operation base." She sent Carlos a quick glance, then turned back to Chloé. "There's a real comtesse there."

It didn't look as if this information raised the spirit in the girl from Nohanent near Clermont-Ferrand, more the opposite.

Esmeralda smiled at her. "She's okay."

Then she asked both Carlos and Chloé for their porties, said, "See you in a while; take care of Bolo," and disappeared by pressing a button on her own porty - after having made a few steps away from Bolo.

And suddenly, while Carlos still caressed the German shepherd, who hadn't liked his mistress' disappearing even at a few steps distance, the remaining four girls were eager to introduce Carlos to what they'd learned so far. The grass wasn't ideal ground for that, but they showed him the steps of the first song, assuring him all the time it wasn't difficult at all - well, not any particular step, that was.

Then Carlos tried a few steps by himself. It was more difficult than expected, for example because Bolo instantly joined him in this jumping game. Yet all considered, Carlos knew that this part of the task would be manageable. Getting his father to accept his part in the formation would be more difficult.

It took more than an hour, and not all the time spent on practising, until Esmeralda was back.

She went to Chloé first. "That's yours - here, that's the button." Then she came to Carlos, gave him his porty back and pointed at the button. "This one takes you to the Chateau Saumur. The comtesse knows about your coming." She lowered her voice. "And don't be surprised if you meet someone else there."

"Hey, what are you whispering to your brother?" Odile had found back to her normal tone, after the conciliatory attack she'd suffered the past forty minutes. "And where did you get the two porties programmed so quickly?"

"Don't you know already more than what's good for you?" Esmeralda gave Odile a malicious grin, then nodded toward Chloé and Carlos. "Go ahead. The music will arrive there, although maybe you'll have to do without in your first session."

Carlos and Chloé looked at each other, then pressed the new buttons in unison.

After the short moment of disorientation, Carlos stood in a hall that could have been the entrance hall of a hotel. Looking around, he saw Chloé next to him, with the nonplussed look in her eyes that was the trademark of unexperienced portkey travellers.

He made a step and took her hand. "Let's find the comtesse."

They had reached the reception desk when a woman came through the door to the inner part of the building. She said, "You two are Carlos and Chloé, right? I'm Marie-Claire, nice to meet you. If you follow me, I'll show you where you can practise any dance you want, and a music player too."

When they followed the woman through a corridor and up a staircase, Chloé asked, somewhat anxiously, "Will we meet the comtesse?"

The woman laughed. "Guess what? You did already. That's me; my full name is Marie-Claire Comtesse de Varanier." And yours?"

"Er, Chloé Broussard."

"As I said, Chloé, nice to meet you, and if you find it too hard to call me Marie-Claire, a simple 'Madame' will be all right."

Having reached the upstairs landing, the woman pointed. "There's the room with the dance floor, this door leads to a room where girls can change dresses, and over there's the room for you, Carlos. Maybe you want to have a look now, so you're familiar with the location."

They nodded and headed toward different doors.

Entering the room the comtesse had indicated and closing the door behind him, Carlos saw the one he'd halfways expected, after Esmeralda's warning and Marie-Claire's pointed look at him: his mother.

She came to him and hugged him. "Funny how we meet again, isn't it?"

"Erm ..." Carlos was ready to smile, any time, certainly, but only after he'd found out what his mother thought about his idea. So far, she hadn't welcomed comparable attempts. But, strangely enough, this time she seemed to support him full-heartedly, from the way she looked.

"You expected me to be worried as hell, am I right?"

When he nodded, she ruffled his hair playfully. "Of course, and for good reason. But this time it's different, and you know why?"

No, he didn't.

"History repeats itself. More than twenty years ago, your father came to Aunt Fleur, at that time still Fleur Delacour, to learn dancing. And today you and your girl come for a similar reason - I take it as an omen, sweetie. It'll turn out okay."

He smiled back in relief.

"Ho do you want to play it? Do you want me to meet your girl? Incognito, I mean - this is a MABEL resort, after all, and I'm the MABEL chairwoman, Chloé should be the last not to believe this story, after she's been converted to a witch herself."

"Yes, Mum, but it's too risky."

She looked at him. "Who's the one you don't trust with a wrong word at the wrong time? Me or yourself?"

He shook his head. "That's not the reason. But Chloé has read this story about Dad, remember how I told you? And in this story there's a girl, she's Chinese and pretty and small, so ..."

His mother sighed. "Well, then. Maybe it's far-fetched, and maybe you're right; at any rate, we'll manage these few days as well. But I really wait for the day when this hide-and-seek is over."

Carlos nodded. "Me, too, Mum. But now I have to go and learn dancing, before Chloé starts wondering where I got lost."

24 - Transformations

The rain fell steady most of the time. Occasionally, a gust of wind blew the drops more horizontally; at these moments, the scene Gabriel watched through the large window front of the coffee bar looked as artificial as the rain in the movies, considerably more histrionic than what used to fall on Carron Lough at the Irish Sea.

Was this the life he'd dreamed of? Watching rain through a window pane in a foreign city? Gabriel didn't know; it was too fresh, the changes came too fast and too hard. Yesterday evening's concert, the first in Linkoeeping and the third on their tour, had been great, their best so far. The afternoon concert today hadn't been quite as good, perhaps the inevitable drop in quality after the initial climax, but they'd recovered and found their way back to good performance. Besides, it was an open question whether anyone in the audience had noticed. Sometimes, not having published an album yet was an advantage; no one could compare their stage performance with a studio quality recording.

And now they were here in this café - no, a coffee bar with signs and employees and company costumes that all behaved as though a cardboard cup of coffee with a lid on it was the hottest thing since sliced bread.

It wasn't. The bar was something new only for Linkoeeping, which had a university and more people and more shops and more life than Joenkoeping, except perhaps on a late Saturday afternoon when it was raining cats and dogs.

Truth be told, it wasn't really worse than what Gabriel could have had twice a week at Carron Lough. But the rain during vacation was always much harder to bear than at home, and today he got a lesson for free that the same was true on tour.

He sent a glance to his side, where Michel stood, doing pretty much the same: staring through the large glass pane into the street, thinking his thoughts, not turning his head if he'd noticed Gabriel's look.

They'd preferred the high desks at the window front over the regular seats. From here they could stare at something unfamiliar, rather than at each other. Sharing the same school, the same class, the same interests, the same band, they were together more often than anyone they knew. They understood each other, wordlessly most of the time, and were still far from the state of annoying routine, but it didn't amount to an animated conversation in a coffee bar at the second day on tour.

Dragonfly had split after the concert. The girls had decided to go shopping - all four of them, suddenly sharing a common interest. Frédéric and Tomas had disappeared, destination unknown, although Gabriel suspected Tomas of having returned home.

Why didn't he do the same? Because it would look like desertion?

Despite the rain, the number of people passing by outside was larger than Gabriel would have expected, shoppers returning from their goodshunt mixed with young people without a clear purpose or destination, which marked them as students from the local university. Swedes seemed weatherproof.

The coffee shop had been rather full when they'd entered a while ago. In the meantime it had emptied a bit; people were preparing for their evening program, and whatever it was, it wouldn't take place here.

The large glass pane created a showcase to both sides. People inside watched the passers-by - this was the purpose of the high desks close to the window, and the people outside examined the scene inside like a shop display which, by some accident, had turned alive. It was a matter of preferences

whether or not to respond to the stares: lifting the focus by an inch or two was enough; there was no need to look the other way.

The girl that strolled by right now was scanning the scene inside routinely. Her glance had wandered over Michel and Gabriel without any change of expression. A second later, though, she stopped rather abruptly. Then she turned. Then she came closer to the window, and now she scrutinized first Michel's and then Gabriel's face as if they were two shop exhibits.

Without turning his head, Michel said, "We've got a fan."

He was probably right, although Gabriel didn't know why. The posters advertising the Dragonfly tour showed no such details; with them alone, a stranger wouldn't even recognize Caitlin, the main figure on the posters. Aside from that, Dragonfly wore stage costumes with mostly black for the boys and mostly white for the girls - not the harsh white of snow, more a creamy kind that responded friendlier to skin colours under spotlights. But of course they'd changed clothes after the concert and now were dressed in the same jeans and sweaters and jackets a million other teens wore.

Not a million. This was Linköping, not Paris; Gabriel hadn't adapted yet to a country in which hundred thousand were enough to rank a city in the top ten. And it didn't matter anyway; the girl had moved on.

Though not far. The door at the other end of the room opened, and the girl came in. Looked around once. Came straight to their desk.

"You're Dragonfly, aren't you?"

The girl still looked as if asking for the way to the railway station, and perhaps this was the reason why she didn't bother with rituals of courtesy, such as saying, "Hello."

Even so, Gabriel thought, one had to be grateful. After all, she could have rattled something in the local lingo. But no, she spoke plain English. So he ignored the somewhat unfocused style of asking and replied, "Yes, we are. How did you know?"

"Why, from your pictures, of course."

What else. Stupid question, as it seemed, ignoring the fact that Gabriel had no idea what pictures she was talking about.

At this moment, Michel asked, "Did you come for an autograph?"

Gabriel looked at him with some astonishment; Michel's voice had sounded gruff, at least for his standards. Was it the girl? Sure, the way she behaved could raise the suspicion she was a bit retarded, but it wasn't Michel's style. Perhaps the rotten afternoon was grating on his nerves still more than on Gabriel's.

"No," said the girl. "What should I do with your autograph?"

Michel shot her a quick glance, as if weighing a reply, then he resumed his stare out of the window.

The girl just stood there, and if Gabriel could sense any growing uneasiness, then only in his friend's mood. The situation was a bit weird, but certainly more interesting than staring into Swedish rain. Suddenly remembering his social skill, Gabriel asked, "Would you like a drink?"

"Yes, please." It wasn't enough to make her smile, which added to the unfavourable impression she gave. "A frappuccino."

For an instant all three of them looked at each other, then Michel nodded curtly and went to the

counter. What could have been courteousness was in fact, as Gabriel clearly sensed, an escape from the alternative: being alone with the girl.

"Where have you seen pictures good enough to recognize us?" he asked.

"In Paris, just where you come from. I was there, on a visit to a friend of mine, and she took me to your concert. There were pictures of you - not in the newspaper, but on the homepage of your school and they were close-ups."

"And here?"

"Yes, of course, I've seen your concert, the one this afternoon. I've seen the one last Saturday too, in Joenkoeping."

It was hardly more than a fifty miles drive from Linkoeping to Joenkoeping. Still, meeting such a hardcore fan on their first tour came - well, unexpected.

Michel returned with the cup for the girl. She took it and said, "Thank you very much. You're Michel, right?"

"Yes. And you? Who are you?"

"I'm Mirja. That's Finnish for Mary. But I'm not Finnish myself. It brings bad fortune to be Finnish, you know."

Gabriel almost laughed out loud. Had this girl stolen away from a residence where they used padded walls?

"Awfully important to know that." Michel almost growled. "But what do you want from us? Why did you come in?"

"Oh." Suddenly the girl smiled. "I want to be your groupie. I guess you haven't one yet, so I'm the first."

Definitely insane. Michel's brief laughter expressed what Gabriel suspected. "Groupie? You?"

The girl had to be about their own age. The figure under her rain coat was hard to guess; she was slender, if not thin. Now that the hood was pulled back, her hair was visible - a blond bordering on colourless, shoulder long. Together with the colour of her eyes, an extremely light blue, she gave the impression of having avoided the albino fate just barely.

"Sure. I'm a Veela."

Michel's head tilted up to stare at her. "No, you aren't. I don't know what you are, except that - well, never mind, but for sure you aren't a Veela. *I'm a Veela*, so I know for certain, and if you want to be our groupie, you should know at least that much. Forget it!"

He looked at Gabriel. "I'm done here. See you later?"

Gabriel just nodded. His curiosity had come awake, and if claiming to be a Veela was an insult, then not to him. He watched Michel leave, then turned to the girl. "What's that supposed to mean, saying I'm a Veela?"

"It was meant as a joke. I know I'm no Veela, although sometimes I dream of being one, because ... I'm not even magical, but with my looks I could daydream being Veela. I'm - I'm pretty much of nothing. I guess that's what made me say I'm your groupie. It would make me the first of something, after all." She glanced up. "You're Gabriel. You are something. Want me to be your groupie?"

"I don't know. It's all fairly new to me."

He quickly revised his first guess, no matter how much it had been his attempt of a failed joke in this encounter. She wasn't insane, while he wouldn't deny an abysmal depth opening inside her.

"You're a wizard, right?"

He nodded.

"Can you do a spell for me?"

It took him a second to realize that she meant a simple demonstration of magic, rather than a conversion of the type he could have provided easily. Furthermore, from the girl not being magical he had a better guess of her age: the Great Plot had started fourteen years ago, so she was fifteen at the least.

"A spell, huh? Anything special?"

"No, just so I can say Ah and Oh." Another quick smile, her second, and for the fraction of a second a look in her eyes that revealed intelligence way above what he'd first thought.

"Can you put down your cup for a moment?"

"Yes, why?"

Because he wanted to summon her to a nicer place, away from this dimly lit coffee shop, and with the cup in her hand, the risk of spilling it from surprise was too high. The only reasonable choice that came to his mind was his home. Rather than answering, he apparated and summoned her simultaneously.

They stood in the dinner room of Carron Lough. He waited expectantly for her reaction.

She looked around. "That's a good spell. It looks much nicer than before, and the other people are gone."

"No, we are gone. I brought us to my home."

"Really? Why?"

"I didn't want to cause attention there with any spell. And as you said, it's much nicer here" - he glanced through the window - "maybe not the weather, but at least inside. And I could do with a piece of cake. What about you?"

"I'm not hungry." She examined the room again, while he walked to the sideboard on which he knew the party with the shortcut to the house-elves. He saw how she watched him ordering a piece of cake for himself. When he'd put down the party and walked back to his seat, she asked, "Who did you talk with? It didn't sound as if you talked with your mother."

He laughed. "No. I spoke with Dobby, our house-elf. My parents aren't here."

"Is there anyone here?"

"Aside from the house-elves? No, why?"

She eyed him, a new look in her eyes. "Perhaps you wanted to get a head start on the groupie stuff."

Before he could find an answer, his cake appeared. Feeling grateful for the short diversion, still more for her fascinated look, telling him she'd been brought off track for the moment, he sat down.

"The only head start I had in mind was on this cake here. You sure you don't want some for yourself?"

She came a step closer and examined the dark-brown chunk, then bent down and sniffed. "No, but I'd like to try. It smells good."

He broke a piece, forked it, and offered it to her.

Rather than taking it with her hand, she opened her mouth, waiting for him to feed her with the

piece, quite obviously unafraid of sharing the fork with him.

He asked, "Are you Swedish?"

"Yes, sure. Why?"

"Well, your English is so fluent, it could have been your parents are from England or the States. But - er, somehow you didn't strike me as American. Actually, not as British either."

She gulped the cake down. "English is quite common in Sweden. Where are we, by the way?"

"This is Carron Lough, an old - "

Gabriel had interrupted himself because he could feel it before it really happened: someone apparating into the room. Then the air popped, and his sister Sandra was standing there, a shopping bag in her hand.

He smiled. "Want to store your prey?"

"Yes, something like that." Which meant, Sandra had returned for a totally different reason, except she didn't want to tell him, or maybe not in the same room with a total stranger, at whom she was staring right now.

Gabriel pointed by way of introduction. "Sandy, this is Mirja, who should have recognized you because she seems to know all Dragonfly people. Mirja is - erm, we met in a coffee bar in Linköping, but they offered no cake, so that's why we're here."

Mirja laughed, quite a genuine sound, all considering. Apparently she had taken Gabriel's explanation for a joke. She laughed once more when Sandra, after saying hello, asked how came the only cake within sight was the one in front of Gabriel. Before he could answer, she said, "He offered me some, and besides, he invited me already to a coffee over there, and all this while I told him a bunch of lies."

"Oh, really?" Sandra, about to leave and mind her own business, stopped. "What lies?"

"First I said I'm a Veela, but the other boy, er, Michel, called it a lie at once. Then I said I'm a groupie, but it's not true either because you can be a groupie only if you've had sex with anyone in the group, right?"

"I guess so," replied Sandra, her eyes a bit bigger and rounder than an instant before.

"I mean, I wouldn't mind sex, but - you know, I just wanted to be something, and trying to be something with your band seemed a good idea to me."

"She's a Muggle," explained Gabriel.

Concerning Muggle teens, Sandra's thoughts followed almost the same patterns as her brother's, because she asked, "How old are you, Mirja?"

"Sixteen - not quite, but almost. Isn't this old enough to be something?"

"I'm the wrong person to answer this question, because - erm, the answer from me wouldn't fit anyone else." Sandra's smile was a bit tense at these words. "But you've found the right one for any such discussion; Gabriel knew what he wanted to be when he was a little boy. And - erm, whatever it'll develop into, this seems the right place for it. Now, if you'll pardon me ..." She left it to the surrounding air to pop into the space she'd occupied an instant earlier.

Mirja turned to Gabriel. "Will you ever tell me where we are?"

"Ireland." Gabriel hadn't known before how unpleasant it could be to eat a large piece of cake while someone else in the room asked all kinds of questions because he - she - hadn't any for herself.

"You all live in an old castle? Why?"

Gabriel shrugged. "Lopphs of choom." He gulped. "Sandra has a complete suite of her own. You won't believe how much space she can occupy."

"And you have just a room?"

"Yes, although the larger instruments are in a separate room."

Mirja glanced at Gabriels plate, now emptied. "You're done. Would you show me your room?"

"I'm not sure."

"What?" Apparently at a loss for a moment, Mirja stared at him. Then, probably from something in his face, she seemed to get an idea. "If I promise not to have sex with you, will you show me then?"

When he nodded hesitantly, she smiled at him, suddenly looking ten years younger. "And, please, let's go like your sister did. I love it to be beamed up."

Gabriel wasn't sure if he really understood what she was talking about, but in his slightly embarrassed state, he wasn't in the mood of asking. So he just stood up and, almost in a reflex trained with other six-year-olds, took her hand before apparating both of them into his room.

She looked around, not letting go of his hand. "It's comfy here," she said. "Just the right place."

"What for?" he asked back, alarm in his voice.

"For - I want to show you a spell of my own. I'm a - a Muggle, as you said, but there's one spell I know."

Then, letting go of his hand, she turned around to stand in front of him, this way giving proof that she was almost exactly the same height. She took his head in her hand and kissed him. "That's what I can give you in return."

For an instant, he'd closed his eyes. Now he opened them again to look into her eyes, which seemed a bit darker than earlier on.

"It's a good spell. Erm - maybe there's something else it has in common with other spells?"

"What?"

"Spells must be practised - normally, that is. With Sandy and me, most often it wasn't true, but, well, this is a Muggle spell, as you said, So I guess we - "

He stopped his own suada, born from an unfamiliar nervousness, just in time before Mirja's mouth had reached his own.

* * *

Sandra deposited her shoppings in her room. They weren't the reason for her appariting home, but now that she was here, it would have been stupid not to use the opportunity. And if the others asked her where she'd left her bags, she could say, "I put them on my bed - at home, of course." It would make her look casual, cool, crafty. Witchcrafty.

Witchcrafty she was no doubt. Could have apparated onto the toilet seat in her hotel room in Linkoeping, only there wouldn't have been anyone around to look impressed.

That girl downstairs ... A girl of fifteen, lacking magic, lacking an orientation in life, had put her off balance. Worse, it had spoiled her plan - the reason why she really had come here, something she would tell no one, now that it had failed. Not even the one she had planned to summon - of course only after telling him what was due, ha ha.

Her plan had been to lose something that developed into a burden with every month passing. She'd

apparated home to check if the air was clean, because - well, the hotel room in Linkoeeping lacked all romanticism. Being away from home bore no adventure for her; what she had in mind was adventure enough, thank you very much.

In her rooms she could do what she wanted. But the knowledge of the two of them downstairs was enough to shatter her peace of mind, actually a non-entity right now. A groupie! As clueless as the girl had looked otherwise, concerning a central aspect of the groupie profession she hadn't shown any uncertainty. Not an exorbitant eagerness either, and perhaps this indifference had unsettled Sandra more than anything else.

Would they? Would Gabriel? If so, he'd do it in his own room, where else, and this thought ... Sandra would have liked to have another look at this Mirja, fake Veela, faultlessly pretty if you fancied this type. What type did Gabriel fancy? And why didn't she mind her own business?

Because the thought of being outrun by her younger brother in a memorable step of growing up had all ingredients for something Sandra only knew from hearsay. It was called panic.

She apparated back to Linkoeeping, right into the lobby of their hotel, to a spot next to the entrance but out of the way walking guests would use. Walking toward the reception, she heard music from the direction of the hotel bar. Piano music, just the kind you would expect in a bar, but somehow quite familiar.

Passing the entrance to the bar, she knew why. Frédéric was the one playing.

The bar filled the most attractive room in this hotel. It had to do with the amount of money Swedes spent on alcohol - considerably more than on hotel rooms with a romantic touch, as it seemed. Perhaps the piano had been little more than a showpiece, but it played, wasn't even out of tune, as far as Sandra could judge, which was less than other people she knew.

People who right now were alone with a girl in a romantic castle at the Irish Sea ...

She admonished herself not to freak out and steer toward the planned goal with the determination of a true Potter. Unfortunately, this thought almost sent her into a fit of hysteric giggles, because suddenly she remembered the tales, no matter how much lacking detail, she'd heard about her parents in a comparable situation. Needless to say, it had been Aunt Fleur's task to tell.

Frédéric had gathered a small audience. People were sitting here and there, at the bar or at tables, but their attention was undeniably focused on the piano player. The clandestine operation Sandra had in mind seemed to grow more difficult by the minute.

She went to the bar and climbed one of the empty stools there. Not ready to believe in omens, even less ready to abandon the possibility altogether, she ordered what came closest to the drinks she'd drunk during the vacation on Jamaica. She got a mix of passion fruit juice with champagne, plus a dash of angostura bitters to balance the sweetness.

Taking sips of her drink, she watched Frédéric. He seemed lost in his music. She had chosen a place at the bar where he could see her only when looking sideways, which he didn't.

Feeling assured that he was the one, and this was the day - if not the place - she ordered a pastis. Frédéric liked pastis, while the idea of confronting him with what was sold here as champagne seemed too risky. Then she walked over to the piano, put the pastis down, gave him a quick smile when he looked up, and walked back to her stool.

A judgment of fate: how long would he play still, knowing her at the bar?

First he brought his current improvisation to an end. Then he sipped from his pastis. Then he played a potpourri of the Dragonfly songs, and was already in the second take when Sandra became aware that it was a special potpourri: he talked with her through music.

The first snippet had been *Share My Music*, number two in their concert program. Then came *While On The Subject*, followed by *The Girl Over There*, *Where's That Gonna Stop*, and *By Midnight I'll Be Ready*. At the last take, he looked over to her, quite alive and not ghostlike at all.

Of course, this way he'd bypassed the judgment, a move as clever as you had to expect from him.

He finished with a musical exclamation mark. Then he stood up, and when the audience didn't hesitate to honour his performance with the due applause, he bowed to both sides. Then he took his drink and came to the bar to climb the stool next to her, and give her a smile.

"Done with shopping?"

"Yes. It's a nice town, but it could be much nicer with a bit of sunshine."

"Where are the others?"

"I don't know, and what's more, I don't care. This city is full of nice places with young people; I guess that's the effect if you have a university in a small-population city, totally different from Paris. So I guess sweet little Moira won't get lost or suffer a fate worse than death."

"Most unlikely. I take it there's a world-class wizard somewhere close to her."

"Actually, no, because Gabriel's the only one of which I know for sure where he is, and that's *not* close to her." Sandra's voice was more upset than amused when she added, "Which doesn't mean there isn't a girl next to him, sweet little fifteen or so."

Frédéric chuckled. "A groupie, no doubt."

"Right, how did you know? You didn't meet her, by any chance? Name's Mirja, the lightest blonde you can imagine, looking for her purpose in life and her place in society."

"Nope, I saw no such girl. But then, I pay little attention to blondes," answered Frédéric casually.

"Where did you get your detailed knowledge about her pursuit? Normally groupies have less complex demands - or so I've been told," he added quickly after a look at Sandra.

"I met them. At home."

"At Carron Lough?" Frédéric issued a soft whistle. "There's a boy who knows a bit or two about the right environment, eh?" Next moment, his amused grin made room for a watchful stare at Sandra.

"And what business, if I may ask, brought you to Carron Lough not quite in the middle of this wonderful day?"

"Maybe ... maybe I know the same two bits about the right environment?" Her voice was more flat than usual. "Maybe I looked at my hotel room and found it less inviting than I'd hoped? And so I looked whether air's clean at home, but it wasn't - don't ask me what the two of them have decided, but they have the castle for themselves, as far as I'm concerned."

Frédéric moved his finger over his glass. "I don't. Right now I'm very busy to listen and *not* to ask any question."

"That's, uhm, clever of you. I want - I want the two of us to go and find a place where we get something to eat, with no one else around we know. Then I want the two of us to go and find a place with no one else around at all. If" - she swallowed, then continued - "if that sounds like a to-do list, then I'm sorry, but I want to be honest and tell you now - er, this term isn't entirely wrong."

"If there ain't no complaint, don't apologize." Frédéric stood up. "Let's go find place number one."

"Here in Linkoeeping?"

"Just here, yes. I'll tell you why, on the road."

Five minutes later, they were walking along the street in the direction of where supposedly the best

restaurants were found, seen from the perspective of young people. Frédéric carried an umbrella, and Sandra had linked arms with him.

"See," he said, "that's one of the reasons why it had to be here. I always wanted to walk down a street, arm in arm with you and an umbrella above us."

She sent him a quick glance. "Is this the *always wanted* day?"

"Could well be. On the other hand, my second reason is more or less the opposite of *always wanted*. It has to do with Dragonfly and our concert tour. We're here, and I think we should acknowledge to ourselves that we're here until tomorrow morning. It's a kind of honesty toward Dragonfly, or toward yourself. You've started the thing, and now that you're in the middle of it, you damn well stop looking for cheap escapes."

Sandra was still thinking about what he'd said and why, when they came around a corner and saw the lights of a pizza restaurant at the other side of a small plaza. Coming closer, not seeing any of the much-dreaded fast food chain logos, they looked at each other, said, "Why not?" and hopped inside.

The other guests were obviously students from the local university. It was loud, it smelled wonderfully of pizza, and the faces around them were unfamiliar but animated by the thought, expectation, or savouring of food.

They found seats at a table on which another couple was already sitting. They gave them a short glance, a polite nod, then continued their own conversation, their sounds almost like white noise because it was Swedish.

When they had ordered, Sandra leaned forward. "What you said outside, about sticking to the schedule - yes, I know you didn't use these words, but a sentence earlier you said something about the opposite of what you always wanted. Is it painful for you to play the keyboard in these concerts?"

"No. Not painful." Frédéric thought for a few seconds. "It's a kind of, 'What am I doing here?' It wasn't my goal in life to be the Dragonfly keyboarder. I do it, I do it well by now, but ..." He shrugged. "There are rewards. They come from totally unexpected corners."

Sandra wasn't entirely sure what he meant, and temporarily at a loss to ask.

He noticed, smiled. "I don't mean us here, today. One reward is a musical one. Our songs forced me to play a music I used to avoid, and sometimes detested. But I had to practise it and, well, it has its own characteristics, and it opens your eyes for new things. Maybe new moods. Me playing the piano in a bar - it might have been possible, but two months ago I would have been playing Chopin, at the same time watching which of the people there listening could appreciate my music."

Frédéric laughed briefly. "All of them can, that's what I've learned. The guy at the next table might never have heard about études, but he knows if the drink's to his taste and he also knows if the music's to his taste."

"But today you didn't play Chopin."

"No, I played stuff I wouldn't have dared a while ago, least of all in public. That's something I owe Dragonfly." He looked up. "Gabriel, to be precise. He's a tricky composer; his music catches you unaware if you don't pay attention. And of course he's the one who lured me into it."

"I'm glad he did."

"I'm glad, too."

They were silent for a few seconds. Before either of them found the words to continue, the waiter

brought their orders, all of them at once - what he'd been late in serving drinks he'd compensated in serving the pizza plates awfully quick.

They ate in silence for a while. Then Sandra asked, "Is there another reward? Not counting today, I mean."

"I hope there is." Frédéric looked determined. "Yes, I'm pretty sure there is. The stunt with your father and his girls in that castle. Being in one team with him and you and your brother, that's something - I know that you three play in a different league, but it doesn't matter."

"No, it doesn't matter," agreed Sandra. "Besides, I wonder if the three of us will be in the same league."

Frédéric stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to meet Aram'chee first, and do the takeover."

Seeing Frédéric's face turn expressionless, Sandra quickly continued. "I met her last week. We were sitting at this beach in the middle of Joenkoeping, and she said I'm ready, and I thought the same - erm, with one exception, and that's why I'm pushing matters a bit now, I hope you don't mind."

"If there are matters that need to be pushed, they're your own." Frédéric laughed, perhaps not quite as lightly as he probably had intended.

"I'm ... I'll finish the role soon and end my duty after it has hardly begun. Aram'chee and I agree that this is the only reasonable solution, now that the entire world is magical. But only *after* this stunt my father has in mind, because there's a lot at stake. If Aram'chee agrees, that is, if it isn't a violation of some rules."

Frédéric looked at her. "It'll change you. Even if your regency may take no more than five minutes, it'll have changed you."

"You're probably right. And that's another reason for today, for the, uhm, pushed matters. I wanted to be myself when - when I'm with you."

"Pity." He grinned. "Originally I'd planned to bring you beyond yourself, If you gave me a chance, but under these circumstances - "

"Please! I'm nervous enough."

"Like the proverbial - " He interrupted himself. "Sorry. I'm not calmness personally myself; in such a mood I tend to stupid jokes. But there's another proverb about how to digest food best, and before we start drowning in our own small talk, maybe we should get going, what do you think?"

"Where?"

"I know a place where we're on our own. It's a chateau too, and you've seen it from upstairs and downstairs - "

"Your grandma's!"

"Yes, just the one where you and Gabriel were stuck. Isn't this an omen? We don't believe in them, but aside from that, it's the perfect omen, right?"

"How do we get there?"

Frédéric looked almost embarrassed. "I apparate, and then I summon you."

"You can summon?" Sandra stared at him in bafflement.

"Actually, yes."

"That's cool, especially now. But why didn't you say a word about it?"

Frédéric looked elfish. "I play the piano, as you know, but it doesn't mean I feel tempted to do so in the presence of, say, Glenn Gould or Pollini or Jarrett. Similarly, I can summon, as you know now, but it doesn't mean I feel tempted in the presence - got the picture?"

She smiled. "That was a nice compliment."

"Just warming up. Let's go."

Sandra had been careful not to drink too much alcohol. She felt tipsy anyway. She felt wonderfully free when she was summoned into the building in which she and Gabriel had broken their first apparition lock, to meet Frédéric's grandmother there afterwards. She followed Frédéric tiptoeing upstairs, although there wasn't anyone around except a house-elf somewhere downstairs. She followed him into a bedroom with a large four-poster. Then she followed his guidance into passion and moments beyond herself, and felt wonderfully languished afterwards.

"I love you," Frédéric said, and added, "Don't answer now."

"Why not?"

He kissed her. "Don't play stupid, don't lie to me, and don't tell me something I know anyway."

"I might learn it. What do I know? I've been preoccupied all my life, maybe I never took the time to examine you a bit more closely."

Frédéric laughed. "Go ahead."

She snuggled closer. "Give me a few more minutes; I'm in no hurry. But I'm serious, and while I know what I'm not supposed to answer, I can tell you one thing: there isn't anyone else."

"Hey - that's exactly what your brother said when he convinced me to join his band, and we weren't talking about keyboard players in that moment."

"That's interesting. He never told me."

"Strange, isn't it?" After a moment of silence, Frédéric giggled. "There's an old movie tale, about a man who lives the same day again and again, and the day is as grey and dirty as the one in Linköping, only snow instead of rain. Then the man starts to learn things - there's a woman of course, he's fallen in love, but he's too arrogant, she detests him - "

"I don't detest you! Quite - "

"No, but listen. He learns playing the piano, and the woman finds him playing piano in a bar or something, and that's his breakthrough. She buys him on a joke auction and, well, that's it. He wakes up, and it's really another day."

"And I found you playing in a bar."

"Exactly. Isn't this an omen? We don't believe in them, but aside from that, it's the perfect omen, right?"

Yes, perhaps it was. She didn't believe in them any more than he did, but he was right, there were times when it was best not to ask and not to answer, not with words, that was, and instead use a non-verbal communication. Maybe her body was wiser, or just less scrupulous, she didn't know, and for the time being had no intention to investigate. There was another body to explore, and so she did.

* * *

Carlos practised. Not quite day and night, although it felt like that: his mind circled through his personal plot all the time, and whenever he could, he let his mind recount the step sequences.

Marie-Claire became his secret sponsor, or perhaps advisor was the better term. She'd been the one

who told him about the recounting. She'd explained to him that dancers and figure skaters used this mental exercise to learn the step sequence by heart and soul and spirit. True, it didn't teach you graciousness, which could only be learned the hard way on the dance floor, but for sure it made you more fluent; not having to think about what came next was a great help.

In retrospect, Carlos knew that without Marie-Claire he'd have been chanceless. Chloé showed him the steps and practised with him, but Chloé was no teacher and had a more intuitive understanding of their dance. It was the comtesse who told him about the few key facts in dancing, hip-hop or otherwise.

Weight. Weight was the key factor number one. Putting a foot down, forward, sideways was no step yet. Putting the weight on that foot, so the other leg became the free one, was the essential part. Once Carlos had understood what it meant, he made progress.

Beat was the other, the one he had no trouble with from the very first moment. "Stop counting," Marie-Claire had said, "as soon as you can, and let the rhythm guide you." He did, still more so as the music to which he danced had something in which Carlos meant to recognize his brother. Maybe it was imagination, but it worked.

Esmeralda had come to visit twice, a sign of solidarity as much as simple curiosity. But she hadn't stayed long; by common understanding Chloé was supposed to be his teacher and training partner.

Someone else also contributed his special support, as Carlos told Chloé with satisfaction: Serge. Knowing from the start that it was impossible to hide his activities from his roommates, Carlos had driven his former approach a step further. Serge was his official confidant and guardian of his secret; paid with sweets, he had to make sure nobody got wind of Carlos' plan, and generally cover his back, whatever that meant.

It meant nothing specific, actually, but the agreement sealed their relationship as something like knight and knave.

To make Serge's life a bit easier, Carlos had also informed Roland, who could keep his mouth shut, but only if he knew the background. Only poor Mathieu was left out - another proof of the old wisdom that you had to be very clever or very stupid, leaving it to the average to suffer.

The secret part of his project lasted from the beginning of the week to Saturday, the day on which the official troupe had their next major practising. Carlos knew that he had to convince his father as early in the schedule as possible; after all, he assumed that he wasn't going to dance "just another girl," that instead his part would be somewhat different, and that his father needed to know about this change before having proceeded too far in his training program.

Saturday's practising session would start ten o'clock in the gymnasium, as the girls had told Carlos. He called his father fifteen minutes beforehand, a schedule that should allow him to join the session right after their talk. When his father agreed to meet him, provided he made it short, Carlos said they should meet in the gymnasium.

"In the gymnasium?" After a few seconds, his father said, "All right, Carlos. Come over."

Walking to the Lorient building, Carlos thought about this short pause before his father's answer. It had sounded as if in these few seconds his father had gotten a hunch of what Carlos was going to say. Unfortunately, he hadn't shown any enthusiasm in his answer.

Or was this imagination just like hearing Gabriel in *Sunrise*?

Arriving in the gymnasium, finding his father at the control desk for the music and the speakers, looking into his eyes, Carlos knew it had been no imagination. Nonetheless, he had to get it out.

"Hello, Prof. I - erm, I wanted to ask you if I can join the girls for the dancing."

His father stared at him.

"I know all the steps. Chloé practised with me - in the Chateau Saumur, and Marie-Claire told me how to do it right, with weight and so. I can show you. Now?"

"No, Carlos. Not now, not afterwards. You can't join."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't work. I have a choreography in which there is no role for a boy. You being the only one would raise so many questions - we can't afford that. We can't risk that. No." Harry shook his head.

"But then I'm the only one who can't partici - "

Carlos didn't come further because his father had moved very quickly to put his finger on Carlos' mouth. The touch was as gentle as determined.

"I know what you mean, but no more word. Not now. Meet me again after this practising, then we can discuss it in more detail."

Which meant, his father would tell him - in as many words as Carlos was ready to listen - the same message he'd given right now: that he should forget it.

He wouldn't. He had to swallow hard while turning and walking out of the building into the fresh air, several girls in sight who were approaching the gymnasium, one of them Chloé. He met her in the middle, in some distance from the other girls.

Seeing his face, she asked, "What did he say?"

"He said, 'No'."

"But why?"

"For the same reasons - " Carlos had to swallow again. "I'll meet him afterwards to talk a bit more. Maybe ... I'm going to visit some other people until then, and see whether they can help me. Please don't tell the others, not as long as I haven't tried my last chance."

Chloé just stared at him, pity in her face. She didn't wish him luck, less for the fact that she didn't know whom he was asking for help, more because Monsieur Pri'chard wasn't famous for changing his mind, once it was set.

"Don't wait for me," said Carlos. Then he took his porty and pressed the first button that crossed his mind, the one for the Chateau Saumur.

Standing in the lobby, he saw more people than all the time before. Apparently, the next MABEL seminar was about to start, so Marie-Claire would be busy. Watching the guests arrive, excitement and expectation in their faces, Carlos felt closer to tears than in a long while.

"Hey, my little chevalier, what's wrong with you?" Marie-Claire stood before him, her hand at his chin turning his face upward. "You look like a dog kicked all through town. How come?"

"He - he said no."

"Oh-la-la. That's bad."

Marie-Claire was the second woman this morning who didn't waste time on something like, "He'll change his mind," a remark Carlos wouldn't believe but wouldn't object hearing, if only as a short-lived solace. Instead, she guided him into the dinner hall, at this time of the day serving as breakfast hall, and let him sit down.

"Have a seat, my dear, and have a second breakfast. I'll be back soon." She left, after notifying a waitress that there was a guest to serve.

When the girl came over, Carlos ordered a hot chocolate and a croissant. He'd taken his first sip and munched half of the delicious pastry when his mother stood beside him.

"Hi, Mum. Did Marie-Claire call you?"

"Yes, sweetie. But she didn't have to call far; I was around anyway because of the new seminar. So he said no, huh?"

"He said I can't be the only boy because it's too suspicious, and there's no role for me in his, er, choreography."

Carlos mother sat down and ordered tea for herself. Then she took a few gulps. Then she told him a story about his father - the story wasn't exactly new, but appeared in a totally different light in this situation: how his father had been excluded from a Flying Squad on broomsticks and how he'd started fighting for his return.

"I was the real reason," said Carlos' mother, "because I was in the Squad and he wasn't. That's when he and the Goblins became friends, because he turned to them, asking for help. And as you know, since then they're soooo close."

His mother's thumb and forefinger, pressed together, illustrated the relationship between his father and the Goblins.

"You two meet again after the practising, right?" His mother thought for a moment. "Well, I can't imagine your equivalent to the Goblins, not at such a short notice, but you can tell him that there's a parallel and that you'll spend twenty-four hours a day to find your own ally in this plot. That's the only chance I see, sunny. Remind him of his own story. I don't know if it's enough, but it's more promising than me trying to talk you into his troupe."

Carlos nodded. "Thanks, Mum. I guess you're right, I mean, I know that you didn't look for an easy way out." He hugged his mother, then excused himself - he needed time to prepare his appeal, and perhaps to find his own ally.



Back in the school in Brest, Carlos found himself a spot in the underbrush close to the gymnasium. He wasn't exactly hidden, not prominently visible either, just the right place for his old game of not being noticed. A larger piece of wood served as his seat; the season for sitting on the ground was over. The entrance to the gymnasium in his view, not expecting anyone coming out for the next forty-five minutes, Carlos sat there and tried to find something to which he could map the story his mother had told him.

Allies ... The Goblins had rescued his father, and he might have talked with them about his situation if he'd been Gabriel or Michel, both of them calling Goblin godfathers their own. Carlos had no friends of this kind. The only relationship crossing his mind was the one with Birdy, who'd paid him and his sister Esmeralda pocket money for a while. But how should Birdy help him now?

Perhaps by discolouring him just like Dobby and Winky had done with his father. Changing him until he looked like a girl? The idea was absurd.

No, when trying to think of allies, all that came to Carlos' mind were his siblings. Gabriel and Sandra - if he could persuade them to ally with him, his father had no choice other than to accept him. Question was, would Gabriel or Sandra be ready to blackmail their father that way? It would be Sunday afternoon before Carlos could find out; right now the two of them were somewhere in Sweden and out of reach for Carlos and his party.

Someone was walking the path from the administration building to the gymnasium. A few seconds later, Carlos recognized Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel - a person with which he didn't try his luck in the game of not being noticed. Ever so slowly, Carlos retreated a few inches until he was truly out of sight from the path, then quickly retreated further into the underbrush.

Fresnel climbed the few steps and went into the building.

Carlos spent the next minutes trying to find a reason for the man's visit. It could have been a perfectly ordinary check - the headmaster having a look at the dance formation of his school shortly before a public appearance - if not for Fresnel's reputation. Carlos didn't like him and knew for a fact that his mother didn't like him either, but he didn't know enough to estimate him better, or his visit.

About ten minutes later, the door to the gymnasium opened again and Fresnel came out. He looked neither pleased nor disappointed, as far as Carlos could judge from his hiding spot, before the man turned to walk back to the Brest building.

Shortly afterwards, the door flew open to make room for a horde of girls storming out. Carlos saw his sister and her friends, and a moment later Chloé. She looked around, apparently in search for him. He didn't move; the conversation he had in mind was something between him and his father.



Inching forward again so he could see the path until the first bend, he waited until no one was left in sight, then he stood up and quickly crossed the few steps to the entrance. He felt sure to find his father still inside; he hadn't heard any key turning in the lock.

Yes, his father was there, sitting at his control desk almost like a few hours earlier. He seemed to have awaited Carlos. His expression hinted at something Carlos couldn't properly categorize: the grimace lurking behind his father's self-control was no amusement for sure, no anger either - anticipation perhaps? Did he know about Carlos' talk with his mother, and her story?

"Hi Da - erm, Prof, I mean."

"Hello, Son. We can talk openly; it's safe here in the gymnasium."

"That's good, Dad, because, uhm, I talked with Mum, and she told me a story how you were excluded from the Squad, and that there's a parallel, but I couldn't find any ally for myself to help me join the Squad - er, I mean the formation."

This wasn't what Carlos had planned to say, not at all. Somehow, the moment his father had put aside the fake teacher-student relationship, Carlos' carefully phrased speech had faded to nothing.

His father stared at him. Then, slowly, he shook his head. Then he laughed, pretty humourless, as it seemed.

"Son, do you know the old saying that goes, 'Who's got such friends doesn't need enemies'?"

"Er, yes, I think I've heard it before. But doesn't it mean that your friends treat you badly?"

"Right." Seeing Carlos' uncomprehending look, his father said, "No, I wasn't referring to the Goblins or any other friends. It's more the other way around."

"Huh?"

If Carlos had been confused a moment earlier, now he was completely nonplussed. What was the other way around of friends behaving as enemies, except that the existing friends didn't?

"Who's got such enemies, doesn't need friends - at least none to ease your way into the group. The headmaster was here a few minutes ago; he's the one who made the contact to the chateau people - "

"Yes, I saw him - but he didn't see mee," Carlos added quickly at the sight of his father's concerned look.

"Now guess what he said."

It had to be something to the desired effect - desired by Carlos, that was. Quickly dismissing all answers that were downright unrealistic, Carlos came up with the only one he could imagine.

"He said they want a boy in the formation."

"Very close - I'm quite pleased about your clear mind in moments of pressure, son."

Giving a damn for such praise right now, Carlos called, "Then what *did* he say?"

"He used plural, not singular. They want boys too in the formation. Any idea where to get them?"

"Boys? How many?"

"He wasn't specific. He mentioned *a few*, whatever that means in practice."

"I know one who'd be able to manage in time. Roland, a roommate of mine. The other two are hopeless, but Roland is quick in any way you can think of."

"Two ..." Carlos' father inhaled deeply. "It's the smallest plural possible, but it meets the request. Son, can you go and fetch him?"

Faster than ever before, Carlos raced to the Toulon building, panting when he reached the second floor, where he found Roland busy getting prepared for the walk to the canteen. Luckily, Serge and Mathieu were already gone to lunch.

"I've got a job for you," said Carlos. "You're the only one who can do it."

With these words, he had his roommate hooked.

On their way downstairs, Roland learned that Carlos hadn't been accepted yet. On their way toward the Lorient building, he learned that Carlos had a good chance. With the gymnasium in sight, he learned that he was supposed to dance, with him and Carlos as the only boys.

Roland didn't turn around to flee, didn't even falter in his step, for which Carlos felt grateful. He walked the rest of their way in thoughtful silence.

They met Carlos' father, now Monsieur Pri'chard again, right on the floor. Carlos said, "I've told him. He knows what this is about."

"No," said Roland, "I only know what I'm supposed to do, and I know it's somehow fishy from start to end. But I really would like to know what this is about."

"If I tell you," said Monsieur Pri'chard, "will you do it?"

"I'm not sure, Monsieur. But I'm sure that I'm not going to do it *without* knowing what's going on."

Carlos' father eyed him. "Can you dance? Like you, I'm not going to buy a pig in a poke."

For an answer, Roland produced a short tap dance, just a few steps, but enough to show that yes, he could move.

"All right, Roland, as far as I'm concerned, you're hired for the job. So what's your price?"

"It's - Monsieur, if my conclusions are right, you know ways how to make someone a real wizard. Is it true?"

After a very brief moment of widening eyes, Monsieur Pri'chard nodded, and smiled. "Yes, it's true; Chloé Broussard can testify for me. If you join us and manage to learn your steps in the short time left, Roland, I'll make sure you become a wizard."

Roland's eyes started to shine. "Not to worry, Monsieur. I'm a quick learner."

"Yes, quite obviously so." Monsieur Pri'chard laughed, moments later joined by the two boys.

Two hours later, after a lunch not quite as voluminous as it was their habit on Saturdays, Carlos and Roland again stood in the gymnasium - at one side, facing two dozen girls opposite.

"Girls," said Carlos' father, "I talked with Monsieur le Director Fresnel, who's the one holding contact to our hosts. They wanted a few boys in the troupe, and what you see here are the ones I could find in so short a time. We have to change a little bit: these two will be the leaders of the packs, one for the sleepers and one for the early risers."

Murmurs rose, half-suppressed shouts, and what Carlos could hear sounded like protest more than astonishment or even approval.

His father interrupted the uproar. "Yes, I know it's machismo and traditional role-playing and an insult for every girlie and this is a man's world, but am I still right in that you want to perform? Okay, in this case, remember that our host was the one who insisted, and now let's get moving."

Carlos' eyes met Chloé's, then those of his sister and her friends. He didn't care much which pack he was going to lead in the first steps; by the end of their song, all girls and boys would have found together, dancing the same steps.

25 - *Guests of Honour*

Sandra watched her brother raise his flute and start the intro to their first song. He'd waited through the short applause from the guests, raised when their host, Lucien de Mirault, had announced the band moments ago.

Serpent Dreamer was Part One in the schedule for their stage appearance here in the Chateau MiraLuc, played and sung by Dragonfly alone. Part Two would be another song, serving as the background for a warming-up of the girls and boys in the *Brest Dance Formation*, the name her father's troupe had received. Part Three would be the rehearsed choreography on *Sunrise*.

Afterwards, probably most people would expect an encore from Dragonfly - another song played and sung as the fade-out after the kids in the Brest Dance Formation had thrown their legs and spun their turns. It seemed reasonable, but it wasn't bound to happen. Harry's announcement, planned after the hip-hop dance, would push aside any thought of leisure music.

As well as any thought of any other leisure the guests might have had in mind for later in the evening.

Examining the guests, twenty-something people sitting in a semi-circle around the stage, Sandra asked herself which of them were child molesters, having followed an invitation to do just that. All of them?

Perhaps not. But the others had to know; it was impossible to be invited for the umpteenth time while having missed the signs at every single occasion before.

They were going to be interrogated - provided Sandra succeeded on what she was expected to do, the task nobody else could perform. She had to break the apparition lock that protected the Chateau MiraLuc and prevented anyone from appearing in - or disappearing from - the chateau.

According to the plan, the chateau would be open and unprotected only for seconds. The moment Sandra had broken the original lock, she was supposed to notify Ray Purcell. The old engineer was waiting outside, ready to activate another lock, of course also from Groucho Transports and Security but different in an essential aspect: it was under control of their task force. It would prevent any escape via apparition, at least escapes of the wrong people.

This was the planning. Sandra should break the lock as soon as she found an opportunity - perhaps before the warming-up, while the kids took their positions. The latest option would be after the dance and before Harry made his own announcement. It was a weak spot in their planning that they hadn't found anything in the schedule where Sandra was expected to be backstage. She had to improvise, be ready when the moment came.

Her original plan of being the High Priestess by now had failed. She hadn't been willing to conceal her intention from Aram'chee, but when she'd told the current High Priestess why she wanted the transformation, the answer had been an immediate and determined "No."

Had Sandra been the High Priestess for a while already, had she received her task as part of her role, had she found herself in this situation by accident - any of these seemingly random coincidences would have allowed her to execute her power in the course of action. But getting the power with the intention of using it for something Aram'chee considered ordinary police work was unacceptable, for it violated the ethics that went with the role.

It had made Sandra temporarily furious. What ethics could this be, forbidding a prosecution and punishment of child molesters?

"The ethics of the High Priestess," Aram'chee had replied, "who is authorized as an arbiter of wizards and witches, not a judge of human malbehaviour. And besides" - Aram'chee's voice had

grown sharp - "nobody and nothing prevents you from doing whatever you think necessary, with the exception of lying through rhetorics. It's not your style anyway."

Sandra had calmed down and promised to return with her request only after the issue was settled. So she wasn't supposed to appear as Supergirl in the chateau? All right then, might her genuine power as Sandra Catherine Potter be the force against human evil.

The short moment of fury had been nothing, compared to the frustration and bitterness when learning from her father that Aram'chee and the local authorities had quite different opinions about *ordinary policy work*. Knowing full well that he had no legal position, nothing he could call proof, Harry had left it to Ron to alert the French equivalent of the Criminal Investigation Department. They didn't expect a platoon of gendarmerie, but they assumed that two, perhaps four detectives would be on alert, waiting outside, ready to take over the moment they were called in.

What Ron had come up with, though, was a gall-wrenching zero. Entering private property without a warrant? Property owned by the respectable citizen Monsieur de Mirault? Where was the evidence, enough to contact a judge for a warrant? And where was this so-called eyewitness? Perhaps if they stopped playing cops and robbers, perhaps if they left it to professionals to complete the investigation and do the arrests. If there was someone to arrest.

Harry had been less surprised. He'd dropped any attempt to work through Ron's EMEC channels; whatever European authorities were good for, police strike forces did not appear in this list. Instead he'd agreed with the Comtesse Marie-Claire to alert local police - once they had a confession, that was. And once they had one, the domino effect could play to their benefit.

Until then, their task force had to make do without legal support, not to mention its own totally illegal state.

Sandra almost missed her cue with the tambourine. She'd been sensing for the apparition lock, touching it, probing with mental fingers. She could feel its presence, cool, smooth, slippery without being greasy, an efficient device not evil nor good by its own. She couldn't break it here on stage; she needed a moment of isolation and concentration. And she needed Gabriel's help.

Her brother had gone a long way since the seconds of tension and anxiousness down in a dungeon of the Pouilly estate, chateau only by the lowest standards. Since then, Gabriel had perfected his technique, his calmness, coolness, confidence. Actually, the Pouilly estate also had changed its reputation in their perspective, thanks to Grandma Pouilly, Frédéric's grandmother. And a few days ago, the same estate had gained a new meaning for Sandra. She felt more complete than ever before. She was no High Priestess, but had anyone ever checked whether Aram'chee could break a lock from Groucho Transports and Security?

Serpent Dreamer was coming to its end. The lyric part was over; only flute and drums and harp were still playing, and would so for another minute. Sandra ran a mental check first on Moira, then on Caitlin. Both girls were on alert but no more than usual on stage: the first song was sung, a short pause until their next cue, and the thought of a special plot lingered somewhere in the background of their minds. It left Sandra's full capacity free for her own business.

The last tunes from Gabriel's flute faded. At the same moment, the light faded. Any second now, the girls and boys would appear to take position for their warming-up.

This was the moment! Fully on stage, but in darkness!

Sandra sent a mental call to her brother. Then she knelt down and brought her body in a perfect balance not needing any attention. She felt Gabriel's hands on her shoulders.

"Just us, then," he whispered. "Let's go."

They'd had a discussion before this evening, about how to break the lock. Sandra would have gladly accepted the power support of the others - Frédéric, Michel, Héloïse in first place. This required physical contact, but all three of them were seated behind more or less bulky instruments and needed much more time to reach her, more than they had. Backstage it might have worked, but they weren't backstage.

Gabriel had drawn the same conclusions, had summarized all pros and cons in a short remark, skipping any question and any doubt. There was no doubt, there was only his power that reached her, rising like foam in a cup of champagne. Sandra took it and pulled.

Power galore ... The tricky part was to get it between the jaws of the lock, as though trying to open the high-polished stainless steel doors of an elevator with bare hands.

Yet Sandra's hands weren't bare, and she used no hands at all. She hooked her mental grip into the parts of the lock and pulled, pulled harder, pulled stronger, denying any thought and any suspicion that the hook might slip.

She had it open - this was the most difficult moment because the slightest dwindling of impact would let her grip slide and shut the jaws tighter than before.

Sandra dropped any thought of a measured attack. Greedy as a child for food, she took Gabriel's full power on top of her own and stuffed it into the hole her mind had drilled into the lock's linking parts.

With an inaudible *ping*, the resistance against her attack disappeared. The lock was broken.

"Yep-di-doo." Gabriel's mouth was close to her ear. "And now ... done; Remus knows it. C'mon, let's settle back." With a last gentle push on her shoulder, Gabriel left her to resume his position at the microphone.

Sandra rose to take her tambourine. Gabriel's remark about Remus meant, he'd pressed the button on his own phony to notify Remus Lupin, who was waiting outside together with Ray Purcell. It had saved her another five seconds, for which she felt grateful. She inhaled deeply and got ready for the next song.

* * *

Remus Lupin received Gabriel's call as an alarm signal on his own party - a short vibration and a buzzing sound, barely audible to himself. He turned to Ray Purcell, who was sitting on the box that contained their own apparition lock.

"Air's clean," he murmured. "The Potter kids just completed Step One."

At these words, the dog in front of him made a face as if next second he was going to howl at the moon that illuminated the scene with a bright but colourless light. But it didn't happen.

Remus returned the stare. "Well," he said as low-voiced as before, "I can't say whether it's been Sandra's or Gabriel's call, so I guess calling them the Potter kids is quite accurate, isn't it?"

The dog seemed to have a different opinion.

This was nothing particularly new for Remus. The dog, animagus shape of his daughter Rahewa, had a different opinion more often than not, but today Rahewa was in no position to protest loudly, a fact that filled him with satisfaction. Right now he had all the time of the world: Ray had started to work after Remus' first words, giving a damn whether it was appropriate to call Sandra and Gabriel *kids*.

But sooner than expected Ray's head came up. "Done," he grunted. "We can switch it off and on

with a response time of about one second. The field's a bit larger; after all, we aren't in the center."

Remus turned to the dog. "Radius check. Front side of the building."

They were at the back side of the Chateau MiraLuc. Two old men, wearing the jackets of French farm hands, and a black dog looked harmless enough. The dog had the advantage of not raising much attention when being seen at the door from inside. Rahewa's task was to reach the front side under this disguise, change into human shape - provided nobody was watching - and check whether she could apparate to the back side.

Two minutes later she came back - from the other direction and in human shape. "The field covers the complete building, and the moat bridge too. You must be well past the bridge before you can apparate." This said, Rahewa changed back into a black dog.

Remus took his porty out and pressed the button for Harry. A polite voice, which he quickly scaled down in volume, said, "This number is temporarily unavailable."

Which meant, right now Harry should be found on stage.

Remus stood up, made two steps forward, and stretched his arms to both sides. It looked as if he was getting rid of a stiffness, after sitting too long. But he held his right arm in its position, until seconds later a large bird came sailing down noiselessly to land on his forearm. It was an owl.

"The locks are changed," Remus said. "I just tried to notify Harry, but his connection is disabled. So I guess he's busy with his own performance. Can you land on the windowsill and watch the scene inside? And if Harry notices you, think about a clever sign to tell him things are okay on our side of the walls."

The owl blinked once.

After a few seconds waiting, Remus's head jerked up as if stung by a bee. "Oh - sorry, Al, I'm just not used to it." Then he threw the owl into the air, this way giving the bird enough space to unfold the large wings and gain more height.

Knowing his own family - Almyra the owl and Rahewa the dog - in good condition, and knowing someone else worrying, Remus pressed another button on his porty.

"Hi Cho, it's me. Your children just turned one of your products to something that's subject to warranty negotiations. But we had a replacement ready."

After listening for a few moments, he said, "Without our permit, the only exit from the building is out of the door and over the moat bridge. But anyone coming through the door is exposed to our cross-fire. Sip a brandy for me, too. Over."

Cho and Marie-Claire were sitting in the Chateau Saumur, officially running a MABEL seminar while in truth biting their nails, one of them ready to call the resources and staff of Groucho, and the other to call the local police.

Coming to think of it, Remus wondered if Marie-Claire's contact wasn't Sûreté. He'd had the impression she was using a contact that once had been close, if not to say intimate, and Marie-Claire never aimed low.

* * *

Carlos laid on the floor, faking sleep.

It was quite difficult, actually more difficult than the dance steps. This had to do with the warming-up they'd just finished. For the other group, for the early birds, the warming-up was exactly what they needed because they had to storm the scene with the fake-sleeping late risers. For them, though, breathing hard was the show-killer, the no-do thing.

He was the leader of the late pack: twelve girls grouped around him, faking sleep and fighting short breath alike. He was the center of the heap, the hub of the wheel, the core of a twelve-pointed star which more resembled a spiral-shaped galaxy, with the girls lying in angles.

They'd done the warming-up already wearing the costumes for their hip-hop performance. It was a breach of stage rules, in Carlos' eyes, a violation of theatre ethics. But the entire warming-up was a weird element - as if their performance hardly mattered at all, was something to ease their own minds, while the key element was them being there, visible, examinable, exhibition pieces more than actors in a little play-acting hip-hop style.

The guest hall in the Chateau MiraLuc wasn't the gymnasium. The stage, too small for their performance anyway, was occupied by Dragonfly. The warming-up and the subsequent hip-hop act took place on the floor between stage and the surrounding tables with the guests. It brought them close to some guests, to smiles and looks Carlos didn't like.

His own costume was black. He wore a T-shirt with sleeves that covered half of his upper arm, and soft trousers - dancer's trousers - that were skin-tight at his thighs and wide at his feet. The girls in his pack also wore black, but their T-shirts were sleeveless and their pants quite short, just long enough to have the beginning of legs. Boy shorts was the proper term, as Carlos had learned, which was funny because the two boys were the only ones in the troupe not wearing shorts.

The early birds had the same costumes, except theirs were white. Not snowy white, more cream-coloured, reflecting the colours of the Dragonfly costumes and creating the impression that the Brest Hip-Hop Formation and Dragonfly belonged to each other.

They did, of course. Officially Dragonfly had sponsored the costumes, which explained the colours. During their dress rehearsal, when Carlos' father had told them that the late risers had to wear black underwear and the early birds white or skin-coloured, Carlos had felt a bit breathless, suddenly remembering Snoopy prints and carefully avoiding Chloé's eyes. This evening, on which he felt exposed to an audience with the wrong kind of smile on their faces, spoiled the effect.

The music was playing. The early birds arrived, tiptoeing first, then firmer in their steps, surrounding the sleepers and challenging them to get up. The sleepers rose, stretched once, stretched again, and then, in a kind of surprise attack, chased the early birds off. This done, they dropped down again, apparently to continue their sleep.

Moments later the early birds came back, forming a circle that pulsed - forward in a kind of wake-up attack, back as if jumping out of reach, and forward again, and back. The sleepers rose once more and, as if finally surrendering to the forces of the light, adapted the pulsing, each black figure picking a white one and vice versa, until the song ended with twelve plus one black-and-white couples, rotating in two rings until, in the last moment, the white ones fell to the floor.

They stood up again under the applause from the audience, to join their black partners and bow with them together. Then, couples holding hands with their partners, a procession with Carlos and Roland in front, drew a last half-circle and finally disappeared through the door next to the stage.

* * *

Gabriel watched the girls and boys disappear. According to what they'd agreed with their host, this was the end of the official program. Nominally, Dragonfly now was supposed to take their instruments and get lost. But Gabriel didn't think it would happen that way.

The host, seated at the first table to the left of the stage, stood up. It was the signal for the other guests to fall silent.

"My dear friends," he said, "I hadn't been sure in advance what to expect from today's young artists. They come from the school in Brest with which MiraLuc has such a close relationship, and all signs were quite promising, but this has been a premiere in every regard. So I hope you'll agree with me when I say, today's performance with musicians and singers and dancers had all ingredients for a splendid future."

Applause rose, and Gabriel felt obliged to deliver two more bows.

"There's one man to whom we owe today's event with such a fresh collection of pretty young faces, as well as the contact to this promising musical group Dragonfly ..."

Another short applause, another bow, quickly cut short by Lucien de Mirault's next words.

"... and certainly the same man will make sure that we haven't seen the last of these appealing young bodies in black and white. I'm talking about the Sports teacher of the Brest school, who is the spirit behind the bodies, Monsieur Thierry Pri'chard."

The applause which started with Harry's first steps into the hall, coming from backstage, faltered for a moment when the audience noticed his prominent discolouration. Next instant, it steadied again and grew stronger.

Gabriel wondered if his father's clothes had anything to do with it. Harry wore his Sports teacher dress in light grey, making it obvious to everyone that there was no risk of him joining the crowd with their expensive evening dresses.

"Monsieur Pri'chard, you deserve our respect and our gratitude for your efforts in such a short time, and rest assured that we won't forget to prove our generosity. What we saw was so wonderful - would it be possible to see it again? This evening? Maybe in a little while?"

Gabriel, son of the major stock holder of Groucho Enterprises, wasn't unfamiliar with the friendly pleas of the rich and mighty, those who took it for granted that nobody could deny a request so obviously padded with rewards. Yet he still was amazed at the skill with which their host had bundled demand and award, so well polished on the surface of his words that any decline could only be perceived as an *éclat*.

Knowing about the still hidden agenda, Gabriel waited for his father's reply with considerable more expectation than the host and his guests.

"We hadn't planned to leave already," Harry said with a knowing smile that grew stronger when the circle of guests chuckled about this apparent joke. "We really appreciate the opportunity to perform here in this chateau, after we took pains to receive the invitation for this particular audience. I dare say that this is the most illustrious collection of *connaisseurs* you can find in France."

At these words, Gabriel saw mostly pleased and satisfied expressions among the guests. Only two or three people, including their host, looked bewildered.

"Unfortunately, other people wouldn't use the term *connaisseur*," Harry continued with a note in his voice sounding like regret, while in fact, as Gabriel could sense, it was simple relief that the play-acting was over. "They'd talk about what you really are: pederasts, rapists, and child molesters."

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Not even the gasping could be heard that might be expected after such an announcement. The guests were simply speechless - too unexpected came the accusation, from the corner they'd expected it last.

Only their host wasn't frozen in shock. To Gabriel's growing worry, he'd taken his mobile and spoke into it.

"For any specific guest in your circle, I could be wrong," Harry said into the silence, "but I doubt it. Your particulars will be recorded, you'll be interrogated, and altogether it'll be a night as long as you might have expected, only for a different reason."

Harry stopped because the noise level grew rapidly, incredulous shouts of protest in his direction mixed with similar shouts toward the host, asking him to make an end to this dishonourable spectacle.

Lucien de Mirault turned to Harry. "Your accusations are outrageous. Do you have any authority to behave the way you do in my own house and toward my own guests?"

"And never mind the question of evidence that holds in front of a court, huh?" Harry smiled thinly. "I'm not police, if that's what you mean. But don't you worry; we can have police here any time we want."

"I don't worry, and I don't think I need any more proof of what you really are."

The host clicked his fingers, actually the same gesture Gabriel knew so well from French crime movies, when the police commandant in charge sent his crowd of detectives and uniformed flics into the suspect's territory. In this case, though, there were just two men who'd entered the hall from an entrance opposite the stage. They stepped forward as if pulled by the same rope and took position in front of Harry but a few steps apart, right hands in their jackets.

It looked so much like a cheap action movie, Gabriel had to fight a wave of unreality. But what he sensed was real, and what these two men were hiding under their jackets, ready to pull, weren't wands. So it could only be guns.

"I took precautions after a few incidents not too long ago," said Lucien de Mirault, more to his guests than to Harry. "Another teacher who used to hold contact with MiraLuc had a weird accident, and Madame Vasseur, my assistant for these matters, disappeared in the middle of the night - my dear guests, I didn't want to bother you with such details, but as you can see, I was prepared for an event like that. Since there isn't any good reason for you to be exposed to this unworthy business any second longer, I suggest to cancel our feast and leave now, and please take my apologies for what you had to witness here."

Harry said, "That won't do, I'm afraid."

"You're in no position to give any orders, and if you want to keep your jawbones unbroken, you better keep your mouth shut as long as you aren't asked." The streamlined entrepreneur and aristocrat was falling off from Lucien de Mirault with every additional remark. "But let me ask you, so you have your line in this dismal one-act play: what should prevent my guests from returning home?"

"The guards surrounding this building. Anyone coming out of the entrance door will be stupefied."

"Ah, yes. That's about what I expected. Will it disappoint you much to hear that your guards won't find a single target?" Mirault turned to his guests and called, "Please don't leave the building through the door; the chateau's environment is temporarily not recommendable. Join my assistants in the lobby, they'll help you to synchronize with our protection when leaving through the portkey gate."

Harry called, "We'll take any attempt to leave as a confession of guilt."

For an instant, Gabriel held his breath - at his father's words, the host's face had distorted to a hateful grimace, while the two men never did so much as turning their heads to see whether he'd give the command for a beating-up. They were competent professionals, confident any such command would be heard loud and clear.

Next moment, Mirault relaxed with some effort. Gabriel wondered for a second why the command hadn't been given, then he knew: as long as there were guests around watching, his father was comparably safe from any punishment. At the same instant, he became aware that his father had used this constellation fully on purpose.

"The only confession of guilt I can see here is yours," Mirault said to Harry. "You didn't deny being involved in what happened to Deray and Madeleine. Am I right?"

"Yes, sure."

"What happened to Madeleine?"

"Guess what, asshole. She met me, that's what happened to her."

Mirault sent a quick glance to the other end of the guest hall, where a bulk of guests was crowding, trying to pass through the door. As always with people in panic, it took them twice the space and threefold the time to leave a room through a normal-sized door, but Gabriel suspected that the traffic jam was mostly caused by the problems at the head of the line, where portkey apparition refused to work.

"Wait till we're alone." Mirault showed an almost desperate longing for - what? The cruelty of Harry's punishment? Probably.

"Is she dead?"

"No." Harry grimaced back. "She's alive and kicking, and full of stories not suited well for any public."

"That - er, comes unexpected, I have to admit. But we'll - " Mirault stopped because his mobile buzzed, a porty, as Gabriel could see from his position.

"Yes?"

After listening for a moment, Mirault looked up and stared at Harry. "Our portkey doesn't work. Do you have any explanation?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Stop playing wiseass, Pri'chard. We have the students of your formation, and these Dragonfly kids, in addition to you. Maybe I can't teach you manners with a few gun barrels hitting your face, but for sure I can make you behave with an audio transmission from the room your troupe is in. I ask you for the last time: what's going on?"

"Your apparition lock has been hijacked and now listens to a different drummer."

While Mirault still was trying to figure out whether this could possibly be true, Harry said, "There's a Pied Piper. In a few seconds, he'll lure Dragonfly backstage - at once."

"What? What nonsense ..."

Gabriel no longer listened. It had taken him an instant to understand his father's last remark as a command meant for himself. He should get the Dragonfly members out of this combat zone, into the same room where the girls and boys were waiting. And at once meant, using a chain summoning synchronized with the briefly interrupted pulse from Ray's apparition lock outside.

He took his porty, pressed a button, and said, "Gabriel. I need a pulse skip for one second. Now."

"Coming." Remus' voice counted, "Three - two - one ..."

The counting was helpful yet not accurate enough. Gabriel put his concentration on the state he

could sense and of which he knew it was the apparition lock. He wasn't his sister, he had no chance to investigate it more closely, but that wasn't necessary anyway: he only had to notice the fraction of a second when the barrier fell open, and to use it.

Michel - Héloïse - Tomas - Frédéric - Caitlin - Moira - Sandra. He had to summon them synchronously without physical contact hand to hand, a task at the limit of his skill.

In the very last instant, an impulse from Sandra told him to leave her in this room. Gabriel had no time to protest and no urge to argue; one person less made his task more manageable.

"... now!" The barrier fell.

Gabriel apparated into the backstage room, taking the other six Dragonfly members with him. Still in the immeasurable moment of the transit, he knew that it had worked, and that only the intimacy they'd developed in long rehearsals had made it possible.

He came out in a room full of girls and boys in black and white - and a man in a blue suit, proving considerably less taste in clothes than the two bodyguards Gabriel just had left.

Still before the students had found the time to gasp at the sudden arrival of seven Dragonfly members, Gabriel's spell knocked the man down.

* * *

When the popping sounds caused by the disappearing Dragonfly members reached his ear, when he saw Mirault's eyes widen to a stare of disbelief, Harry decided he could turn around and have a look himself.

It might also have been a good moment to disarm the two muscle men in front of him; for a fraction of a second, even their attention had wavered. But as long as Mirault believed he was in control of the scene here in the hall, Harry wanted to keep the status quo: he was craving for information, for confessions, for details from Mirault as much as their host was craving for Harry's face beaten to pulp, making his discolouration bloody real.

Maybe he was stressing his luck. What he could sense from the two men told him about their excellent training, experience in the job, their ability to switch off their memory when necessary, and a non-existent sympathy with victims.

Turning around, he saw not quite what he'd expected to see. Yes, the stage had emptied from people who'd left their instruments behind, but with one exception. His daughter Sandra stood there.

Now she sat down, legs crossed, arms folded and resting on her knees.

The view made Harry relax a bit. What looked like a girl playing the coolest broad under the sun was in fact Sandra taking position - and aim - to shoot a spell any time. The arms with the folded hands formed the arrowhead which more than compensated for the wand she couldn't reach without the two men reacting.

Mirault turned back to Harry. "Where did the others go? How did they do it?"

"To a safer place, I guess. I told you that your apparition lock is under our control."

"Bullshit, you can't have it under control. Probably you've got your own ... But then, how could they apparate when our - anyway." Mirault, showing first signs of a deteriorating grip on reality, turned to Sandra. "And you? Why are you still here?"

"To help my father. One false move from these two and you're dead."

"Your father?" Mirault was too preoccupied to show any reaction to Sandra's threat. He pointed at Harry. "Is this your father?"

Seeing Sandra's reaction, probably a nod, Mirault turned back to Harry. "Who are you? And what business do you have sneaking into my chateau and humiliating me in front of my guests?"

"I'm a father," Harry said. "But in contrast to you, I still have my children. My daughter didn't commit suicide, my son disappeared from your view but not from mine. They help me investigating a few more suicides - boys who were students of the school in Brest. And the track ends here. Lucien de Mirault, you're guilty of having sent these boys to their death, after whatever was done to them here in your chateau."

"Oh, really? And what are you going to do about that?"

"Taking the right one, and leaving the left man to my daughter."

"Huh? What nonsense - "

But the two bodyguards had followed the conversation with a better understanding of what Harry meant. The two arms that were halfways hidden in the jackets moved as if driven by the same mind, then started to come out.

Not being sure whether he stood in the way for Sandra's shot, Harry fell down to a position with one leg stretched, the other kneeling. In his downward movement, he formed the arrowhead with his own arms and sent the fastest spell he knew.

The green flash disappeared in the man's head.

The man's hand, holding a short-barreled gun, fell down first. The gun hit the floor with a *gonk* that was instantly followed by the heavy thud with which the man's body reached the ground.

Only then, in retrospect and with some consternation, Harry became aware that the other man had also been hit by a green flash.

He found no time to exchange a look with his daughter because Mirault made a jump forward and bent down where Sandra's victim had fallen to the floor. There he reached for the weapon.

"Mirault!" Harry called sharply. "Drop the gun!"

After a second's hesitation, the man looked up, not making any attempt to raise the weapon. "You think I wanted to complete what these two tried so unsuccessfully? Certainly not. No, what I have in mind is much simpler - after having sent my daughter into suicide, after having sent a few boys into suicide without any of them serving as surrogate for the one I had in mind, which is my son Patrice, I'm left with the only decent choice: doing the same to myself. Are you going to let me do it?"

When Harry hesitated, Mirault said, "You don't really think I'm going to appear in court, do you? You have no case at all, not legally. A lawyer would cut you to pieces in public."

"Maybe I didn't plan to go to court."

"Then why don't you give me these few seconds I need for a last act of self-determination? If that's the right term; to me it doesn't feel as if I've had much of self-determination before in my life." Mirault looked at Sandra, then back at Harry. "You have my guests, have fun with them. A rotten bunch of perverts, one worse than the other."

And you? Harry felt tempted to scream. Instead, he asked, "How did you send the boys into suicide?"

"How? Ask Madeleine." Mirault showed a horrible smile. "The method was a bit more intricate than this here."

The gun was in his hands. Long before Harry had found the time to send a disarming or stupefying

spell, long before he knew whether he really objected, Mirault lifted the barrel to his own forehead and pulled the trigger.

* * *

Sandra sent a glance to the bloody mess their former host had made of the back of his own head. For a few seconds, she thought she was going to throw up. Then her father reached her, hugged her, and sent her a calming mental wave.

Her head was still buried at his chest when he asked her, "How are you?"

"Better, now. If I don't have to look again at his head ..."

"I was thinking more of the other man."

"Oh, that." Sandra felt good, but was glad she didn't have to look into her father's eyes. "He was ready to shoot you, or me, and I found not the smallest spark of pity inside him. And besides - the Killing Curse's the fastest by far."

"Yes, it's true." Her father hugged her. "Our first serious fight side by side. Hopefully it's the last. Now let's put the situation under control as quickly as we can."

While her father secured the entrance to the hall, Sandra first sent her brother Gabriel a mental message that she was coming and then entered the backstage room, noticing how crowded the room was, and hot from all the bodies, and a bit smelly too - the smell of fear, adrenaline and sweat.

"It's over," she said. "Well, almost, we still have the guests to register and interrogate." She looked at Frédéric. "It'll be a long night."

Esmeralda stared at her. "There's been a shot."

Sandra wondered for a moment how her younger sister could be so sure. Shots in the movies sounded totally different from real shots, and the Potter household was no place to learn more. Then she remembered - Esmeralda's parents had died in a shooting during an attempt of illegal immigration at the Mexican border to the USA, and most likely the girl had been inside a car like she'd been inside this room now.

Sandra said, "Yes. Monsieur Mirault shot himself. We didn't stop him."

Her audience took it with a mix of satisfaction and worry, but mostly silent agreement.

"He's left a real mess," Sandra added. "That's nothing you ought to see; even I almost had to puke." She turned to Gabriel. "Can you take them away from here? We need to get the guests under control."

"Where? The school?"

"Erm - "

"The Chateau Saumur," called Carlos. "There's enough room, and Marie-Claire knows some of us already." He was beaming of pride, while his fellow dancer, Roland, lapped up every gran of information he could get.

Gabriel took his phony to talk with Remus about a synchronized skip in the lock pulse. At this moment, Moira asked, "What about those two men?"

"They won't bother us any longer."

"What happened to them?"

Looking around, Sandra could see the same question in all Dragonfly faces, perhaps with the exception of her brother. The girls and boys of her father's hip-hop formation hadn't seen anything

of the two men, but no doubt there had been time enough to exchange information.

"Something very final happened to them," Sandra said. "And now get lost; we've got work to do."

She apparated to Carron Lough, using the same pulse skip in which Gabriel summoned the students out of the one chateau and into the other. In their own castle, she went upstairs to fetch her old pet, the serpent.

"Hi, Nagini," she said. "We've got a few perverts to interrogate. Will you help us?"

"Naturally, Missus. I'm glad to serve a purpose every once in a while."

"That'll pile up your account. Let's go."

Arriving at the Chateau MiraLuc, Sandra learned that the chateau was already under their own control. Using a megaphone, Remus had announced that *they* - leaving it open who *they* were - would now come inside, and anyone not lying flat on the ground, belly to the floor and hands folded in their necks, would deeply regret not having chosen this position. Then he'd opened, sending in two dogs first, who sniffed at every body lying on the ground, scaring most people shitless. Their perverted taste aside, these were society animals, not fighters.

In negotiations of any kind - interrogations, for example - they felt more at home and seemed ready to fight toe and nail for details as elementary as their real name and address. Nagini could tell a lie from the truth, but she couldn't extract the truth from an uncooperating mind.

Someone else could: Remus, helped by his daughter Rahewa, in cooperation with Harry, Nagini, and Frédéric. Their team worked well, and grew very fluent on the cleaning spells they had to issue for almost every couple of guests:

Frédéric guided the next couple into the guest hall, the same they'd left in such a hurry earlier the same evening. They were offered seats, facing two dead men and the bloody mass of their former host in front of them and two apathetic looking figures to their sides - an older man and a younger woman, with just one disquieting fact in common: they were playing with short-barreled guns, opening them, closing them, pulling a trigger on an obviously empty magazine, and suddenly starting to insert cartridges.

Around this time, inevitably one of the couple threw up. It was the signal for the other to follow.

They were asked for their name and address. If the responses weren't true, as Nagini confirmed, they were asked if they wanted to roll in their own puke. Usually this was enough to extract the real names.

Hearing how Frédéric, member of the Pouilly family, could locate most names in the French hierarchy of important names and families, seemed to have an extremely unnerving effect. If this wasn't enough, hearing how Remus announced that the chateau would burn to the ground later that night and only a signed confession qualified for a ticket out of the building had an extraordinary unnerving effect. Watching Almyra's magical quill spin over the parchment they used for the confessions broke the last resistance.

The confessions were short. 'I, so-and-so, confess having participated in festivities in the Chateau MiraLuc in the course of which students from the Ecole des Etudiants Magiques Gênes in Brest were sexually misused. My own contribution to these child molestations included - ' and the terms appearing here ranked from 'watching pornographic scenes' over 'accepting sexual ministrations' to the term as short and cruel, 'rape.'

Twelve couples, then they were done and could send them home.

When the last guests had disappeared through the portkey gate in the lobby, Sandra turned to her father. "Why didn't you call in the police Marie-Claire had ready?"

"Because they wouldn't be in any position to help us, more the opposite. One look at the scene here, and their first impulse would have been to arrest us."

Sandra had to agree, although she couldn't feel guilt. She knew that she had to expect a phase in which she would feel miserable for having killed a life, and she was ready to suffer through this phase - if it came, that was; women were much more pitiless than men, so it was still an open question. Something else bothered her more.

"What are these confessions worth? Will any of them hold in court?"

"Most unlikely." Her father smiled. "But they aren't intended to be used in court. They might go to the press - to independent press, that is, and Paul Sillitoe would have to tell us which newspapers and magazines to use. No matter how much the culprits deny, at the very least they had to explain how such a confession could appear in first place. And don't forget - they can't afford any kind of lie detector."

Sandra almost laughed; nobody else had a lie detector like Nagini, but something as simple as Veritaserum was very efficient if you knew which questions to ask.

"Then what exactly are these confessions worth?"

"At the very least, they confirm that we've done our job here, and that a rotten nest of pederasts has been smoked out." Harry grinned. "Which doesn't mean we should burn it to the ground."

Sandra didn't feel satisfied with this answer, and apparently it showed in her face, because her father took her shoulders to pull her closer and to hug her before explaining a bit more.

"I'm not sure yet, Sandy. I'm tired, sick to death, and the puke we had to clean every five minutes was the smallest problem. Maybe blackmailing them is the best we can do - if they donate so-and-so much for child welfare within the next five years, they'll get their written confessions. Maybe this method but only for the minor cases, while the rapist cases are made public. I have to ask other people what's best for the children, and then we'll sit together and decide. You've got a vote, your brother, your mother - "

"Frédéric too."

"Okay, Frédéric too."

Sandra could feel a short mental impulse of curiosity. When she didn't respond, more from her own exhaustion and feeling sick than for any other reason, her father continued.

"We can't stop the habit of child abuse in our society. We can't even be sure the people we just sent home will abandon the habit; to be honest, I don't think so. But we've made a school in Brest a safe place, and for this I'm proud of you and my other children and myself."

"And Mum."

Her father didn't agree, at least not in words; but then, what Sandra could feel told her that her remark hadn't been wrong either. She briefly wondered what it meant, and if there was a fact still hidden from her, but she was tired enough not to investigate further.

* * *

Cho sat down in front of the oversized desk, noticing with satisfaction that the old visitor's chair had been replaced by something better. Perhaps only for this particular visit, but it was enough: this would be the last visit in the office.

"Good morning, Madame Chang. How can I help you?"

"Good morning, Monsieur le Directeur Fresnel. Did you hear what happened yesterday evening in the Chateau MiraLuc?"

"Yes indeed - a ghastly story. But I can tell you for a fact, Madame Chang, that none of our students was involved, and that they were backstage when - when the horrible incident with Monsieur de Mirault happened. So your own children - "

"I know," Cho cut him short. "I have eyewitness reports, probably better than your own. That's not why I'm here."

"No?"

For a moment, Fresnel looked absent-minded. Probably he was trying to figure out what her remark about *eyewitness reports* meant, and how to respond to a frontier he hadn't been aware of.

"I had a conversation. With a woman. From the Chateau MiraLuc. Madeleine Vasseur. She told me. About you."

Cho had held her tone lightly, as if exchanging gossip over a cup of tea. Still, her purposefully short sentences had left traces in Fresnel's face, and only with some effort he'd avoided to twist under her words like under the lashes of a whip.

"You knew what was going on. Not only did you let it happen, you encouraged it and took your own profit."

"That's what she said? This is an infamous allegation." Fresnel recovered with remarkable speed.

"Whatever this lady was talking about, I deny any personal involvement, and I strictly refuse to be pulled into a scandal which is suited to cause severe damage on our school's reputation."

"Stop it."

Cho, not even in the mood for a few insults aside, leaned back in her chair while she held her bag in her lap.

"Remember my last visit? Remember what I said about Chinese Triads? Do you still have the dagger I sent you afterwards?"

Fresnel didn't answer, not even nod. But the watchful stare with which he was waiting for her next words was answer enough.

"I know. You know. That's enough. I won't even try to find any proof for what you did, how deep you were involved, the dirt on your hands and on your soul. I have a much simpler solution."

"Really?"

"You've got time until today evening. If, by then, there is a written and signed confession sent to the school authorities, you'll live. This confession - I'll accept 'active support of child abuse in my function as headmaster,' no less. So if this letter is sent, you won't hear from me again. If not - "

"Madame Chang - "

"If not," she interrupted his interruption with the voice she had honed in many Groucho meetings, "you'll get a last greeting from me. It'll be brought by a member of said Triads, and I personally just don't care whether they use a dagger or a half-rotten fish to stuff it into your throath. But I guess you would prefer a dagger."

"Madame Chang, your suggestions are completely unacceptable. I'm not going to write any such confession, not today and never - "

"That's what I thought," said Cho. "You're not the man to stand to your crimes."

"I'm certainly not the man to wait for your messengers either. You know, I take you seriously, you made sure of that with your frightening present." Fresnel tried to smile, but failed. "It scared me, enough to take my own precautions, and this comes in just handy now." He opened a drawer and grabbed something. When his hand came up again, it held a gun.

He quickly stood up so he could move more freely. He showed her the gun, although without aiming at her, more in the style of lawyer in front of a judge, showing Exhibit Number One.

Cho pulled her bag closer. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm going to disappear," replied Fresnel, "and I need your assistance for that. You'll accompany me, until I'm sure my head start is enough to let me reach an unknown destination before you can raise any alarm." He waved the gun. "I'm a desperate man, Madame Chang, and you can only blame yourself for that. So think about how we can get some money for my escape without raising alarm either, because any such alarm would put you at risk for your own life. I'm no expert in such matters of physical force, but I can assure you, if I have to go, you'll go first, you bloody bitch."

He stared at her, all smiles gone. "And don't try anything clever with your wand."

"I'm not particularly good with my wand." Cho replied. Then she pulled the trigger of the gun she'd held in her bag for the last five minutes. The popping sound was astonishingly quiet; the silencer on the gun had taken most of the noise, and the expensively soft leather bag the rest.

Fresnel looked very surprised. He staggered, then sat heavily down in his own luxurious chair. Only now, a spot on his chest slowly turned red. "Wha - what did you do?"

Cho stood up and made a step to Fresnel's desk. She pulled her hand with the gun out of the bag.

"Here - that's what I did. As I said, I'm not very good with a wand, but a gun with a silencer does the job any time."

At close range, she pulled the trigger twice more. At least one of the two shots had been lethal: the mean sparkling in Fresnel's eyes faded to a sightless stare.

Cho let the gun drop on the desk, but kept her gloves on, exactly as her old friend Laila had told her. Nobody would be able to backtrack the weapon; Laila's sources were waterproof.

Walking out of the Brest building, Cho met no one. The meeting which currently took place, about the scandal, in the same building but a few walls away, held everyone in its own spell.

26 - Settling the Scores

Sandra sent a last glance that took in the entire room. Then she stepped out of the half-circle formed by her family plus Frédéric, and walked forward until she stood right in front of the current High Priestess.

Aram'chee gave her a brief, encouraging smile, then she grew serious again.

"Sandra Catherine Potter, daughter of Harry Potter and Cho Chang, you've been elected to become the next High Priestess and my successor in this authority. Do you agree to this choice?"

"Yes, I do."

"Sandra Catherine, are you ready to take over the duty now and relieve me from this burden?"

"Yes, I am."

Aram'chee took both of her hands in her own. "Then, Sandra, I appoint you High Priestess of the Magical World and declare myself free of this role. May your ruling be guided by mercy and justice, kindness and courage, no matter how long."

With another smile, Aram'chee added, "Or short." She hugged Sandra, took her head in her own hands, and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "That's it, my little one. Now you're the High Priestess, and I'm free."

Listening into herself, Sandra couldn't feel any difference. Doubtfully glancing at Aram'chee, she said, "I thought I would feel something, but I'm the same as before."

"Not quite. Now you have the power of authority inside you, but as long as there isn't anything to judge, it won't bother you." Aram'chee laughed. "This isn't like a crown you have to wear until your head aches. But you can give it a try, then you know how it feels."

Sandra turned around and looked at the others, facing stares in response, different by their degrees of smile and seriousness: her father, her mother, Gabriel, Carlos and Esmeralda, and Frédéric.

Seeing the shining eyes of the two youngest, Sandra suddenly knew what Aram'chee had meant by "giving it a try." She took position where Aram'chee had stood a moment ago and said, "Carlos, Esmeralda, please come to me."

The look from her young sister told her that this was exactly what Esmeralda had expected. Carlos showed surprise for an instant, yet by the time both of them were standing in front of her, he seemed to know what was coming because he beamed in anticipation.

"Carlos, Esmeralda, you two sacrificed your magical power in favour of a plot to uncover a bunch of perverts. Now that the task is completed, the time has come to reinstate your true nature. Do you want your magic back?"

"Yes." The answer came almost in unison.

"Then ..."

Sandra faltered because a new thought had crossed her mind. She sent a quick glance to Aram'chee, knowing at the same time that she couldn't ask, or if she asked, Aram'chee wouldn't answer: Sandra was the High Priestess now; whatever she did in this role was her own decision, her own responsibility.

But in this case, if what she had in mind felt justified to her, wasn't it okay? She would feel it, Aram'chee had said. Listening again, Sandra heard no inner voice telling her right from wrong. Testing her idea again, tasting it with the best sense of ethics she could muster, she still found it

justified.

"... perhaps your magical power should be, erm, somewhat improved so you can better cope with your siblings? What do you think?"

In the corner of her eye, Sandra could see a grin spreading on Aram'chee's face. Maybe it was nepotism what she did; but if so, she seemed not the first High Priestess falling for this minor sin.

Esmeralda was quickest. "You mean, more powerful so we're closer to you and Gabriel? No, it's enough if you two are the super wizard and witch. But if you could give us something so Carlos and I could talk to each other without words, like you and Gabriel do all the time, that'd be great."

Carlos nodded in agreement. "Yes, please."

"Let's see." Sandra simply didn't know, but wasn't the own family just right for first failures? And first successes too, come to think of it.

She took Carlos' left hand and Esmeralda's right hand between her own. "Little brother, little sister, your magic shall be as strong and vivid as it has been before. Your spirits shall shine in harmony and mutual understanding."

She let go of the hands, which had folded almost by their own. "Did it work? Please tell me; you know, I'm fairly new in the job."

Esmeralda looked at her brother. "What am I thinking right now?"

"You ..." Rather than completing his answer, Carlos turned to Sandra. "Yes, she's right, there are a few more people who wait for their magical power. Esmeralda's roommates, and Roland, who's been promised by Dad, and maybe Serge and Mathieu too, although I wonder what this bonehead of Serge will do with his magic."

Sandra exhaled. "Seems as if your non-verbal communication works better than before. That's what I had in mind, so perhaps it's really my doing. But otherwise - I'll convert them pretty soon, but today it's just family, okay?"

Esmeralda nodded, and Carlos seemed fully absorbed by his first tentative steps in sending and receiving mental impulses.

Sandra hugged her father and her mother. With Gabriel, she already had exchanged the mental equivalent in the moments before. She was on her way to Frédéric when her father asked, "How long will you keep it, Sandy?"

Before she could answer, her mother said, "Sorry to interrupt, but I just was asking myself who's going to do the conversions in the MABEL seminars, now that Aram'chee is out of business."

"Oh."

Sandra hadn't thought of that before, and it seemed nobody else had either, and the question had all qualities to spoil the day. As much as she supported her mother's work in general and the idea behind MABEL in particular, she wasn't ready to spend her next years as a secret MABEL employee.

Aram'chee said, "I have to explain something."

All heads were turning in her direction.

"When I described what will happen from Sandra's takeover of the role and duty, I wasn't completely clear, or maybe I should say I wasn't completely honest. To make it simple and short - well, I'm not necessarily out of the business forever."

"What?"

"It's ... you can compare it with a soldier returning from the war but not delivering all his weaponry. He is no longer a soldier, the reasons for going to war no longer exist, but he's still there and his sword is still sharp, so to speak."

Aram'chee turned to Cho. "Using the power that's left in me for my own, egotistical reasons would make me a criminal of the worst kind, and I'm pretty sure it would destroy me soon. But converting Muggles to Magicals, in this world ruled by the others ... I have to find something to make a living, and this is indeed a tiny egotistical motive, but I believe I can justify it. So if MABEL would offer me the role, I would gladly agree."

"You bet." Cho grinned. "And call it a job, not a role, otherwise people won't know what you're talking about."

"I will have to learn more than that, but I'm looking forward to it," replied Aram'chee. "I feel like a little girl discovering the world, almost like Esmeralda."

Sandra saw a few differences, one in particular which had to do with a male partner. But she knew better than to express her thought in this circle.

"So, Sandy, you're totally free in your decision," said her father. "Any idea what you'll do, or when?"

"I don't think my - er, term will last more than a few weeks. But it's absolutely new to me, and maybe there's something to do which we didn't think of yet; I mean, the step is not reversible, regardless of what power'll be left. And besides, even if there isn't any official job left to do, in a sense I've been waiting for this role most of my life - now I want to find out how it feels. Doing normal things as the High Priestess, something like that."

At these words, she looked at Frédéric, and what he saw in her eyes made him almost blush.

* * *

When he heard Jeannette announce the visitor in the intercom, Harry stood up from behind the pompous desk and walked to the door. Just before he'd reached it, the door was opened from outside.

"Hello, Ron," Harry said, smiling broader than the situation deserved, "please come in. This ridiculous arrangement with the desk between us isn't my choice, but it's the place where everyone can find me, so ..."

"Never mind," said Ron. He sat down in the visitor's chair and examined the desk. "That's where he's been found?"

"Yes, and at least he had the decency not to leave blood spots on this magnificent carpet. Not like Mirault."

"Not his own merit," replied Ron with arched eyebrows. "After all, he didn't do it himself."

"No, not in the technical sense."

"He had it coming, you mean? Yes, probably so. Any suspects?"

"If the police has suspects, they don't discuss them with me," said Harry with an expressionless face. "And I have other things to do than mourn any of the teachers who were released from their duty this way or the other. Ron, the school's no longer in operation."

"Tell me something new." Ron sighed. "The scandal's so big, I don't think the EMEC has left any choice other than closing the school forever."

"What'll happen to the students?"

"Sent home, sent back, sent to other schools - I don't know." Ron made a gesture that hinted at the building or the school altogether. "This place here's stigmatized, but of course we need a replacement, a new school for magically handicapped students."

"And when will it be available?"

Ron stared at him incredulously. "You aren't serious, are you? We're talking about a European school authority, still in shock from the worst scandal in their history. You know the old saying, 'It's hard to predict, especially if it's the future.' In this case, though, it's easier: they'll need two years at the minimum."

"Too late for our students."

"This is a local problem." Seeing Harry's stare, Ron said, "Don't look at me that way. I know I sent you here, and you solved the mystery. You did a great job, Harry, but only from the perspective of a normal citizen. Administration-wise, it's a disaster. It would have been wiser to replace a few teachers as quietly as possible, because then we still had a school in operation."

"Thanks a lot," Harry growled.

Ron showed something of his own, boyish grin. "You're welcome. I mean, you never expected me to sugarcoat things, so I'm not going to start the habit now. Let me tell you so much, Harry - I personally feel admiration and satisfaction and want to dance on Fresnel's grave and shake your hand until it aches ..."

Harry grinned back. Yes, that's what he'd wanted to hear.

"... while on a more business-oriented level, I'd really appreciate if you held the fort until the proceedings are completed."

"Arrghh - that's just what I was afraid you'd say. I'm the worst administrator you can imagine - "

"No, you're not."

"Okay, yes, I know what you mean, but administration is the last thing I had in mind. Anyway, you're right, I get along with the students, and the teachers either want to shake my hand as you just said or they're scared out of their minds. So, okay, I'll hold your fort."

"Thank you. You're a true friend."

"Am I, huh? In contrast to someone else I know." Harry grinned despite his words.

"Listen, wiseass, you came to me in search of a job to fill the hours. Now you've got it, and now you complain. But that's okay, there's nothing as hard as man's ingratitude." Ron stood up. "And this on such a soft carpet."

Harry continued with his paperwork until he felt like screaming. Then he apparated home - to Carron Lough; the times of the joyless Apartment 27 in the Cayenne building were over. Arriving in the dinner room, he was greeted by his wife.

"Where's the rest of the family?" he asked.

"Mostly with friends, plural or singular as the situation deserves. The same goes for the gender." Cho laughed. "This scene is so much the cliché of an ordinary family, it's incredible: husband coming home, wife expecting him, kids anywhere but close."

"Is it? I wouldn't know. But maybe I have to get used to it." Harry told Cho what he'd promised Ron

to do, and what it meant in practical terms.

"Well," she said, "you asked for a job, and now you've got it."

"That's what Ron said, too."

Cho examined his expression. "How does it feel, this job?"

"Being with the students is great. Teaching the teachers the fear of god, more exactly getting a few boneheads in line of something that dimly resembles teaching, is a very satisfying task. The rest - I wasn't born for paperwork, and I never knew it as clearly as today."

"So if you had a Chief of Administration, you would be in your element?"

"That'd be like a dream. This estate is just great, and never mind its shattered repu - " Harry stopped himself and stared at his wife. "What are you talking about? The Brest school is past; the scandal took care of that."

"The Brest school in the incredibly competent hands of the EMEC is past, yes," replied Cho. "So they'll sell the estate, and that'll be that."

"Exactly. So what are we talking about?"

"About the events of the day, just like other couples, except you aren't used to it." Before he could protest because somehow it had sounded differently, Cho asked, "What about your discolouration?"

"Well, I guess I'm going to keep it for a few more days. The students are troubled so much from the events and the changes, I don't want to lose one of the few fixpoints they've kept."

"That fits well," said Cho with a dreamy voice, "because, you know, I have this fantasy, a sexual fantasy actually, about a lumberjack, a bit rough at the edges, and his face shows the traces of some kind of explosion, and he - well, it isn't rape, simply because I fully agree with what he's going to do with me - "

"And when is this chap going to do with you?"

"What about now?" Cho took his hands to pull him upright.

"What about food? What about this mythical end of an ordinary working day?"

"Well, you can drive any comparison too far, and as for food - you won't believe how good the food will taste. Afterwards, I mean."

Harry would. Yes, he could remember a proverb claiming the other order as the preferred choice, but what he'd promised Ron would take still a few more days. Time enough to try all variations, and find out what worked best.

* * *

Carlos was strolling through the park of the Brest school. The air felt a bit fresh on his skin; here at the corner between the Channel and the Atlantic Ocean, autumn was not to be ignored any longer when dressing for a walk. At first, Dona Gata had been snugly tucked into the bag Carlos wore on his back, with only the cat's head visible to the outside. But soon Dona Gata had lost interest in such a passive role and had jumped out to stroll her own path at her own speed, probably looking for chance encounters with mice.

Carlos' speed was dictated mostly by the leisurely walk of the girl at his side. He and Chloé had things to discuss, of a nature that didn't fit into the canteen or any other place close to other students - or adults, for that matter. Carlos would have liked to discuss the issue in Carron Lough, but -

"To tell you the truth," said Chloé at this moment, "I'd hoped you were going to invite me to your home in Ireland for this occasion. I have that button on my party, but ... you know I never would

use it on my own, don't you?"

"Yes, I know - funny that you mention it just when I was trying ... I wish we could jump there right on the spot" - Carlos held his step for a moment to look at Chloé and show her how serious he was - "but there's something we have to talk about first."

"Maybe you're afraid I can't behave because my people are poor and yours are rich, is it that?"

Rather than answering, Carlos had to fight a fit of the giggles, enough to tell Chloé this wasn't the reason. "If it's about being poor," he finally managed, "you've got no chance against Esmeralda. But - "

"Huh?"

"I mean her real parents, before she was adopted. They were Mexicans, immigrants, and compared to illegal Mexican immigrants, people in the Massif Central are almost wealthy."

Chloé stopped, stared at him. "You sound as if quoting a book. What book did you read?"

Carlos' fist pushed empty air, a sign of impatience and frustration with himself, because his remark had sounded rehearsed even in his own ears. "I didn't read any book, but you're right, I repeated the words of someone I asked. Can we - "

"Who told you?"

Carlos blew air through his nose. "My mother."

"Oh."

"And she too asked me when I was going to invite you to *our home in Ireland*, so much for that." With satisfaction, he noticed the slight flush that had crept into Chloé's face at his mock quotation of her own words. "But there's something - yes, it has to do with your people, and my people, and a book's involved too, although I didn't read it, and once this is settled - maybe it doesn't take long at all ..."

It took a few seconds after Carlos' voice had faded before Chloé said, "I haven't got any idea what you're talking about. You've lost me."

"It's ..." Carlos cleared his throat. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're a witch. No matter what's going to happen with this school, there's no place for you here. So what are you going to do? Go back to - er, Nohanent?"

"Who said there's no place for me here? And besides, you're a wizard too, or you'll be as soon as you've got the counter cure or whatever it's called. So what are *you* going to do?"

Carlos, briefly feeling guilt because he hadn't told Chloé about the completed cure, was experienced enough in negotiations with girls his age to know that the slightly accusing tone was purely self-defense, and the counter question a play for time. But he didn't object answering first.

"I asked my father. He ... he said there are people who'd like to continue with this school, but of course under different conditions and so, you know what I mean. And he said, it's important to have only students with failed magic. He said - he said, it's different from a situation where a student with an amputated leg or something like that is put together with healthy students, because that leg might be amputated forever, while the failing magic can be cured. But what's more, a single witch or wizard under all the failing students wouldn't make any sense. That's what he said. So I have to pick another school."

"Pick another?" Chloé looked confused. "Can you choose?"

"Well, sort of ..." Carlos made a wry face. "Yes, I can choose whatever I want, and my choice is a school Esmeralda and I can attend together, and that limits my choice considerably - "

"... because she's made up her mind already," finished Chloé the sentence for him, with a smile that faded already at her last words.

Carlos' grin was steadier. "You don't know half of what you think you know. Yes, she's made up her mind enough to know that she wants to stay together with her friends - the other girls with the bracelets, but even so there are two options. There are two schools, one in France and one in England, but by some magic they're just a staircase apart, and so far the girls couldn't figure out whether all of them go for the French side, or all for the English, or each at her side because there are those houses anyway, and - "

"But they don't know a single word of English!"

It wasn't indignation what Carlos could hear in Chloé's voice, not incredulousness either. It was anxiety, proof enough for him to know that his and Chloé's mind were already running in parallel tracks.

"They should have learned a few by now, but anyway, that's something you can change in just a week. As long as they can't decide what they want, maybe someone coming along and telling them might have a chance, and - erm, I'd thought, if you and I could pick the same school ... but if you want to go back to Nohanent ..."

"I don't know," replied Chloé hesitantly. "It would be nice to have my old classmates around, but somehow they're much farther away than a few weeks ago. And I know for a fact that I want to keep in touch with - er, with you and your sister and her dog and your cat and ... you know, the whole bunch."

"The two schools are Beauxbatons at the French side ..."

Chloé nodded. She'd heard that name before.

"... and Hogwarts at the English side. We could - "

"Say that name again."

Carlos knew what was coming; moreover, he'd anticipated it. "Hogwarts."

"Spell that name."

"H-o-g-w-a-r-t-s."

"That's the school where - " Chloé's face lighted up. "Now I know what book you meant a minute ago - the one I read long ago, because Hogwarts, that's where this Henri Portère went to school. Imagine! We'd sit in the same rooms where - oh, that'd be ... too good to be true," she finished as if chiding herself for a digression. "It isn't going to work."

"Why not?"

"I can't speak English. We don't have the money. It's too far away. It's ..." Apparently bare of any other argument that could be put into words, Chloé shook her head as the only way to express her disbelief.

"You've been attending a boarding school all the time," Carlos started carefully. "This one. Here."

"Yes, but it was paid by the state, because I'm handi - because I couldn't do magic. That's no longer true, so they aren't going to pay any longer."

"What I mean is, one boarding school is as good or bad as another - for being away from home, I

mean. And with your party, your parents are just a button press away ... after you've got that target programmed onto another button."

"Oh." Chloé's eyes grew big in astonishment. "I hadn't thought of that."

"About the cost, er, Hogwarts offers scholarships for special cases. Your part in - in what happened here should be enough to get you very high on that list. I know someone there."

"Do you?" Chloé gave him a scrutinizing stare. "And why should this someone vote for me? And what does all this have to do with the question why we have to walk through the cold instead of sitting in the warmth? Or maybe it's cold and wet where you live, eh?"

"Only to the outside." Carlos' grin faded. "Uhm, I didn't tell you the full truth."

"Really? Now, that takes me so much by surprise, I hardly can tell you how - " Chloé stopped in the middle of her outburst and stared at him suspiciously. "The whole story with those schools a stairway apart is a fake, right? And there's no way to - "

"Wait!"

Carlos' imploringly raised hands silenced Chloé better than his shout. Calmer, he continued.

"About the schools, and Esmeralda and her friends and you and me, every single word I said is true. All you have to say is 'Yes,' then we can start at Hogwarts tomorrow - or maybe Beauxbatons, although I really hope Esmeralda and her friends vote for the English side; it's much nicer there for a dog and a cat." He inhaled deeply. "Maybe we should just apparate to Ireland now, maybe it's simpler there - it's just that I didn't want to invite you under a false pretense, that's all."

"False pretense?" Chloé frowned at him. "Is this a joke? You haven't pretended anything so far."

"Er, yes, that's correct, and that's exactly what I mean - "

Chloé started to pull her party out. "Let's go, because you're hopeless." She stopped in mid-motion and looked up. "Each time I think there's something admirable in you, you make a fuss about something that should be told in a sentence or two, it's almost unbelievable." By now she had the party out and examined the control surface with anger in her face. "What button do I have to press?"

"Potter."

"What? There's no such button."

"You said, 'Two sentences,' but I can do it shorter. Potter."

Chloé looked up; his tone of lost patience had caught her attention. "And what does it mean?"

"That's his real name. Potter. Your hero, the one who's called Henri Portère in that book. Portère is the French version; his real name is Harry Potter."

"Okay. So?"

"My real name is Carlos Garcia Potter. Chang, that's my mother's maiden name. Her full name is Cho Chang-Potter."

Chloé stared at him with more confusion than disbelief. "I know what you're trying to say, only I don't believe you. And it doesn't fit - in that book, he had two children, but they must be much older than you and Esmeralda by now - "

"They are, and you saw them actually." Carlos couldn't suppress a short giggle. "Remember the band in the castle? Dragonfly? The flutist, that was his son, and the girl with the tambourine, that

was his daughter. These were Gabriel and Sandra."

The way he spoke the two names drilled a hole into the wall of disbelief in Chloé's face, but she closed it quickly. "The children of that wizard? Playing in a band? You must be dreaming. Next second you're going to tell me he himself was around too, right?"

Carlos sighed. "You're right in just one thing - it's hopeless, and I shouldn't even have started. Let me show you which buttons to press."

In Chloé's eyes was a look that said, right now she considered him badly ill, a questionable companion, but anyway harmless and still a possible source of warmth and a piece of cake.

He explained in which sequence the target and the confirmation button had to be pressed. "You'll come out in a dining room. See you in a second." He pressed his own buttons.

Standing in the large round dinner room, destination of all in-house apparitions, he had to wait fifteen seconds, and it felt like an eternity. Then, with Chloé standing there and looking lost, he could hear steps coming nearer. Next moment, his mother came through the door.

"Mum! How did you know that we just arrived?"

His mother smiled triumphantly. "A small piece of Muggle technology is all you need for that, and I had it installed because I wanted to know who's coming into my house, and when, and never mind apparition." She returned his hug with a kiss and turned to the girl. "You must be Chloé."

"Yes, madam."

"Did Carlos tell you where we are here?"

"Erm ..."

Carlos came to help. "I tried, Mum. I told her - uhm, no, I tried to tell her who we really are, and about Gabriel and Sandy, but - er, it didn't work, and so I thought it best to just come over."

His mother nodded. "You were right. Here she can watch and take her time and draw her own conclusions." She turned to the girl. "Carlos told me about a certain hero you worship, but maybe we should just start with something to eat, right? What would you like to drink?"

"Erm, café au lait, please."

Carlos watched as his mother took out her phony and called Dobby and Winky, the house-elves, to ask them for drinks and a few pieces of cake. It took him a few seconds to realize that, for Chloé, the conversation suddenly had changed into something unintelligible, because his mother had talked with her in French but with the house-elves in English.

Cho turned to the girl. "The drinks and the cake will appear in a second. Would you like to sit down?"

Rather than following the suggestion, Chloé stared at her. "Did ... did you just talk with someone who's called Dobby?"

"Yes, he's the husband of our house-elf couple. Would you like to meet him? But I should tell you, he's a bit afraid of visitors, while Winky, his wife, is more open-minded."

Chloé sat down like kicked by an invisible force. "Dobby."

Cho turned to Carlos, an unspoken question on her face.

"I guess the book she read mentioned Dobby," he explained. "I told her his real name is Harry Potter - in that book, he was called Henri Portère, but as I said, we - "

"Yes, Dobby was the house-elf in that story." Chloé's confirmation came in a flat voice. "And ... but

there wasn't anything about two more children, and Carlos ... and Esmeralda - " Chloé's stammering ended in a gasp, because at that moment the cups had appeared on the large table.

Cho said, "It's a long story, and it's a sad story because some people died, but it's also good story because it's true and brought us together. I think we should have our café and tea and our cake, and you, Chloé, can decide who should tell you the story - Carlos, or I, or Harry, who is my husband and Carlos and Esmeralda's adopted father. But for now, dug in."

"Yes, madam."

As Carlos could watch, at least Chloé's survival habits had mastered the situation, and made her bite and chew and swallow and sip. Otherwise - her mind hadn't completely arrived yet, perhaps also from the apparition jump, and she looked as if the mystery could only be solved if she took the right choice of the one to tell her the story.

He had little doubt: she would choose his father, with or without the mark that made him look like Monsieur le Professeur Thierry Pri'chard. The thought that he, Carlos, would sit and listen to a tale he knew by heart, and watch a girl he knew for a little while, started spreading in him like a warmth he hadn't ever felt before.

* * *

Cho sat in the dinner room of the Vancouver Resort, at the same table as on several occasions before. The man sitting opposite her also was the same as on these occasions. Still, something was different, and without having touched the topic with a single word, they were both aware of it: this would be their last dinner and lunch in the Vancouver Resort - lunch for Reuben, running on local time, dinner for Cho, eight hours ahead on European time.

During the meal, they had talked about the events in Brest, although not going into much detail, and about the state of things here on the Vancouver Island, where the MABEL seminar and its resort had reached the state any engineer dreamed of, that of a well-oiled machine running almost noiselessly.

"Isn't it boring?" asked Cho.

Reuben smiled. "Compared to the stories you can tell for sure."

"No, that's not ..." Seeing his smile change to the boyish grin he showed each time he could trick her with his attitude of a professional host, Cho dropped the explanation she had planned. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do, and no, it's *not* boring. Actually, in a way your question is the best compliment a hotel manager can get, because the challenge is to make it look that simple, easy, and boring." He chuckled. "It's a new challenge every day, trust my word."

"It certainly is. I know it, you know that I know, and your attempt to make me look as if I didn't know is just your second defense line, so I don't even take offence - "

"Lucky me."

Cho grinned at him. "I'm not going to be put off track, so stop it. From a real manager, your answer would be okay, but then, if you were a real manager, I wouldn't have asked."

"Oh, I'm not?" Reuben managed an astonishment that was sufficiently unconvincing to tell her that he'd understood. "Wouldn't this be the right time for me to take offence?"

She smiled more warmly than before. "No, because you're more of a constructor, or designer, who gets satisfaction from putting something together until it runs as smoothly as this resort, which you persist calling a hotel."

"Maybe so. But you can't do construction work all the time, and for a change it's nice to lean back and watch the wheels clicking along, and since the thrill will fade into routine quite by itself, there's no need of provoking that feeling prematurely."

Cho nodded as though his reaction had allowed her to check off the next item on a hidden agenda. "Maybe if I had a hotel chain to offer ..."

After a second in which Cho didn't continue, Reuben asked, "What makes you think I would accept it?"

Cho's bafflement looked genuine. "Didn't you dream of a hotel chain - "

"Yes I did, but only of a very specific one - my own."

"You wouldn't accept it as a present, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't."

As lightly as their conversation sounded, there was no question that Reuben's answer was based on a fundamental belief.

"So you're oldfashioned."

"Yes, I am."

"Afraid people would consider it as a payment for something we never managed, not even once."

Reuben's answer was silence, just what she had expected after her provocative remark. Any reply would have steered dangerously close to bad taste.

Cho nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much what I'd expected. So instead, would you accept me showing you the way to the starter kit for a hotel chain?"

"The starter kit?"

She had Reuben's full attention. The light ironic smile, which had played on his face still a moment ago, was wiped off - he knew that she was a businesswoman in the upper ranks, and he had heard the message in her question.

"Well, maybe this term fits badly to what I have in mind, but then, maybe it's not exactly a hotel chain I have in mind, but again, it's mostly a matter of terminology, common terms applied to an unusual - "

"It's not MABEL, is it?"

His impolite interruption told her that he had a fair guess of the idea that had formed not too long ago in her own mind, and that the chance of making his ambitions come true was rupturing his composure. But that was okay; she could well remember the first days of the Groucho empire.

"No, it's not MABEL."

"But it's about hosting a bunch of people, and the term *hotel* is as inappropriate as here in the Vancouver Resort ..."

Her smile, simultaneously encouraging and expectant, told him to continue.

"... so it's something other people might have called *boarding school*, and the starter kit is found somewhere in that school in Brest ... whatever that means," Reuben finished with a dash of confusion in his satisfaction about having solved the mystery.

"Exactly. But calling it a boarding school would also be inaccurate, because what I have in mind - no, what *we* have in mind includes something like a guest wing, although a wing that's large enough to pass for a hotel anywhere else."

"We? Why don't you just tell me what you have in mind? You alone, or you two, or - "

"Okay. I didn't plan to torture you. I said *we* and meant Harry and myself, but this *we* isn't coordinated yet, and the ideas are still vague. The planning has developed as far as that: Harry restarts the school in Brest, for exactly the purpose it had all the time, except without - well, let me just state that the conditions will be totally different, and the ruling authority will be such that no teacher not worth his title will have a chance to hibernate there until his pension is due."

"The ruling authority will be you."

Cho shook her head. "Definitely not. Harry and I have found out earlier in our life that we're a bad team in leadership of the same enterprise. We are both unable to keep our fingers off the handles of power and our mouths shut at the wrong moment - or the right, whatever. Besides, the EMEC, the European Magical Education Authority, will remain the controlling element in matters of education, but not in administration, and that's the point."

"And Harry?"

"His part is the education business, the big scheme, the vision, but not dirty laundry and tomorrow's breakfast. Harry can move the world, but he can't move a cubic foot of concrete, if you know what I'm trying to express."

"Where are the boundaries? Where does one saying stop, and another start? We both know that he can well move cubic feet of solid rock, if the need arises - he did so for his own training hall, as I was told, and - "

"Yes, okay, but I'm still right in a general sense." Cho's placatory gesture made Reuben relax a bit.

"Harry would welcome a working infrastructure for sure. Let me give you an example. If boys of fourteen, at ten o'clock in the evening, are found on a floor that contains only girls' dormitories, it's an educational issue. Whether they had to climb a single flight of stairs or break a hole into concrete to reach their destination, that's an administration issue."

Reuben had to smile. "I wonder what he would decide in such a case."

"Me too. Probably send them to a seminar where they learn how to do it without being caught."

=====

Her reply earned no laughter, perhaps also because her prediction was more truth than joke. Quickly growing serious again, Reuben asked, "What about the starter kit you mentioned?"

"The school must be a private enterprise, so that it's possible to fire someone if the need arises, be it a teacher or a janitor. Someone has to buy the estate from the current owner, and let me tell you, just recently the price dropped to the bottomless - well, considering the address and location. If I buy it, I clash with Harry. If Harry buys it, he loses his focus on what really interests him. So I think the best solution is to find an interested buyer - and to support him with a loan or two, if necessary."

"And then?"

"The teaching is only part of the story, and maybe not even the most important one. If teaching is your main interest, one school is the natural limit, or just one class in such a school. But Harry's goal is the same as that of MABEL, only on a different level and in a different way. He wants to make these children fully qualified wizards and witches, and for that he needs more schools of that kind."

"And preferably with the same administration partner."

"Right." Cho leaned back, looking expectant.

"There are a million open issues, but only two that need a better outline than this pie in the sky

you've drawn in the last minutes." Reuben's shining eyes told her: he was ready to fly. "The first is the exact relationship between the administration layer and the educational layer. I mean, who'll be contractor for whom?"

"Figure it out and offer a solution."

"Yeah, that can be done. But this was the minor issue anyway. The more important thing is the financing. Even though that girl, Chloé, and her parents aren't the norm, the question remains where to get the money that's necessary to run such an establishment. Top level luxury like here isn't a must for me, but the hotel chain in my dreams always kept a minimum standard."

Cho smiled. "You're pushing open doors with this demand. There are various sources of money, and sponsoring is a major issue here. The idea is to expand this sponsoring to a public level, preferably to the rich and famous. Imagine, you offer sponsorships for specific students, and the hotel wing in the school is the place where the sponsor can reside while visiting his or her student of choice, or come to pick one - "

Reuben grimaced. "After your stories, a millionaire of fifty coming to pick a girl of twelve for sponsorship has just the wrong connotation."

Cho grinned. "Let me expand my example from a moment ago. Should, instead of a boy of fourteen, this millionaire be found on the same floor and at the same time, you'd be in deep shit. This said, making sure it won't happen and making sure the connotation sounds right are the challenges to master, and they're as constant as the one here."

Reuben nodded slowly, looking thoughtful. "Sounds good. Let me think it over for a few days, to get a feeling how it could work in reality."

Cho made a face. "I'd hoped to get an answer today."

Reuben laughed. "I can answer you that I feel thrilled to the hairtips. I can answer you that the idea of working together with Harry - and occasionally fighting with him about some authority or other - tickles me a lot. For anything else, I need a little time, a notepad and a sharp pencil."

"Hm."

"As you said, it's two-layer business. If you want decisions at the spur of the moment, for things that change the face of the world, ask Harry. If you want a working infrastructure, ask me next week."

Cho didn't bother to hide her slight disappointment. But she shouldn't have worried, because a moment later, Reuben looked up.

"What the heck," he said, "I guess it's a done thing. I'll need most of the time just to find a successor for the job here."

* * *

Gabriel listened to the chatter of the Dragonfly crew, content to sit, eat his lunch, and laugh about the remarks from the others. His own contribution, not audible nor visible to the outside, was a mind impulse every now and then, exchanged with Sandra. Since she was High Priestess, their non-verbal communication had gained detail and depth.

"The concert where I knew my father in the audience was the worst," Moira said at this moment. "Since then I feel like an old pro, cool to the heart."

Her remark earned the expected laughter, plus a few appreciating glances. It was true; since the Friday concert in Stockholm Moira had lost most of her nervousness, and the idea of performing without Sandra and without Sandra's calming effect no longer was a nightmare for her. As Gabriel

knew for a fact, it had a lot to do with Sandra, somewhat tired of her mother hen function, using her Priestess power to make her calming impulse a bit more permanent, but blaming the passed exam of a father in the audience was just the natural explanation they needed.

Since then, Moira was - well, normal might be the proper term. No longer a panicking bundle, showing an almost different personality. She could laugh, joke, be genuinely excited like any girl her age. She could laugh and joke with Michel better than ever before, as Gabriel had noticed.

Sandra had noticed too, to send a questioning impulse upon which Gabriel had shrugged mentally. Another side-effect from Moira's new behaviour was that his protection instincts toward her had cooled down. At least this was his own explanation; he was fairly sure it had started *before* Michel moved into the focus of Moira's attention. Or was it the other way around?

And what role, if you please, played a girl with almost colourless hair in this reasoning?

They were sitting in the lunch room of the *Three Crowns* hotel in Uppsala, having an early lunch so their afternoon concert would not conflict with their digestion. It was Saturday noon. The concert three hours from now would be their last on this tour through Sweden.

Uppsala, the northernmost point they would reach, still was deep south when compared to a map of the entire Swedish country. All five cities of their tour were so close together, you could cover them with a single thumb on a book-sized map. But apparently they weren't close enough for some other people; a week ago in Stockholm, Gabriel hadn't seen a trace of Mirja.

"My own family didn't make me nervous," said Caitlin. "I don't know why, but somehow the afternoon concerts are less thrilling in a pleasurable way."

The McFarlanes had attended the afternoon concert in Stockholm, probably with respect to Caitlin's younger sister Grania. They'd been excited from the occasion and rapt by Caitlin's performance, telling Gabriel afterwards what an extraordinary luck it had been, him and Caitlin sharing a babysitter long ago. He'd nodded and smiled and thought that family was misplaced backstage, no matter how nice.

Caitlin turned to Gabriel. "What about you? More nervous than usual?"

Héloïse answered first. "If he's nervous, then not because of his parents in the audience." She sent him the friendly, sympathetic, merciless smile he had to expect from this Veela. Still looking at her, Gabriel saw how Héloïse opened her mouth once more, apparently for another remark, but then almost gasped before closing it again.

He sent her his own smile, sympathetic and knowing. Sandra had told her friend to shut up - Gabriel hadn't felt anything of this impulse, but he knew.

"I'm not nervous," he said. "A bit worried, perhaps, but not because of the concert, or anyone sitting there, or anyone *not* sitting there ..."

The quick glance he sent to Héloïse at these words was rewarded with a smile, this time really compassionate.

"... it's more about what will be afterwards. There's an album recording we have to manage, and there's the question what two of us will decide. They've promised to complete the tour with us, and before this day's over, their promise will be fulfilled."

Some faces turned to stare at the two Gabriel had talked about : Sandra and Frédéric.

"I'm torn apart," said Sandra. "It's great to be with you, but honestly, a tambourine and a bit of chorus isn't the challenge of my life. The studio sessions for the album recording are okay, I mean, I feel tickled like anyone else to read my name on a CD. But then? I don't know yet."

"Then we might ask the other," said Héloïse. "Could be it makes Sandy's decision a bit simpler?"

"Hardly," said Frédéric into the chuckle, "because it's just the other way around. As long as Sandra is a crew member, I'll be, too. The moment she resigns, I'm off." He stared at Héloïse. "You can call it fickle, if you want."

With limited amusement, Gabriel watched as Héloïse kept her silence, slightly flush-faced and with thin lips. Héloïse's relationship with Benoît deserved the term *fickle* considerably more than Frédéric's affection for Sandra, which was unwavering and open to everyone's inspection. Frédéric had simply shut up Héloïse, very elegantly and in full public.

Sandra said, "We don't need to hurry. The next tour isn't within sight, is it?"

Ireen shook her head. "No, but it doesn't mean much. There'll be offers plenty; it'll be more difficult to choose the right time and the right area."

Sandra turned to Rebecca. "Didn't you ever want to play the tambourine?"

"Me?" Rebecca almost jumped out of her seat. "I am backstage, I'll be backstage, and may no one ever tempt me to forget."

"Amen," said Michel, earning a chuckle from Moira.

"I know someone for the tambourine," said Tomas, raising astonishment in some faces because he hardly ever spoke at such occasions. "The keyboard is a different matter, though, and a complicated too because Frédéric has set standards."

"Thank you." Frédéric bowed to the gypsy. "And who's the one for the tambourine? Someone black-haired, with flamenco robe and dark-glowing eyes?"

"Sounds like Tomas' sister," said Caitlin.

"Not mine, but otherwise pretty close." Tomas grinned toward Gabriel. "Yours."

Gabriel opened and closed his mouth, then he exchanged a look and a thought with Sandra. Tomas was right; Esmeralda would be perfect for this role.

"I wonder what your parents will have to say about this idea," said Moira. "Mine would have a stroke at the thought of an eleven-year-old on stage, but I couldn't help thinking yours have a different perspective."

People from the neighbour tables were staring at them with amusement or indignation as the Dragonfly table was almost rolling over from laughing.

"We can find out soon," said Gabriel.

Their parents had booked for the evening before and for this afternoon, after promising to make it for at least one of the two concerts. Both of them were drowning in work and, as far as Gabriel could judge, even in the same project - something with that school in Brest but MABEL never far away. They hadn't attended the Friday concert at the evening before, so this afternoon was their last chance in a while.

After lunch, Gabriel suggested a walk through the city. He found agreement only with Michel and the two singer girls, while Sandra and Frédéric had different plans. The same was true for Héloïse and Tomas, a combination that struck Gabriel as no coincidence, in particular since the roadies - including Benoît - hadn't joined their lunch table. Not his problem.

Uppsala, like Linköping, had a university but lacked the homeliness they'd found there; it was too large and too much tourist attraction. There were churches and castles aplenty, not attracting anyone

in their group of four. They'd had their share of castles, thank you very much.

Sauntering through shopping streets, Gabriel noticed with astonishment how the initial coupling - he and Caitlin, Michel and Moira - suddenly changed rather quickly and significantly. Glancing to Moira at his side, he knew that it hadn't been by accident.

"I wanted to talk with you," she said. "Alone."

"And so you sent Michel off, and Caitlin too."

"Er, yes."

"You sure we have to talk? I mean, I have eyes to see."

"It's not that simple," Moira replied. "Yes, you're right, Michel and I, that's ... But you know, I like you too, only with you it's different, more - "

"Like a brother," completed Gabriel dryly.

It earned him a sharp glance from Moira, reminding him that she was the source of lyrics that could only originate from an attentive observer.

"I owe you so much, Gabriel - and your sister too; I know she did something with me and since then I know I can be myself in the presence of other people, but I owe you still more, and the last thing I want is to hurt you. But isn't it funny? Only since this change I'm in a position to talk with you the way I do, and I don't want to hide my feelings. I dearly hope we can be friends, but with Michel it's something else. He - he said you'd met a girl and were quite fascinated by her, and he couldn't understand" - Moira showed a quick grin - "and if that's true, I'd be truly happy because then I could stop feeling guilty, and, well, that's it."

After a moment of silence, he said, "You ask me things I've been asking myself. I thought I - I had a crush on you, but then you changed, and I thought it's been just someone to protect, like a little sister. And you and Michel - it doesn't hurt watching you; it's just something ... I guess it's a bit jealousy, you being better off than I, that's all."

"And that girl?"

"Mirja? I don't know, she's - er, don't take me wrong, but when I met you I thought there's a truly weird girl ..."

Moira laughed joyfully.

"... but compared to her you're boringly normal. I wonder if it isn't just another case of coddling up a bird with a broken wing, if you'll pardon the expression."

"I will," said Moira, regally waving her hand.

"But it's not your problem. I'm single-minded enough to wish you so much luck with Michel that we can harvest a few new lyrics from it."

Moira eyed him again. "Even if it's a broken wing - go and cuddle her, I mean, cuddle her up." With these words, she accelerated her step to reach the other couple, fifty yards ahead of them.

Returning to the hotel, Moira's words still ringing in his ears, Gabriel found his father in the lobby. Alone.

"Hello son, here I am, and that's the good news. Your mother's awfully sorry, and she asked me to tell you, her only excuse is that she's working for the benefit of all students at the Brest school. I know it's a weak consolation for you, but at least it's true. There's a good chance we're back in our

own operation within a few weeks."

Gabriel nodded, not revealing that right now a totally different issue was predominant in his mind.

"Did you come with someone else, Dad?"

"No. Cho tried till the last minute, so I didn't ask anyone."

Before his inner eye, Gabriel saw an empty seat in an otherwise sould-out auditorium. This impulse was all he needed to take out his porty and enter a number he knew by heart without having stored it on a shortcut yet.

"Yes?"

"Mirja? Gabriel here. Where are you?"

"At home. Why are you calling? Doesn't your concert start in a few minutes?"

"Have you got time? Two hours?"

"Yes, why?"

"Come to the window."

Gabriel apparated to Jonkoeping, where Mirja lived, as he knew since he'd taken her home from Carron Lough. Seeing her at the window, he apparated into her room, took her hand, and summoned her back into the hotel lobby. With Mirja still at his hand, he walked back to the corner where his father was waiting.

"Dad, this is Mirja. Mirja, this is my father; he's got a spare ticket, actually for a first-class seat."

Mirja eyed Gabriel's father, not hiding how she examined the large discolouration. "Good afternoon, sir, nice to meet you."

"Hello, Mirja. I'm pleased my son could find such a pretty concert partner for me. People will stare at us - the beauty and the beast."

Mirja laughed, totally unembarrassed.

Seeing his father's questioning look, Gabriel said, "Mirja is a Dragonfly fan; we met when she was looking for a purpose in her life. She can tell you the rest, because for me it's time to get ready."

With a nod to the unlikely couple, Gabriel turned to reach his suite, where he would fetch his clothes before crossing the street and enter the Uppland Concert Hall backstage. He could hear how his father said, "Purpose in your life? I'm an expert in that, because I just found mine, so maybe - "

The rest drowned in the noise from the hotel lobby, but Gabriel had no doubt of these two getting along. After all, one of them was weirder than the other, measured by any common standard.

In his suite, while changing into his stage costume, Gabrie wondered if he would be able to see them against the spot lights, sitting side by side in the first row. Then the concert ahead and his own purpose as the Dragonfly piper pushed other thoughts aside.

----- The End -----