

Harry Potter™

ET LE COMPAS DU CHAOS

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O. PREFACE

Voldemort is defeated, his followers scattered.

Yet, in the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry Potter finds himself besieged by doubt. Though hailed as a hero by some, he remains a young man in search of a future. And nothing—not even a strangely cool summer at The Burrow with his friends—can truly comfort him.

As if to deliver the final blow, a glacial cold and a mysterious epidemic seem to descend upon a world in reconstruction.

Could a dormant power, far more ancient than the Dark Lord and his faithful Death Eaters, have awakened to threaten wizards and Muggles alike? A power whose roots lie in a secret that once involved the greatest sorcerers of their time: Tom Riddle, Gellert Grindelwald, and Albus Dumbledore?

The answer lies before your eyes, in this direct and unofficial sequel to the adventures of Harry Potter.

Harry Potter and the Compass of Chaos

To my parents, my friends, to J.K. Rowling and her fans, I dedicate this new unofficial episode of the adventures of Harry Potter.

The plot strives to remain faithful to the events of the seven books (while borrowing certain elements from the films inspired by them), serving as a direct sequel taking place shortly after the Battle of Hogwarts and well before the epilogue of the seventh book.

The play Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, which describes the evolution of the Wizarding World many years later, has also been taken into account to a certain extent...

May this story transport you as it did me during these five years of writing.

PS: Rest assured, Harry will manage to get the watch given to him by Mrs Weasley repaired during a certain mission in Helvetic territory.

PPS: As for the scar... did someone try to make us believe it had fallen silent?

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I. THE DEVIL'S PEAK

Far, very far away... in a remote land all but forgotten, two dark silhouettes stood out against the pristine whiteness of a high mountain landscape. Above them, the sun had already begun its descent behind the dizzying peak that loomed as their next milestone. The slope was frightfully steep, and judging by the climbers' hesitant steps and the state of their patched travelling cloaks, the exhaustion of a long-haul journey had set in far too long ago.

Built for the task, the leader of the group—a large, solid fellow—strove to maintain a steady pace. Even though the snow came up to his thighs and the icy wind pierced through the rest of his body, a fire burned within him that gave him the strength to carry on. A little earlier, his brother, the man accompanying him, had uttered a few words that had not ceased to echo in his head since: *"All hope is not lost of finding him; I have a plan."*

A few dozen yards downhill, however, the brother in question was finding it increasingly difficult to keep up. For some time now, he had been stumbling, slipping more often, and only catching himself at the last moment to avoid a fall that could well be his last. Of a frail, almost slight stature, he was far from possessing the musculature of his climbing partner. His assets were of a more cerebral nature and proved of limited interest in the context of this endless flight that had brought them this far: to the confines of a white hell that chilled you to the bone while burning your retinas.

Out of breath, the second climber had no choice but to pause. Doubled over, leaning as best he could on a shaky leg, his throat felt like a piece of molten metal. Yet he had to straighten up; he had to warn his fellow traveler. There was no point in letting the rope connecting them grow taut, to the point where one of them might end up headfirst in the snow, or worse still, topple off one side or the other of the jagged ridge they were scaling.

"Rodo... Rodolphus! W-wait! Wait for me!" he finally shouted, his trembling hands cupped around his mouth.

But the only answer he received was a fresh gust of wind laced with powdery, icy flakes.

A little higher up, seemingly in a world of his own, Rodolphus, the leader, continued his progress, mulling over the encouraging words heard earlier. He had always found his brother brilliant; cruel too, but not to the point of giving him false hope, not at a time like this. Rabastan had something in mind; he had led them to these distant lands for a good reason, he had read it deep in his pale blue eyes.

A powerful gust swept across the ridge, and for once Rodolphus congratulated himself on being so deeply sunk into the snow. Had he been even a little lighter, it is a safe bet that he would have tipped over for good. A bad feeling did not take long to assail him, however, even as the rope wrapped around his waist jerked him backward sharply.

Instinctively, Rodolphus threw himself flat on his stomach.

"No! Not like this, not now!" he gasped, panting, before getting up with infinite caution.

It was impossible to see anything below, but the line remained taut, a sign that someone was still at the other end. Despite the wounds and fatigue that had plagued him for days, Rodolphus turned back. As cautiously as his common sense dictated, he hastened back down the slope in search of his brother.

If only... if only they could have resorted to magic, none of this would have happened. The journey would have been child's play. It was so insulting that people of their rank should be reduced to behaving like vulgar Muggles...

"Rabastan! By Salazar, get up!"

His complexion extremely pale, his lips purplish, Rabastan was kneeling in the snow, almost motionless. Upon discovering this so diminished reflection of his own flesh, Rodolphus was struck with horror.

"You're wondering... if you should just finish me off..." Rabastan murmured painfully, raising an accusing gaze to him. "Do it... and you will never know."

"Do you think I would have bothered to come back down? I could have just cut the rope... and gone on my way, big brother."

"You would have abandoned the ring? His last gift?" retorted Rabastan, waving a hand, flashing a golden ring that was missing a large stone.

"There is no trace of magic left in that object, assuming there ever was any... I don't even know why he entrusted it to you. So that we remember him? Yet he must have been aware of our loyalty."

With that, Rodolphus rolled up his sleeve and rubbed with annoyance the indelible mark their master had branded on his forearm.

"He was well aware of it. And that is why we are here today. I will explain... once we are safe."

"Then stand up. I don't have the strength to carry you anymore and the sun will be down within four or five hours, at most," retorted Rodolphus, pulling his sleeve down sharply.

He didn't know how right he was. After several hours of walking that felt like entire days, of falls, of getting back on their feet, of tears frozen as soon as they appeared, the irresistibly enchanting scent of a wood fire finally filled the air.

Comfort intoxicated them for good as a plume of smoke took shape on the horizon, just behind a ledge imbued with the glowing light of the setting sun. Tonight, after so many others, Rodolphus and Rabastan would sleep with a roof over their heads; stomachs full perhaps, if one took into account the fumes of onion soup now mingling with the smell of burning wood.

"What if the Aurors are waiting for us?" worried Rodolphus as the refuge was only a few steps away, a sort of small hut lost in the middle of the meringued snow.

"Let me handle this, will you?" replied Rabastan in a low voice. "You are too impulsive, and blowing everything up is out of the question this time."

These last words spoken, he withdrew a piece of wood about twelve inches long from one of his pockets. He then positioned himself slightly offset from the door of the refuge, so as not to expose himself too much in case of an ambush, and knocked three times. A scraping noise, like a stool being moved, was heard on the other side of the wall and a shadow passed furtively in front of the building's only window.

"That's a surprise... Good evening," said a graying man through the crack in the door.

He must have been in his sixties, although it was difficult to say for sure as his face bore the marks of a lifetime spent roaming.

"For a moment I thought it was good old Sergei returning from one of his fanciful expeditions," the man added, "he always had a knack for arriving when least expected, as if appearing out of nowhere... But I'm forgetting my manners, I'm Gary. Come in, then, you must be hungry and that works out well, there is plenty to eat."

The mere prospect of a bowl of hot broth was enough to make Rodolphus's stomach rumble; they hadn't eaten anything for so long...

The man named Gary invited them to follow him with a wave of his hand and they soon found themselves all three inside. Like an old friend rejoicing at an unexpected visit, the fire dancing in the fireplace at the back of the refuge's single room welcomed them with a crackle. Just above it hung a cauldron gently steaming, regularly letting out the characteristic bubbling sound that any potion enthusiast holds dear. Not to mention the deliciously salty scent emanating from it...

"Sit down, then, I'll serve us a bowl," said Gary, pointing to a rough wooden table surrounded by a few stools.

Impatient but cautious, Rodolphus and Rabastan sat down.

"You have no gear? Not even a bag?" noted Gary while stirring the contents of the cauldron, his back turned.

Rodolphus wanted to answer but Rabastan silenced him with a discreet kick. Their host might be behaving like a perfect Muggle, but nothing so far had proven that he wasn't an Auror undercover, patiently waiting for the return of his comrades to deal with them. So, it was better to say as little as possible.

"Forgive my asking," Gary resumed after a few seconds of awkward silence. "I can't quite say why but you remind me of Sergei. He almost always barges in unannounced without any survival gear; a cloak, at most... a bit like you!"

"And is it him you were expecting this evening?" tried Rabastan, anxious to know where he and his brother had landed. "This cauldron would be enough to feed a whole team..."

Gary paused for a moment facing the vessel, looking bewildered.

"To be honest, I can't quite say what pushed me to prepare so much soup... A happy premonition, no doubt!" Gary laughed.

Facing Rabastan, Rodolphus's features hardened.

"Yes...? Perhaps you are a bit of a wizard, after all..." Rabastan resumed with feigned lightness. "Perhaps... perhaps your friend will join us later too?"

"Wizard, me? And why not!" replied Gary, looking amused. "As for the chances of Sergei joining us, I couldn't say. Except that meeting him is all I wish for you. He is brimming with imagination, his tales are stunning... enough to write a book, believe me!"

Delighted to have managed to engage conversation, Gary hastened to serve three large bowls which he distributed on the table. Rodolphus was trembling with his whole being. Rabastan, for his part, had to concentrate with all his might not to let the onion fumes go to his head. Two days. Two days they had braved the mountain and its infernal climate on an empty stomach.

"You're going to find me really curious but... You wouldn't be from the capital, by any chance?" questioned Gary before blowing delicately on his soup.

A metallic noise rang out like a chime. Rodolphus bent down to pick up his spoon. How could this man know? Was it possible that he was a Legilimens, one of those wizards capable of probing surrounding minds?

"You say?" temporized Rabastan, suddenly blinded by the burn his first sip imposed on him.

"I am sorry, truly," resumed Gary, a radiant smile printed on his face. "In her lifetime, my wife taught diction. And as you can see, I myself paid the price! Would you be from Mayfair? Or would it be South Kensington?"

On the other side of the table, Rodolphus was now staring at Rabastan so intensely that his eyes could have shot lightning bolts. At the slightest sign, it was certain he would grab his wand...

"Wh... what talent! I confess I am unmasked!" replied Rabastan, forcing a laugh, which led him irremediably to choke on his meal.

"Yes... bravo!" chimed in Rodolphus while getting up to give his brother a hearty pat on the back.

"Fantastic!" cried Gary, in turn giving a thump between Rabastan's shoulder blades. "Incredible, imagine that I am a Londoner too! Three fellow Englishmen in the middle of the Carpathians, now where did I put that drink..."

By the time Rabastan regained his wits, Gary had left the table and was busy with his travel bag. His blood ran cold at the thought that their host had slipped away in search of something far more terrible than a simple bottle of wine. He thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Here, a little Chablis! I hope you like Chardonnay..."

Gary turned around to discover two wands pointed directly at his chest.

"Is everything alright gentlemen? For a moment I thought you had pistols... Fortunately the wine is still corked, ha!"

The two brothers hastened to lower their weapons.

"They are very refined. Would you also be sculptors?" asked Gary naively, pointing to the wands. "I heard one could find springs with this kind of tool."

He joined them and undertook to open the bottle. At the very moment the cork came out, a loud *CRACK!* resounded outside. As one man, Rodolphus and Rabastan jumped. Silence fell then, until panting breathing was heard on the other side of the door.

"Gârrry? Gârry, are you zere my friend?"

Gary hurried to open up under the distraught gaze of Rodolphus and Rabastan.

"Sergei! I was sure the white would bring you! Come in, come in then! So many visitors, what a beautiful evening!"

A slightly stooped but solid-looking man entered the refuge. As their host had described earlier, the newcomer wore nothing but a travel cloak covered in snow. Not to mention a shaggy beard that hid almost half his face.

"Gud evening," Sergei greeted them with a thick Eastern European accent before rubbing his nose, reddened by the cold.

Rodolphus and Rabastan merely nodded with annoyance. Unless on the run, no man would have been mad enough to brave such an environment so scantily clad. No one, except a wizard...

"You come back from far away, Sergei?" asked Gary conversationally before preparing another bowl. "I've just opened a good bottle."

"Oh... As usual... I vas lookink for zis castle."

Gary began to pour. Rodolphus watched his glass fill with covetousness. For his part, Rabastan was torn between desire and apprehension. They had suffered so much that they had well deserved a drink. But alcohol could have devastating effects on a weakened body, and no mistake was allowed, especially not in the presence of this kind of surprise visitor.

"Fantastic, I am certain your story will interest our guests greatly. Let me introduce..."

Rodolphus stiffened, scrutinising his brother for the slightest indication. Exhausted, Rabastan preferred to risk it all by means of a final test:

"I am Rabastan... Rabastan Lestrage," he enunciated clearly, "and this is my brother, Rodolphus."

On the other side of the table, Sergei took a deep breath. After a few seconds during which the Lestrage brothers had time to ask themselves a million questions, he leaned on the table and bent forward to offer them a still-cool hand.

"Sergei Sudz, pliz to meet you."

It was hard to say how relieved Rabastan felt. For the first time in weeks and weeks of being chased by the Aurors, the famous British services, fate seemed to be working in their favour. Neither of the two strangers, whether the Muggle or the potential wizard, had heard of them. Without letting their guard down completely, they would finally be able to breathe and regain their strength. Perhaps they could even gather some precious information in the process...

"You said you were looking for a castle?" said Rabastan as if nothing were amiss after they had toasted warmly.

"Yes, since monz I walk peaks to find. It become... obsession. Sergei is guide," added the latter, pointing to himself, "must know Carpathians like pocket."

With that, he drained half his glass in one go.

"Very goot, your vine, Gary."

"It's a sure bet," replied Gary, "to be shared among friends! But without wanting to twist the knife in the wound, you know the region by heart, you've criss-crossed it dozens of times. How come you haven't already got your hands on it? Is it buried under the ice, your castle?"

Outside, the wind had started blowing again and an armful of flakes crashed forcefully against the windowpane. Rodolphus and Rabastan said

nothing but listened, ears wide open, while filling their stomachs with broth.

Sergei emitted what sounded like a growl.

"Niet, not buried in ice. Perched! On top of cliff, on invisible mountain!"

Gary burst out laughing, Rodolphus kept his nose in his bowl, impassive, and Rabastan sketched a smile. He knew what Sergei wanted to talk about.

"It not joke!" Sergei fumed, grabbing the wine to refill their glasses. "I already been zere... vunce!"

"How did you do it?" asked Rabastan, trying to conceal his interest. "If the mountain is hidden from the eyes of the world, how did you get there?"

"Ha! I knew his stories would please you!" intervened Gary, whose enthusiasm was starting to overflow because of the drink. "To Sergei!"

Again, they clinked glasses. The soup and the wine had warmed them up and everyone made themselves comfortable. Gary undid a few buttons of his shirt, Sergei removed his travel cloak, Rabastan let his slide down his shoulders, and Rodolphus rolled up his sleeves.

"Behind Peak, zere vas footbridge," Sergei asserted, nodding his head. "Very long, in middle of clouds. Zen, cliff, zen castle... Zen forget, vake up here. But it not dream, niet!"

"Interesting..." slipped in Rabastan, rubbing his chin, his eyes sparkling.

"Isn't it? But tell me," Gary chimed in, straightening up, "a question has been burning on my lips since you introduced yourselves. If it is indisputable that you are from London, your names are nonetheless uncommon, would you know their origin? Etymology is another of my hobbies."

"No idea," cut in Rabastan, frustrated by this abrupt change of subject.

Everyone turned to Rodolphus who suddenly felt that the temperature in the room had risen even further.

"Er... it's German..." he replied, embarrassed. "It means 'Glorious Wolf', or something like that."

A bead of sweat slid down his nose and he mopped his brow with the back of his hand. His brother had clearly told him to be quiet, but what

harm could there be in answering this kind of harmless question?

In that case, why all this sudden agitation around the table?

"Zat... zat very bad! Bad Vizard!" Sergei agitatedly wobbled on his stool before pointing a finger at Rodolphus's bared forearm. The very one that bore a certain mark.

"What's got into you all of a sudden! The white wine is going to your head!" said Gary, trying to restrain his friend.

In vain, Sergei had already plunged his hand into his jumper to extract his wand. But suffice to say that a simple mountain guide, wizard though he might be, stood no chance against the hardened killer that was Rodolphus Lestrange.

"Rodolphus, DON'T DO IT!"

"Avada Kedavra! AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Before anyone could blink, two green flashes had shot out. The lifeless bodies of Gary and Sergei collapsed onto the table, overturning what remained of their drinks in a sound of breaking glass and porcelain.

"Why? WHY?!" screamed Rabastan, leaping up, mad with rage.

"Why what? I've never stopped you from killing anyone," retorted Rodolphus vehemently.

"Why was my imbecile of a brother obliged to use magic, when the Aurors have put the Trace on us?"

"Ah... that..." said Rodolphus, a tone lower.

"Why do you think we've been going to all this trouble for weeks? For the pleasure of imitating these pathetic Muggles?"

"I..."

"Why did you have to kill this unexpected chance? This Sergei was an asset!"

"There... I don't understand..." replied Rodolphus, frowning.

"You never understand anything, little brother..."

Stung to the quick, Rodolphus grabbed Rabastan by the collar with one of his powerful hands, while threatening him with his wand with the other.

"I've had it up to here with your schemes," he spluttered. "I want to know what the Master told you before disappearing. Now!"

With a gesture, he shoved Rabastan against the nearest wall. The impact winded him and he slid down to the floor.

"It's too risky, the Aurors will be on us any minute now," replied Rabastan bitterly once he had got his breath back.

"I prefer fighting a whole army to continuing this damn run without knowing where or why for days and days..." retorted Rodolphus.

"In that case... help me up," said Rabastan. "And watch the surroundings closely, the risks have just increased, dangerously."

Rodolphus complied and both considered each other for a moment. The younger of the Lestrangle brothers had always had a difficult temperament, but never before had he laid a hand on his own blood. Times were hard.

"Do you remember, when the Master took me aside? When all our forces were gathered in the Forbidden Forest, during the Battle of Hogwarts?" asked Rabastan with a sigh.

Rodolphus simply nodded. How could he have forgotten that moment? Victory was at hand. The school was supposed to fall along with the rest of the opposition, among whom that young man: Harry Potter, "the Chosen One"...

"What he whispered in my ear, I didn't want to believe at first," resumed Rabastan. "I thought he was testing me."

"What was it?"

"He said... that he had taken one more step on the path to immortality. Right next to us, Bellatrix already seemed aware. She looked so proud, so satisfied!"

"She always was his favourite... along with Snape," grunted Rodolphus. "And then?"

In the hearth, not far away, the fire began to crackle more fiercely. The Lestranges paused, time enough to realize that a veritable blizzard was raging outside.

"He told me to leave... At first, I only saw it as a way to make me pay for my past failures, to deprive me of this hour of glory we had all been waiting for so long," said Rabastan, his throat suddenly tight. "But he finally gave me the ring... and presented me the plan he had for us, his most faithful..."

A blinding flash flooded the refuge and the Lestranges clutched their wands. The sharp crack of thunder followed immediately.

"So...? There is still hope, really?" asked Rodolphus greedily, while lightning struck again.

"Our Master, the Dark Lord, has always been a visionary," replied Rabastan, plunging his gaze into his brother's. "Yes... there is still a chance. I won't lie to you, it is tiny. We will have to be discreet, astute, patient, persevering, and united... above all!" he added with a hint of defiance in his voice; "but the ultimate honour will return to us if..."

Rabastan could not finish his sentence. Suddenly, the fire in the hearth had turned green. Soon, it was swirling, throwing sparks everywhere. Without wasting a second, the Lestranges threw themselves out of the refuge to find themselves plunged into the midst of the storm.

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO USE MAGIC! THEY WILL NEVER LEAVE US ALONE!" shouted Rabastan, so deafening were the snow-laden gusts shaking them. "RUN NOW! RUN AND DON'T LOOK BACK!"

"ANYTHING YOU WANT, BUT NOT BEFORE SETTling A FEW SCORES!" retorted Rodolphus. "CURSED AURORS, COME ON THEN IF YOU WANT IT SO MUCH! *BOMBARDA MAXIMA!*"

Rabastan was trying as best he could to protect himself from the flakes lacerating his face when the scene occurred. An orange flash shot from his brother's wand and was lost in the distance, in the darkness. Moments later, a terrible rumble resounded. This time, it was not thunder, but a colossal mass of snow hurtling down a nearby slope at full speed... until it buried the refuge: the only chance they'd had to recover in weeks.

There remained only the mountain and their journey. Thus the silhouettes of the Lestranges disappeared, into the night, beyond thick curtains of turbulent snow.

2. AFTER THE BATTLE

Miles away, a beautiful day was dawning at The Burrow. Deserted for nearly a year while Lord Voldemort and his servants scoured the world for their opponents, the home of the wizarding Weasley family had found a second wind.

Encouraged by new prospects, Arthur and Molly Weasley had put their heads together as soon as they moved back in. The structure of the building was showing its age, and the few living areas became stifling whenever their large family gathered. So, even though the Weasleys were hardly rolling in Galleons, the question didn't even arise. The time had come to call upon the services of a Master Builder.

A few days and several deft combinations of charms and spells later, the crooked edifice towered over the surrounding marshland, standing no fewer than seven storeys high. That was not all. At the foot of the dwelling, facing the front door, the vegetable patch had been freshly restored and the first shoots were already venturing out of the soil—a real godsend for the gnomes who used it as an obstacle course.

On the other side of the house, amidst the fields, Ginny (the youngest Weasley) had even managed to get a portion of the perimeter set up for her personal training in the wizards' favourite sport: Quidditch.

Looking sleepy, his hair a mess, a young man with a forehead marked by a prominent scar was walking onto the new pitch. His Firebolt in one hand, a leather case in the other, Harry Potter shivered. The summer sun was beginning to climb, but the air remained cool. It had been a few weeks since it had been truly warm. In fact, it felt more like autumn than the height of the season.

"You'll be careful, won't you? I'm fond of that broom; it was a gift from Sirius," said Harry.

Ginny, coming out of the house to join him, wore a broad smile.

"Are you worried about your broom, or your pride? Just imagine if it works better for me than for you!"

"Ginny the Red Tornado on her Firebolt... I'd like to see that," retorted Harry with amusement.

"You can just take my Nimbus 3000. It's the one Gwenog Jones, the Captain of the Holyhead Harpies herself, lent me," said Ginny in a falsely superior tone, raising an eyebrow.

She held out her arm to make the exchange and Harry hastened to examine the Nimbus from every angle with passion.

"Mahogany handle for flexibility and rigidity; stirrups with anti-dismounting charms; bundle of Pernambuco twigs for reduced drag and better manoeuvrability. On parchment, it looks tempting. 'The poor man's Firebolt', as they call it in the *Prophet*... I look forward to trying it out."

"Hang on, that's not the last gift Gwenog gave me!" exclaimed Ginny. "Yes... she insists we use first names now," she added, full of pride.

Carefully, she opened the case they had brought, revealing the equipment of the perfect Quidditch player.

"Everything has been enchanted by the I.M.S., the Institute of Magical Sports. You can ask the balls and bats to follow very specific scenarios to improve your reactions to certain situations. The gear is capable of playing by itself, without anyone to handle it. Plus, you see the ghosts of the players as if they were really setting up the plays! No need to bother anyone to help me train anymore! Except you, of course..."

"Blimey, with this we won't need real players soon..." replied Harry, unsure how to welcome this new magical prowess.

With a flick of her wand, Ginny commanded the contents of the case to conform to a representation of the 1994 Quidditch World Cup final. This event was dear to her, as well as to Harry. They had indeed benefited from a rare chance on that occasion by witnessing with their own eyes the ultimate match between Ireland and Bulgaria.

Soon, Ginny was shooting into the air like a rocket. Harry mounted the Nimbus 3000 and followed her example with a slight push off the ground. The first few minutes proved surprising. If the acceleration was a little less sharp than with his Firebolt, the changes in trajectory seemed even keener. Concentrating on the sensation of the wind against his skin, the rush in his hair, the thrust of his new broom, Harry paid little attention to the progress of the game.

When, drunk on sensations, he finally stopped, Ginny was struggling below to open the scoring. Her style had become unrecognizable. As if the gifts she was already cultivating when they wore the Gryffindor colours had fully revealed themselves since. Needless to say, flying on a mount that was not her own did not seem to bother her for a single moment. On the contrary, a broad smile stretched across her face when she passed Harry, brushing him by a few inches.

Demonstrating disconcerting grace and ease, Ginny continued her run and dodged a first then a second Bludger sent by the ghostly Beaters of the Bulgarian team. A few minutes later, she intercepted the Quaffle with her fingertips. She then swooped down on the Keeper whom she hypnotised with a sequence of ultra-fast swerves. Arriving at the end of the pitch, she shot and scored Ireland's first goal through the middle hoop, exactly as history dictated.

Harry raised a fist to show his joy, expecting the delirious crowd to follow suit. But the ground was empty, and only the cries of the gnomes partying in the vegetable patch reached him in a distant echo. The Quaffle was put back into play and the match did not take long to resume with renewed vigour.

"Chaser!" announced Harry aloud to indicate the position he now wished to take.

The ghostly Irish player whose role he had just taken immediately climbed vertically to replace Harry in the spot he had occupied until then.

If he was used to playing as a Seeker at a competitive level, on the lookout for the slightest sign of the Golden Snitch, Harry was far from being a neophyte as a Chaser. He had already tried his hand at this position many times over past summers, staying with the Weasleys. So he got into formation alongside Ginny and both spent several hours playing in this manner.

Soaked in sweat, his body aching from the effort, Harry landed on the grass with a radiant face.

"Fantastic feint Harry! At first you seemed a bit lost but... what a finale! You should embark on a professional career too," cried Ginny, stopping at his side.

"Flattery now?" replied Harry, cheeks flushed, before bursting into joyful laughter. "As for you, nothing special; I thought you would have improved but I guess the Firebolt is far too subtle for a lump like you..."

Ginny grimaced and poked her index finger between his ribs before replying:

"Even Grandma Cedrella could fly on this broom; I've never seen anything so intuitive. And what punch! The time to think about accelerating and I was already at the other end of the field!"

Pleased with themselves, they quietly packed up their gear before heading back towards The Burrow.

It was a very special summer. While Harry had known moments of joy in the past, they had never lasted very long. Since the fall of the formidable Dark Wizard that was Voldemort (so formidable that only his staunchest adversaries had been brave enough to continue calling him by his name), his Death Eaters, and other followers, happiness had manifested itself on multiple occasions and in an almost uninterrupted manner. Harry had rekindled his romance with Ginny, he had received some exciting news from his friends, and the wizarding community seemed to be recovering from the turmoil in good spirits and mutual aid.

Everything was going well. He hadn't even had to ask to spend the holidays with the Weasleys, one of the places he loved most in the world. Molly, a true matriarch, had invited him to The Burrow as soon as the Battle of Hogwarts had ended. Of course, Harry's heart was heavy whenever he thought back to the fighting and those who had fallen, but he could not allow himself to sink into gloom because of it. Those who were gone would not have wanted it. They had fought so that the survivors could know better days—truly happy days.

Although the season was unusually cool, Harry enjoyed going out in the evening to watch the sun go down. Lying on a grassy slope, he would follow the slow descent of the golden disc behind the distant hills, letting his mind wander, careful not to think about what might happen the next day. Ginny understood what these moments meant to him. She therefore preferred not to impose her company on him and took the opportunity to spend time with her family in the newly refurbished living room.

Harry often returned only once the stars had begun to twinkle in the night sky. He would then bid the Weasleys goodnight and go up to sleep in his designated room on the fourth floor. Sometimes Ginny would join him a little later, or vice versa, so that they could fall asleep side by side. Such tranquility Harry had not known for a very long time. In fact, he had never felt as good as he did these days.

Early the next morning, however, something came to disturb the quiet habits that The Burrow had settled into. A resounding crash, similar to the sound of a flatulence expelled on a bad day, shook Harry's bedroom door.

"Very funny, George... You can come in, you know; it's not like I'm capable of sleeping after a stunt like that," grumbled Harry, still in shock.

To his great astonishment, the shock of orange hair that appeared in the doorway was not that of the most prankish of the Weasley twins.

"Surprise! We're back!" announced Ron, his best friend, before throwing himself onto the bed to sprawl out at full length.

"Ron, you overweight, flatulent troll, get off me this instant, you're crushing me!" screamed Ginny, her annoyed face bursting out from under the duvet.

Ron's surprise was such that he fell backwards. Painfully getting back on his feet, he addressed his little sister with an incredulous look.

"Ginny? But... what are you doing here!"

"Right now, I'm choosing which hex I'm going to cast on you, you big lump!"

With a dark look, Ginny turned towards a silhouette that had remained silent until now:

"Hi Hermione, how are you?"

"I *did* tell him he might be interrupting," replied Hermione, embarrassed. "But I didn't count on his brain ceasing to function as soon as his stomach grumbled."

"Interrupting? Honestly, the world's gone mad! I pay a visit to my best friend, in my own home, and now I'm interrupting!" exploded Ron, scandalized. "And besides..."

But Ginny had seized her wand and was fixing him with a disturbing look. Ron closed his mouth and swallowed. No sane person would have risked suffering Ginny Weasley's dreaded Bat-Bogey Hex. Especially not on an empty stomach.

"We'll wait for you downstairs, it's safer. Breakfast is about to be served, are you coming Ron?"

Head hunched into his shoulders, Ron followed Hermione, muttering, then disappeared through the doorframe. When the sound of his footsteps became distant enough, Ginny giggled, quickly kissed Harry, and set about

going to the dining room first. It was better that they didn't both arrive downstairs at the same time; the risk of arousing her parents' suspicions was too great. Although the mistress of the house had not been fooled for quite some time now...

Harry therefore did not rush to pull on his jeans and a clean t-shirt smelling of the Bergamot wash elixir so dear to the Weasleys. He nevertheless ended up bounding down the stairs four at a time, too impatient was he to hear news of his friends.

While the clock indicating the activity of each family member had not moved (although its hands no longer pointed to "Mortal Peril", but now to "Olympic Form"), the dining room of The Burrow had undergone some modifications since the first time Harry had set foot in it, many years ago. Molly Weasley had taken advantage of the Master Builder's visit to have the chimney repositioned, and the hearth was now located right between the eating area and the kitchen, at the very back. In addition to bringing a practical advantage for serving dishes, the mistress of the house congratulated herself on this arrangement. She liked to project herself into the coming winter, imagining herself already warming up by the fire while the snow and cold wind outside licked the room's windows. She could sometimes be a bit soft.

"Oh hello Harry dear! Come and sit down, today we have fresh croissants!" she cried before hugging him tightly.

His ribs still sore, Harry took a seat on one of the fragile-looking old wooden chairs that framed the table. He had barely poured himself some pumpkin juice when Mrs Weasley resumed:

"So, how was the trip to Australia? And your parents, Hermione, how are they?"

Ron wanted to answer but the half-croissant he had just swallowed prevented him. No doubt used to this kind of situation, Hermione rolled her eyes and spoke up.

"I'm really relieved. It took a while before they fully regained their memory, but I think things are finally back to normal."

She paused briefly, looking suddenly dejected.

"I still haven't dared to explain to them what I put them through..." she added in a hushed voice.

"It was for their own good, for *your* good!" intervened Ginny with assurance. "It was very noble of you to modify their memory so they could escape the Dark Lord; you have nothing to be ashamed of. In your place, I would have done the same thing, you know. Even if I certainly wouldn't have needed to, seeing the speed at which Dad and Mum would pop off..."

"Thank you for that clarification, my darling daughter," retorted Mrs Weasley, who seemed as much amused as prey to a sudden doubt.

She handed the pitcher of pumpkin juice to Ron who was on his second croissant.

"Hermione's folks are brilliant!" he exclaimed before draining his glass in one go. "Even if her dad scared me a bit, at first, when he showed me the tools he uses for his trade. They looked like instruments of torture..."

As if to recover from his emotions, he served himself again and continued:

"Still, I think it's a waste. I mean, not showing them a bit more of what magic looks like. We could have saved them from bothering with a few household chores, for example."

"We've already discussed this; they are too old now. Past a certain age, discovering—or rather rediscovering—the existence of magic is too dangerous for Muggles," replied Hermione. "Their minds have been so formatted that they would refuse to accept what is presented to them. Professor Dumbledore was categorical; it can drive them mad!"

"In that case, you could very well have let me do the washing up with a wand while you went for a family walk on the beach," replied Ron.

Hermione sighed.

"What you have trouble understanding is that they were very happy to do all that for us. Besides, they would never have allowed you to take care of it... especially not after seeing how much fun you were having surfing!"

"Surfing?" noted Ginny, intrigued.

"It's a sport that Muggles practice," explained Harry, miming the gestures of someone seeking their balance. "You have to glide on waves while standing on a sort of large wooden board!"

"It's bril-liant," added Ron. "You love Quidditch, you'd adore it! By the way, how are your interviews with the Holyhead Harpies going?"

"Not too bad..." replied Ginny, struggling to suppress a smile. "Harry was actually able to judge the latest progress for himself yesterday; we replayed the final of the '94 cup. Gwenog told me that if I passed the interview, I could join the team directly as a Junior... without having to sit my N.E.W.T.s!"

Ron was about to applaud to welcome the news when his teacup suddenly exploded.

"THAT IS ABSOLUTELY OUT OF THE QUESTION!" roared Mrs Weasley. "First your brothers, Fred and George, and now you? You will see your studies through to the end, my girl, I'm telling you!"

If Mrs Weasley's face had just taken on the hue of a ripe tomato, Ginny's had paled and was now verging on greenish-white. Even the freckles across her nose seemed to disappear, as if to take shelter from maternal anger.

It took a few moments for Ginny to regain her composure and take a deep breath.

"Mum, I intend to do what I want with my life," she said in a surprisingly calm and resolute tone.

"You will do as you please... when you have obtained your N.E.W.T.s! Don't count on me to let you jeopardize your future simply because this Miss Jones dangles dreams of grandeur on a broomstick in front of you!"

"Just because *you* don't care about Quidditch doesn't mean I have to!" snapped Ginny.

In the dining room, no one spoke anymore. Everyone had followed the scene, turning their heads from left to right at each exchange, as one would follow a tennis match. Even Ron, who had just filled his mouth with bread and jam, had stopped chewing so as not to miss anything.

The kettle hanging over the fire finally whistled and the argument resumed immediately. Mrs Weasley proved as implacable as every time her children's well-being was at stake. She even went so far as to evoke a possible future in which Ginny's career would end like that of Ludo Bagman, a scoundrel and former sportsman who had played on his connections to obtain a post at the Ministry, before disappearing without warning to escape the mass of debts his dubious bets had led him to accumulate.

This last argument overcame Ginny's defenses, and she surrendered, looking devastated.

"I don't think I could ever fall as low as Bagman..."

"Of course not, my darling. Even with a thousand like him we wouldn't make one like you. So get your N.E.W.T.s, then choose... why not a career as a player, if that's really what you wish. At least, you'll always be able to fall back on something else if the situation no longer suits you... thanks to your diplomas!"

"I know, Mum, I know..." said Ginny, eyes glistening with tears, before biting sadly into her slice of bread and chocolate spread.

The argument over, Ron resumed chewing with the falsely haggard look of someone who has something to hide. As if to ensure that the storm had indeed passed, he risked a discreet glance at the end of the table, where his mother stood. Unfortunately for him, he seemed to be next on the mistress of the house's list. Heated by her dispute with Ginny, she was staring at him, motionless, a ferocious look printed on her face.

Without leaving her time to utter a word, Ron rushed:

"Yeah-Mum! We'll discuss it when Dad gets back tonight, alright?"

"As you wish, my boy, but don't count on your father's presence to soften me up. And by the time he's back, I'd like you to take care of installing the furniture in your new bedroom. Hermione, you can just sleep on the floor below," said Mrs Weasley, waving her magic wand so that the breakfast crockery arranged itself into a neat file.

Impatient to be alone together, Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione hurried towards the staircase while several plates were already diving into a bath of foam and multicoloured bubbles.

A few steps later and they arrived on the fifth floor, where Ron's new room now faced Ginny's. Ron was trembling with impatience at the idea of discovering his new quarters and entered first. He had barely crossed the threshold when a deafening explosion rang out.

"Sorry Ron-Ron! George heavily insisted that we let him install one of his brand-new gadgets. I think he called it a *Weasley Fart Amplifier*," laughed Ginny.

"Very powerful magic; even the smell seems amplified..." remarked Hermione. "Oh, and that's not all, it seems!"

Facing them, on the back wall of the room, a message written in gold letters had just appeared:

"*Welcome home, Big Nose*"? Since when does George call me that? And what's wrong with my nose anyway?" asked Ron, dumbfounded.

"Don't worry my darling, with all his freckles it looks quite small," said Hermione, pinching his nostrils.

"Small, my node?" replied Ron in a falsely offended tone, arms crossed, eyebrows furrowed, nose blocked.

While Hermione and Ron agreed on the size of his appendage, Harry and Ginny undertook to arrange the furniture with great sweeps of their magic wands. In no time, the boxes were unpacked and the room set up. Making the message left by George disappear proved trickier than expected, however. With each unsuccessful attempt, the words changed appearance and the Fart Amplifier resounded more loudly.

"If only we could have had that back when we were still at Hogwarts. That old cow Umbridge would have been ruffled more than once," said Harry with a dreamy smile as his ineffective *Reparo* spell triggered a new thunderous flatulence.

"Good old Hogwarts. With all the fighting, it hasn't exactly been spared..." replied Ron, suddenly looking lost in thought. "Dad says the best Master Builders on the continent have been called in to renovate it, but apparently it might take a while. They don't even know if the school will be able to welcome all its students this year. They're having a lot of difficulties if I understand correctly. Apparently, they're discovering residual curses even today, weeks after the battle. They ended up cordoning off the whole area, for safety. No Apparating possible, even in Hogsmeade..."

"The Death Eaters didn't do things by halves..." mused Harry aloud. "By the way, what exactly does the job of a Builder consist of?" he asked, intrigued by this new career prospect.

"It involves defining all the enchantments that constitute the magical foundations of the place. If the foundations are poorly prepared, the building can just as easily implode as explode... or the place simply becomes dangerous to frequent," explained Hermione learnedly.

"I remember, that happened to one of those blokes in Ireland," agreed Ron. "The guy had removed all gravity from his house. Since that wasn't

enough for him, he then applied a variant of the Undetectable Extension Charm of his own creation, then put stars and bits of rock everywhere."

"What was the result?" asked Harry curiously.

"Predictable... Specialists from the Improper Use of Magic Office had to be dispatched by his wife to try and find him. As soon as he set foot in his new house he was sucked into the sort of void he had created. The squad members still took a day round trip on Firebolts to get him back. The guy had got himself stuck in orbit around one of his own artificial moons!"

"That will never happen to our school, rest assured Harry," Hermione hastened to intervene. "I read in the latest version of *Hogwarts: A History* that Jack Majackson himself is supervising the works. He was already entrusted with the renovation of the Ministry of Magic's Atrium, after Voldemort and Dumbledore destroyed everything."

"Hey! We asked you to erase George's message, not add to it!" shouted Ron as Hermione began tracing the words of a new sentence on the wall, twirling her wand gracefully.

"*Big — nose — yourself*"? read Ron distinctly as the words materialized above their heads.

As soon as he finished reading, the two inscriptions superimposed and disappeared. The lifting of George's curse was welcomed by a final, particularly foul-smelling amplified fart.

"Classic George... It's him alright, no doubt about it..." concluded Ginny, holding her nose.

3. NEW START, NEW CHALLENGES

The day continued without any other prank left by George manifesting itself. Once the room was ready, the four friends went down to the garden after taking care to open every window on the fifth floor wide. The smell of rotten eggs remained unbearable there, and even Hermione's best dissipating spells hadn't been able to get rid of it.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione spent most of the sunny afternoon in the garden, lounging on deckchairs. They chatted quietly while sipping pumpkin juice as Ginny practised Quidditch, right above their heads.

The discussion revolved mainly around Ron and Hermione's recent trip to Australia. Having barely returned, Ron already seemed ready to leave again, so much had he enjoyed the excursion. To hear him tell it, he was even considering taking a gap year to discover other foreign countries—an announcement Hermione greeted with a mocking giggle.

When Mrs Weasley called them for dinner a few hours later, Ginny was scoring the final point of her virtual match between Sweden and Italy for the famous 1987 cup. Harry took the opportunity to scoop up the winner and carry her in his arms to the entrance in triumph.

All four had just entered the dining room when Arthur Weasley appeared full-length in the fireplace, surrounded by green flames shooting sparks in all directions.

"Hello Hermione, what a joy to see you again! Oh, and here is my big boy!" he exclaimed before rushing to hug Ron tightly in turn.

Their embrace lasted, and when Mr Weasley finally released his son, it was with undisguised admiration that he considered him for a good minute longer. A blossoming young man had replaced the little boy of yesteryear. Well aware of what her husband might be feeling at such a sight, Mrs Weasley, who had just entered the room, shed a few tears of emotion.

"Honestly Mum! You're not going to cry every time you see me!" cried Ron, whose cheeks were starting to turn red.

"For once, I agree with him. But wait until we've talked about his future career..." slipped in Ginny surreptitiously, weaving between them, arms laden with dishes.

Mrs Weasley pretended not to have heard anything. However, the sharp way she slammed the oven door as soon as she returned to the kitchen fooled no one.

"Come on, to the table now! Percy sent me an owl to warn me he wouldn't be eating with us tonight," she announced.

No one needed telling twice. The two "Cream and Morel Turkeys à la Weasley" that had suddenly appeared on the table looked delicious, and everyone congratulated the chef in turn as they tasted the dish. Ron was the last to speak up because of the large piece of wing he had swallowed hastily.

"Ith amathing Mum!" he finally managed to say after a few moments.

"I'm delighted you like it, my darling," she replied absently. "And now that your father is home, let's get to the point: you should have had enough time to think about it by now... What wizarding career do you intend to pursue?"

Harry had dreaded this moment for his friend, particularly the part where he would hear him give a plethora of falsely good excuses before the situation degenerated irremediably.

"Well... I think I'm going to become an Auror," replied Ron flatly, to everyone's surprise.

Harry tried to probe Ron's gaze for further clues. But the latter was staring at his plate with such insistence one would have thought the turkey legs on it had suddenly started dancing the polka.

"Now there's an excellent idea! I am convinced that after everything you've overcome, you will quickly become an asset to that department at the Ministry!" enthused Mr Weasley, raising his glass to toast the news. "You and Harry should apply quickly while Kingsley is still interim Minister for Magic."

"Do you really think he'll let them become apprentice Aurors without having taken any N.E.W.T.s?" asked Hermione.

A little earlier, she had confided to them that she preferred to finish her studies at Hogwarts rather than start training next term. Although her level

far exceeded that of the best seventh-year students, Hermione had always found it hard not to do things in the proper order.

"Oh yes, quite possibly," said Mr Weasley. "You three have more than proven yourselves last year... One would have to be in bad faith to deny it! N.E.W.T.s and other medals are an asset, of course, but you have to pass tests to be admitted to this program anyway."

"Te—tests?" choked Harry as if suddenly pulled from a dream.

"Absolutely. They are of a different nature each year, but generally, they are theoretical tests complemented by practical assessments."

The quiet world Harry had been living in for a few weeks was suddenly turned upside down. Since defeating the Dark Lord in a duel during the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry hadn't had to use his Defence Against the Dark Arts knowledge once. And for good reason: a part of him had liked to believe that the considerable efforts made over the past year would earn him an eternity of good grace and deserved rest. That was clearly without counting on that "providence" which had striven to thwart his plans since his earliest age...

Yes, he would have to prove himself once again if he wanted to become an Auror. But what would happen if he, "the Chosen One of the prophecy", failed a simple exam, after having saved a good part of the wizarding world? He had never paid attention to what others might think of him, even less when his life was endangered by Voldemort. In that case, why this sudden apprehension?

His gaze met Ron's and confirmed his suspicions. His friend suddenly seemed less sure of himself. *He threw out this Auror story just like that, to shut his mother up*, thought Harry. On reflection, perhaps it would be better for both of them to commit to a final seventh year of studies at Hogwarts rather than launching into professional life immediately. It would be an opportunity to reunite with many friends who, like them, hadn't been able to take their exams because of the harmful influence Voldemort had had on the castle last year. They could even count on Hermione's support to get their N.E.W.T.s, and, above all, Harry could be with Ginny every day.

Mrs Weasley's voice rang out, pulling him from his reflection. She looked worried.

"Arthur, don't you think our family has given enough to the wizarding cause already? I mean... becoming an Auror... it's exposing yourself to danger every day."

"I have always done my best to prevent misfortune befalling our children, Molly. But they want to do this job, and they will certainly be very gifted at it," replied Mr Weasley calmly. "Let's encourage them instead of imposing our own fears on them."

As if Ron and Harry were going to disappear forever before even tasting dessert, Mrs Weasley stood up, gave them each a big kiss on the cheek, then disappeared into the kitchen.

"I think the application deadline is set for the end of this week. You should prepare your files without delay," remarked Hermione, a vengeful smile on her lips. "Shame about the gap year, Ron. It was such a good idea," she added in a whisper, so that only Ron, Harry, and Ginny could hear her.

A tempting Black Forest gâteau was floating in front of Mrs Weasley when she rejoined them. She finished levitating the cake over the table, a miniature firework exploded, then the slices cut themselves before landing delicately on the guests' plates.

"And you Dad, any news from the Ministry?" asked Ron before throwing himself hungrily on his dessert.

"There's an awful lot going on at the moment," agreed Mr Weasley. "Between the last Death Eaters on the run to catch, the trial of those who have been arrested, the appointment of the future Minister for Magic... not counting 'business as usual'. No surprise Percy is absent tonight, once again."

Conversations continued at a good pace for a while, fuelled by Ginny's suspicions. She was convinced it wasn't work hogging Percy, but rather a new romantic encounter. Harry felt his eyelids growing heavy and was more than relieved when Mrs Weasley exclaimed:

"Gallop! Gargoyles, look at the time! To bed now, everyone! Arthur arrived late tonight and you need to rest to prepare your applications tomorrow! I'll tidy all this up another time, off you go, shoo!"

Without needing to be asked twice, everyone stood up and began climbing the stairs in single file. Mind foggy, Harry almost blundered by climbing the extra floor separating his room from Ginny's. It was

Hermione who saved him perceptively by asking him just in time if he had a bedside book or two to lend her.

Once in his quarters, Harry brushed his teeth with his favourite "Choc-Hazelnut Flavour" toothpaste and put on his pyjamas. His preparatory ritual accomplished, he held his breath and strained his ears... No noise, no sign of a Weasley parent undertaking to come back down the stairs for any reason. It was time to go and find Ginny.

Like a feline with a supple gait and stealthy step, Harry quietly left his room. Moments later and he found himself nose to nose with Ron who seemed to have undertaken the same kind of top-secret mission. One going up, the other down, they crossed with amusement. They exchanged a few teases in passing which narrowly missed revealing them. Finally, a few steps further, Harry slipped into Ginny's bed. He soon sank into a deep sleep while she tenderly stroked his scalp.

Harry dreamed. He had just been appointed Head of the Auror Office. Abusing his position as boss, he had hired Ron who had come to work at the Ministry in his pyjamas. Everything seemed confused. In a sort of room filled with strange utensils, Ron had started talking to him while waving his arms. Unfortunately, it was impossible for Harry to understand anything. And when he had asked Ron to repeat, the latter had suddenly got angry and dealt him a violent blow to the head with a cream-covered turkey leg.

The office in the dream then morphed into a sort of dungeon cell. Semi-darkness and a diffuse fog reigned there, making reading the room hazardous. Although Ron had disappeared, Harry didn't feel alone for all that. In a corner of the cell, wrapped in a patchwork of patched cloaks, a silhouette seemed to be waiting for him, shivering.

Harry had barely laid eyes on this pile of filthy fabric when a disturbing snigger echoed in the room. Cautiously, he approached with the foreboding that something sinister was about to happen. Fists clenched, he had only taken a few steps when a voice broke the silence... a voice that seemed to come from the hooded figure:

"So you have come. I thought you would... one day."

The scene blurred for the space of a fraction of a second. When it finally became clear again, the silhouette had straightened up and the veil masking its face until then was gone, revealing emaciated features, like a death's head.

"But your journey was pointless. I never had it," resumed the man dressed in rags before laughing out loud.

"You lie!" Harry surprised himself by answering spontaneously.

Barely had he finished his sentence when a flash of green light shot out of him, crossed the room, and struck the man still laughing heartily.

There was no cry, no death rattle, only a brief burst of indigo light as his lifeless body slumped to the dungeon floor.

Harry's legs had become so heavy he wouldn't have been surprised to find them turned to lead. He could have remained motionless, waiting for the nightmare to stop... But he felt without being able to explain it that something even more frightening would happen if he didn't decide to act quickly. Gathering his courage, he approached the pile of cloaks covering the remains.

The few steps he managed to take seemed to last an entire eternity. Harry knelt cautiously. Although he had expected to find something particularly repulsive, what he discovered horrified him even more. The creature lying under the cloak had taken on the appearance of Ginny. Except that her complexion was sickly pale, and her red hair was bathed in a scarlet pool.

Harry had barely brushed her with his fingertips when her eyes opened, oversized. With pupils so large it looked as if the white of her eyes had disappeared, she stared at him. Then, as if the flow of time had been disturbed, she rushed at his throat to bite him hungrily...

"Harry? HARRY!"

Ginny was shaking him firmly. Harry sat up, pyjamas soaked in sweat.

"Ginny! Wha...? I thought I was finally rid of these damn nightmares!" he exploded.

"What happened? Don't tell me... Did you see him? Was it him... Voldemort?"

"What? I don't know. Yes and no... It was only a dream but it seemed so real... It looked like one of those visions I had when I was still connected to Voldemort. Especially when he was looking for the Elder Wand, and he murdered Grindelwald in his cell at Nurmengard."

"That was a traumatic time, especially for you. No wonder it still haunts you today; after all, Voldemort's fall was almost yesterday. That said, I'd

feel better if you talked to Mum and Dad about it, just in case."

"Ginny... it was just a damn dream. Voldemort is the past, we destroyed him! No more Horcruxes, no more Elder Wand, nothing!"

Faced with Ginny's imploring look, Harry abdicated.

"Alright... If it reassures you I'll do it. But give me five minutes, I'll join you downstairs."

Nauseous, Harry got up, doing his best not to show his state of weakness. Rather than waiting sitting on the bed, he undertook to go and wash. He needed a simple occupation to take his mind off things, to distance himself from the moment of dread he had just lived.

Reaching the bathroom, he filled the sink with cold water and plunged his head entirely into it. It was an old habit he had picked up back when he and Voldemort were still connected by a spiritual link. Focusing on the sensation of water on his skin helped him repress the fears tugging at his mind.

"All that is over. Turning the page now," he told himself while drying off, eyes locked with the gaze of that man considering him with apprehension through the mirror. "Ginny is fine, everything is fine..."

Everyone was already seated when Harry arrived on the ground floor for breakfast. To his great relief Mrs and Mr Weasley were absent, and neither Hermione nor Ron asked him anything about the past night when he took his place among them.

"Mum went out to do some shopping," explained Ginny, welcoming him with an affectionate caress.

Harry thanked Ginny internally for keeping her fears to herself until then and grabbed a packet of cereal. Barely had he started pouring the contents into his bowl when a ball of feathers flew low over his head, ruffling his hair. It was a tiny owl zig-zagging towards Hermione, a package almost as big as itself clutched in its talons. The bird was having all the trouble in the world maintaining altitude and nearly landed in a cup twice before reaching its target. It finally dropped its package on Hermione's head and landed on the table, hooting as if demanding a reward.

"Ron, how can your owl still be so clumsy?" grumbled Hermione, unwrapping her package.

"I don't think Pigwidgeon is clumsy; I think he just likes annoying you," replied Ron, presenting a few cereal flakes to the little owl in the palm of his hand. "I like it when he annoys you too, by the way."

"*First Case of Lethargum Tenebris in the Country* hmm, looks like your father hasn't finished having work," said Hermione without taking her eyes off the newspaper she had just received.

"*Lethar-what?*" asked Ron.

"The mysterious epidemic that spread in Eastern Europe a few weeks ago has claimed its first victim in the United Kingdom. Octogenarian Londoner Eltoras Munter died last night in circumstances that specialists at St Mungo's Hospital are still struggling to explain..." read Hermione aloud.

"Another one of those old fools who wanted to mix his Youth Potion with Firewhisky to improve the taste," sniggered Ron. "Anyway I hope the specialists at St Mungo's don't have the same aptitude for potions as us. Otherwise they're not close to finding an effective antidote!"

"No risk," replied Hermione without even looking up from the paper. "Oh and speaking of skills! Weren't you supposed to be preparing your Magical Interdisciplinary Mastery Units. applications?"

Harry and Ron hunched their shoulders as if a giant had just dealt them a blow with a club.

"Come on," encouraged Ginny, "you've already done the hardest part!"

Harry threw a last crumb of cereal to Pigwidgeon and stood up, determined.

Ginny was right, he and Ron had a real chance of being selected. And even if that weren't the case, life wasn't going to stop. After all, their days had never been happier since they had defeated the Death Eaters, so it wasn't an application file or a few stupid nightmares that were going to spoil everything.

Thus, Harry and Ron spent their entire day inside, preparing their M.I.M.U. files. The sun had begun to set behind the hills on the horizon when Harry lifted his head from the desk where he and Ron had been working for hours. A good dozen crossed-out parchments lay at their feet.

"Do you think I should mention how I knocked out a Troll in first year?" asked Ron. "It was more luck than magical prowess, but hey..."

"I'd put it in," replied Harry without hesitation. "A good reaction in an emergency situation must be worth points in the eyes of the recruitment office."

"Right, very well. This time I think I'm done. A little Butterbeer to recover from all this?"

A weight off their minds, Ron and Harry found the girls in the middle of a game of Wizard's Chess. The game quickly turned into two against two and Ron and Hermione's team ended up winning.

"Ron, that's something you should add to your M.I.M.U.s," exclaimed Ginny. "You're a fine strategist!"

Before the idea left his head, Ron was rushing upstairs to update his file.

The evening was dedicated to hunting down any mistakes, a task in which Hermione proved to be an essential help. It was nearly two in the morning when the owl specially dispatched for the occasion finally flew from The Burrow towards the Ministry, the precious applications attached to each of its legs.

That night, it was with a certain apprehension that Harry lay down in his bed and closed his eyes. The prospect of a new nightmare with Voldemort, or in which one of his friends would attack him, still worried him. Exhausted by a whole day of intense reflection, however, he soon sank into a deep sleep...

"Harry? HARRY!"

Harry sat up on his bed, heart pounding. Prey to panic, he tried to regain his wits as quickly as possible. What could he have done while unconscious to deserve such a wake-up call? Was it a bad dream, again?

"What? WHAT?!"

"Harry, you've already received a reply from the Ministry, look!"

Leaning slightly over his bed, Hermione was handing him a yellowed envelope. The letter did indeed bear an official-looking seal. Behind her, a half-asleep Ron entered the room with a staggering gait like a zombie.

"Whaaat's haappening?" he asked with a long yawn.

His eyes widened and his torpor suddenly left him when he discovered the ministerial message in Harry's hands.

"You... already got your answer? And me, is there any mail for me?"

"Yours will arrive very soon too, I'm certain," affirmed Hermione in a tone meant to be reassuring. "Go on Harry, open it!"

Harry didn't need asking twice. He removed the wax seal closing the envelope and unfolded the letter inside with a trembling hand.

"Blimey!" he exclaimed, a few long seconds later.

"What... What is it? Did they select you? Ha! I was sure of it! Darn it, well done mate!" said Ron before applauding.

"No-no! It has nothing to do with that. I am summoned to the Ministry for a hearing... to 'testify regarding the actions of Mr Draco Lucius Malfoy'."

"You're joking!"

"Not at all. Apparently the Wizengamot is asking for me. It looks serious; Draco is 'accused of having actively participated in the activities of the terrorist group known as Death Eaters'."

"That'll teach him to be clever. I hope you won't hesitate to sink that scoundrel once and for all!" cried Ron. "It's because of him we suffered so much these last few years..."

"...and also thanks to him that I'm still alive," cut in Harry.

"What? You're joking! If Draco had just behaved like the average Slytherin, we would never have come to this!"

"Be that as it may. But I still find it very hard not to put myself in his shoes. He took real risks to right his wrongs. I know it's hard to admit, but the situation couldn't have been easy for him either. With his father in prison... and especially Voldemort's breathing down his neck..."

"To hear you talk, one would think he was forced to act like a piece of scum," sneered Ron sarcastically. "Poor Malfoy: misunderstood, alone against the world... I think I'm going to cry; or vomit, depending."

"Ron..." intervened Hermione.

"Don't forget that before the situation degenerated, Malfoy still had a choice! But he's always been a nasty-vicious-unhealthy little git, since the first day of his first year at Hogwarts!"

"That's true," replied Hermione calmly. "But what do you think we would have become if we had received the Malfoys' upbringing?"

"Hermione, honestly... you're not going to start too?" indignated Ron.

"Try to look at the situation from another angle for a moment. Imagine growing up while being constantly made to believe that others are inferior in every way. If you had been spoiled by being showered with overpriced toys from your earliest age, who would you be today?" retorted Hermione, staring at him gravely.

"First of all, spoiled with overpriced toys, I've never had any idea what that might feel like, so..."

"Ron..."

"Alright, alright... It is possible that, in those conditions, I might have become an unbearable-pretentious-little-git-who-deserves-a-good-thrashing..."

But Ron still seemed prey to a real internal struggle and hastened to add:

"Still... 'Ronald Lucius Malfoy', that doesn't sound right at all!"

His conclusion imposed a momentary silence. Lost in thought, Harry surprised himself imagining his best friend dressed in Draco Malfoy's platinum blonde hair. As for Hermione and Ginny, their absent look suggested the same kind of internal calculation.

"Well... it wasn't a summons to become an Auror, but when I think of what Draco must be going through right now, I'm still relieved not to be in his shoes," resumed Harry, ruffling Ron affectionately. "And above all, I am very glad you are the way you are, if that's any comfort, Ronald Weasley."

"Me too you know... It's crazy how hungry all this has made me," replied Ron philosophically while flattening his hair. "Shall we go down?"

The controversy started by the Ministry's summons letter lasted well after breakfast had been swallowed. If opinions might diverge, everyone acknowledged that giving testimony in this kind of situation would be no small matter.

Harry couldn't help rejoicing a little later, when Mr Weasley announced he had to leave urgently. Not that the presence of Ron and Ginny's father bothered him; he had always got on very well with him. In reality, the fact was that the situation had subtly turned in his favour... The unexpected arrival of this mail had spared Harry the painful account of his last nightmare. Everyone seemed to have forgotten about that absurd dream story, and so much the better.

The days that passed then were all alike. Every morning Harry and Ron jumped out of bed to rush downstairs. Alas, each time, their hope of finding the long-awaited summons on the dining room table was disappointed. Frustrated by this silence, they spent their days pacing the floors of The Burrow as if deprived of all energy. Depending on the weather, they might make the effort to go out and sprawl in the deckchairs set up near the Quidditch pitch, but that was about it. The only thing that mattered to them now was knowing if their talents would be recognised by the prestigious Auror Office. The rest didn't really matter anymore.

After a while, Hermione, whom this situation seemed to annoy, had the good idea of putting their free time to good use. She proposed duel workshops and Defence Against the Dark Arts training which managed to gradually wake up the two candidates. In addition to preventing them from brooding, Harry and Ron were led to note that they had lost none of their reflexes or magical aptitudes. These exercises finally proved their effectiveness when Ron managed to gain the upper hand over Hermione during a duel that lasted a good half-hour.

It was at the dawn of a day that promised to be just as sadly banal as the previous ones that the unthinkable happened. It must have been seven in the morning when Harry went down to the kitchen. Mouth pasty, he hoped to find some pumpkin juice to hydrate before going back to bed. It was only when returning from the kitchen, glass in hand, that he noticed two parchments neatly aligned on the dining room table.

A note accompanied them:

Dear Ron and Harry,

Kingsley passed these scrolls on to me for your attention. I hope it is good news! Whatever the verdict, try to enjoy this beautiful day,

Arthur

Throat drier than ever despite the pumpkin juice, Harry approached with apprehension. The moment of truth had finally arrived.

"Ah..." simply said Ron gravely, entering the room in turn, eyes glassy.

In a final moment of apprehension, they exchanged an imploring look then pounced on the parchments. For nearly a minute, only the distant groans of the gnomes established in the vegetable patch punctuated the atmosphere. Finally, Harry's face emerged above his letter:

"They... They are summoning me this Friday, July 31st... for an interview," he announced in a small voice.

For his part, Ron seemed paralysed. Only his eyes went back and forth incessantly from one edge of the yellowed sheet to the other.

"I... Me too..." he finally replied, short of breath.

An irrepressible smile rose to their ears.

"YEAH!" exploded Ron, fist raised, before waddling as if he had just performed the most incredible Quidditch move of his career.

"HAHA, GREAT!" followed Harry before hugging him. "Wow! It's going to be a hell of a day! Draco's hearing in the morning, and interview in the afternoon."

"What time have you got? Two o'clock?" asked Ron.

"Two o'clock, same!"

That morning, it wasn't a breakfast Harry and Ron treated themselves to, but a veritable feast.

Relieved by this good news, they quickly regained their good humour and all their joy of living, to the great delight of the inhabitants of The Burrow. Come evening, Mrs Weasley greeted this small victory in her own way by preparing one of Ron's favourite dishes: her famous pork chops with dragon garlic potatoes. A real delight, for anyone not put off by the idea of breathing fire of all colours through their nose.

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4. THE STAR OF STARS

The few days separating Harry and Ron from their interview passed like hours. And as the deadline approached, Harry gradually began to doubt his chances of success.

Admittedly, he had been selected. Yes, he had managed to defeat the most formidable wizard in the country in a duel. But a small voice in his head strove to remind him that luck had played a part in this past success. After all, it was Voldemort who had made mistakes. On the one hand by overestimating his mastery of the Elder Wand, and on the other by underestimating the power of the protective magic Harry benefited from. In fact, it wasn't really Harry who had won but rather Voldemort who had lost. The latter had ultimately just rushed headlong into his interpretation of the prophecy binding them. It had cost him the victory, and at the same time, his life.

More and more often, Harry saw himself depositing and then sealing the Elder Wand in Dumbledore's tomb. "*Poor fool!*" he told himself internally. If only he could have turned back time and kept the all-powerful wand for himself... Harry remembered having thought long and hard before parting with the famous Hallow, but the good reasons he had found then for acting in such a way now seemed hasty and childish. Let that be a lesson to him; it would be the last time he played the noble hero with a big heart.

These annoyances were still trotting in Harry's head when he opened his eyes in his bed, on the morning of July 31st.

"Happy birthday, you utter moron," he said to himself before extracting himself from his bed with a groan.

He spent a moment looking at his bare feet resting on the bedroom floorboards. He was alone. The day before, Harry had explained to Ginny that he preferred they sleep separately. She hadn't insisted too

much. Doubtless to avoid being an additional constraint in this tense period. Alas, to Harry's great regret, the solitary night had ultimately helped nothing.

That morning, he felt like he had rested two or three hours at most. His eyes hurt and his stomach felt unsettled.

"Come on, buck up!" sighed Harry, getting up painfully.

What he needed to keep going was a good hot shower and some breakfast. Things could only get better after that.

When Harry arrived in the dining room a little later, he already felt more disposed to face the day awaiting him. The Panettone Percy had sent them from his mission in Italy was more than welcome and helped to invigorate him.

Opposite him, Ron was having all the trouble in the world swallowing his breakfast. Slumped over his bowl of cereal, face pale and eyes red from lack of sleep, he looked like he was heading for the slaughterhouse. The last time Harry had seen his best friend like this must have been back in their sixth year at school. Both were then wearing the colours of the Gryffindor Quidditch team and were about to play a decisive match.

"I don't feel good about this," mumbled Ron before placing his spoon next to his bowl, like a soldier surrendering his weapons.

"It'll be fine, my kitten," replied Mrs Weasley tenderly. "Give it everything you've got and you'll have nothing to regret."

"Don't say that Mum, or the examiners might soon find themselves with the contents of my stomach on their knees."

"Have faith!" said Harry, smiling at the idea of a fierce seven-foot-tall Auror suddenly covered in vomit. "If they selected you, it's for a good reason."

"Well spoken!" bounced back Mrs Weasley. "And now, finish getting ready. Departure for London in ten minutes!"

The day's schedule had been modified the day before. Hermione and Ginny had first proposed taking advantage of the trip to buy their seventh-year books, then, everyone having found something to do there,

it had finally been decided that they would all spend the day in the capital.

When everyone was ready, they lined up in single file facing the Weasleys' brick fireplace. One after another, they disappeared in a swirl of emerald green flames after announcing aloud: "Diagon Alley!". The Floo network took them straight to the Leaky Cauldron, the pub serving as a junction. A few sleight of hands later and they were already emerging onto the famous street.

Packed with wizarding shops of all kinds ranging from ready-to-wear to wand making, the place was experiencing an agitation incomparable to the last time Harry had set foot there, back when the Death Eaters still ruled over London and the whole country. The wide alley, once dark and deserted, was now saturated by the crowd and never emptied.

Without wasting a second, Harry rushed after Ginny into the uninterrupted flow of wizards. His presence didn't go unnoticed for long and the "Harry Potter!", "Harry Potter? Did he say Harry Potter?" soon began to flow from all sides, a few people even going so far as to hold out their hand or take off their hat as he passed. Intimidated, Harry tried in vain to smooth down a few locks of hair on his forehead and quickened his pace.

"Wait! We should take a look inside, don't you think?" shouted Ron in the middle of the crush as they passed the most breathtaking shop window Harry had ever seen.

It was the Weasley brothers' shop: *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes*.

"I'm afraid there are even more people inside," replied Hermione, hands cupped around her mouth, while striving to resist the flow.

"I haven't seen George in a while, let's go!" insisted Ron. "Harry still has an hour... and when I think of what awaits us, it won't hurt to take our minds off things, by Merlin's beard!"

At the cost of much effort, the group managed to gather on the doorstep of the shop. They were immediately welcomed by a nasal voice repeating the slogan endlessly:

"You too, become Poo-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and brandish his new arsenal of Smelly Hallows! Only available at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes in the Gross section!"

"How horrible," sighed Hermione with consternation. "The Fart Amplifiers were quite enough on their own..."

Mrs Weasley made no comment. But when she turned around to count them before entering, Harry told himself from the annoyed look she displayed that she doubtless thought no less.

"Hello," said a familiar voice as soon as they entered. "Well then...? Come to restock on Nosebleed Nougat and Puking Pastilles before school starts?"

Wearing a radiant smile, George Weasley, the owner of the place, moved to meet them. He was dressed in a sumptuous orange robe with bright reflections as well as a purple earmuff, right where Severus Snape's spell had struck him, nearly a year earlier.

"School's over," retorted Ron, straightening up with pride. "Harry and I are taking our Auror interviews this afternoon."

George greeted the news by gratifying them with an exaggeratedly stiff bow.

"In that case... some of our new products might interest you..." he added in a low voice, as if he were suddenly addressing secret agents. "Come this way instead..."

As Hermione had feared, the shop was packed to the rafters. George's flamboyant presence could have been an asset to part the crowd, but he had to stop constantly, each time hailed by a different assistant seeking information. Business seemed to be booming.

"Finally, here we are!" announced the master of the place a few moments later. "The new Madam Malkin-Weasley collection!"

Overflowing with imagination, the Weasley brothers had clearly not been idle during the Death Eaters' reign. A large part of their items had become much more than simple jokes. The strange prototypes of gloves and anti-hex hats that Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had found in

Fred and George's room a few days earlier were now before them, available in a multitude of cuts and colours.

"Madam Malkin closed her ready-to-wear shop when the Ministry fell under Voldemort's influence," explained George, smiling more than ever. "One evening, she visited us. We talked a lot. All she wanted was to continue helping in her own way! We owe the style of this collection to her."

"Magnificent!" cried Harry. "And do they work well?"

"No one has ever complained yet... They can reflect an offensive spell of low to medium power back towards its caster about every hour."

"Do you think..."

"I don't think that kind of assistance is tolerated when taking an exam at the Auror Office," cut in Hermione abruptly.

"Shame," said Harry, whom Hermione's perceptiveness still managed to surprise.

"Do you like this one?" asked George, grabbing an elegant satin black hat adorned with a purple ribbon from a shelf set a bit apart. "It could save you a lot of trouble, or attract heaps, who knows..."

Without warning, he shoved the hat into his hands.

"Useless to resist, it's a gift. From where he is, Fred would curse me if I let you leave empty-handed."

"But..."

"Funds for the shop... saving Ginny, then Dad, then the whole world," added George, putting on a theatrical air. "Take it and don't make a fuss, please."

A little embarrassed, Harry put on his new hat.

"It suits you really well!" enthused Ginny, rising on tiptoe to adjust it for him.

"I almost forgot a very useful gadget!" cried George before leaning towards his ear to whisper very quietly. "This hat is a bit special... It possesses the power to create a vacuum around its wearer. The kind of

thing that can prove useful for a victim of his own success such as yourself. To trigger the spell, you just have to say the magic word: 'Umbridge'."

Barely had the formula been pronounced when the hat emitted a loud gurgling sound, halfway between croaking and belching. Half the shop jumped and Harry had to apologize profusely. He was still justifying himself to Ginny when the group resumed its visit. George seemed very amused...

"Never accept a gift from a Weasley twin again..." Harry promised himself moments later as they passed a basin filled with Pygmy Puffs.

The tiny creatures looking like balls of multi-coloured fur hopped in all directions and cheeped happily in a touching buzzing sound. Hypnotised by this spectacle, Harry put aside his impatience to browse the aisles, separated from the group, and moved closer. He contemplated the heap of small beasts constantly bouncing against each other for a moment, then, unable to resist the temptation any longer, surprised himself by plunging his hands into the tank.

Dozens of small fluffy paws tickled him as he sank deeper. Soon, Harry was seized with a fit of giggles and nearly tipped headfirst. Eyes flooded with tears, he caught himself as best he could and undertook to extract himself carefully from the quivering mass.

It was at this precise moment that the tickling gave way to a completely different sensation. A sort of irresistibly gentle warmth. The heat invaded Harry's fingers, then travelled up his arm before stopping at his chest. Curious to know if an overdose of Pygmy Puff tickling could cause such symptoms, Harry finished extracting himself from the basin. He then stepped back a good yard to mark a certain distance from the presumed source of the phenomenon, but his test did not have the expected effect. The impression of heat was still there, on him, in him. It was a sensation so pleasant it would have been welcome even during the hottest of summers.

The heat finished moving from his shoulder to his sternum. When Harry plunged his hand into the collar of his robes to ensure he wasn't going mad, he was stupified to find something that couldn't be him. The

thing in question pulsed peacefully and was even softer than all the Pygmy Puffs he had been able to stroke. Harry grabbed it as delicately as possible and brought it in front of him.

What he discovered upon opening his hand left him speechless. A tiny ball of reddish down rested in the center of his palm. Provided with a pair of tiny dark beads surmounting a very small beak, the thing seemed to stare at him with reciprocal curiosity.

"Hello you," tried Harry.

The strange creature flapped two miniature wings and let out a small shrill cry.

"Harry? Are you there?" came a relatively close voice.

"Ginny? You're not going to believe me, look what I found."

"I looked for you everywhere, I didn't even notice you weren't with u..." continued Ginny on her momentum, "oh... but what is that? It looks like a chick, but cuter. Did it undergo a Shrinking Charm?"

"No idea, I found it in the basin right next to us, or rather... it found me. Hey, what are you doing!"

"Cheep!" seemed to reply the chick just before jumping onto Ginny's red mop.

"Wow, that's really weird! He's all warm... a real hot water bottle!" exclaimed Ginny, eyes to the ceiling, as if to see what was plotting on her head.

"I think he likes you," remarked Harry as the tiny bird arranged Ginny's hair to make a sort of nest.

Time having passed more quickly than expected, Harry and Ginny hastened to join the others. Back at the shop entrance, they shared their discovery with the rest of the group. George proved unable to explain what this intruder could be doing amidst his Pygmy Puffs.

"I don't know... Between soft critters they must have affinities," he replied, intrigued. "What I can assure you, however, is that he doesn't come from us."

"Are you sure?" insisted Harry, anxious not to wrong anyone.

"Certain. And besides, it looks like he's found a quiet spot," added George pointing to Ginny's head. "Take him then. If he's not happy, he'll surely find a way to let you know."

After a moving hugging session, the group resumed its route by grafting itself to the flow of wizards. They detached themselves a moment later to join the small square where *Flourish and Blotts*, the largest bookstore in Diagon Alley, was located.

Here too reigned unusual agitation. On a small platform near the sign, four intriguing characters were giving a "Rock" performance. Harry might have gradually got used to the quirks of the wizarding world, he couldn't suppress a "Wow..." at the atypical look of the musicians. Adorned with a red wizard hat with a wide brim giving him a slightly goofy look, the singer did not go unnoticed. However, the prize for eccentricity went without contest to the guitarist. Waddling on stage half-naked, he was entirely covered in a sort of black polish on which what looked like a skeleton had been daubed. The paint must have had something magical, for the bright white bones followed their wearer's movements with a delay, providing the bluffing impression that the musician's fingers were running almost everywhere at once on his instrument.

If the Rock band in question seemed to enjoy frank success, it was not unanimous for all that. Many young wizards had stopped to wiggle, while those of a certain age preferred to flee the tumult shaking their heads with an indignant air.

"What a racket! And what vulgarity!" grated Mrs Weasley, outraged.

"I lo-ve this band!" slipped Ginny quietly, delighted.

Mrs Weasley hurried into the bookstore and everyone followed suit. Harry, bringing up the rear, was however hailed before being able to cross the threshold of the shop.

"My effing gad! This is effin' HARRY POTTER!" shouted the singer into his wand while pointing at Harry. "Excuse us a second, folks!"

The rockers hastened to leave the stage, leaving their instruments behind. Without anyone to handle it, the guitar began to play of its own accord for a solo of the finest effect. Meanwhile, the musicians rushed at Harry with such enthusiasm he hesitated to flee rather than end up trampled.

"Jeezus eff! I am such a fan of yours, buddy!" cried the singer with a strong American accent.

He gave a high five to the hand Harry had just held out thinking the more cooperative he showed himself, the sooner they would leave him alone. The rest of the band followed the example and Harry soon found himself overwhelmed by a crowd of feverish groupies. He was saved a few moments later by Ginny who grabbed him firmly by the collar to pull him into the bookstore. The door closed with a saving bell sound and the mess reigning outside was almost forgotten.

"I can't believe it! Oh Harry, you are the Star of Stars!" stomped Hermione.

"Cool, but er... these people, who were they?"

"Come on Harry, it's not because you were educated among Muggles that you shouldn't take an interest in Wizarding World culture!"

"If you can call that an education..."

"...and if you can call that culture," grimaced Ron.

"Yes... well, these 'people' as you say, were still the members of the well-known band *Limp Magikstik!*"

The news slid off Harry who merely shrugged. He had never liked fame and would gladly have done without it again today. He preferred to cut the discussion short and glanced at his watch to note he only had about fifteen minutes left before presenting himself at the hearing. Once again, time had passed surprisingly. He therefore said goodbye to Mrs Weasley, Ron, and Hermione, leaned over Ginny to kiss her, and left.

While on his way, Harry was more than tempted to call upon the powers of George's magic hat. This feeling still hadn't left him when he finally trod the marble floor of the Ministry. Just like outside, the place

was in total effervescence. Everywhere around him people flowed, ebbed, while calling out to each other here and there. Pressed for time, Harry ran doing his best to minimise collisions.

He was out of breath when he finally reached the visitors' welcome desk where a witch of a certain age took charge of him. She gave him a badge to pin to his wizard robes and added with a benevolent smile:

"Very pretty hat, Mr Potter. But if I were you, I would wear something more sober for the hearing. The session takes place on level two and should start any minute! Come on, hurry up young man!"

Harry thanked the witch politely for her advice and didn't need telling twice. He had just shrunk the headgear offered by George when the lifts and their golden grilles opened, pouring a new flow of wizards onto him. Weary of this incessant churning, he chose the smallest cabin possible and entered alone—except for the swarm of impatient office memos that rushed in at the same instant, quivering above his head.

The doors closed and Harry could finally breathe. At least, that's what he thought. For a surprise awaited him at the bottom of his pocket, right where he intended to put his miniaturised hat.

"Blimey, but what are *you* doing here?" he exclaimed, carefully extracting his hand from his robe.

Snuggled against his palm, the tiny chick did not react. He was asleep, his fluffy belly going up and down quietly to the peaceful rhythm of his breathing. He must have taken advantage of the kiss exchanged a little earlier with Ginny to change vehicles...

"Right... be good above all, or I'm going to be in trouble," whispered Harry as the lift stopped with a metallic screech.

"Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, Wizengamot Administration Services," said a voice he was beginning to know.

Worried not to cross anyone in the corridors that followed, Harry hastened to cover the distance separating him from the courtroom. The door was closing when he arrived. He slipped through the crack as discreetly as he could and, anxious not to be noticed, sat in the last row.

The room, or rather the amphitheatre, was packed. After scanning the assembly, Harry recognised a few faces. There was among others Professor Minerva McGonagall, the new Headmistress of Hogwarts; Aberforth Dumbledore, brother of the late Professor Dumbledore; Kingsley Shacklebolt, Auror and interim Minister for Magic; John Dawlish, another Auror, known for his conservative attitude; Rita Skeeter, the journalist he hated most in the world; and finally, occupying three seats all by himself, his immense friend Rubeus Hagrid.

Trembling like a dead leaf, Draco waited much lower down on a platform in the centre of the room. The only company granted to him was that of an imposing armchair whose armrests were covered with thick steel chains. Sworn enemies since their first day of school, he and Harry knew each other particularly well—almost intimately, one might say. Yet he had rarely seen him in such a pitiful state...

An old wizard with a greying beard—no doubt the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot—cleared his throat from a desk overlooking the assembly and a heavy silence settled.

"The hearing of this day aims to judge the actions of Mr Draco Lucius Malfoy—son of Narcissa Malfoy Black and Lucius Malfoy—during the last war against the terrorist group known as 'Death Eaters'."

Amplified by magic, the judge's last words echoed macabrely in the audience. Harry shivered. It was nothing, however, compared to Draco Malfoy whose limbs had suddenly been seized by uncontrollable trembling.

The president of the assembly resumed, undertaking this time to list the charges. It didn't take long before the silence imposed shortly before was broken by whispers and other excited murmurs. Soon, the animosity hitherto contained in the crowd exploded, just after the question of "crimes against Humanity" had been addressed.

"No need to discuss! Send him to prison, to Azkaban!" rose an outraged voice from a corner of the room.

"Yes! Let him go join his kind with the Dementors..." continued another.

Anxious to maintain order in his court, the judge found nothing better to do than hammer his desk. His gesture only had the effect of rekindling the fire of the protesters who raised their voices in a most chaotic hubbub. In the middle of this storm of clamour, Harry was unable to take his eyes off Malfoy. Isolated in the centre of the assembly, his wizard robes soaked in cold sweat, he was digging his nails so deep into his skin one could almost see the blood beading.

"Today!" managed to resume the president after a moment. "Today... as on rare occasions, the accused can only be defended by himself and by potential testimonies given in his favour. Everyone present here has been summoned because they have been evaluated—by the prosecutor or by the accused in person—as being able to give testimony that could help the jury decide. While it is not expected that everyone speaks, please note that this step will be mandatory for witnesses designated as essential."

Calm restored, the most important witnesses were called to the stand one by one to present their arguments. The damning accounts followed one another uninterruptedly and, as far as possible, the atmosphere in the room tightened a little more.

The situation was much worse than Harry could have imagined. Malfoy hadn't just been obnoxious at times; he had apparently dedicated the major part of his existence to torturing those around him. Disrespect, theft, destruction, physical violence, moral aggression, intimidation, contempt, manipulation, tyranny... Harry's insides were knotted by the flow of filth in which he found himself plunged despite himself. Even defeated, Draco Malfoy had always had a knack for dragging those around him into turmoil...

The unease continued to spread in Harry as the testimonies went on. The situation had become so painful he resolved not to pay attention to what was being said around him anymore. He preferred to take refuge in an imaginary Quidditch match, played alongside Ron and Ginny.

Passes were going well, Wood, the former Gryffindor team captain, had just appeared spectacularly in the game when a new explosion of shouts pulled Harry from his reverie. A little further to his right, a witch

who could very well have been his friend Neville Longbottom's grandmother was pointing an accusing finger at the defendant with indignation:

"I will repeat it as many times as necessary," she fumed in a shrill voice, "it is because of him, of that wretched scoundrel, that we lost Albus Dumbledore!"

Without being able to do anything about it, barely had Harry assimilated this sentence when he was thrown into his memories as if he had jumped into a Pensieve from the top of a cliff. The mental Quidditch pitch on which he ventured moments earlier was expelled far, very far away, miles from there, and Harry relived Professor Dumbledore's slow and unbearable fall from the top of the Astronomy Tower. He remembered his broken body on the ground, his half-closed blue eyes, the narrow trickle of blood flowing from his mouth...

Other memories imposed themselves in turn. Memories Harry had kept himself from thinking about since the battle had ended, for fear of losing himself in the world of past suffering to which they belonged. Struggling with all his might, he tried to use his Patronus expertise to focus on a moment of happiness.

Too late... Remus Lupin had already appeared. He was there, so real Harry could have touched him. Professor Lupin was handing him a square of chocolate during a private Defence Against the Dark Arts session against Dementors and, the next moment, a green flash struck his back. Lupin then collapsed like a doll. Then it was Tonks's turn. The Auror gave her face a pig-like appearance, winked amusedly at Harry before finding herself a fraction of a second later lying on a dusty flagstone, dead. Fred Weasley appeared next. Looking delighted, he crossed the circle drawn around the Goblet of Fire before being brutally expelled. A ridiculous and interminable beard then grew on him, triggering hilarity among his comrades... He was now circling on a broom in the middle of a study hall before setting off the most beautiful firework display Hogwarts had ever known under Professor Umbridge's bewildered eyes. Finally, he fell in turn and his sparkling gaze extinguished behind the veil of death.

It was too much... If he could have, Harry would have exploded, imploded, or anything else that would have delivered him from all the resentment consuming him. Ron was only too right, Draco Malfoy deserved nothing other than to pay for his crimes.

"Thank you, thank you... Let us listen to our last essential witness," said a distant voice. "Mr Potter, please present yourself to the stand."

The time had come... Harry stood up, decided. He could feel dozens of people watching him as he took the stairs leading to the centre of the court. A buzzing background noise accompanied the descent of the steps. Reaching the bottom, he found himself for a moment nose to nose with Malfoy who implored him with his eyes. Without an ounce of compassion, Harry turned his eyes away from his old enemy to rest them on the jurors and a glacial silence fell again.

Harry wanted to open his mouth, to tell how much Malfoy had also made him suffer throughout his short wizarding existence. There was so much to say! But something on him, in him, prevented him... A strange sensation, extraordinarily soft and warm...

Just as had happened a little earlier in the morning, the heat had moved, rising from his pocket to curl against his neck. Harry closed his eyes for a moment and savoured the extraordinary sensation. He could feel his muscles relaxing one by one while the pain lacerating his insides dissipated progressively.

A moment later and he felt much better. He was soothed.

"Mr Potter? Have you nothing to present to us? Your testimony is most important," insisted the judge.

Harry hesitated.

"It's just that... many things have already been said, and repeated... Mr President. If there was anything to add, it would be to express a certain surprise," he replied before pausing briefly. "I am astonished to note how, after enduring so much suffering, the Wizarding Community seems so eager to inflict new ones upon itself. Crimes must be punished, but... punishing a child?"

"A child, Mr Potter? Need I remind you the accused is over seventeen?"

In the room around them, no one said a word anymore.

"That is unnecessary Your Honour," replied Harry politely, "I am well aware. But it seems important to recall that Draco Malfoy has only been an adult for a year, or barely more. Yet, the majority of testimonies received today date from before this event..."

"Contextual elements are however very much admissible," ruled the president. "These are important data for the jury."

"So it would be fair to judge a man according to facts dating back to his childhood? Particularly when the only year of majority this person has known took place with Voldemort as an imposed guest, threatening his own life and that of his parents?"

Almost the entire assembly shivered at the name of the Dark Lord. Satisfied, Harry continued while striving to express himself as Hermione might have done if she had been in his place.

"Draco Malfoy would never have killed Albus Dumbledore, never... He is not a good person, that is a fact, but he is not a killer. What he did during the Death Eaters' reign, he did mainly to survive. Who, right here, would have had the courage to do otherwise? To stand against the forces of Evil? A minority, at most... otherwise, we would never have reached this point, and this war would never have taken place. Also, it would be prudent... and undoubtedly fairer, to ensure this hearing does not become a pretext offered to everyone to make the accused pay the price of their own wrongs... That is all I have to say Your Honour, thank you."

As proud as if he had just defeated Voldemort a second time, Harry stared at the president without blinking, awaiting his verdict. He had never liked his fame, but if there was one time he should use it, it was today. For turning a deaf ear to the words of "the Chosen One" during a hearing as political and publicised as this one would have heavy consequences...

Uncomfortable, the president fidgeted in his seat, coughing.

"That... gives food for thought, Mr Potter. Would anyone... have anything to add in favour of the accused?" he said, scanning the assembly.

Once again, the amphitheatre was plunged into deep silence. For a good minute, everyone seemed to gauge their neighbour with apprehension... Until a hand shot up in the air, attracting all attention:

"Me!" cried Professor McGonagall vehemently.

"Me too!" thundered Hagrid then, rising from his seat, thereby knocking over his nearest neighbours.

"And me..." supported Aberforth Dumbledore.

As if stimulated by these first interventions, many other people came forward in turn to testify.

Stunned by this last-minute change, the Wizengamot judges had to meet behind closed doors for a good while. When they reappeared to announce their verdict, it was nearly noon and every wizard present in the room hung on the President's lips:

"After deliberation, the jury recognises the exceptionally constraining situation in which Mr Malfoy found himself at the time of the facts, supporting the thesis of follower behaviour, rather than actor. Other testimonies also play in favour of the accused. Notably those according to which the latter deliberately deserted the ranks of the Death Eaters while they were still in a position of strength, during the last phase of the Battle of Hogwarts. That being said, the jury cannot turn a blind eye to the multiple and repeated wrongs caused to the Wizarding Community by the accused. Mr Malfoy, please rise."

The president paused, time to run his fingers through his beard one last time. For a few long seconds, only Draco Malfoy's strangled sobs remained audible.

"Given the elements presented," finally resumed the judge, "the Wizengamot has decided to sentence you to twelve months of detention in Azkaban prison... suspended."

Without another word, the president concluded the session with a bang of his gavel as journalists' flashes mingled with the deafening thunder of cheers and disapprovals from the crowd.

Harry was well aware his intervention, decisive as it may have been, was far from having won unanimous support. In this moment he cared little, however. Much as he hated Draco, he had managed to be as upright and impartial as he deemed he could be. And that was all those alongside whom he had fought for years would have wanted.

5. THE MOST CHARMING SMILE

The hearing over, Harry stood up and began to leave the room, joining a line of wizards. He longed to be out in the open air with his friends, far from the torments this place evoked. Ideally, he would take advantage of the walk back to exchange a few words with Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, or Aberforth Dumbledore. The last time he had seen them was months ago, just after the Battle of Hogwarts.

To his great disappointment, it soon turned out that all three had beaten him to it. Someone else seemed to be waiting for him, however, camped in front of the exit. Of average height, wrapped in the pristine white cloak of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement officers, it was John Dawlish, an Auror about whom Harry knew little, except that the man asked few questions. For instance, he had never questioned his allegiance to the Ministry. Not even when the administration in question, fallen into the hands of the Death Eaters, had begun applying all sorts of measures as brutal as they were arbitrary towards both magical and non-magical populations.

In this moment, Dawlish was holding open one of the large doors through which the hearing witnesses were rushing, staring at Harry with a strange look, bordering on hostility. His jaw was so tight one would have thought he had just swallowed a particularly sticky Zonko's caramel fly.

"Ah, here he is at last! The saviour, the hero with the big heart..." Dawlish finally managed to say as Harry reached his level.

Dumbfounded, Harry merely raised an eyebrow.

"So, are we satisfied with our performance?" continued the Auror, his tone suggesting sarcasm more than a genuine question. "Defending that lonely young Death Eater, what a trick... The press must be rubbing their hands with glee!"

"I beg your pardon?" choked Harry. "I only pleaded the cause that seemed fairest to me!"

A nasty sneer stretched across Dawlish's face, so Harry added with all the indifference he could muster:

"And what others might think of it is their problem."

He tried to pass but Dawlish blocked his way. Before Harry even had a chance to react, the Auror had firmly grabbed him by the arm to pull him close. From a distance, one could have mistaken them for two old friends embracing.

"You'll play the tough guy less this afternoon," whispered Dawlish in his ear as the crowd passed them on all sides. "Your luck and that overrated reputation will be of no help to you this time, and then we shall see! Take my advice, Potter: stay on your guard. It would be unfortunate if our Star of the moment were to injure himself during his exam, or worse; yet, accidents happen so quickly..."

And before Harry even had time to understand what was happening to him, Dawlish had left, slamming the door behind him, right in the face of a tall wizard who was about to cross the threshold. The latter let out a curse that was immediately covered by a distant announcement from the back of the room:

"Please! Kindly hurry up and leave so the witnesses for the next trial can be seated. Make haste, thank you!"

Still in shock, Harry preferred to avoid further jostling. He waited for the flow of participants filling the room again to subside and resumed his run. Questions jostled in his head. Why had Dawlish set upon him like that? How could such an experienced Auror misunderstand his intentions to such an extent? The recent events in court alone could not explain such aggressive behaviour. But then... what could he have done in the past to justify it?

More worrying still, what was this story about putting his life in danger for an interview?

Lost in thought, Harry realised he was still in the room, that everyone was seated, and that the next hearing was about to begin. He slipped

away quietly, as he had learned to do when he sensed Mrs Weasley was about to visit Ginny in her room and he wasn't supposed to be there.

As Harry pushed the large wooden door to close it, the voice of the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot rang out in the distance:

"Our next defendant will be Miss Dolores Umbridge. The charges are as follows..."

The door finished its course and slammed shut, cutting short the details of the upcoming trial. At the same moment, a tiny belch escaped from one of Harry's pockets, making him jump. A smile on his lips, he wondered what other surprises George's enchanted objects might have in store for him, and hastened to leave the Ministry.

"What? He said *that* to you?!" exclaimed Ron as soon as Harry had finished summarising his recent altercation with Dawlish. "Ghoul-head! He'd do better to mind his own cauldrons!"

"Don't think about it anymore Harry, you'll never be able to please everyone anyway. Dawlish must have had a grudge against Draco and didn't appreciate your honest behaviour, that's all," said Hermione.

"Well... For that, we could understand him," mumbled Ron. "Draco is a horrible brat and he will be all his life; it's in his genes. He'll never change course... Not even after your helping hand, mate."

But Harry wasn't listening. He was still just as worried. He hesitated for a moment to report the death threats uttered by the Auror but finally refrained. Ron was already white as a sheet; he didn't need to hear that kind of thing just before their test.

"Come on, eat! Get your strength back for this afternoon," intervened Ginny, handing him a sandwich. "Mum made them for us. You'll see, they're the good!"

Harry swallowed his first bite and his worries vanished immediately. Mrs Weasley's cooking truly had something magical about it. His well-being restored, he could finally fully appreciate the comfort offered by the long bench on which all four were sitting.

Harry had joined his friends in a quiet square, a few streets from Diagon Alley. The sky presented a magnificent azure hue and the sun had reached its zenith, bringing a more than welcome warmth in this chilly mid-summer.

"Did you manage to buy your supplies, then?" asked Harry before starting his second sandwich.

"Yes, it's all good, we found everything. But it's really weird; the bookseller insisted heavily on selling us a copy that wasn't on the list," replied Hermione. "*The Pugnacious Little Book of Great Fighters*; it's a book on Battle Magic and as far as I know, that discipline hasn't been taught at Hogwarts for centuries."

"Maybe McGonagall decided to bring it back into fashion," intervened Ron with a shrug. "After all, she's the Headmistress now."

"Anyway, that awful book has already slapped me twice since I bought it," complained Ginny. "Let's say the second time it tried but ended up smashed at the bottom of the bag just after taking off. I can tell you it's been quiet since..."

Harry looked at Ginny's bag and noticed it was trembling and growling. If that was what a moment of quiet looked like, what could possibly happen when the book was upset? The bright side was that this was a problem that didn't concern him, or at most indirectly. Provided, of course, that he managed to prove himself during the upcoming interviews, which was still far from certain.

"By the way, Harry! We stopped by Florian Fortescue's, the ice cream maker; he sends his regards. He's developed a brand new recipe to celebrate the return of fine weather, look!" cried Ginny, handing him a sort of misty sphere she had just delicately extracted from the bottom of her bag.

"Ah, well... I didn't know Trelawney, our dear ex-Divination teacher, had retrained in sweet desserts," joked Harry while grabbing the object with apprehension.

As he expected, the sphere proved cold to the touch. It seemed inert, but looking closer one could observe a spectacle unexpected to say the

least. The mist glimpsed moments before was in fact a thick layer of swirling small clouds whose tint tended towards purple. The clouds in question were dropping a multitude of tiny snowflakes accumulating on what could be described as a miniature powder snow hill. At the foot of this same hill was a lake with carmine reflections condensing on the lower part of the sphere, right at Harry's fingers. Finally, little by little, the fine droplets of condensation rose as if by magic to swell the clouds in what seemed to be a perpetual cycle.

"So... is... is that the ice cream?" said Harry, amazed.

"*Gluttonis!*" Ginny simply replied, tapping the top of the sphere with her wand, thus making its lid disappear.

A soft and scented breeze caressed Harry's face. Won over, he took a deep breath that finished transporting him far from his worries. He had always loved forest fruits.

"Honours to you," announced Ginny, passing him a spoon.

Determined to taste the intriguing dessert with a good mouthful, Harry plunged his spoon to the bottom of the globe. Contrary to his expectations, it wasn't a piece of the powdery hill he brought up but rather a small sample of each phase contained in the sphere. He then opened his mouth wide, anxious to avoid the small cloud floating above his spoon ending up drawing him a moustache. That was without counting on the fact that Ginny was a Weasley, and not just any Weasley since she owed a good part of her education not to her parents, but to her two prankster twin brothers.

"Ooh, it's cold! And it's good, oh yes!" exclaimed Harry, a good part of whose face found itself covered in ice cream following a strategic nudge from Ginny. "Fantastic! The tastes scroll one after another! Strawberry... raspberry... blueberry. You'd better try it!"

Rather than give his spoon back to Ginny so she could try the experiment in turn, Harry preferred to apply the adage "Revenge is a dish best served cold" to the letter. He hastened to hug her tight before giving her a huge slobbery blackberry-flavoured kiss.

"That was a good joke but... anyone have a tissue? I can't show up to the interview like this, all smeared with ice cream," said Harry, looking at his reflection distorted by the sphere. "Although, if I'm dealing with a female examiner, maybe a scented kiss will turn into a springboard for my career..."

By way of answer, Ginny simply stuck out a multi-coloured tongue at him (no doubt a side effect of the frozen dessert).

"No need for a tissue when you have magic!" retorted Hermione with satisfaction. "*Tergeo!*" she added after placing her wand so close to Harry he nearly went cross-eyed. "There Ginny," she added, "no more risk now! We can continue our shopping with peace of mind, while our two heroes fight proudly for our love."

"What do you mean 'no *more* risk now?'" emphasised Harry, frowning.

But at the same instant, Hermione's spell had worked. Harry had the impression a thin film of epidermis was detaching from his face, a bit as if he had undergone an accelerated moult. A few more seconds and his skin was as clear and soft as if he had emerged from the most rigorous skincare session.

"I knew it!" cried Ron as if he had just solved a particularly tricky riddle. "I told myself there was a scam, something not normal somewhere. That's how you get ready faster than me in the morning!"

"Ron, in those moments I'd call your slowness 'not normal' if you want my opinion," retorted Hermione. "And for your information, if you ever get the idea to try your hand at your first grooming spell—which could constitute a great advance, perhaps not for the whole Earth, but at least for those who rub shoulders with you daily—know that a badly performed *Tergeo* spell can have disastrous effects. Well... that's what Parvati told me once."

Harry imagined for a moment arriving at the interview with the head of Gregory Goyle, Draco Malfoy's stupid sidekick, and congratulated himself that Hermione was such a brilliant witch.

"Ready for the big departure, Ron?" he called out before stretching to free himself from the digestive torpor trying to seize him.

Ron proved he could offer a very convincing imitation of Fred when his mother forced him to tidy his room before getting up in turn.

"Yeah... I really hope it's not 'Triwizard Tournament' type trials waiting for us," he said, biting his lip. "I don't especially want to spend the end of the summer at St Mungo's Hospital."

Harry's stomach contracted thinking back to the threats Dawlish had uttered earlier in the morning; for a moment he hesitated to tell his friend everything then changed his mind. It was too late now; better to preserve Ron to the end.

After a long and touching hugging session, and once Harry had entrusted the tiny red chick with strange powers to Ginny, the two boys turned on their heels. On the way to the Ministry, Ron never ceased lamenting, imagining the worst possibilities. To hear him tell it, he and Harry would soon be led to face countless cohorts of dragons while having been previously bound hand and foot and blindfolded. Although this prospect seemed far-fetched to him, Harry couldn't help wondering to what extent Ron's conjectures would be confirmed.

Despite their precautions, they arrived at the Ministry with only relative advance. Interminable queues of witches seemed to have sprung up during the lunch break, starting from the reception counters and extending over dozens of yards like the sinuous roots of a huge tree. Alas, it was the only path Harry and Ron could take to reach their goal. Indeed, it was unthinkable to present oneself for interviews without having previously procured the visitor's badge, a badge only the clerks were able to issue.

Harry and Ron therefore chose a queue that led them just behind a large gathering of witches from which emanated a mixture of giggles and excited laughter.

"By all the Hippogriffs, what are these bimbos doing here?" asked Ron a few minutes later, as his last zests of patience threatened to crumble. "We're at the Ministry here, not in a hen house!"

Intrigued, Harry refrained from answering to better strain his ears.

"He has crazy charm, don't you think?"

"Yes, and his look! His hair, did you see his hair?!"

"Not to mention his little smile, oh my... Next time he gives me one like that—I warn you—I'm fainting!"

"Well there, I'm sorry my dear, but I think that look was for me just now."

Ron, who had missed nothing of the scene, seemed so exasperated it wouldn't have been surprising to see steam coming out of his ears.

"Excuse me... Would you mind telling us who could possibly be the object of so much... idolatry?" Harry ventured to ask in a falsely stiff tone. "Has the dandy Gilderoy Lockhart been released from his asylum earlier this morning?"

The three young witches at the end of the group turned around as one. Harry took a step back discovering their exasperated expression. A little more and they would have riddled him with hexes.

"Gilder-who? Not at all... it's the great hero of the Battle of Hogwarts, y'know! The one who won the *Witch Weekly* Most Charming Smile Award. He's here!" replied a teenager whose face with bulbous eyes evoked distant family ties with a particularly repulsive toad family.

The other two witches giggled and began to flutter eyelashes so oversized Harry could feel the surrounding air swirl.

"Ah... right... And this famous hero, does he have a name?"

"Obviously he has one! It's the great, oh yes the fabulous, oh the fantastic... Neeeviiiille!" exclaimed another witch with extravagant makeup as if she were about to faint.

"Neville, you say...?"

"Well yeah! I swear, what rock have you been living under?" indignated the young woman, casting an alarmed glance at her companions. "IT'S NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM, AND HE IS HERE!"

Ron was seized with uncontrollable laughter. He quickly judged it preferable, however, to shove a fist in his mouth while slipping under cover behind Harry. A wise initiative, for with their fierce air, the

witches didn't seem the type to tolerate anyone attacking the object of their worship.

"Hey, wait a sec... you there!" intervened the third witch. "Wouldn't you be Harry Potter? The famous Harry Potter...?" she added, staring at him with sudden greed.

"Harry Potter? Oh, there must be a mistake... I'm Roger. Yes, that's it... Roger Bloggs! A friend drew this fake scar on my forehead. He's very funny. Er... he found it at *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes*, you know the great shop in Diagon..."

"Shame, he wasn't bad," the witch cut him off as if Harry had been nothing more than a juicy steak on which a pigeon dropping had suddenly landed.

Without another word, the groupies turned their backs on them and the cackling resumed with renewed vigour.

"Did you hear that?" hastened to whisper Ron. "Neville Longbottom, 'Hunk' of the year?! What is this rubbish? This story reeks of Butterbeer abuse, I tell you!"

"Yes... all the more so as with those three, better to be only 'not bad'," chuckled Harry.

Despite his derisive tone, Harry couldn't help thinking most seriously about the question. Was it possible there was another Neville Longbottom in the vicinity? Such a thing was hard to imagine. But assuming it was indeed the same Neville—who had indeed behaved bravely during the battle—since when in that case could he be posing in magazines for witches in full hormonal crisis?

"One thing is certain, if we don't move faster, we can kiss our interview goodbye," resumed Ron. "There must be another hour of waiting there, with those nutters clogging up the front... I knew Hermione was wrong to stop us taking your new hat. One magic word and we'd be there already!"

As if by miracle, the voice of the clerk, the very same who had welcomed Harry earlier in the morning, rang out loudly in the Great Hall:

"Please Ladies! Kindly take your place in another queue. The candidates for the Auror tests are expected! And calm down a little!"

Harry and Ron didn't need telling twice and hastened to go up their interminable queue at a run, under the wrathful gaze of the impatient women. Incredible as it may seem, a few more strides, a signature, and they were already on the other side of the counters, each wearing a silver badge bearing the inscription "Auror in Training".

Ron had just struck a pose after waddling provocatively while rolling his muscles, an index finger proudly pointed at his badge, when a voice exclaimed not far away:

"Harry! Ron! Hey, how are you?"

A young man with an athletic physique and a muscular jaw was advancing towards them waving his arms to signal them. From a distance, one could have thought it was Cedric Diggory: ex-Triwizard Tournament champion of reputed beauty and tragic victim of Lord Voldemort. Something was wrong, however. The snag seemed to come from the newcomer's gait, which lacked Cedric's assurance and conquering step.

The boy approached a little closer and as soon as Harry met his gaze he knew who he was dealing with. There was such kindness in those eyes...

"Neville! Impossible, is it really you?" exclaimed Ron, incredulous.

"Yes... Sorry I should have let you know sooner, but... I didn't dare," replied the strapping lad.

"You look superb, what are you talking about?"

"Well, a lot has happened since we last saw each other. After the battle, my grandmother was very proud of me and she offered to treat me to a stay at the *Fieralur* Centre, on the Mediterranean coast."

"Really? And... was it good?" asked Harry, on the verge of pinching himself to ensure he wasn't dreaming.

"At first I struggled to imagine what they meant by 'fitness centre'," said Neville. "I expected to do a bit of exercise, the hostesses looked

rather pretty and the setting was dreamy, so I let myself be tempted. And then there I met Marianne, a charming person who..."

"What a handsome man!" cut in Ron giving him a brotherly flick on the shoulder. "With an angel face like that, the Marianne in question must not have resisted very long!"

"Actually, I was the Neville from before when we met... It was... she who explained to me that the centre was also famous for its aesthetic spells."

"You mean...?"

"Oh Neville, you are so close to my masculine ideal. Just lift your nose a bit, realign your teeth, pin back your ears, yada yada yada..." cried Neville then in a nasal voice.

Harry and Ron, who had started laughing listening to the story, stopped dead upon noticing Neville wasn't imitating them.

"Come on, you shouldn't regret it! We always liked you as you were! It's sure now you're going to overshadow us a lot with the girls! But that doesn't call our friendship into question for all that," said Ron as Neville seemed on the verge of breaking down.

"I suspect as much, that's not really the problem. The thing is... I was very much in love, you understand? One after another, I did all these operations for that girl without thinking too much. And one morning, without warning, a Howler falls on me right in the middle of breakfast."

"Did your grandmother have a fit of jealousy?" chortled Ron, determined not to follow Neville in his gloom.

"What? No... She had received the bills. Three thousand Gold Galleons! I... ruined the family. Obviously once the operations were finished things went sour with Marianne, and finally I realised she was in cahoots with the *Fieralur* Centre."

"Not a great ending indeed," conceded Harry.

Ron nodded sympathetically. For his part, Neville seemed to have got something in his eye.

"When I came back, my grandmother didn't let go of me, you can imagine. She entered me in a whole bunch of contests and other stupid shows," said Neville whose voice was choking. "She told me she was going to manage me, until every last Knut had been paid back!"

"You mean... so it was true then? We are really in the presence of the winner of the Most Charming Smile contest?" asked Ron, admiringly.

"I should hope so! Otherwise I would have been transformed into Owl Treat ages ago. And I'd better not mess up today's interview, believe me."

"Did you sign up to become an Auror too?"

"It's the only ground on which we could agree, my grandmother and I," acquiesced Neville. "And for once, I know I have a chance!"

Unexpected as it might be, this spark of self-confidence emanating from Neville cheered up the team. Both happy and a little reassured to find themselves together before the test, they headed towards the lifts. The trio had settled in the cabin and the grilles had begun to close when a hysterical scream eclipsed the surrounding din.

"I am yours for eternity! THINK OF ME NEVILLE!" said a female voice in the distance.

Barely had this cry from the heart faded when a small pink ball of silky appearance landed just in time in the lift, a bit like a grenade with the pin pulled in an action movie.

"What the...?" jumped Neville whose cheeks had inflamed.

"Must be for you," suggested Harry perceptively while Ron rolled his eyes murmuring something like "Plenty more fish in the sea...".

Under the mocking gaze of his friends, Neville bent down naively to pick up the object.

"I... knickers?!" he nearly choked, eyes fixed on the thing swinging lazily at the end of his wand.

Barely a few moments later (as well as a few floors lower), the lift doors opened on an imposing wizard dressed in an indigo robe. All three knew him well; it was Kingsley Shacklebolt, an Auror who had always

supported Albus Dumbledore and alongside whom they had ended up fighting Voldemort and his Death Eaters. His recent appointment as interim Minister for Magic made him more impressive than usual, however, and Neville hastened to stuff the underwear just received into one of his pockets.

Try as he might to hide the undergarment, the powerful floral perfume with which it was soaked did not fail to spread in the cabin...

"What a powerful aura!" exclaimed Kingsley after inhaling deeply. "Good luck for your tests, Gentlemen!"

Without another word, he swapped places with the group, gave them a final enigmatic wink, and disappeared with the closing of the doors.

"Do... do you think he saw?" worried Neville, head in his shoulders.

"Don't worry about that, handsome, we're really not early," replied Ron.

They then rushed towards the Auror Office. On the way, Neville must have been preoccupied for he never ceased grumbling. While the trio progressed at a good pace in an interminable maze of corridors, Harry managed to catch a few snatches of his monologues among which "fed up", "are nuts" and "what will they think of me?".

It was almost time for the appointment when they arrived breathless at the end of a long corridor of supernatural whiteness. Before them stood a large marble door on which was engraved "Department of Magical Law Enforcement – Auror Office – Candidate Reception".

"At least we're warmed up!" panted Ron before pushing the door.

But the leaves didn't budge an inch. Ron insisted, without success, before calling for his companions' help. Determined, Neville was about to use his shoulder as a battering ram when a face with grumpy features appeared on the wall, drawn by the striations running through the stone.

"Ah, here are more of them... Wants to save the world and is ready to brave all dangers, but knows nothing of the rules of etiquette," grumbled the face.

"Er... can you open for us, please?"

"It doesn't work like that, young fools! You knock before entering!" said the face angrily.

"Very well, as you wish!" retorted Ron, looking delighted, before knocking three times right on the nose of their strange interlocutor.

The door finally opened in a stream of curses that must have dated back several centuries, for neither Harry, nor Ron, nor Neville really understood their meaning. In the frame then appeared a small room with pale white walls, devoid of windows, with for only furniture a platform and a few faded desks.

6. AT THE RISK OF HIS LIFE

Harry stepped into the reception room and immediately felt that the time for joyous reunions with Neville was over. A wave of anxiety seized him as he recalled Professor McGonagall's warnings about the complexity of the Auror exams.

Several heads turned as the trio made their entrance. Some seemed familiar to Harry, but he would have been quite unable to say whom they belonged to. They were probably former Hogwarts students he had crossed paths with in the corridors during his schooling. Some candidates, however, must have recognised him for they gave him a slight nod which Harry returned without hesitation. Sometimes, simply being in the same mess could create powerful bonds.

Ron leaned against a wall, arms crossed, face tense. Neville, for his part, began pacing the room and soon ended up on the floor after tripping over a table leg. Harry took advantage of the scene to study the other candidates' reactions. Three of the ten other wizards present started what looked like a move to help him, while the rest merely gave a vague, annoyed look. Assuming a phase of the exam had to be completed in a group, Harry would head straight for those three.

Long minutes passed before a section of the wall finally slid open. A short, bald wizard, wearing a grey coat and a long cape sweeping the floor behind him, appeared. His military gait, his extravagant, impeccably trimmed moustache, and the sneer distorting his face gave him a rather disturbing appearance.

"Sit down, rookies," he ordered coldly.

Everyone hastened to follow his directive and within seconds everyone was seated, straight-backed, motionless, and alert.

A deathly silence fell on the room and Harry's heart began to beat faster and faster. In this moment he would have paid dearly to be elsewhere doing anything else, like anyone else. He promised himself to remember this feeling the next time he got the funny idea of being bored, assuming that opportunity arose again.

"Right, you are all here. I am Instructor Huntson," said the grey-clad wizard, stepping onto the platform (which placed him barely higher than the candidates sitting in the front row). "If you are before me, it is because you have been selected to become an elite. An elite dedicated to defending humanity against the threat posed by Dark Wizards. Note that while the latter have recently suffered a crushing defeat, many of them are still on the run somewhere in the wild... Many talented Aurors fell during the clashes, and I won't hide from you that some of you wouldn't be here today if we weren't suffering from such a shortage of staff."

Harry's stomach lurched. After Dawlish, it was now Huntson's turn to sow doubt. Had Ron, Neville, and he really been accepted for their qualities, or for other unrelated reasons? Would other points Dawlish had advanced soon be confirmed?

A little further to the left, Neville had started squirming in his chair as if seized by an urgent need to go to the toilet.

"What's going on?" asked Huntson loudly. "Does our Mr Smiley have a problem?"

"Er yes, I mean no... Please don't call me that," stammered Neville.

"Cut to the chase, Longbottom, we haven't got all night. What's eating you?"

Ron, who was just to Harry's right, took advantage of the scene to lean closer, pretending one of his laces was undone.

"Dragon's breath, where did they find this one? He doesn't look friendly," he whispered, head between his knees.

"WEASLEY! LET POTTER HOLD HIS GUTS TOGETHER BY HIMSELF, HE'S GOING TO NEED THEM!" bellowed the Auror, spraying a shower of spittle that easily reached the second-row candidates.

"Instructor?" resumed Neville, this time in a more decided tone. "I was told some candidates died in the past, during the tests. Is that true?"

Huntson pivoted slowly to fix him with his pale eyes. Eyes that seemed to have seen so many battles it would have been impossible to count them all.

"Affirmative, Longbottom... and before the test begins, you will have to sign a waiver. Being an Auror, and thereby becoming an Auror, means being ready to give your life for the cause. Get that into your skulls!"

Harry didn't need to turn his head to feel Ron stiffen instantly a few feet away, and a wave of guilt washed over him. So Dawlish's words were confirmed. His best friend would soon be put in mortal danger. Harry had suspected it—no, he had always known it deep down—but he had done nothing to warn him.

The instructor swept the room with an amused look, smoothed his moustache, and resumed:

"As some of you may know, the interview will take place in two stages during which you will be constantly assessed. The first will consist of a mainly theoretical exam. You will have twenty minutes, and not a second more, to complete a multiple-choice questionnaire. The second part of the test will only be accessible to candidates who have answered enough questions correctly. They will then have to overcome a rather peculiar obstacle course..."

Huntson paused again, during which Harry could tell from the numerous sighs heard that he wasn't the only one feeling a strong adrenaline rush in that moment.

"You will be on your own throughout the test. Any questions? Yes, Longbottom?"

"How do we know if we've given enough correct answers during the first stage?"

"All I can tell you is that something will happen at that moment that you won't be able to miss," replied Huntson. "Weasley?"

"Are there specific success criteria, or will reaching the end of the trials be enough?" asked Ron, throat tight.

"Your success will indeed depend on your ability to come out of the exam in one piece. In addition to that, you will be assigned a secret score which will help us assign you missions later. It will be based on various criteria, such as your magical power, your adaptability, your responsiveness, your inventiveness, your speed, your concentration..."

"And teamwork?" said Harry after raising his hand at the last moment.

"Good point, Potter. That aspect of the Auror profession constitutes a key to its success, obviously. But that data will only be exercised and examined during your first mission. So focus for the moment on the criteria I just cited."

A few moments passed during which everyone seemed to digest the instructor's announcements. Harry could hear Ron repeating under his breath the various magic formulas they had revised together with Hermione's help. As he mentally scanned his own repertoire of spells, he felt a drop of sweat slide down his arm. A quick shoulder movement allowed him to note that his T-shirt had turned into a veritable icy sponge. He shivered. The comfort offered by the large feather duvet bed in which he had woken a few hours earlier now seemed terribly distant.

A small flying paper note passed through the opening from which the instructor had appeared and unfolded at the level of his moustache, without him having to touch it for a single moment.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, it is time to go," announced Huntson, beckoning them closer. "Let the trials begin!"

A new section of wall opened a few yards from the platform, outlining a frame of inky blackness contrasting so sharply with the ghostly white of the room it looked like it was sucking all the light out of it. The Auror stopped a few steps from the sort of black hole and ordered the candidates to do the same.

"Before entering, please sign the waiver posted to my left. If you feel your time has come, or simply if you wish to give up, keep in mind that simply saying the words 'I give up' aloud will end the exam immediately. Warning, however! There is no second chance. Therefore, ending the exam in this way will also end your career as an Auror, forever."

The room emptied as small groups of applicants disappeared through the portal of darkness. Soon only Harry, Ron, Neville, and Instructor Huntson remained, considering them with undisguised interest. Harry was the last to sign the form. With a trembling hand, he put down the small raven quill that had been made available to candidates and went to join his friends.

Finally, as one man, Harry, Ron, and Neville plunged into the passage which closed immediately behind them.

"By Merlin's beard, we can't see a thing in here!" came Ron's voice.

"Ouch! Who stepped on my foot?" replied Neville's.

"Shh! *Lumos!*" whispered Harry.

Harry's wand illuminated the surroundings, revealing the silhouettes of Ron and Neville standing close by. The rest, floor included, was pitch

black. The light projected by his wand diminished rapidly however, and all three found themselves plunged into darkness again.

"This test is off to a great start," commented Ron. "'So how did it go boys? Oh great listen, only trouble is we couldn't find the room where the first task was held. Apart from that, easy.' Er... guys?"

"Yes, I'm here!" said Neville.

"Me too," replied Harry. "*Lumos Maxima!*"

The phenomenon that had just occurred repeated itself. For a moment Ron and Neville were clearly visible and, a few seconds later, darkness had taken over again.

"For now we'd better stick together. Hold on to me," suggested Harry.

But this time, no answer came back to him. Harry shouted to his friends in vain. Ron and Neville had vanished for good.

Left to his own devices, Harry undertook to head straight ahead in the hope of finding a wall he could then follow. Right hand firmly gripping his wand, left hand held out to prevent any potential collision, Harry set off.

Harry walked like this for a time that seemed an eternity but no obstacle barred his way. He was beginning to lose hope when a faint glow appeared on the horizon, like a lone star lost in the void of space. Harry soon noticed the light source gaining intensity as he progressed in its direction. Impatient, he broke into a run. Restrained at first, then finally with all the energy at his disposal. It was out of the question to let this glimmer of hope slip through his fingers.

Breathless, massaging himself to silence the throbbing pain of a stitch, Harry finally reached the famous light source and found himself facing a most unexpected scene.

Planted in the middle of nowhere, an old Victorian streetlamp illuminated a sumptuous ebony desk in front of which was positioned a Chesterfield armchair with coppery reflections. A stack of parchments, accompanied by an eagle quill and an inkwell, rested on the work surface. Finally, hanging a few yards directly above the armchair, held by two chains with rusty links, was suspended the blade of a massive guillotine.

"*Accio parchment!*" tried Harry.

Nothing happened. Harry tried a multitude of spells that might have allowed him to discover the contents of the scrolls without risking himself under the impressive blade, without success... The rules of the game were

set, it seemed, and he clearly would have no choice but to accept them if he intended to continue the exam.

Observing a thousand precautions, Harry took a seat in the luxurious leather armchair. Barely had he sat down when the desk facing him moved closer until it slammed brutally against him. Breath half knocked out of him, Harry understood it was now useless to hope to leave the place. Resigned, he grabbed the eagle quill and turned over the top parchment of the stack, thus revealing the multiple-choice questionnaire Huntson had spoken of during the preparatory phase.

The meagre relief Harry might have felt moments earlier as he extracted himself from the darkness was short-lived. He had just begun to leaf through the stack of parchments, eager to measure the extent of the work required, when a strange metallic clinking rang out somewhere above him. Instinctively, he looked up and discovered with horror that the guillotine hanging over him had started to swing. Worse still, the blade seemed to be losing altitude with each of its comings and goings...

Having not a second to lose, Harry got back to his questionnaire, striving not to pay too much attention to the incessant noise of the swinging.

At first glance, the majority of the questions would require deep thought. Harry remembered the instructor had mentioned a duration of twenty minutes for this phase of the exam. He related this value to the number of questions he had just counted and obtained... thirty seconds. He therefore had on average only half a minute to deal with each point of the questionnaire.

Reviewing his estimates, Harry had the unpleasant surprise of noting that many statements were so long it seemed impossible to assimilate their content in less than a minute. How was he supposed to manage? Did he have to resort to a specific spell? No, that was unlikely. The fact that no spell had worked so far could not be a coincidence. But then how? Getting through all these questions in so little time was simply a miracle! There must be a mistake somewhere. Unless it was enough to answer as many questions as possible? Or reach a certain score? And then damn it! Harry told himself internally. Dithering like this, the point of no return would be reached before he had even started filling in his parchments. The time had come to act.

Thus, Harry chose to deal with the short questions first. The rest would wait...

"What is the name of the Dark Magic spell causing devastating flames capable of taking the appearance of mythological monsters?" read Harry at full speed. Caught in his memories, he saw himself back in the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts, chased by a gigantic inferno that had momentarily taken the form of a snake. A few days later, Hermione had explained to him what spell it was. What had she said then? Fire... Old Fire... Old Firewhisky? No, no and no! It was... Fire... *Fiendfyre!* Harry hastened to tick the corresponding box to throw himself on the next question.

Answers followed one another like this, and Harry didn't need to look at his watch to feel he had caught up. Now, astonishing as it might seem, he saw himself well enough on track to finish a little early. Brain boiling, Harry stopped for a short break. He took the opportunity to try and find a position that was a little more accommodating, as far as possible given the pressure the desk continued to exert on his hip.

Shoulders sunk into the soft and enveloping backrest of the Chesterfield, his questionnaire in a more than decent state of progress, Harry finally managed to relax a little. He was going to make it, he was almost there. Carried away by comfort, he felt as if gently pulled out of himself. He then projected himself, leaving the exam triumphant, adulated by his peers, the Minister for Magic rushing at him to shake the hand of the best candidate the Auror Office had seen in a century, then...

Whooooooooooooosh... Shooooooooooooooooom...

Harry jumped and a lock of black hair tickled his nose before landing on his wizard robes. He didn't take long to understand what had just happened. He had dozed off in the strange armchair and half a dozen precious minutes had taken the opportunity to fly away. Now, the guillotine was swinging so low Harry had to press himself against the desk not to end up sliced on the next pass.

Eyes now glued to the parchment, Harry resolved to resume the questions he had foolishly left pending: "You find yourself thrown into an inferno by your opponent, your clothes catch fire and a biting burning sensation seizes you, what do you do?"

Shoooooooooooooof... Whooooooooooooosh...

"You are in a bar, pretending to have a drink to obtain certain information from a dubious individual as part of an infiltration mission. Barely have you finished your drink when your throat tightens..."

SHOOOooooooooosh... SHOOOOOOooooooooosh...

"...you are suffocating, your vision is already blurring. Among the remedies proposed below, which do you choose to ingest first?"

WHOOOOOOOOOSH... WHOOOOOOOOOOOSH...

Unable to resist any longer, Harry took his eyes off the questionnaire for a fraction of a second... It was too late, he couldn't extract himself from the armchair, he was completely trapped and the blade had already begun its descent, swooping on him hissing like a metallic snake pouncing on its prey. For a brief moment its sharp edge glinted in the tepid light of the lamp post. *It's over*, realised Harry.

"At least it shouldn't hurt too much," he thought aloud.

SCHLACK!

Harry felt himself spinning and falling in slow motion. He could see the guillotine pass one last time as it began a new pass and shredded the seat holding him prisoner.

At the last moment, Harry thought he heard his mother Lily's voice. "The answer is a Bezoar, you know that, my darling," he had perceived in a soothing whisper. Blindly, Harry had scribbled a cross where the corresponding box was supposed to be on his parchment. The desk had then withdrawn so brutally Harry had lost his balance. But instead of crashing violently to the ground, he had continued his course through a trapdoor he hadn't noticed upon arrival, so obsessed had he been with the impressive guillotine and his haste to start the exam...

Harry ended his fall headfirst to land in a sort of pipe. At least that's what he thought for the same oppressive darkness reigned around him as when he had started the test alongside his friends. The only thing he was certain of now was that he felt himself falling ever lower, carried by his own weight and sliding in contact with an icy liquid.

Gradually, Harry must have gathered speed for he found himself thrown several times against the walls of the tube like a luge lost out of control during a bobsleigh event. He was soon speeding so fast he had to press his hands against his nose to protect himself from the splashes choking him while lacerating his skin. Finally, without warning, physical contact with the pipe ceased. A new fall began... to end moments later with a great *SPLASH!*

A terrible cold seized Harry, so much so that he screamed in pain. His complaint was limited however to a sort of shrill vibration accompanied by a consequent volume of air bubbles. He had just fallen into a large, dark, icy pool. Disoriented, Harry struggled in a sort of fight against himself; before even thinking of finding the surface, he had to regain control of his body and muscles paralysed by the cold. No sooner had he managed it than he launched himself blindly into the oppressive void.

To his great dismay, the only surface he managed to reach proved soft and unpleasantly slimy. In his confusion, Harry had likely not followed the right direction. The darkness surrounding him remained impenetrable and he still had no clue as to the direction to follow. Lost and on the verge of suffocating, Harry felt panic overtaking him. For a moment he thought of saying the words "I give up" but changed his mind almost immediately. Clearly, no one would hear his cries of distress from the bottom of the pool. He had to find something else, and fast.

During the second task of the Triwizard Tournament, which had been held exclusively under the surface of the Hogwarts lake, some candidates had cleverly used the Bubble-Head Charm to manage to breathe underwater. Harry had indeed revised the spell with Ron and Hermione a week before, but he didn't know if he would be capable of casting it without pronouncing the incantation aloud. Indeed, non-verbal spells required an advanced level of magic, or even more, depending on the complexity of the desired enchantment. Another problem that might arise, one generally cast the Bubble-Head Charm in the open air, in other words before finding oneself with one's head submerged.

Harry tried to apply the method Hermione had taught him. He strove to relax, listen to his senses, and forget the other signals his brain was transmitting to focus on his objective.

"*Aer bulla!*" he thought as soon as he felt ready.

Harry waited a short moment but nothing happened. At most, he had managed to inflict a violent migraine on himself adding to the long list of ailments already plaguing him.

"*Aer bulla,*" he persisted then. "*Aer bulla!*"

Nothing.

Harry had the vague impression of drifting away, detaching from his own body. His air reserves were exhausted; he probably had only one last

attempt before losing consciousness and sinking into the depths of the pool.

"Aer bulla... Aer bulla! Aer bulla!!"

Running out of oxygen, Harry felt the little energy remaining abandon him. It was a bit as if the few strengths he still had were being sucked out of him, diluting on contact with the surrounding liquid to vanish into the freezing darkness. Like a puppet whose strings had been cut, Harry drifted slowly towards the abyss. In a final moment of consciousness, he could feel the gentle caress of Death on his face. She embraced him tenderly then, her grip assured, her embrace tightened suddenly. She contemplated him then with her beautiful hazel eyes before offering him a final smile speckled with freckles and finally placed her lips on his...

Harry felt a sort of electric shock.

"Aer bulla!" he pronounced immediately internally, while describing a circle with the tip of his wand at the cost of inestimable effort.

After a few seconds, Harry had the strange impression the water had started to quiver. The sensation was pleasant and tickled slightly. In reality, a multitude of small bubbles had materialised before starting to fizz all around his face. The next moment, a comforting sensation of dryness spread from his lips to his nose before rising to his ears.

Harry opened his mouth wide and sucked in all the air he could find. He had done it; he could breathe again.

Although he burned to know a little more about the strange phenomenon that had just saved him, Harry put his questions off until later. A milestone had been passed but salvation was not guaranteed for all that. He was still lost, buried under several feet of water, at the mercy of a glacial cold piercing him from all sides.

Harry hastened to chase away the darkness surrounding him with a new spell. To his great relief, and contrary to what he had experienced during the first part of the exam, the beam of light he shot from his wand held. As soon as his vision had adapted to the new lighting conditions, he scanned the surroundings in search of an escape. Judging by the silvery reflections rippling somewhere in the distance to his left, he had swum in the wrong direction just after his fall, moving even further from his goal.

Full of newfound hope, he pushed off the spongy surface into which he had inadvertently sunk a moment earlier and launched himself. But barely had he begun his ascent when a huge orange eye, split by a pupil at least a

yard long, opened facing him... He had just woken a gigantic underwater monster.

Having had enough opportunities to judge the dangerousness of the trials, Harry left nothing to chance. He spontaneously extended the arm holding his wand towards the eye and, with a discharge, dealt the most powerful Conjunctivitis Curse he knew. The entire pool began to shake as the spell hit its target, diffusing a terrible scream in the air bubble encompassing Harry's head. Twice he narrowly missed being snatched by tentacles that seemed to emerge from nowhere then, after swimming as vigorously as he could, he finally managed to extract himself from the pool.

"Sorry, Hagrid... You would have known how to handle that thing," coughed Harry, getting up painfully.

It took him several minutes to recover from his emotions. The peaceful summer he had spent with the Weasleys must have softened him a bit. For better or worse, he had almost forgotten what it felt like to risk his life at every turn. His clothes dried with a flick of his wand, Harry hurried to continue his way by rushing into the long rocky tunnel presenting itself to him. He felt exhausted and dreamed of only one thing: getting out of this hell as quickly as possible.

Hard to say how long he walked then, for his watch, which he had managed to repair with Ginny a few weeks earlier, seemed to have taken one bad knock too many. Harry therefore let himself go along the winding tunnel wondering what other surprise could possibly await him. As he wandered, the shadows projected by his wand light did not fail to stimulate his imagination, and he jumped on his own more than once.

A little later, Harry had just stumbled against the start of a stalagmite when something burning passed by grazing his cheek. He had only a fraction of a second after raising his head to understand a new orange flash threatened him. Harry dived instinctively to the ground and fired back, hoping to buy himself the little respite necessary to establish a plan. However, judging by the cry and thud that followed, his covering fire had hit the mark.

Head hunched in his shoulders, wand raised, ready to sweep aside any further attack, he pushed further into the tunnel. A vaguely familiar silhouette gradually took shape as he progressed. There was soon another flash but Harry deflected it as easily as if it had been a dart. A Disarming Charm later and the fight was over for good.

"Don't hurt me, I surrender!" pleaded a voice recognisable among all.

"Ron? Is that you?" exclaimed Harry. "What are you doing here? You gave me one hell of a fright!"

"I didn't mean any harm! I... I-I must have got lost!" cried Ron, prey to panic fear.

As if he didn't recognise Harry, he raised his hands in surrender and added:

"It's... it's a real maze, this place!"

"You said it! And the exit isn't on my side," replied Harry. "Unless you want to take on a giant squid, or something like that!"

Unable to resist any longer, he burst out laughing with relief.

"With hindsight, I'm ready to bet it was Hagrid who lent them that monster!" he added gaily.

"Hagrid?"

"Well yes, Hagrid... Anyway, Ron... Are you sure you're okay?"

"I don't know... I banged my head against a rock because of your spell," retorted Ron, a glint of reproach in his eyes.

"Sorry... but at the same time, you shot first. By the way, what was that spell?" he added. "I'd never seen you do that before. Don't tell me Hermione taught you on the sly!"

"My head really hurts... we'll discuss it later."

Ron looked so upset Harry didn't insist. Instead, he helped him up with a big smile, far too happy not to have to face the remaining trials alone anymore. Although still a little shaky, Ron declared himself sufficiently recovered and the two friends resumed their route in search of the coveted exit.

They didn't take long to find new challenges worthy of them... The maze of tunnels led Harry and Ron to face the largest Troll they had ever met. And that was before finding themselves facing a horde of Dementors floating macabrely above a vast frozen lake. Each time, Harry managed to save the situation just in time. First by turning the Troll's big club against him using the very handy Levitation Charm *Wingardium Leviosa*, as he had learned in his first year at Hogwarts, then by chasing the Dementors with a Patronus that would have made Professor Lupin proud.

For his part, Ron still seemed to be in shock and showed excessive imprudence. He had even nearly precipitated Harry into the lake by triggering a spell inadvertently, in the middle of the fight against the Dementors. To top it all off, Ron had developed an unfortunate tendency to lag behind. Doing so, he muttered incomprehensible words he forgot as soon as Harry asked him to repeat. His behaviour was becoming increasingly worrying, and Harry almost came to regret their paths had crossed. Lucky as they might have been so far, nothing said their lucky star would still shine when the next danger manifested.

"Ron! Come on, snap out of it mate," lectured Harry impatiently. "We're almost there, look!"

They had just tumbled into a vast room fitted with a fireplace occupying almost the entire back wall. An emerald-hued brazier crackled there, reflecting on the impeccably polished sea-green marble slabs lining the place, from floor to ceiling. As if to attract their attention, a golden plaque had started to sparkle right above the hearth after their entry.

"*Towards the Room of the... Admitted,*" read Harry aloud, his excitement growing as he deciphered the sign.

Eager to be done with the trial, its maze and its innumerable pitfalls, he rushed towards the exit.

"Hurry up, Ron! That's it, it's over, we did it!" he threw over his shoulder.

But the steps of Ron, supposed to be following him, were never heard. Instead, a lugubrious laugh soon burst out before echoing through the room.

"I doubt it strongly... Potter," said a strange voice.

Harry didn't have time to turn around. Something hit him right between the shoulder blades and he was thrown into the air before crashing painfully a few yards away.

Winded, head about to explode, he rushed for his wand and spun around. Myriads of stars danced in his field of vision and he only had time to glimpse Ron's silhouette, a menacing arm outstretched in his direction, before being hit full force by an orange flash. A blinding pain seized Harry. His insides had caught fire, every nerve running through his body had become an incandescent metal wire.

"Earlier, you were so keen to know what spell you had just narrowly escaped," said Ron, whose voice seemed to be changing. "I was dying to demonstrate it to you, you can imagine. But I preferred to wait, to study you a little..."

Harry was traversed by a new wave of suffering and Ron resumed:

"I thought the following trials would get the better of you, and I congratulated myself on having taken a front-row seat to witness your failure. But you did everything to deprive me of that pleasure... And when I saw we were reaching the end of the session, I understood I had to take matters into my own hands... The spell to which you are currently subjected comes from a very ancient form of Dark Magic. You will not fail to find similarities with the *Cruciatus* Curse, if you have ever tasted it. It is a little less powerful, admittedly, but it has a great advantage... It has been forgotten for ages, and is not among the Unforgivable Curses."

The torture ceased with the end of the monologue. As he tried to catch his breath, Harry heard the sharp sound of approaching footsteps. A menacing shadow soon spread over his face.

"You!" gasped Harry.

"I thought I warned you, Potter. Yes, it is I... John Dawlish, Transfiguration specialist on behalf of the Auror Office. Obviously, despite my facilities, it still took me some time to reach such a perfect degree of imitation of your crony, young Weasley. The hardest part wasn't taking his appearance but rather transcribing his retarded behaviour. The poor boy... he must have already given up by now, or succumbed, it wouldn't surprise me much."

A gleam of infinite satisfaction shone in Dawlish's eyes. It looked like he had planned and waited for this moment for days.

"For here is the world you gave us... A world in which devoted Ministry employees such as dear Dolores Umbridge find themselves incarcerated, while young whippersnappers like you forget their place, and go so far as to apply to become Aurors... when they haven't obtained a single N.E.W.T.! But no matter... While I live, order and respect for essential values will endure. Do you have one last thing to say, before we end this?"

Through fumbling, Harry had managed to get his fingers on his wand. His opponent left him no chance, however. With a quick gesture, Dawlish

conjured a strange ghostly rope that wrapped around his prey's throat. Air became increasingly scarce and Harry soon suffocated, strangled.

" be a good sport, Potter. Admit defeat and you can leave here without significant damage. Resist, and you are good to join your beloved parents, your uncle Sirius, good old Dumbledore... I will know how to make it look like an accident, trust me."

Harry wasn't listening anymore. One way or another, it was out of the question he yielded. He would have preferred to disappear, or never to have existed. Tears of rage blurred his vision as the rope slowly dug into his flesh.

"ABDICATE, POTTER!" barked Dawlish, spluttering like a rabid dog. "I am saving you from a career in which your incompetence would cover you with shame as well as this office, you should thank me for it!"

Harry moved his lips without managing to emit any sound.

"Yes? That's it, come to your senses? Good boy..." sneered Dawlish, loosening the grip of the rope with a sharp movement of his wand.

"I gi...ve..." choked Harry.

"That's it... a little more effort."

Like a conductor, Dawlish was now waving his arms, beating time.

"Let's resume," he said gently: "'I gi... I give...'?"

"I gi...ve... up... "

Dawlish burst into cold laughter and immediately vanished the rope with a snap of his fingers. Stretched out on the floor, Harry contorted coughing, hands pressed to his throat.

"... never..." could then be heard in a barely perceptible whisper.

The Auror turned around, the mark of a terrible doubt printed on his face.

"I beg your pardon?" he barely had time to be surprised.

"*STUPEFY!*" retorted Harry with all the strength of his lungs.

Like a rocket, Dawlish crossed the room from one end to the other without even touching the floor. His flight ended only once the back wall was reached, a wall against which he crashed so violently the marble covering it cracked.

"I said: 'I give up never.'," repeated Harry distinctly, his magic wand still pointed firmly at his opponent's inanimate body.

7. THE NEW CHIEF

Dawlish appeared to have taken a nasty knock to the head. Admittedly, Harry hadn't exactly held back. Despite his resentment, he hadn't expected to unleash such force with his final spell. It had all happened so fast, so easily... It was almost disquieting, for the source of this sudden power stemmed from anything but serenity. It seemed to have a different origin entirely—something darker, almost monstrous.

For a fleeting moment, Harry wondered if the Dark Lord had sown other seeds within him, similar to his dreadful Horcruxes. No, that was reasonably impossible. Voldemort had been defeated, consumed forever before his very eyes...

Trembling from the adrenaline still coursing through his veins, Harry hesitated to bring Dawlish's body along with him. It wasn't his habit to turn his back on someone in distress, but in this instance, it was someone who had caused him so much grief that he arguably deserved no better. His decision made, he stepped alone into the emerald flames of the fireplace. The image of the small room and Dawlish's lifeless body began to spin dizzily away.

Harry took a few moments to recover from the disorientating lurch of the Floo Network. He had landed on a magnificent oriental rug in what appeared to be a grand office. The walls were plastered with notes and maps of all kinds, upon which various routes traced in red ink were animating themselves. Nearby, an immense window diffused a pale, silvery light that was undoubtedly magical in origin, given that Auror Headquarters had always been buried deep underground.

"Anyone there?" Harry called out.

"They shouldn't be long. Patience, lad. And congratulations on your success, though it only half surprises me..." replied a cavernous voice coming from a portrait hanging at the far end, in the opposite corner of the room.

Curious to know who was addressing him, Harry crossed the office, which was bristling with instruments likely designed to detect Dark Magic.

It was only after navigating around a peculiar stone table—upon which sat a Sneakoscope that rivalled the pocket model Ron had given him in second year—that he discovered the painting in question.

"Alastor Moody!" Harry exclaimed, staring at a startlingly lifelike painting of the legendary Auror. "You had a portrait done before you left us? I didn't know!"

"Bah! Not my idea, I'd never have wanted it! I'm not one of those who stubbornly insist on leaving a trace of themselves after they're gone..."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"That rogue Kingsley snapped the picture. A blasted photo that served as the model for this abominable portrait. He caught me by surprise! And to top it all off, he felt the need to inflict his company on me by having me hung in his office! You see, Potter, one can try their best to maintain Constant Vigilance..."

"Oh, you have to understand him. This portrait is an aesthetic marvel in every respect," Harry replied mockingly, striking a pose of faux approval.

Moody merely responded with a grimace that highlighted his innumerable scars even further. Truth be told, associating a painting of Mad-Eye Moody with any form of visual aesthetic was the very definition of an antithesis: his face alone resembled a knight's shield that had seen a thousand years of battlefields.

"But what in the name of a dragon are they doing? How much are you willing to wager I'll find them sitting somewhere, calmly sipping pumpkin juice?" grumbled Moody. "Just a moment, lad, I'm going to wake up this office full of Flobberworms!"

Mad-Eye vanished from his frame, but the metallic clanking of his limp lingered for a moment, as if he were walking somewhere between the floor and the ceiling.

Alone in the room for good now, Harry's attention was drawn to one of the large sheets of yellowed parchment stretched across the adjacent wall. It was a geographical map, scattered with memos and scribbles, some of which evoked the shape of a question mark. Harry noticed that a pair of photographs had been affixed along the mountain range labelled "Carpathian Transylvania". The two men depicted in them appeared to be asleep. Their pale complexions, sombre expressions, and the purplish bags under their closed eyelids suggested a state bordering on exhaustion. There was also something familiar about the structure of their faces. Perhaps it

was the line of their lips—thin; so thin one might have thought them non-existent. Features Harry had seen somewhere before...

Nose pressed against the parchment, eyes narrowed, Harry found his answer in a tiny handwritten legend:

— Rodolphus & Rabastan Lestrangle — — Death Eaters — — Exercise extreme caution, terribly dangerous. — — Rabastan: specialist in torture. — — Rodolphus: specialist in curses of Death and destruction. —

"So that was it... Brothers of that awful Bellatrix... Distant cousins of Sirius," Harry murmured. "Let's hope they get their hands on them soon."

As he straightened up with a sigh, the eyes of the figures in the photos snapped open. The one who must have been Rabastan fixed him with a glacial, penetrating stare, while the other slowly slid a thumb across his throat.

"Ah, there we are! Our first recruit has arrived!" said Instructor Huntson's voice behind Harry, making him jump.

"Moody seems to be in a good mood today," remarked Kingsley, who was seconding the instructor, a broad smile on his lips. "He only called us dragon dung before announcing your arrival. Usually, the nicknames he bestows upon us are far less flattering."

Both relieved and a little ashamed, Harry didn't dare broach the subject of the Lestrangle brothers. After all, he wasn't supposed to be snooping in the Department Head's business. The rest of the event proceeded quietly, with the other candidates trickling in over the next hour and a half. Ron and Neville arrived fourth and sixth out of seven, respectively. One with his clothes half-burnt and great smears of soot on his face, the other covered from head to toe in a viscous substance emitting a foul odour.

"I... I was swallowed by some sort of giant slug," Neville clarified, as if to justify himself.

For his part, Ron explained that he'd had to sneak behind a Chinese Fireball before inadvertently tripping over one of its eggs.

"I don't know how Charlie spends his days with beasts like that," Ron added, shaking his head. "One wrong move and you end up as a charred snack!"

Excitement was at its peak in the admission room, and everyone exploded with joy upon learning that, despite their failure, none of the three missing candidates had suffered overly serious injuries during the

trials. This announcement reminded Harry that Dawlish was still knocked out somewhere in one of the many dungeons he had traversed. He took advantage of one of the rare moments when Kingsley Shacklebolt was available to break the news to him.

"Ah! He tried to pull the 'Big Bad Villain' act on you? That's a classic of his!" said Kingsley, after Harry had reported the curious behaviour he had confronted. "It was play-acting, Harry, nothing to worry about. Anyway, I'd best send someone to fetch him straight away..."

Harry found it hard to understand how one could claim to be playing the villain whilst resorting to a near-unforgivable curse, but he didn't press the point. Dawlish had received a good thrashing that would likely calm him down for a while. Better to consider the matter closed and savour the moment; he was longing to finally return to the Burrow with Ron to announce the good news of their triumph.

Neville was in the middle of recounting how he had managed to extract himself from the slimy belly of the monster that had engulfed him by tickling its insides, when Instructor Huntson made a piece of parchment appear under everyone's nose.

"Auror Apprentice Contracts! You saw what happened during the exam? What awaits you will assuredly be even tougher. It is up to you to decide if you feel up to signing!" he announced to the candidates, as if the prospect of new challenges would stimulate them.

For a brief moment, Harry let himself go, thoughtfully stroking the parchment with his fingertips. If he had known, all those years ago, that he would travel this far when a giant with a shaggy beard had burst into his life to tell him he belonged to the wizarding world, what would he have thought? Would he have had the courage then to embark on this new existence, so full of peril?

Harry managed, somehow or other, to dip his quill into an inkwell that was hovering past and signed with immense pride. The parchment vanished in a shower of multicoloured sparks, through which Instructor Huntson's outstretched hand soon passed, quickly joined by Kingsley's, and then those of the other signatories surrounding him.

"Bravo! Well done to you all!" exclaimed Kingsley with open arms. "We are finished here, and you may now return home to savour your success properly."

"Letters will reach you by the end of August to inform you of what comes next!" Huntson intervened at the last minute, as the room was already plunged into the bustle of departure. "Each of you must be ready to commence your mission on September the first! Until then, rest, and *pre-prepare* yourselves!"

Harry, Ron, and Neville didn't need telling twice. They traversed a long corridor lined with wanted posters of Dark Wizards, each with a face more disturbing than the last, and hopped into the first lift likely to take them back to the Atrium. As the cabin ascended, several Ministry employees cast exasperated glances in the direction of Neville, who still hadn't found a way to rid himself of the putrid jelly coating him.

Too eager to leave the premises, the group cut through the crowd in the hall at a run. The task proved much easier than on the way in; Harry and Ron having taken care to strategically position Neville at the front of the procession, to take advantage of his exceptional and temporary repelling capabilities.

"Blimey, that worked surprisingly well! Did you see their faces?" the latter said with admiration after reaching the fireplaces where visitors were appearing and disappearing.

"Yeah! Great job, Neville," replied Ron, struggling to recover from a fit of giggles. "I won't shake your hand, though, no offence. Come see us at the Burrow if you have time!"

And Ron vanished, spinning away in a burst of deep green flames.

"See you soon," Harry said in turn with a wave of farewell. "And watch out, looks like you grabbed the wrong handkerchief..."

Harry began to spin very fast, and his view of Neville, who was trying as best he could to wipe himself down with a pair of pink knickers, faded away at the same instant.

No sooner had he appeared, and before he'd even had time to gather his wits, than someone pulled Harry forward to hug him tightly. He didn't need to open his eyes to know who he was dealing with. That subtle scent of strawberries and bergamot could only be Ginny's.

"You did it!" she said, tightening her embrace.

"Surprised?" Harry simply replied with a smile that could probably have secured him a podium finish in a *Witch Weekly* contest.

Over Ginny's shoulder, Harry could see Ron being half-suffocated by his mother, who was weeping hot tears under Hermione's perplexed gaze.

"My boy! My little boy! An Apprentice Auror, oh, I am so proud of you!" sobbed Mrs Weasley.

"Mum! The little boy has grown a bit since then," retorted Ron, his eyes a little brighter than usual.

No doubt alerted by his mother, George hadn't taken long to Apparate and had hastened to release the small winged ball, similar to a Golden Snitch, which was struggling in the palm of his hand. Freed, the object began to spread a mess of confetti throughout the room whilst cheerfully whistling something that sounded like 'We Are the Champions'.

"Great atmosphere in here, looks like I've arrived just in time. Well done, Big Nose, I always knew you'd end up like Percy! I even bet ten Galleons with Fred... That's right, laugh, you rascal, you'll pay me back," George added, as if communicating with a spirit lodged in the ceiling.

Shortly afterwards, Mr Weasley and Percy appeared in the fireplace in turn. The festivities could begin as soon as the little ball deemed they had both received enough confetti on their heads. Surprisingly, it spent much more time hovering over Percy, which seemed to delight George.

Once again, Mrs Weasley had outdone herself in the kitchen. Her husband, meanwhile, decided to celebrate the event by opening a prestigious bottle of French wine that the Ministry had gifted him for services rendered.

"*Mare-salt Charm-z Prem-yay Crew*, doesn't look too bad!" he said after popping the cork with a flick of his wand.

Stomach full of good food and with a day that couldn't have been fuller behind him, Harry realised with astonishment that he had totally forgotten an event that was taking place that very day and which concerned him directly. It was Ginny who reminded him shortly before midnight, sliding a small red and gold package towards his plate.

"Happy Birthday! It's from everyone. Neville, Luna, Seamus, and Dean pitched in too."

Somewhat intimidated, Harry unwrapped his gift and discovered one of the most fabulous presents he had ever been given. It was a watch. The object was of such refinement and elegance that it would have been enough to delight anyone. However, what gave it such value in Harry's eyes lay

elsewhere. It was the very first time that so many people he loved had concerted to give him something. And for Harry, who had been raised to believe he deserved nothing better than ignorance and contempt, there was nothing more beautiful.

Only one detail troubled him.

"I... It's truly wonderful, thank you so much, but... what about last year's watch? The one that belonged to your brother, Mrs Weasley..."

"The one you and Ginny tried to repair I don't know how many times over the summer, Harry dear? It's had its day, you know. And as you so rightly pointed out, it belonged to someone else."

"It doesn't matter to me that it belonged to someone else."

"Harry, I think you should just accept it," Hermione suggested calmly. "I searched all over Europe for a Wizard Specialising in Temporal Magic capable of repairing your watch, and I didn't find one. I even received a very kind owl from a Swiss watchmaker I'd contacted. He said your model had been subjected to spells dating from another era, and that the risk of damaging what was left of it was greater than restoring it."

"But!"

"But nothing, mate," interrupted Ron, placing a hand on his shoulder.

As his eyes misted over, Harry finally accepted.

A scant half-hour later, noting that fatigue was beginning to weigh on everyone's eyelids—and with good reason—Molly Weasley announced curfew. His new watch on his wrist, his hand in Ginny's, his friends in his heart, Harry went up to bed.

The few days that followed the trials were filled with accounts of Harry and Ron's adventures. Not half an hour went by without one or the other recounting the details of a scene that had suddenly come back to them. Apparently, both had experienced a fairly similar start to the exam. Ron, too, had nearly fallen asleep in the luxurious Chesterfield armchair, and Hermione had wondered if the object hadn't been subjected to a powerful Sleeping Charm.

"I can't remember where I read the other day that a salesman got into trouble after setting up a whole range of bedding items with enchantments of that style. The principle was sound, but the execution left something to be desired."

"How do you mean? Who could possibly complain about falling asleep in their bed?" asked Ron, shaking his head in disbelief.

Hermione had then replied that the problem lay in the fact that the users of these enchanted beds never managed to extract themselves in time, leading them inevitably to arrive late, or even to miss all their appointments.

"That's what happens when you have poor mastery of conditional charms," she added with a superior air. "It's a very advanced form of magic, mind you; we don't see them until seventh year."

But far too relieved to be done with their school life, particularly with all the lessons and subsequent exams, Harry and Ron had immediately launched back into their retrospective.

"I got the sort of infernal slide after the theory phase too, but it dumped me into a kind of nest full of Hippogriffs," Ron explained before shivering. "Lucky Hagrid taught us some manners in third year!"

As the days and episodes followed one another, Harry had been struck to note that, although Ron had had to deal with all sorts of extremely dangerous creatures during his course, dragon included, he hadn't, however, been subjected to the final head-to-head duel with a bellicose Auror.

"Oh, you know, hard to say what must have been most terrible," said Ron after Harry had detailed his confrontation with Dawlish. "The dragon gave me a hard time too!"

"That's not what I'm saying!" sighed Harry. "I just find it surprising that Dawlish went after me to that extent all day long, that's all!"

"Harry, if Kingsley told you Dawlish was acting, and even if I admit he went a bit strong, I think we can trust him," intervened Hermione. "You've always had a vision, let's say... a bit pessimistic in these sorts of situations."

Harry found it hard to believe his ears; it was as if all those years growing up together had taught them nothing. As far as he knew, his intuitions, good or bad, had very often proved well-founded. And it wasn't his fault if fate tended to hound him so.

"Right, it's me again, taking pleasure in torturing myself with stuff that will never happen," he had concluded dryly.

Then, not leaving them time to reply, Harry had hurried out of the room to go find Ginny, who was training for Quidditch behind the house.

Ginny was still struggling to accept the decision she had taken to finish her studies first—that is to say, before devoting herself to her playing career. The recent interview she'd had with Gwenog Jones, the Captain of the Holyhead Harpies whom she admired so much, hadn't helped matters. When Ginny had informed her of her decision, the Captain hadn't hesitated to tell her that the position she coveted wouldn't remain open forever, and that she was wasting a "truly unique opportunity". Ginny hadn't been fazed, retorting that she would train relentlessly at Quidditch during her seventh year of studies to be able to present an even higher level of play upon her return, and that she would be ready to seek that "unique opportunity" at another club if left with no other choice.

Since then, she had received no further news from Gwenog Jones.

That said, and despite a few clashes inherent to communal living, the inhabitants of the Burrow were doing wonderfully. One morning in mid-August, Harry, who had woken up much earlier than usual, had gone down alone to the dining room where he had witnessed a most surprising spectacle. A rictus of fury stamped on his face, Percy had appeared without warning in the fireplace, dressed in an old, lace-trimmed grandmother's dress and plush slippers in the shape of canaries that squeaked with his every step. Obviously, a quick glance at the label on his clothes had revealed the logo of the Weasley brothers' joke shop.

"THAT IS THE LAST TIME GEORGE GOES NEAR MY WARDROBE!" Percy had roared before rushing upstairs.

And barely had Harry had time to grab a piece of toast than Percy had reappeared in a much more conventional outfit. When he addressed him a few seconds later, he even displayed a tender look that was unlike him:

"Harry... I wanted once again to offer you my most sincere congratulations on your entry into the higher spheres of the Ministry. You know, now that we are colleagues, and it would probably be more... let's say... *professional!* to refrain from reporting this sort of anecdote at the office."

One hand placed on his heart, the other fingers crossed behind his back, Harry had improvised a most reassuring speech. Thus, faithful to his good habits, Percy had departed, puffing out his chest like a rooster in a farmyard. The next day, Harry, who had in the meantime told the whole story to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, provoking general hilarity, had finally understood why Percy had appreciated George's prank so little.

On the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, the headline read: "We Have Our New Minister for Magic!". The illustration that followed a little further down showed Kingsley Shacklebolt, waving, a radiant smile on his face. Percy only appeared in the background. One could see him, desperately craning his neck as if to ensure he would appear clearly in the photo. Unfortunately for him, he must have lost his balance and stumbled to the front of the stage before a flash suddenly triggered the disastrous metamorphosis of his outfit. A metamorphosis that one could follow step-by-step and which repeated, loop after loop, for pictures in the wizarding world were almost always animated.

"Wow! That's going to be hell of an advertisement for George, what a genius marketing stroke!" exclaimed Ron with admiration.

"Kingsley looks rather amused by it too, look at his face," pointed out Ginny.

Tears of laughter still filling his eyes, Harry launched into reading the article.

He had barely scanned the first few lines when he received a shock...

The votes revealed late last night that our new Minister for Magic would be none other than the one who was already occupying the position on an interim basis, namely the illustrious Kingsley Shacklebolt. The man who was previously at the head of the prestigious Auror Office, and whose recent actions preserved us from a second reign of Terror by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, intends to make his integrity a golden rule at the Ministry, which he is preparing to reform. He will shortly be replaced at his former post by the no less renowned John Dawlish, an Auror who also possesses great experience in the fight against the forces of Evil...

"What is this tissue of lies?" exploded Harry. "The only reputation Dawlish has today is for ending every one of his missions completely out of action because he got Stupefied!"

No one answered, and a silence heavy with meaning fell. Even the tiny red chick, which had been chirping peacefully between Crookshanks' ears until then, stopped.

Harry felt stupid, cheated, abused. How could he have let himself believe once again that this won battle would mark a turning point? Seeing Kingsley become Minister was everything he wished for, but how could the latter have let Dawlish access such an important position only hours after

receiving his new attributions? He, Kingsley, who seemed so upright and clear-sighted?

"None of this makes any sense," sighed Harry, shaking his head. "Even I, at eighteen, would make a better boss than Dawlish!"

"Reason enough to hang in there, Harry," replied Ron, raising a fist to waist height. "And you're not alone, we survived the exam, we'll survive this too."

Try as everyone might to comfort him, Harry was unable to set aside his apprehension during the weeks that followed. Not to mention the fact that no post from the Auror Office had reached them since the exam, contrary to what had been announced...

From Quidditch matches to chess games, from animated discussions about the future awaiting them to strolling on the surrounding hills, time passed. And without warning, the dawn of the first of September soon loomed on the horizon. By mutual agreement, the two couples had decided that the goodbyes would take place at the Burrow and not at King's Cross station, for the sake of privacy. Alas, Hermione had suddenly insisted on the day itself on leaving a good hour early (no doubt linked to her recent appointment as Head Girl of Hogwarts). In Harry's eyes, this early departure constituted a sort of crime of high treason. The situation being tense enough, however, he had preferred to bite his tongue, and it was with a heavy heart that he had kissed Ginny and hugged Hermione at the moment of their departure.

As if the minutes had ticked by at the pace of seconds, the two young women had finally disappeared into the inferno of the fireplace, not without blowing them a final kiss from their fingertips. Harry and Ron had then found themselves alone and completely disoriented in the dining room. The little red chick must have sensed the unease inhabiting Harry, for it did not take long to come and nestle against his neck. But even this comforting presence failed to soothe him. Half-absent, he contented himself with scratching the tiny fluffy head with his fingertips, his gaze lost in the distance.

A good while passed before he became aware of the spectacle that was taking place right before his eyes. Behind the window, in the garden, the Garden Gnomes were wiggling and hopping in all directions, probably celebrating the departure of the most formidable predator known to date: Crookshanks, Hermione's cat.

"What in Merlin's name are they doing?" snapped Ron, as if a fly had bitten him.

"Who?" asked Harry, still half-wandering in his thoughts.

"The Aurors, of course! The admin department, the post, I don't know! According to Huntson we were supposed to receive a parchment that..."

Ron's grumbling was interrupted by a noise, a sort of dull thud coming from one of the upper floors. Usually, neither he nor Harry would have worried much if George or Crookshanks had been in the vicinity. The feline could be a veritable walking storm all on his own. As for George, he used every one of his visits to concoct explosive novelties on the sly in his quarters. This time, however, there was supposed to be no one else but Harry and Ron at the Burrow.

Still dressed in their pyjamas, they grabbed their wands and advanced cautiously up the stairs. Arriving at the fourth floor, Harry noticed a sort of almost imperceptible scratching that seemed to be coming from his room. He signalled Ron to halt, and Ron prepared to push the door open after taking a deep breath. Ready to face the danger, they rushed into the opening in a flash.

However, they found only an untidy room, plunged into deep silence.

"What's going on here?" asked Ron, frowning. "I definitely heard something just now, I'm not mad!"

"Shh!"

The strange scratching had resumed discreetly.

Harry closed his eyes and turned in the room for a few moments before heading towards the window where he finally discovered the source of the strange phenomenon. It was neither a monster that had ended its run at the Burrow by mistake, nor a Death Eater come to avenge the fall of his peers. Two overweight owls, evidently at the end of their tether, were stranded on the window ledge, on the other side of the glass.

Ron hurried to open it and the birds let themselves slide in. Limply, they crashed onto the floorboards to form nothing more than a shapeless, inert mass. Harry tried to stimulate the curious pile of feathers by shaking it with the tip of his wand, without success. As if it had understood the situation, the little red chick jumped from its perch (the collar of Harry's nightshirt) to come and trample the bellies of the arrivals in a festival of

cheeps. The operation proved more fruitful this time and, soon, the two owls lazily held out a leg to present their message.

Harry and Ron hastened to unroll the scrolls of parchment upon which the words 'Confidential – Auror Office' could be distinguished.

Heart pounding fit to burst, Harry read:

Mr Potter,

Please meet me before the gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this Tuesday, September 1st at 6 p.m. to receive your mission briefing. My schedule being very busy, I shall have but little time to grant you. Any lateness, whatever the motive, will earn you a 'Dreadful' as the grade for your first task.

Regards, J. Dawlish, Supervisor and Head of the Auror Office

Harry lifted his gaze from the letter to rest it on Ron.

"You too? Hogwarts, tonight, 6 p.m.? How does he expect us to arrive in time warning us so late? The train is probably already preparing to leave the platform," Ron replied, a panicked glint deep in his eyes.

8. ON THE RAILS

For a few days now, as the post delayed in arriving, Harry had sensed that something was amiss. However, not knowing what sort of trick to expect from their new superior, he had found nothing better to do to protect himself than to prepare by revising his Defence Against the Dark Arts textbooks for the umpteenth time. Unfortunately, what he had dreaded so much in his heart of hearts had just come to pass, and he and Ron were now in a deadlock.

The message from Dawlish digested, Harry felt an urgent need to move, to do anything that would give him the impression that things were progressing, if only a little.

"I'll-sort-the-owls-and-get-changed, no-way-I'm-staying-in-my-pyjamas-a-minute-longer," Harry blurted out in a fraction of a second, grabbing the two feathered messengers still vegetating at his feet.

As he took the stairs four at a time up to the attic that served as an owlery, Harry concentrated on finding a plan. How could they get to Hogwarts in such a short time and, what was more, without being noticed? In the past, he and Ron had borrowed an illegal flying car belonging to Mr Weasley. They had followed the Hogwarts Express from a distance and arrived almost at the same time as its passengers. However, it was hard to claim the operation had been a success. Numerous Muggles had seen the car in the sky and the affair had taken on unimaginable proportions. Ron's father had even nearly lost his job at the Ministry. No, obviously, the solution did not lie there.

Suddenly, Harry felt foolish. It was so obvious he should have thought of it sooner! They simply had to Apparate. Alas, no sooner had the idea germinated in his mind than a very annoying version of Hermione's voice resonated within it: *"How many times do I have to repeat it to you? You cannot Apparate inside the grounds of Hogwarts! If you had taken the time to read your first-year books..."*

"Dragon dung, Hermione, you're not helping!" Harry exploded in the middle of the owlery, making the sleeping messengers he had just

deposited near a ration of Owl Treats jump.

So, it was impossible to Apparate directly to Hogwarts, and borrowing one of Mr Weasley's enchanted cars—assuming he even had another one—would only increase their troubles.

A new idea crossed his mind as he changed. Harry could take his Firebolt, don his Invisibility Cloak, and follow the Hogwarts Express, unseen and unknown. The journey would be very uncomfortable, but at least he would arrive on time. Except... what to do with Ron? He and Ron would manage a few minutes riding double on his broom, but never an entire day. The Firebolt was a racing broom. It wasn't one of those transport brooms reserved for wizards who hadn't obtained their Apparition licence, or who simply suffered from M.T.I.D. sickness—*Magical Transport Involving Disappearance* (an ailment that always caused you to appear in the wrong place whilst sprouting hair inside your ears).

For a brief moment, Harry wondered what a journey of several hundred miles on one of those contraptions might be like. According to what Seamus had once told him, these stealth brooms could offer up to eight seats and presented extraordinary luxury and comfort. Some were even equipped with magical armchairs that could heat up or cool down depending on the weather conditions.

"Oh! Hey! Come quick, I know how to do it!" Ron's voice called from the ground floor.

Harry descended the stairs like a rocket, ignoring the final steps a little too ambitiously. He was caught *in extremis* by Ron, which saved him from smashing into the wall at the foot of the flight.

"Harry, I know! We're going to Apparate!" announced Ron with the delighted look of a child who has just discovered buried treasure.

"Ron... we can't..."

"... Apparate at Hogwarts, nor in Hogsmeade since the renovations started, I know all that."

"In that case, where do you want to go? The meeting is at Hogwarts!"

"Harry, it's just gone eleven. The train must still be at the station, we have to try!"

"What, to... Apparate to King's Cross? Right in the middle of a crowd of Muggles and wizards? You're completely mad, we'll Splinch ourselves into

someone!" cried Harry, who still remembered all too well the deep wound Ron had suffered after a botched Apparition a few months prior.

"We've risked worse, and anyway, there's no other solution."

Harry was preparing to explain to Ron just how fanciful and risky he found his plan when the latter grabbed him firmly by the arm. A brief instant later, the world was spinning around him and his body felt tightly compressed, as if being forced through the narrow mesh of space and time.

Without warning, Ron had acted. They had both just Apparated.

Gravity reclaimed its rights over Harry's body so brutally that he lost his balance. He felt himself fall heavily until one of his knees collided with something hideously hard. With the impact, his glasses slid off his nose and his eyes soon filled with tears.

"Ah, well done Ron, I really congratulate you!" choked Harry, massaging his bruised leg. "Bloody hell, would it have killed you to warn me?"

On all fours, still reeling from the pain, Harry groped the ground on either side in the hope of finding his glasses. Lost in the middle of what seemed to be a vast, stony expanse, his hands made contact with something surprisingly smooth and cold. As he brushed it with curiosity, the object began to vibrate, first subtly, then harder and harder.

Harry realised what was happening and surprise gave way to stupor. He had indeed appeared at King's Cross station, but he had landed right in the middle of the tracks of Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, and the Hogwarts Express was rushing towards him at full steam. His blood ran cold. *So much for the glasses*, he told himself, before sprinting towards a blurred, colourful strip that must have marked the edge of the platform.

A few yards to his right, the dark silhouette of the train seemed to be growing ever faster. Harry stumbled on his painful leg and nearly fell again. Barely had he regained his balance when the locomotive issued a final warning in a terrifying whistle.

In a final effort, Harry dived forward. Alas, his injured knee buckled under the load of the impulse... and his leap was deprived of the required momentum. It was then that, as if springing from nowhere, two hands grabbed him to pull him vigorously forward. A fraction of a second later, the train passed behind Harry, screaming in a storm of steam and dust.

"Ron! We can say that... that you have excellent timing!" exclaimed Harry, out of breath. "Without you, I was cooked!"

"I owed you that much! Blimey, I'm sorry... I let go of you just before we appeared. I didn't know where you'd fallen, and by the time I understood..."

"Later! We'd better board, the locomotive isn't at full speed yet!"

Without another word, Harry reached out a hand with apprehension and managed to grab the railing of a passing carriage at the cost of a violent jolt to his shoulders. He retrieved his glasses (which had evidently not enjoyed being run over by the Hogwarts Express) using a Summoning Charm, before finally venturing inside the carriage.

Harry and Ron had just hoisted themselves into one of the last cars in the line. The compartments were filled with Slytherin students who watched them pass with a flabbergasted air as they made their way up the train. It must be said that with his limping gait, his dusty, completely dishevelled hair, his torn tunic, and his wand in hand, Harry looked as if he had just emerged from a ferocious battle.

As he hobbled painfully towards the lead carriage, Harry struggled to suppress a smile. He had missed the Hogwarts Express, much more than he would have imagined. He was astonished to note that the place seemed much less vast and imposing than when he had boarded it at the dawn of his first year as a wizard, some seven years earlier. It was as if the premises had since been subjected to a Shrinking Charm. Harry now had to stoop slightly to operate the handles that used to reach his shoulder level. The corridor also seemed far less spacious. And the brass lamps, swinging from the ceiling with the swaying of the journey, seemed dangerously close.

"If it's alright with you, I'd prefer what just happened to stay between us..." said Ron a few minutes later, head hunched in his shoulders, as Harry prepared to enter the compartment occupied by Ginny, Hermione, Neville, and Luna.

"I don't see what you're talking about," replied Harry with a smile before sliding the door open.

Even as they entered, he and Ron were immediately plunged into the middle of an animated conversation that seemed to be pitting Hermione against Luna.

"I'm telling you that your *Rumple-Corned Snorkack*, sorry, that the *Crumple-Horned Snorkack* is a pure urban legend! It's like those wizards in the Alps who amuse us with their Dahu... These are children's tales, Luna,

and as far as I know, you're past the age of dreaming about all these stories!"

"My father has always said that those who refuse to dream are just adults with the problems of frustrated people who can't accept themselves... And I think that it's precisely by agreeing to believe in them that these stories come to life," retorted Luna fiercely.

Most naturally in the world, she then turned to Harry and Ron and greeted them.

"Hello Luna, what's new? Still want to become a naturalist?" replied Harry, dropping down beside Ginny.

"Oh, yes... I'm certain there are plenty of fantastic beasts that haven't been discovered yet. And you? Were you summoned to Hogwarts, like Neville?"

"Excellent question. Neville, tell me they warned you at the last minute too!" fumed Ron with anger.

"No... To be honest, I received the Ministry letter yesterday. The thing is..."

"You owe Neville a big favour, it seems. It's probably thanks to him that you managed to catch the train on time," intervened Hermione. "Besides, instead of telling us all your stories about dragons and abominable monsters these past weeks, couldn't you have cut to the chase and explained that our Neville Longbottom had transformed into a veritable Adonis?"

Ron pretended not to hear Hermione's remark and resumed as if he had never been interrupted.

"The thing is... Yes, Neville?"

"Let's say that..."

"Let's say the train couldn't leave at the scheduled time. All thanks to this modest riot Neville triggered the very moment his foot touched the platform," resumed Ginny, who seemed to take a certain pleasure in reliving the scene.

"What can I do about it! Every time I go out it's the same! Everyone chases after me... I can't take it anymore, it's unliveable! I'm going to end up exiling myself if this continues."

"*Oh Neeeeeviiiille! I'm heeeere Neeeviiiille!*" cried Hermione in the voice of a possessed teenager that Harry didn't recognise.

Ginny and Luna immediately began to imitate her, filling the compartment with a cacophony of moans and other evocative cooing sounds. Harry, Ron, and Neville looked at each other with stupefaction before bursting into laughter.

Calm restored, Harry and Ron explained their setbacks to the group whilst carefully avoiding going into the details of their arrival at the station.

"There must have been a mistake, that's all," concluded Luna dreamily at the end of the tale. "Or perhaps they have a Nargle infestation problem at the Ministry. Daddy had to deal with that sort of situation at *The Quibbler* too; it took them three months to realise they were publishing the same version of the paper."

"They sent us two bicentennial owls to inform us of a meeting that was due to take place only a few hours later. It's neither a mistake, nor a story about imaginary beasties, Luna, it's sabotage! If we hadn't *Appari-sprinted* so fast, we'd never have made it!" flared Ron before being seized by a rather unconvincing coughing fit.

"*Appari-sprinted*, hmm?" noted Hermione with a dubious look. "And, like Neville, I imagine you had to traverse countless cohorts of feverish groupies. Unless, as the state of your robes suggests, you each fell down the stairs three times on the way. Right..."

Harry had already opened his mouth to back Ron up when the compartment door slid open suddenly. A platinum-blond head appeared in the frame. In a heavy silence, the newcomer stared at the occupants as if they were nothing but a repulsive pile of manure.

"Potter... Potter... I thought that was you I saw go past just now," said Draco Malfoy in his usual scathing tone. "My sources within the Ministry had intimated, however, that you had stopped your studies to become an Auror. Was I misinformed?"

"What business is it of yours?" retorted Harry dryly.

"None... after all," conceded Malfoy, shaking his head impatiently. "Basically, I was just passing by to say..."

"Oh hey, Draco! What are you doing? You're not going to waste your time with these Squibs! Come quickly, or they'll contaminate you!" came

the voice of Pansy Parkinson from the other end of the corridor.

At these words, Draco jumped as if he had just been caught red-handed and disappeared as promptly as he had appeared.

"Malfoy and Parkinson... Ugh! I saw them snogging when we walked through the train earlier," said Ron with a grimace of disgust before kicking the door shut. "A slug kissing a Pekingese, never seen such a repulsive couple."

"He's got some nerve coming back to Hogwarts after everything he did," scowled Ginny.

Harry was only listening with one ear. Leaning back against the seat, he wondered what Draco Malfoy could possibly have wanted to say to him just now. Judging by the contemptuous expression he'd worn, it couldn't have been anything very cheerful. Yet, Harry had dealt enough with Malfoy and his perverse calculations in the past to know that he would never have ventured alone into the carriage with the intention of starting a fight...

"Harry, whatever is that?" suddenly cried Luna with eyes so round one might have said she had just discovered a Crumple-Horned Snorkack in the flesh.

"Luna, meet Chick!" exclaimed Ron while Harry was still wondering what could be so spectacular about the collar of his robe.

"Can we know since when he's been called that?" Ginny called out.

"Well, he's tiny, covered in soft down... with a teeny-weeny beak. He needs a name! And besides, 'Chick' suits him well, I think."

"True, it's not so bad..." approved Ginny, pensive. "But come to think of it! And you, what would you say if we called you 'Big Nose' from now on?"

Ron was preparing to offer his own derogatory retort when little Chick launched himself to land in his hand. There, he stretched, chirping tenderly.

"You can call me whatever you want, I don't care: here is proof by example that Chick likes my proposal. Eh, Chick?"

"I get the impression he's doubled over laughing at the sight of your conk," retorted Ginny as the ball of fluff began to coo.

"I've never seen anything so pretty! Did Hagrid entrust him to you?" marvelled Luna, whose interest seemed to grow by the second.

"We don't really know where he comes from. Harry found him a few weeks ago in the Weasley twins' joke shop," replied Hermione. "But if there's one thing to hope for, it's that he won't follow the same growth curve as most of Hagrid's creatures!"

Harry smiled at the idea of an immense red chick shaking the earth with every step, roaring like a fearsome prehistoric monster and chasing a terrified Dawlish. *If only... if only that dream could come true upon arriving at Hogwarts*, he mused. But the chances were slim. In truth, one should rather expect the opposite. Namely, a monstrous Dawlish who would probably fly into a black rage when he discovered that he and Ron had managed to board the Hogwarts Express on time...

"Forget all that for the moment," whispered Ginny, who had become very adept at sensing when something was troubling him.

Following her recommendation proved all the easier as, in a burst of altruism, Ron did not delay in showing the compartment's occupants just how annoying his brother George's latest invention could be. The *Infinicrisp*, as he called it, was a type of crisp that could be crunched indefinitely, without any of its crunchy properties or its delicious salty potato taste being diminished.

"It's impressive Ron, you even manage to drown out the noise of the train when you have that thing in your mouth," remarked Hermione after closing *How I Became Minister for Magic, The True Story of Millicent Bagnold* with a resigned gesture.

A few hours later, Harry stepped out of the carriage that had carried them from the station platform to the Hogwarts grounds and shivered. Not that he was cold, for the gust that came to turn up the collar of his robe, triggering the whisper of the surrounding branches, was rather mild. Before him, under a sky heavy with threatening charcoal clouds, stretched the place that had seen him grow up and had finally made him a man.

Hogwarts, his first true home, the gateway to a world he cherished so much, seemed today to be nothing more than the vestige of a bygone past. The granite columns topped with sculptures of winged boars that once welcomed arrivals were fragmented by spell impacts; the gamekeeper's hut had been completely razed; and the west wing of the castle was reduced to

a heap of charred stones, surrounded by rickety ramparts that threatened to collapse at the next gust of wind.

The rest of the castle looked better. Visibly, the Master Builders at work had something to do with it. The din, composed of sounds of cutting, sharpening, and carving, emanating from the immense tent set up near the lake, bore witness to intense activity. In the distance, Harry could see his half-giant friend Hagrid, two enormous beams strapped to his back, climbing an interminable scaffolding that snaked up to the top of the Astronomy Tower (the highest in the castle). He was evidently not the only one giving his all on the gigantic building site. Even the Giant Squid, which lived in the depths of the lake, was helping by bringing up large quantities of silt to the clamour of the workers. His task finished, the cephalopod would then shake the hands of a few labourers with the tips of his tentacles before returning to the abyss.

Harry turned to Ginny and saw that she was crying.

"I'm glad to see Hogwarts is getting a new lease of life," she said in a strangled voice. "But all the same, what a horror... Everything Voldemort did, or rather undid... It's a bit as if he stole a part of our history."

"A bit, yes... But we're still here. We can always bear witness to what happened here," replied Harry, his heart tight, wiping away a tear that was sliding slowly down Ginny's cheek.

"Harry... be very careful, please. And send me an owl if Dawlish gives you any more trouble, I'll come and sort him out."

"Don't worry about that. And you, work a bit on that Wronski Feint, the last one I saw you execute reminded me of Goyle when he tried to play for Slytherin."

Ginny poked a finger into his ribs, kissed him tenderly, and gave him a final watery wink before joining Hermione and Professor McGonagall, who had come to meet the new arrivals. Resigned, Harry soaked in the landscape one last time and headed towards the gates where his new boss awaited him, not without heaving a deep sigh.

Dawlish seemed to be in top form. Surrounded by a troop of eccentric-looking wizards, bedecked with strange devices, he was struggling with great flourishes and theatrical gestures, as if he were in the heart of an intense battle.

"Ah! What did I tell you! Our star is temperamental, but what wouldn't he do to give a new interview and take a few photos in the company of his

new mentor!" exclaimed Dawlish as soon as Harry had joined them.

Determined to prevent the situation from worsening, Harry silently shook the hands of the journalists surrounding Dawlish. He was soon imitated by Ron and Neville who had just arrived in turn.

"What a charming young man we have here," exclaimed one of the reporters. "But, is it possible? Would you not be Neville Longbottom, the grand winner of this summer's Best Smile Contest?"

"Possible... indeed," replied Neville with an evasive air.

"Well! It's a veritable team of celebrities looming on the horizon, our readers will love it! And you, Sir, who might you be?"

"I'm Ronald Weasley. I... I destroyed one of Voldemort's Horcruxes during the war," said Ron, half-blushing.

"Fantastic! Dawlish, really, you spoil us! It wouldn't be surprising if these three young men offered the country great deeds that will still be talked about years from now!"

"Absolutely, Monty," replied the Head of the Aurors with a tight smile. "The reverse seems indeed highly improbable, and would be the source of immense disappointment for the Office... but also, and above all, for the entire magical community."

Ending his sentence, Dawlish placed his hand on Harry's shoulder as a benevolent father might have done. Ron and Neville were, for their part, moved and positioned by the photographers as if they were simple dolls. Soon, they found themselves on either side of the duo in a posture intended to be heroic.

The journalists readied their cameras and, as the moment of being dazzled by an avalanche of flashes seemed imminent, Harry couldn't help but call out loud: "Come on, everyone smile! Say *Stupefy!*!"

A few moments later, his field of vision filled with fireworks of multicoloured sparks and Dawlish's grip tightened on his shoulder as if attempting to crush it.

"Per-fect! You look superb! Even if that smile looks a little forced, Dawlish. A pity... You know, you should ask young Neville to give you lessons!" laughed the man called Monty, nose bent over a blackened parchment that must have offered him a preview of the shot. "Well, it's not too serious; it will give you the look of the serious boss you are, after all."

"Thank you... thank you, gentlemen," replied Dawlish in a suddenly less warm tone. "You will excuse us for a few moments now. The details of our new recruits' mandate must remain secret, a matter of State security, you understand."

The Head Auror took Harry, Ron, and Neville aside, into the shade of a large copper-leaved oak. When he spoke again to explain what awaited them, his voice had lost all trace of friendliness.

"Right, enough joking... Before getting to the heart of the matter, I want you to know that I am entrusting you with a mission of the highest importance. Unlike your peers, whose entry into service will consist of most conventional training at Headquarters, you are going to have the opportunity to find yourselves on the front line, in the heart of the action."

The Office Head paused for a moment and gauged the trio, shaking his head with vexation.

"What, is that all you have to say? It is a great honour being bestowed upon you, or rather, that *I* am bestowing upon you... Did your parents teach you nothing, not even gratitude?"

"You must surely know that neither Neville nor I ever really knew our parents, Sir," retorted Harry coldly.

"What a pity, Potter. They wouldn't have wasted their time offering you a few lessons in decorum and instilling the respect due to one's superior... Watch yourself! Your insolence will not be tolerated as it might have been during your time at Hogwarts. The late Dumbledore is no longer here to protect his little pet."

Harry felt a flush of heat. In that moment, he would gladly have given all the gold in his Gringotts vault to watch Dawlish's head swell and float away like a common balloon under the journalists' frenetic flashes.

"No other misplaced remark? You still have to be treated like children, do you? Dolores Umbridge had already warned me, back when she was setting things straight at Hogwarts."

Harry felt Neville and Ron tense beside him. However, it was out of the question for Dawlish to drag anyone other than him into this quarrel of dubious origin. For his only answer, he contented himself with reproducing the behaviour the Weasley twins would have adopted in his place and presented his most impertinent smile.

"Can we know what you expect of us, Sir?" asked Ron, whilst Dawlish glared daggers at Harry.

"Ah yes, the mission... As I was saying before being interrupted by Potter, you have been chosen for a task of the highest importance. The Office is counting on you to get your hands on two fugitives. Death Eaters on the run, to be more precise."

Dawlish paused again, as if hoping to detect some form of panic on their faces. Disappointed, he resumed smugly:

"The Death Eaters in question are two brothers of the Lestrangle family. I am, of course, speaking of Rodolphus and Rabastan, the last representatives of a line of degenerates, related among others to Sirius Black..."

"And where... are we supposed to find them?" asked Neville, looking suddenly intimidated.

"According to our scouts, they are somewhere in the East. The most probable lead points directly to the Durmstrang Institute. That rings a bell, doesn't it?"

"We met the Durmstrang students when Karkaroff came with his delegation to compete in the Triwizard Tournament," agreed Ron, anxious to maintain a climate as constructive as possible. "But the location of their castle is a secret," he hastened to add. "How do you expect us to..."

"Oh, well, it seems everything has been arranged with this Mr D., the new Headmaster of the school," cut in Dawlish, waving his hand dismissively. "The Hogwarts Express will take you there and you will be housed at the school for the duration of your mission, or something of the sort... Anyway, I hope that once you arrive you will know how to show more consideration towards the local authorities than you have demonstrated so far. No showing off! Our relations with the East have already suffered enough from the crimes of You-Know-Who. They still haven't forgiven us for the assassination of their infamous Gellert Grindelwald within his own prison; as if we had anything to do with it... In any case, hurry up and get your hands on those Death Eaters. In theory, they've already been trying to survive lost in the surrounding mountains for weeks. Capturing them should therefore be child's play, at least for a team of *celebrities* such as yours."

At the end of the speech, Neville had begun to tremble, Ron had regained the habitual pallor he wore when dreading an upcoming event,

and Harry was clenching his fists, biting his lip so as not to explode. Dawlish, on the contrary, seemed to be revelling in a pleasure long awaited.

"I'm doing you a favour by assigning you this highly coveted mission. Don't even contemplate failing; that would mean kissing your career as an Auror goodbye, I guarantee it. What now, Potter?"

"When is boarding for Durmstrang?" asked Harry with the secret hope of seeing Ginny one last time before leaving.

"Now there's a funny question!" exulted Dawlish. "Don't tell me you came like that, without any luggage? It's terribly cold in those mountains. What, you neither?" he added after turning to Ron and Neville, whose anxiety was palpable. "The train leaves, *now!*"

"Now?" gulped Neville.

Scarcely had he fallen silent than the whistle of the Hogwarts Express resounded in the distance.

"Have you forgotten your heads as well? Come on, hurry up! And don't come back without those Death Eaters under any circumstances!"

9. THE DARK DEALINGS OF DURMSTRANG

If they missed the departure of the Hogwarts Express, it was almost certain that Dawlish would hold his perfect excuse to strike them from the training programme. Giving a quick wave to the journalists who had stayed on the sidelines, the trio broke into a frantic run.

As he sprinted, Harry cast one last glance back towards Hogwarts. At the far end of the grounds, gilded by the last rays of the sun, he spotted the procession of students undulating like a serpent behind the upright, slender silhouette of Professor McGonagall. Harry spared a thought for Ginny, who must be there somewhere, exchanging impressions with Hermione and Luna on her final return to school. Soon she would take her place at the High Table alongside her Gryffindor housemates and, as usual, they would all enjoy a marvellous feast together. Imagining himself sitting there too, quietly drinking pumpkin juice in the company of his friends, reminiscing about good times past and dreaming of those to come, Harry wondered what on earth had possessed him, a few weeks earlier, to sign up to become an Auror.

Lungs on the point of bursting, throats on fire, Harry, Ron, and Neville arrived at Hogsmeade Station just in time to throw themselves into a rear carriage of the Hogwarts Express. Moments later, the train was hurtling into the falling night along a track that none of them had ever taken before.

"What exactly did you do to Dawlish?" asked Neville, still breathless, as they settled into the first available compartment (admittedly, they were spoilt for choice).

"I have no idea what could have triggered all this," sighed Harry, collapsing onto the leather seat. "All I can tell you is that he came at me during the practical entrance exams and left me no choice but to Stupefy him..."

"That, I can understand him being displeased about. But us? We've never done anything to him as far as I know. So, why?"

"You're my friends; that might be enough for him."

"Would he be that petty?"

"Go figure," intervened Ron. "The bloke seems completely off his rocker. Who knows, years ago, back when he was still an Auror, maybe your dad forgot to shake his hand one morning arriving at the office, or something like that... Since then, Dawlish has held a deadly grudge, but since good old Frank Longbottom isn't here to suffer his resentment, he takes it out on his son... Or!" Ron paused for dramatic effect. "He simply knows what wrongs the Lestranges caused your family, and since he's a bloody pervert, he couldn't think of anything better than sending you on their trail."

"It's definitely hard to think of a lower blow," commented Neville, digging his fingernails into the back of his hand. "We'd better be on top of our game, you know. These Death Eaters... they're amongst the worst there are."

Harry said nothing but thought no less. He remembered all too well the note "terribly dangerous" he had found written in bold beneath the photo of the two Dark Wizards in the Head Auror's office.

As he tried to conjure the faces of the Lestrangle brothers in his mind again, something caught Harry's attention. A ball of candy-pink wool had just rolled into the compartment before ending its run against one of his trainers. Under normal circumstances, Harry would simply have kicked the object away. This time, however, he held back... The ball of wool evoked something familiar. Where had he seen it for the last time?

Two yellow, almond-shaped eyes set with vertical pupils then appeared in the crack of the door, and Harry understood immediately. The ball of wool was part of the arsenal of toys belonging to Crookshanks, Hermione's fluffy cat. Intrigued, Harry left Ron and Neville to their discussion on the best way to cast a Shield Charm and followed the feline, which had begun to trot down the corridor.

As Crookshanks's large, bushy tail swayed lazily before his eyes, a host of questions jostled in Harry's head. Brilliant as she was, Hermione could sometimes be absent-minded. She was human after all, and could very well forget something, as happens to everyone from time to time. But that she would leave her adored cat, her "ginger puffball" as she sometimes called him, trapped alone on the train after her departure, seemed insane.

Reaching the end of the carriage, Harry was only half-surprised to see Crookshanks jump up and grab the door handle to open it, just as he

himself might have done. That cat had always demonstrated great intelligence. In the past, he had even understood that Ron's pet, the rat Scabbers, was in fact an Animagus (a wizard capable of changing into an animal)—something Harry, Ron, and Hermione had discovered to their cost many months later.

Following in the feline's footsteps, Harry traversed three further carriages. Outside, night had spread its black cloak over the entire region. From time to time, a lamppost would cross the train's path, giving life for a fraction of a second to shadows with disquieting shapes that amused themselves by running alongside the carriage before vanishing suddenly. Harry did his utmost not to let his imagination get the better of him and soon found himself behind a door haloed by a delicate thread of orange light. Stupefied, he pulled the handle.

A peculiar silhouette collided with him violently.

"Ouch! Who... Who goes there?!"

"Ow! Is... is that you, Harry?"

"Hermione! But what are you doing here? I thought you were at Hogwarts, with the others!"

"I went to get Crookshanks. He dashed off, even though he usually stays with us during journeys."

"I still don't understand. Just now I saw you talking to McGonagall by the gates, then you all disappeared towards the castle... and here you are in front of me, as if nothing had happened. Don't tell me you've got hold of another one of those stupid Time-Turners?"

"As far as the Time-Turner goes, you're completely wrong, but for the rest, you're almost there," replied Hermione with a mischievous smile. "Except for the detail that we weren't with the students going to Hogwarts. *We* were asked to get back on the train."

"'We', you mean...?"

"That's right! Ginny, Luna, Dean, Seamus... They're all on board too. In fact, it's the same for all the sixth and seventh-year students."

Harry shook his head mechanically; he still didn't understand a thing. What were all these people doing on the train in the middle of the night? And why did Hermione have to be so stingy with explanations at this precise moment? She, who could spend entire days boring others with her accounts of how such and such a thing had happened?

"Is it just you?" asked Hermione timidly, with a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"We didn't do things in style like you," replied Harry impatiently. "It's just the three of us. We settled in the rear carriage. Now, will you please tell me why..."

"Go find Ginny and the others, they're just a bit further down, they'll tell you the whole story. I'll take charge of bringing back Ron and Neville; I absolutely want to see their faces when they realise we're all together!"

"So McGonagall told you to get back on the train to go to Durmstrang? That doesn't sound like her at all," remarked Ron a few minutes later, after everyone had reunited and Harry had explained what Dawlish's mission entailed.

"Yes, she looked very upset, very worried," clarified Ginny. "Apparently, until a few weeks ago, Hogwarts would have been sufficiently restored to welcome us all."

"But then, what happened?" asked Neville, scratching Crookshanks more and more frantically between the ears.

"The building site was allegedly the victim of sabotage," intervened Luna. "Funny idea, isn't it? Destroying what others are trying to build..."

"McGonagall thinks only a powerful Master Builder could cause so much damage," Hermione chimed in. "A supporter of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named who infiltrated the renovation group quietly, for example."

"I'm certain she's mistaken. It's obviously the work of Flugibulps."

Ron opened his mouth, but Hermione stamped brutally on his foot at the same instant, sweeping the subject of Flugibulps from the conversation in one fell swoop.

"Did McGonagall tell you why she chose Durmstrang and not another school?" asked Harry, who was burning to know more. "Beauxbatons could have done just as well, right?"

"Actually, it seems the Headmaster of Durmstrang was the only one to reply to her letters. If I understood correctly, she would have preferred to send us anywhere else. But ultimately, no other option presented itself."

"How come?" said Ron, shrugging his shoulders. "When he wasn't busy playing false modesty, Krum rather gave the impression that the castle he

came from was quite a shack. Plus, it must be much better since Karkaroff left! Hard to find worse than an ex-Death Eater for a Headmaster, no?"

"I don't know," replied Hermione, pensive. "In fact, it seems no one really knows who the new Headmaster is. The only information we have is that he calls himself 'D.', but he has apparently never appeared in public yet. According to McGonagall—again—he's a descendant of the Institute's founder who appeared out of nowhere only a few months ago to claim his inheritance."

"He can't be that bad if he decided the place could still be used as a school," noted Neville who, after having Crookshanks on his lap, had just welcomed Chick onto his head. "After all, he could very well have kept it for himself if he'd wanted. And who knows, maybe he'll even transform the place into something even better!"

Ginny shuddered.

"You say that because you weren't there to see the reaction of Cathy Livingstone, a Ravenclaw girl in sixth year. She burst into tears when she learned we had to go there."

"Meh, that doesn't mean much," sniggered Ron. "Harry's ex-girlfriend, Cho Chang, was also in Ravenclaw and spent her time crying too. I really don't see why we should be worried."

"You'd do well to worry for yourself if you keep acting like a troll like that," replied Ginny, shooting Ron a wrathful look. "Cathy has a cousin at Durmstrang, just so you know. She reported to her that, this summer, several boarding students fell ill under strange conditions. Some were even found in a sort of bizarre coma, and one of them apparently even lost their life. According to rumour, an unwholesome aura has taken hold of the castle. People even go so far as to talk of the nefarious influence of Grindelwald's ghost."

"Grindelwald? The Dark Wizard Dumbledore finally had imprisoned in his own prison, at Nurmengard?" said Harry, astonished. "The one murdered by Voldemort when he was tracking down the Elder Wand?"

Ginny nodded gravely, and lightning suddenly streaked the sky with a deafening crash. Everyone jumped. Raindrops as big as Galleons began to hammer the windows, which were soon reduced to the state of dripping stained glass.

It had been an hour now since they had left the station, and Harry was longing to get to the bottom of all these stories about Durmstrang.

However, he seemed to be the only one concerned with the subject. As if Ginny's account had dampened the group's spirits, no one else broached the topic, and everyone found another activity. Ron and Harry launched into a game of Wizard's Chess under Neville's curious eye, whilst Ginny and Luna amused themselves by tickling Chick from every angle. Hermione, for her part, made everyone jump again. Scarcely had she opened her new book on *The Weird Sisters*, her favourite band, than an uninterrupted and amplified stream of profanities had resounded in the cabin.

"Harry, dear friend. You are aware that even by cheating you won't manage to beat me, aren't you?" said Ron in a pompous tone, a good while after the start of their game.

"Cheating, dearest? What an accusation," retorted Harry, pretending to be offended even as he searched for which 'divine intervention' might effectively reverse the course of the game.

"Let's say your bishop was guarding the white squares when we started playing. So, would you mind explaining to me by what miracle he suddenly ended up on the black ones?"

"It's true I moved my knight earlier, while you were kissing Hermione. Granted. But this time, I did absolutely nothing. And anyway, that'll teach you to take your eyes off the game..." replied Harry in the tone of a sage sharing an important life lesson.

Ron was preparing to offer his own lesson in wisdom when the entire carriage began to shake. First the pawns, then the board itself ended up sliding off the table before crashing to the floor. Crookshanks hissed, digging his claws into Neville's leg, who let out a strangely high-pitched scream, which caused Chick to fly up and take refuge in the collar of Harry's robe. Soon, the vibrations reached such intensity that the cabin's occupants felt as if they were bumping down a staircase on their bottoms. Helpless, Harry could only watch Ginny's large trunk as it began to oscillate dangerously from the luggage rack directly above her head.

The object had already threatened to tip over several times when the shaking finally subsided.

After heaving a sigh of relief, Harry approached the window that stretched from one side of their cabin to the other, looking for an explanation. The glass was misted up, and he had to wipe it several times with his sleeve to finally see anything.

"Woah! I didn't know the Hogwarts Express was capable of that!" he exclaimed then.

The countryside landscapes that had been unrolling endlessly until now had just given way to a sort of map dotted with fields and winding tracks, along which small lights moved here and there, sometimes yellow, sometimes red. In all likelihood, the train had just left the rails to launch itself into the air.

Continuing their momentum, locomotive and carriages soon passed through thick walls of fog and finished their ascent smoothly, just above an ocean of clouds overseen by a majestic moon. Around the orb, an infinity of stars sparkled, each twinkling brighter than the last, as if to monopolise the passengers' attention.

"It's magnificent..." murmured Harry, placing his hands delicately on Ginny's shoulders. "No wonder the Centaurs love watching the night sky so much."

Ron joined them and did not take long to fall under the spell in turn.

"I wonder what Firenze would say if he saw all this. With such a panorama, I'm sure he could predict our next twenty years."

"Do you think we'll see any Schmulusks?" intervened Luna, eyes narrowed, as if trying to detect some movement in the distance.

"Sure there are some, but they must be sleeping at this hour," replied Neville, without the faintest idea what a Schmulusks might be.

The group remained there admiring the surroundings as if time had stopped. It was only when his eyes began to sting and the pain in his knee reminded him of its presence that Harry resigned himself to turning away from the spectacle. As if the cabin had been aware of their advanced state of fatigue, it immediately expanded by several feet before manifesting half a dozen bunk beds with a soft 'POP!'. The phenomenon reminded Harry of his last journey aboard the Knight Bus, a mode of transport for wizards capable of forcing its way anywhere, even into the narrowest of alleys, by modifying its shape at will.

Well-settled into his mattress, the reassuring pressure of a thick feather duvet distributed entirely over his body, Harry heard Hermione as she discreetly slid the compartment door open. There was nothing to worry about. She would return later, once she had carried out the rounds her duty as Head Girl required. Only too happy not to be in her place and to

have nothing else to do but let himself go, he fell asleep to the rocking of the train...

"Is... is it c-c-cold or is it j-j-just m-m-me?" came Neville's muffled voice from the bed above Harry's.

Painfully, Harry opened his eyes and understood, by the pink-gold glow creeping gradually into the compartment, that day was breaking. Next to his head, the slight swaying of the chain hanging from his reading lamp indicated that the Hogwarts Express was still moving.

They still hadn't arrived.

Harry turned over in his sheets and noted with relief that his knee was much better. On the other hand, just like Neville, he felt frozen to the bone.

"Can you see anything out the window, from where you are?" whispered Harry in a cloud of breath.

"Not really, looks like there's a layer of frost on the glass. That's about all."

Reluctantly, Harry made the effort to get up, taking care beforehand to wrap himself in his duvet. He placed the tip of his wand against the pane and waited a few moments for the film of ice to vanish. Outside, the vast expanse of clouds from the night before had disappeared. It had given way to a multitude of snowy peaks that were not unlike those beds scattered with nails one sometimes saw Fakirs lying on.

One by one, the cabin's occupants emerged from their sleep. Hermione did not take long to save the day by warming up the atmosphere. As she sometimes did, she had arranged her famous Bluebell Flames charm to distribute it into a multitude of small jars that had been scattered around the cabin. Her task accomplished, she pulled from her bag a large volume titled *Guide to Wizarding Schools in Europe, by Prof. D. M. Oddbody*, in which she immersed herself studiously.

"Only Hermione would inflict stuff like that on herself," said Ron with a mocking look, pointing at her.

"What?" asked Neville.

"All those books, you know... The other day I even saw her disappear completely into her satchel. 'I'll be right back, I'd like to find one of my

notes,' she said. And after ten minutes of her not coming back up, I had to go and look for myself."

"Blimey, has she become that good at enchantments?"

"You can't imagine! Guess what I found when I went down."

Neville shrugged and Ron continued.

"She was there, get this, sitting reading in a nice cosy armchair, surrounded by I don't know how many shelves full of books. The room wasn't very big, a few square feet at most... But still!"

"Ron, I asked you not to talk about it!" exclaimed Hermione as if she had followed everything from the start, despite the attention she was devoting to her reading. "In theory, I'm not allowed to do that."

"Come off it, it's fantastic what you did with that bag! The day I manage to do a thing like that, I'll be quite incapable of not bragging about it!"

"And you'll attract a lot of unnecessary trouble!" stated Hermione implacably.

Ron rolled his eyes and heaved a deep sigh.

"And your book, what does it say?" asked Harry, deeming it preferable to change the subject. "Do you know any more about what awaits us?"

"Let's say this Professor Oddbody seems to have studied the subject better than the others. There are many more details on the school's past than in *All the Facts and Tiniest Tattle on Durmstrang*, by Prof. Ag. Jean Badmouth, for example. That said, I doubt what I've managed to find is representative of the current state of things. Each new Headmaster seems to have had a notable influence on the place, and given that Durmstrang has just changed hands..."

"We should mostly expect to set foot in a real cradle of Dark Magic, shouldn't we?" said Neville, furrowing his perfectly trimmed eyebrows.

"If I understood correctly, it was over time that the school built a reputation in that field," replied Hermione. "Originally, the founder's intentions seemed entirely laudable; listen to this: *According to scrolls found in the Great Tower of Archives in Nizhny Novgorod, Durmstrang was conceived, designed, built, and inaugurated by Nerida Vulchanova towards the end of the thirteenth century AD. First Headmistress of the establishment, Vulchanova was greatly appreciated for her pedagogical talents but also, and above all, for the great kindness and love of others she demonstrated daily.*"

"So far so good, it seems," remarked Harry, as Hermione paused to catch her breath.

"Quite agree, unfortunately what follows is a little less rosy: *After only a few years of service, Nerida Vulchanova disappeared under mysterious circumstances. She was then replaced by Potions Master Harfang Munter. This successor was the instigator of much darker values that left numerous scars—Durmstrang being renowned to this day for the harshness of its teaching, its love of Martial Magic, or indeed its penchant for the Dark Arts...*"

"That certainly kills the romance of it," commented Ron. "Anyway, that explains why you ended up with that nutter's book in your hands coming out of Flourish and Blotts. What's it called again..."

"You must mean *The Pugnacious Little Book of Great Fighters*. Indeed, McGonagall must have already spread the word just in case the Hogwarts renovations fell behind schedule," said Ginny, glancing at her bag which had started to wiggle and growl again.

Outside, the train seemed to have gently lost altitude and was now slaloming between the snowy peaks. The route becoming increasingly winding, Neville had not delayed in leaving the compartment to head for the toilets. Luna and Ginny, for their part, had plunged into reading the latest edition of *The Quibbler*, the cover of which displayed: "HOW VOLDEMORT WILL RISE ONCE AGAIN, all details, signs and suppositions on his future ascent to power on p.42". Finally, Ron was amusing himself solving the riddles in *Tests That Will Let You Shine at Parties, Vol. III*, a work taken by mistake that Hermione had handed him just before leaving to do her rounds.

For his part, Harry had welcomed the little red chick onto his head and was dozing whilst watching the mountain landscape scroll by. He had always liked snow and the cold. This climate reminded him of a time of year during which the annual return to the Dursleys was still too distant to worry about.

As the snowflakes danced intermittently, chased by the irregular turbulence of the Hogwarts Express, Harry wondered if he, Ron, and Neville would manage to get their hands on the Death Eaters quickly. If Dawlish was to be believed, it would suffice to find their lair to pick them up there, while they were still weakened by weeks of gruelling trekking. Harry obviously wanted to believe this flattering version. But deep inside

him, a small voice with accents of wisdom strove to remind him that Dawlish hadn't exactly made life easy for them so far.

The short night he had passed, added to the gentle warmth of the chick huddled on his skull and the blue flames nearby, got the better of the last vestiges of energy Harry still had available. He rested his head comfortably on Ginny's knees and soon sank into a deep sleep.

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know, someone must have received instructions, right?"

"Are you kidding? The Headmistress almost threw us onto this blasted train before leaving. They don't care at all what might happen to us."

"It's true, it was already the same in Dumbledore's time. Everything for the Gryffindors and nothing for the others. When my parents hear about this!"

"If you would just stop working yourselves up with tall tales for a moment... McGonagall communicated directives to all the prefects before departure."

"Oh really? And what do they say, these directives, Miss Know-It-All and I'm-The-Head-Girl?"

"It's very simple, you are going to..."

Harry heard the compartment door slide as it closed, and the echoes reaching him from the corridor faded immediately. Body stiff and numb, he opened his eyes and stared at the wooden ceiling above him. Judging by the calm now reigning in the cabin, he was all alone and the train had stopped. From time to time, the window would whistle and the floor would pitch slightly. In all likelihood, a violent snowstorm was raging outside.

Bit by bit, Harry felt his limbs coming back to life and soon thanked Ginny for leaving a jar of blue flames on his stomach before slipping away, so much had the temperature dropped since he had dozed off. He sat up slowly and understood then why the students had seemed so agitated moments before. They must have been stopped for a good while already, and from where he was sitting, Harry could see nothing at all, or almost nothing. A veil of ghostly whiteness floated just in front of his nose, on the other side of the glass, where swarms of snowflakes seemed to amass tirelessly from all directions.

They were lost in the middle of nowhere and, at the rate things were going, they would soon end up buried alive under several cubic feet of snow.

The door slid open behind Harry with a crash.

"And that's all she told you?" cried Ron, who had just entered the compartment on Hermione's heels.

"Ron, how many times will I have to repeat it to you? Her last words were, and I quote: 'Whatever happens, *do not* venture off the train. The Headmaster will come and fetch you.'"

"Great, so we just have to wait to die of cold? Or get buried all together playing cards?" raged Ron. "No way are we ending up like that... I'm going to go get help. You stay with the students."

"Please, don't do that! You can't even tell up from down out there, you'll get lost or fall into a crevasse, or I don't know what... It's madness!"

"Trust me, it'll be fine... Harry, do you feel up to coming with me to look for help?" added Ron, turning towards him.

"That won't be necessary, I think..." said Harry, leaning over the window already half-covered in snow.

In the distance, as if by enchantment, a dark, strangely hunched silhouette had just appeared...

10. BACKS TO THE WALL

Harry felt his stomach lurch. The silhouette was advancing slowly in their direction, rather like a spectre. It was as if it had floated through the storm, hitched to invisible rails that guided it through the numerous gusts frantically battering the train and its passengers.

"D-D-Dementor!" exclaimed Ron, teeth chattering, pointing a finger forward as the hooded shadow stopped a few yards from the carriage.

Large clumps of snowflakes were smashing against the windowpane, and Harry had to squint and concentrate as best he could to distinguish the strange visitor wandering outside. No sooner had he managed to lock his gaze onto the target than Hermione emitted a peculiar whimper. Turning as one, Harry and Ron realised it was already too late. Hand clamped over her mouth, Hermione took a deep breath before sneezing to her heart's content.

A heavy silence fell over the cabin, and no one dared move behind the glass.

"It... it can't see us, can it?" whispered Hermione barely moving her lips.

"No, that... that would be impossible. Have you seen the weather out there?" murmured Ron, paralysed.

But the thing was already unscrewing its neck... slowly... until its hood finally pointed in their direction. An eternity passed during which Harry, Ron, and Hermione wondered if they had been spotted. Then, without warning, the spectre contorted itself before letting out a ghastly wail that pierced through the cabin's occupants, making them tremble from head to toe.

"Looks like it spotted us all right," grimaced Harry, instinctively plunging his hand into his robes in search of his wand.

"Blimey, what is that thing now?" muttered Ron under his breath.

A gust of superior violence slammed into the carriage, kicking up a veritable wall of powdery snow in its wake.

"It's impossible... it's gone!" cried Hermione a few moments later.

The white cloud had settled, but the shadow had vanished. Outside, the few traces that still attested to its passage were already being erased, covered by the flakes the storm brought and stirred ceaselessly.

"Do you think it got blown away?"

"That would be possible," confirmed Ron. "Yes, that must be what happened..."

Scarcely had he fallen silent than a metallic noise rang out...

CLANG... CLANG... CLANG...

"It's it! The thing, the-the Dementor... It's looking for a way in!" choked Hermione in an anguished whisper, whilst the sounds of clanking metal continued to propagate through the carcass of the train. "It's trying to get in!"

"Harry... do you... feel ready?" asked Ron. "I'm not sure I can summon a powerful enough Patronus in these conditions..."

"All the same... there's something wrong," mused Harry aloud. "Have you ever heard a Dementor do that sort of thing? Usually, they just move objects from a distance, except of course when they're about to give you a Kiss."

"And why not, if it's probing the carriages looking for a breach to slip through?"

"I mean..." continued Harry, following his train of thought. "It could just as easily be someone announcing themselves, don't you think?"

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry as if he had just swallowed an entire packet of the very latest *Fainting Fancies* from Weasley & Weasley.

"Honestly, Hermione, weren't you just saying that the Headmaster was supposed to come and fetch us?"

Hermione shook her head in denial; she looked on the verge of fainting.

"No... well, I mean... That thing outside... a Headmaster? Did you hear that sort of scream it let out just now?" she replied. "Can you imagine Dumbledore greeting us like that?"

"Certainly not. But look, the train has stopped and someone, or something, has come to meet us. That resembles what McGonagall told you."

There was a fresh silence during which Ron and Hermione seemed to be internally turning Harry's theory over in every direction.

"Oh... Perhaps... yes," admitted Hermione after a few moments. "In that case... it's up to me to go and meet him. I'm the one in charge of the students here."

"No way are you going out there alone, we're coming with you!" exclaimed Ron. "Right, Harry?"

Harry nodded, and Hermione gave them a look filled with infinite gratitude. For a split second, Harry felt as though he were facing a much

younger Hermione. The one from the time they had all three faced the mountain troll in the Hogwarts toilets, many years ago.

They walked down the carriage, wands at the ready. Along the way, packed like sardines to preserve warmth, the students seemed to be watching for what would happen next with avid curiosity. Several times, as he forced a path through the gatherings puncturing his route, Harry thought he heard snatches of conversation such as "Look, it's Potter!", "... the saviour of Hogwarts!" or even "Is that him? I imagined him taller...".

Hermione couldn't help but pause when they finally reached the metal door marking the end of the carriage. Her bravery seemed to have been shaken during the crossing. She turned back one last time, as if to soak up the comforting presence of Harry and Ron, and finally pulled on the door, which opened with a lugubrious creak.

A gust of wind brutally forced its entry into the carriage. The flames of the sconces arranged along the walls flickered before vanishing, and the chandeliers began to dance on the ceiling, tinkling ominously. Harry felt his nose prickle then burn as a fresh wave of polar cold definitively took hold of the premises. Assaulted from all sides by the dry, freezing air, eyes watering, he wondered who on earth could be mad enough to risk venturing outside alone in such extreme conditions...

The answer stood in the doorframe, now wide open.

The shadow he had seen prowling near the train moments before stood out against the immaculate background of the snowstorm. It appeared smaller than Harry had judged at first glance, and its posture had something strange about it. Rather as if this person or thing carried a large hump beneath the piece of patched canvas that served as a travelling cloak. Even more intriguing was the appearance of its face, which remained half-masked by a hood from which large plumes of steam escaped regularly.

Hand held as a visor to protect herself from the flakes shooting into the compartment, Hermione stepped forward cautiously...

"Hello, I... I am Hermione Granger. H-H-Head Girl and responsible for the sixth and seventh-year students of Hogwarts," she announced in a loud voice that struggled, however, to cover the tumult of the gusts. "Are you the Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute?"

For his only answer, the visitor approached until he crossed the few dozen inches still separating them. Ron began a defensive gesture which Harry stopped dead, determined only to trigger hostilities as a last resort. Dawlish had been clear: as representatives of the Auror Office, they could not afford to compromise the tense relations persisting between West and East. Provided, of course, that their visitor was a local...

"Do... do you speak English?" tried Hermione, short of inspiration.

Without a word, the stranger revealed two hands the size of frying pans from beneath his cloak. His sausage-like, scar-riddled fingers then rose slowly towards Hermione's face. Just like Ron, whose path he was still blocking, Harry held his breath. At the last moment, however, the strange visitor swerved to grip his black canvas hood... which he pulled back.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron stifled an exclamation.

From the darkness had just emerged a hideous head, dotted here and there with tufts of dishevelled hair. The nose was flattened, covered in pustules, and overhung a slobbering smile half-hidden by exuberant teeth whose colour recalled that of the old parchments one might find in the Antiquities section at Flourish and Blotts. The being stared at Hermione with his small black eyes with intensity. In that precise moment, Harry would have struggled to say if the hunchback was preparing to throw himself on his friend to devour her, or if he was merely beatific with admiration before the chosen one of his heart.

Hermione had just undertaken a new attempt at communication when the visitor suddenly straightened up. His deformed hands brought to the grotesque slit serving as his mouth, the hunchback began to scream with all his might. The same strident cry that had petrified Harry, Ron, and Hermione with horror a few minutes earlier now filled the entire carriage.

Harry clapped his hands over his ears as hard as he could. In vain. A terrible pain had seized him, ever sharper and more penetrating. It was as if a dozen Golden Eggs from the Triwizard Tournament had been abruptly opened inside his head. In a brief moment of lucidity, he considered casting a Silencing Charm at the screamer. But the mere prospect of having to peel a hand off his skull to direct the spell was enough to discourage him. Around him, the students were writhing in all directions, their faces expressing a mixture of terror and agony.

Harry's senses blurred, so unbearable was the suffering. Incapable of supporting his own weight any longer, he hit the nearest wall and let himself slide to the floor. His blood was pounding in his temples, his vision blurring...

From nowhere, a voice imposed itself as if by magic in Harry's mind, until it gained the upper hand over the screaming.

"Enough, Koulok. Enough... We received your signal and are already on our way to find you. Thank you, dear friend..." said the voice gently amidst the din.

The strange visitor's scream cut off like an old civil defence siren and gave way to a buzzing silence. Little by little, life seemed to return inside

the carriage.

"Ow-ow-ow! What was that?" said Ron, curled up on the floor less than a yard from Harry. "Lucky someone asked him to stop, a bit more and my head would have exploded. You... You heard him too, right?"

"I... Yes... So, unless it's a collective hallucination, someone definitely spoke just now," replied Harry, raising his voice to manage to hear himself, so present was the scream still in his skull.

"A voice with a clear, calm timbre... rather reassuring?"

Harry nodded, before adding:

"Hard to say if it was a woman or a man... It was really strange."

A little further away, the other occupants of the carriage were beginning to get up, grumbling.

"That felt like Legilimency. You know, that form of magic that allows one to penetrate people's minds," remarked Hermione, rubbing a hand over her face like someone trying to wake up after a bad dream.

"I thought you needed eye contact to do that sort of thing."

"That is normally the case, yes. But I'm convinced the most powerful wizards don't necessarily need it," retorted Hermione. "Remember, when Voldemort infiltrated your mind, Harry, in fifth year... He was dozens of miles away."

"Yes well, he had left a piece of his soul in me beforehand," objected Harry with disgust. "That must surely have helped the process."

"What an exciting discussion, Miss, Gentlemen..." came the voice in Harry's head again. *"How would you like to continue it by the warmth of a good fire, deep in a plump armchair, escorted by the centuries upon centuries of knowledge our library contains? Yes... Durmstrang, its history, its magic, and its students await you with the greatest impatience. So, would you be so kind as to come and find us at the foot of the cliff without further delay? Mr Koulok, who is standing with you at this very moment, is our servant. He will guide you."*

Scarcely had the voice faded, swallowed by the gusts, than their visitor pulled his hood back up over his head and bowed. His pustule-covered nose only inches from the ground, he invited them to leave the carriage with a wave of his hand.

No doubt stimulated by the prospect of finally returning to school (as well as finding herself "escorted by centuries upon centuries of knowledge"), Hermione regained her wits and got back on her feet in record time. She hastened to gather the students who were still wandering here and there in the corridors, as if their souls had just been sucked out by a Dementor.

No one apart from the Head Girl was in a hurry to venture out into the middle of the storm, and Hermione had to move heaven and earth to get everyone moving. Unsurprisingly, the Slytherins proved particularly recalcitrant. It was not Draco Malfoy who caused the most trouble but his girlfriend, Pansy Parkinson. The cohort was almost entirely mobilised when she planted herself in the middle of the corridor, fists on hips.

"And you want us to go out, in weather like this, following that moron?" she scoffed with contempt, pointing at their hunchbacked guide. "Where are the carriages, or the sleighs... There is no way I am leaving the train in these conditions!"

To general surprise, Hermione did not insist.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Madame's carriage hasn't been brought round yet. If you are too fragile to walk, you had better stay here, indeed..."

She stepped towards the Slytherin and placed a hand on her shoulder with a tender look that was unlike her.

"Thank you for sacrificing yourself for the group, Pansy. I'll tell your parents you were as brave and generous as a Gryffindor when we present them with your frozen corpse. They'll be able to be proud..."

The stratagem worked perfectly and preparations resumed with renewed vigour. Pansy Parkinson even ceased complaining for the fifteen minutes that followed. In an ironic whisper, Ron remarked that this was a historic record.

A little later, bundled up as best they could be in their travelling cloaks, the students (Miss Parkinson included) exited the lead carriage in small groups before plunging into the blizzard. Hermione, who was leading the caravan behind the Durmstrang scout, asked Harry if he would mind bringing up the rear of the convoy to ensure no one got lost on the way. Wishing for nothing more than to lend a hand to his friend who was already crumbling under responsibilities, Harry accepted without flinching.

Very quickly, however, he came to wonder if he was really the man for the job.

Harry could see almost nothing. At times he seemed to distinguish the edge of a cloak, or perhaps the silhouette of a student in front of him, but that was about all. Following the tracks and placing his own feet in those of the students preceding him represented, in fact, a hazardous exercise. To the point where he frequently found himself sunk in fresh snow up to his pelvis, following a departure from the path. Thus trapped, the herd of bewitched luggage floating in suspension behind him crashed violently into his back more than once, projecting him entirely into the powder. Try

as Harry might to warn, and even scream threats at, the large luxurious trunk upon which the gold letters "D. L. Malfoy" were embroidered, the dives into the snow multiplied.

Soon, the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that Harry had lost all sensation in his face (upon which a thin film of frost seemed to have deposited itself) and in his hands, which he had nevertheless wrapped in his travelling cloak and placed carefully on either side of Hermione's jar of blue flames. Ironically, the only part of his body that still seemed capable of sending him signals was his aching knee.

Despite everything, Harry continued to advance head down, clinging to the idea that they would arrive shortly at the castle, where the start-of-term feast and a good old log fire would be waiting for them.

Whoever they might be, Harry blessed the gods of the mountain when the convoy finally stopped. Catching his breath, he managed to dodge *in extremis* the large trunk which, once again, hadn't slowed down in time. The imposing piece of luggage ended its run a little further on, right in the wobbling legs of a sixth-year girl who had had the misfortune of being in its trajectory. Moments later, Ron's familiar silhouette, broad-shouldered and with a slightly awkward gait, stood out against the whiteout to come and meet them.

"Hurry up and join Hermione at the front, she's waiting for you!" he yelled at the few students who had gathered around the girl to help her. "Harry, I need a word, we have a problem!"

Harry found it hard to believe his ears. Judging by the situation, they didn't have *a* problem, they had tons of them...

"I don't see what you're talking about!" replied Harry, yelling in turn to cover the din of the storm. "We have everything one could dream of here, don't we?"

Ron advanced until he was nose-to-nose with him and resumed:

"It's serious! There's someone over there, I think it's that guy, the bloke with the voice from earlier! And I also think he's the Headmaster of Durmstrang!"

"That's very clear, thanks Ron! So what? Reassure me, he sent a rescue team equipped with portable campfires or whatever with him, right?"

"Harry, he doesn't want us to follow the others to... to Durmstrang! He says neither you, nor I, nor Neville, are on the guest list!"

Without being able to explain why, Harry laughed in Ron's face. Nervously, without any joy. How could he have envisaged for a single moment that Dawlish would entrust them with an easy, or even achievable, mission? They were going to end up stuck there, the three of them, in the

middle of nowhere. Plunged into a blizzard that threatened to sweep them at any moment into the bottom of a crevasse, without any idea where to go or how to get back...

Like a ghost who had just walked through a wall, Neville surged from the nearest whirlwind of snow.

"Harry, Ron! I... I explained everything to him! The Death Eaters, the Auror Office, the training, everything! But he won't hear of it. He says 'there is no room for English spies within the walls of Durmstrang!' What are we going to do?"

Harry felt his despair give way to profound fury. That the Headmaster should refuse them entry in such conditions was already unacceptable, but that he should take the opportunity to mock them by making them out to be spies bordered on insult.

"I want to speak to him. Where is he, this Headmaster? This famous D.?" replied Harry before blowing into the hollow of his numb hands.

"We'll take you," said Ron. "But watch out, there's a sort of enormous, nasty dog with him, not to mention that weird guy who came to get us at the train earlier..."

Ron and Neville guided Harry to the front of the procession. Throughout the journey, Harry took care to keep himself tense in view of the negotiations to come. It was out of the question for room and board to be refused to them, if only for one night. From now on, he was ready to do anything to get what he wanted, even to force passage, whatever the political fallout might be. After all, it was Dawlish's fault and not theirs if they were here today.

"Here, this is it, that's him," said Ron with a nod.

"Be careful," added Neville. "I couldn't really say what, but something is wrong with this guy."

In front of them, only a few yards away, a man with a slender silhouette was immersed in what seemed to be a passionate discussion with Hermione and Ginny. From his cream-grey hair, long and curly, resting delicately on the immense gold-rimmed collar of his black cloak, to his long, impeccably polished musketeer boots, everything about him inspired elegance and grace. This man, with features so fine he could easily have been mistaken for a woman of great beauty, seemed to float in the middle of the storm like a lost angel. And as if the elements had also been seduced by this miracle of nature, not a single flake nor the subtlest of breezes came to brush against him; so as, no doubt, not to alter in any way the magnificence radiating from him.

Disconcerted, Harry approached, before sinking once again into the snow. As he tried to extricate himself painfully for the umpteenth time that day, he was surprised to feel both ridiculous and uncouth. Coming to disturb this balance, this subtle peace that nature itself dared not disturb, suddenly appeared to him as an act of great vulgarity.

Still crouching, Harry raised his head one last time to witness the bewitching spectacle before the irreparable was committed. But the scene had disappeared. In its place now stood an immense black wolf, a beast barely smaller than an ox, staring at him with appetite... and which soon advanced towards him with a growl.

Transfixed by fear and cold, Harry didn't move a muscle. His hands were still buried under the snow, out of reach of his wand which he had had the foolishness to leave in one of his pockets. Powerless, he contented himself with observing the wolf as it progressed in his direction. An instant later and a maw with sickening exhalations, entirely lined with fangs, was agitating right in front of his nose.

"Fear not," came a peaceful voice somewhere behind the beast. "We shall do you no harm. Not until we have had our little chat, in any case..."

The beast snapped its jaws a few inches from Harry's face, shook itself, jingling its collar, and retraced its steps. With a dragging gait, it rejoined its master before curling up lazily at his feet. As skilfully as he could, Harry extricated himself from the snow trap he had fallen into and hastened to stand up.

"Our apologies. We were simply too curious to smell what blood you are made of," said the man who seemed to have fallen from the sky, with smugness.

Harry felt his impatience growing within him. He had had enough of all this, of the train, the walking, the snow, the cold, and this species of humiliation being inflicted upon him. All he wanted was to slip into a bed, in the warm, with a roof over his head.

"What interest is that to you?" he retorted in an icy tone. "Do you plan to turn away all Half-bloods and Muggle-borns too? Professor McGonagall must surely have sensitized you to Hogwarts' values, and its position on this subject, before sending you her students."

"We probably misunderstood each other, young Potter. The kind of qualities to which you allude are nowadays perfectly indifferent to us, here at Durmstrang. But no matter... Permit us to introduce ourselves, we are Halcard," said the man, giving a bow that could not have been more graceful. "And for a few months now, it is upon us that the honour and task of educating the school's students has fallen. Your teammates, Messrs

Weasley and Longbottom, already came to explain your situation to us a short while ago. Know that if it has not evolved since, it will be impossible for us to let you follow us further."

"According to my superior, Mr John Dawlish, Head of the Auror Office of the United Kingdom, it is with your Headmaster, 'Mr D.', that we must discuss this. And we would never have undertaken such a journey here if that person had not first given his agreement."

The man named Halcard burst into forced laughter.

"'Mr D.'? Yes, of course.... A pseudonym, at most... which will have proved its effectiveness in preventing our numerous cousins from taking a little too close an interest in certain questions of inheritance... Be that as it may, the Headmaster stands before you, young man, rest assured," he said with a mischievous smile. "It is, however, to be feared that we never got wind of this famous mission, nor of anything else resembling it."

"Easy to say all that..." replied Harry whilst discreetly plunging his hand into the pocket where his magic wand was located. "My teammates explained it to you apparently. There are two Death Eaters somewhere in the area... Who tells me you aren't one of them, in disguise? And where is the castle, then, or this famous cliff we were supposed to reach?"

For the first time since he had met him, Halcard's face, with features yet so seductive, hardened. Around them, the gusts ceased and the snowflakes suddenly seemed to hang in suspension, as if time had stopped.

"We should be able to trust him Harry," intervened Hermione feverishly. "He... he holds a scroll of parchment signed by Professor McGonagall. I saw it, it is indeed her signature..."

"We should be able to do without your help, Miss Granger, thank you..." cut in Halcard in a dry tone. "We will add that, for your own safety, you had better stand aside from this moment on."

Deep in his pocket, Harry felt against his fingers the familiar contact of the holly wood that composed his wand. Facing him, Halcard threw his finely embroidered cloak back with a sweeping movement of his shoulder. With a brisk gesture, he brought his hand to his belt and drew a magnificently crafted sword whose blade seemed made of crystal. He then pointed it at Harry and his monstrous wolf stood up, growling.

Around them, the students backed away. All except a few daring ones, amongst whom were Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, who closed ranks around Harry.

"Mr Potter... There seems to be a misunderstanding. If there had been an intrusion at Durmstrang, our faithful Koulok would have told us a while ago; which makes your presence as unjustifiable as it is out of place.

Given, however, the recent prowess that a good part of Europe seems to grant you, we are ready to infringe our precious regulations to the point of revealing to you the Cliff of the Initiate..."

Without another word, Halcard raised his weapon towards the sky. A blast exploded somewhere above them and the elements unleashed themselves as if the end of the world had arrived. Moments later, however, the oppressive fog dissipated to reveal a purple-hued sky as absolute calm descended. Before them now stood an impressive façade of rock and ice, hundreds of feet high.

Halcard brought the point of his blade back towards Harry, and resumed:

"Consider this demonstration a token of respect, and now leave, Harry Potter. You, and your Auror trainee teammates. Upon your return, tell your superior that Durmstrang will never be the playground of agents from the West. Do not forget also to remind him that your kind have already done enough damage in the past, and that we now intend to compensate for your failings, in our own way."

Harry felt all hope leave him as his gaze met that of the strange guardian angel of the place. Whoever he was, this wizard seemed capable of rivalling Dumbledore himself. It was unthinkable to face a being commanding such magical power, even ten against one. And even assuming they managed to subdue him for a moment, it was almost certain that his immense pet would jump on them to rip them apart, with great slashes of fangs and claws.

They had lost. In fact, they had never even had the slightest chance.

Ron heaved a sigh of disappointment and turned to Harry, looking devastated. Seething with rage at his own powerlessness, Harry lowered his head as well as his wand. A terrible sensation of guilt had just seized him. If he hadn't sealed that stupid Elder Wand a few months earlier, he would probably have had a chance today. But... Would that have been the right method regardless? *To hell with the past and the present*, he told himself internally. This was the last time he would show himself so weak, in his own eyes, in Ginny's, and in those of all his friends. Next time, his promise was made, he would rise to the occasion, whatever the cost.

Someone put a hand on his back, no doubt to offer a caress of comfort, but Harry contented himself with hunching his head into his shoulders.

It was Hermione.

"Pro-Professor? S-Sir? What... What if they are Hogwarts students wishing to take their N.E.W.T.s?"

Halcard lowered his weapon in turn and regained his seductive air.

"You say, Miss Granger? We are not sure we follow you."

"Well..." resumed Hermione, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "If Ron, Harry, and Neville decide to present themselves as seventh-year students... you cannot refuse them access. I mean... that is indeed what is written on the parchment you showed me just now, isn't it?"

"All that is correct, Miss Granger. Provided, of course, that these Gentlemen agree to bow to our internal regulations, and thus to assiduously attend their classes whilst respecting the curfews. Otherwise they will see themselves severely punished then expelled. I insist: here, in our home, Durmstrang law prevails, however severe it may appear to the eyes of the outside world..."

But in the present moment, Harry was absolutely not disposed to submit to any conditions whatsoever. His recent failure to assert his right of entry as an Auror seemed to have awakened a monster that was lacerating his insides. What was the point of having crossed all these obstacles if it was to end up treated like this?

He heard Ron and Neville discussing in low voices a little further away. Both seemed to agree to sign up at the last minute, according to Hermione's proposal.

"And you Harry, what do you say?" Neville finally asked him timidly.

"I say you didn't hang about giving up," retorted Harry, exasperated.

Ron shook his head without saying anything, as if he had just received a slap in the face. Harry was still congratulating himself internally for having hit so close to the mark when Ginny grabbed him firmly by the arm.

"Stop it, will you!" she whispered to him angrily. "Maybe this isn't how you saw things, but it's your only way to get your hands on those guys. Isn't that more important than knowing who is right? And besides... it would allow us to be together a little longer," she added after a few moments.

"Yes, just accept and let's go like that. We'll do as we've always done: we'll help each other, and we'll get there," added Hermione.

With a look, Harry swept the assembly of his friends before breathing in deeply.

"All right. I'm with you..." he said finally.

II. THE CASTLE IN THE SKY

Both relieved to know that the doors of Durmstrang would not remain closed to him indefinitely, and worried about the turn his very first mission as an Apprentice Auror was taking, Harry imitated Ron and Neville by appending his signature to the parchment the Headmaster held out to them. The unease accompanying this unforeseen commitment intensified further upon discovering the avidity with which Halcard reclaimed his document.

Moments later, the latter was congratulating Hermione on her presence of mind, declaring it "worthy of everything Professor McGonagall could have suggested," when Draco Malfoy burst right into the middle of their conversation. Like the other students, he appeared completely frozen.

"Sir? Where is the castle? Don't tell me it's all the way up there," said Draco, trembling from head to toe.

"And yet... it is greatly to be feared that it is, young man. The ascent of the Cliff of the Initiate is a very ancient custom. A tradition dating back to the remote era of this school's creation, and one which is very dear to us."

"And isn't there a more *direct*, or less painful way to get there?" intervened Pansy, whose nose had turned blue since their departure from the train.

"Access to Durmstrang must be earned," the Dean affirmed implacably. "All we can do to alleviate your suffering is to lend you this, young witch," he finally added, bringing his hand to his belt.

Scarcely had he placed his slender fingers on the hilt of his strange sword than their luggage vanished. The next instant, everyone found themselves shod in a pair of wide snowshoes and clad in a thick fur coat. Caught off guard by the weight of this extra layer of clothing, Harry (like many others around him) nearly fell backwards once again. The curse that threatened to escape him was quickly stifled, however. All things considered, this surprise was more than welcome.

"Mr Koulok, go on ahead and make haste to warn the others of our imminent arrival. As for us, let us go," said Halcard, gesturing for them to

follow, whilst the hunchbacked scout overtook them at breakneck speed before disappearing into the distance. "Our presence is highly anticipated, and it would be a pity if the feast were to stew for too long, should we perchance delay in showing ourselves..."

The remark hit home in the ranks of the students, who immediately scrambled in the Headmaster's footsteps. He led them onto a steep and craggy path winding in the shadow of the cliff. Harry climbed the first few yards with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. For the first time in his life, he was going to discover a wizarding school other than his beloved Hogwarts.

A few paces ahead, Halcard hadn't bothered to equip himself with snowshoes and gave the impression of levitating over the fresh snow with each stride. It looked as if the difficulty of the exercise left him totally indifferent. Soon, he began telling Hermione how the ritual of the Cliff of the Initiate was born in 1294, when it had been necessary to welcome the champions of other schools on the occasion of the very first Triwizard Tournament. Hermione looked absorbed by the tale and was doubtless dying to ask more in-depth questions, but she seemed to lack the breath.

She wasn't the only one struggling. The enthusiastic conversations that had started here and there at the beginning of the climb had long since given way to multiple groans and other muffled whimpers. As for Harry, every inhalation in this icy atmosphere gave him the impression of having swallowed half a dozen flaming shots of *Ogden's Old Firewhisky* (a game the Weasley twins had once, and only once, indulged in under the half-impressed, half-pitying gazes of their peers in the Gryffindor common room).

"We... we have to get our hands on those Death Eaters quickly. If... If not, Dawlish is going to kill us," stammered Ron painfully as they skirted an immense waterfall frozen into ice. "I-I don't want to spend the rest of my days in this... this sort of thing Hermione's parents have that makes c-cold..."

"A refrigerator?" suggested Harry, lost in his thoughts.

"Yeah that's it, a *freezegeerator*. Anyway, we have to get out of here! People aren't normal in this part of the world. Remember K-Krum, when he dived into the lake, in the middle of winter?"

"Maybe we should avoid telling him anything for the moment—Daw-Daw... Dawlish I mean," suggested Neville, who looked as though he had

stepped straight out of Ron's freezer. "We could just act as if nothing had happened."

Harry found it hard to give an opinion. The situation was complex. Had Dawlish deliberately omitted to announce their arrival at Durmstrang to harm them? Or... was this strange Halcard hiding something from them? Alas, for the moment it seemed impossible to obtain a precise answer without risking expulsion from the Auror Apprentice programme on one side, or from the walls of Durmstrang on the other.

"I say we wait and see how this turns out," confirmed Harry, focusing on the warmth of the little red chick against his neck. "You never know, perhaps the future will prove more lenient."

"Fine by me," replied Ron. "Actually, I'm starting to get too hungry to worry about all that. I hope the cooking is good in this country. Ah... it's crazy how much I miss the Burrow and Hogwarts already..."

The caravan of students continued its path for a good half-hour before taking a short break, to give those who were struggling the most a chance to catch their breath. Harry felt a little more relaxed. It was as if this latest physical exercise had managed to help him get some distance from his recent setbacks. Thinking about it, his friends were right there with him and in good health, and as long as they remained united, they would have every chance of overcoming the obstacles that might stand in their way.

"Phew! I think we're nearly there," wheezed Ginny, pointing to a snowy cornice a little higher up that was glittering in the light of the setting sun.

"And not a moment too soon!" said Ron. "Since we got on the Hogwarts Express we've nearly been buried, frozen, swept away by the storm and even, narrowly, sliced into rounds by that weird albino guy," (he cast a cautious glance in Halcard's direction to ensure he hadn't heard anything, but the Headmaster still seemed absorbed in his conversation with Hermione). "If only those idiot Death Eaters could have got lost in the vicinity of Beauxbatons, we wouldn't have had to suffer all this..."

"What saddens me the most for the moment is the absence of greenery," said Neville. "Have you noticed? There's only snow and rocks here."

Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Luna, in her own way, consoled Neville as best they could by pointing out that, here, at least, he could walk around without being constantly harassed by a crowd of feverish groupies.

A few minutes later, they crossed a small ridge which led them to one of the most beautiful viewpoints Harry had ever had the occasion to

contemplate.

"There!" announced Halcard proudly, suddenly transformed into an elegant silhouette by the reddish light of the twilight. "Exceptionally, for you, behold the Castle in the Sky, behold Durmstrang!"

Below a basin, flanked on one side by the snowy slope of an imposing peak, and on the other by the void of a sheer cliff, sat an impressive structure with the look of a Gothic cathedral. Bristling with ramparts and twisted towers, some curled upon themselves, each taller and sharper than the last, the castle appeared to Harry like a strange and marvellous pincushion of granite needles. The edifice rose above a frozen lake in which the great ship with torn sails that had carried the Durmstrang delegation to Hogwarts a few years earlier was peacefully moored. Finally, a few yards away, a lush forest of fir trees dusted with fresh snow adjoined both the flank of the mountain and the edge of the basin.

"It's splendid!" enthused Hermione. "It's... it's like an island! Lost right in the middle of the clouds."

"Is it not, Miss Granger? The founder, Nerida Vulchanova, was undeniably the most powerful witch of her time. But her greatness was not limited to that; she was also a person of taste. The Devil's Horn, upon which we stand, and the Devil's Peak which you can see in the distance, are probably the two most majestic summits of the Carpathian range."

"A commanding position, sheltered from prying eyes, what's more. It is well thought out, indeed," acknowledged Hermione.

"Ah! And there are trees too! Finally!" sighed Neville with relief. "I was starting to lose hope."

"The Silver Forest serves both as protection for the castle against avalanches, and as a refuge for a good number of creatures, Mr Longbottom," explained Halcard. "Beware, however; visits there are forbidden for the place is not without danger."

The spectacle offered to them was so striking that it seemed even to touch Draco and Pansy. Both sat down hand in hand, totally indifferent to Harry's presence.

"So this is Durmstrang..." said Draco in his drawling voice. "My father hesitated for a long time about sending me here. He said I could learn the only true magic here. The Dark Arts..."

"Pah! In recent years, the teaching has gone very soft," replied Pansy with a grimace as if she had just swallowed something truly repulsive.

"What makes you say that?"

"I have family in the region, you know, on my mother's side. They are real ignorant brutes... Mother didn't take long to distance herself—that's how she ended up in London. They come every year for Christmas... and it's never a pleasure, believe me."

At these words, the enormous wolf began to growl and Halcard appeared to startle.

"You are Miss Parkinson, are you not?" he said, approaching the couple with his light gait. "Seeing you earlier, we thought we recognised someone... Could it be that one of your ancestors..."

Halcard could not finish. The howl that had deafened them a little earlier, whilst they were still on the train, had just resounded in the distance, in the direction of the castle.

"Koulok seems very impatient all of a sudden... We are not early, it is true, but..." he mused aloud. "Never mind, come along young people, the break is over. Durmstrang awaits us."

Following Halcard, the students started down the snowy slope leading to the castle. The surroundings darkened as they descended and night unfurled above their heads. To general surprise, a scarlet moon, so large one would have thought it within reach, soon rose beyond the sinuous towers dominating them. The admiring "Oohs" and "Aahs" that rang out everywhere brought the general excitement to a fever pitch.

A new snowstorm had risen when they reached the drawbridge marking the sole passage into the castle grounds. No sooner had Koulok spotted them than he rushed towards them with his half-limping, half-bounding gait.

"What is so important that it cannot wait for the start of the meal, Koulok?" asked Halcard, a hint of annoyance in the depths of his voice. "Do not wait for us, Miss Granger!" he added, turning back vaguely. "Go on ahead and cross the bridge with the students. We shall have caught up with you within a minute."

For a while now, Harry had felt his legs growing heavy and hunger gnawing at him as if his stomach were caught in a vice. A few more strides and he would be sitting in shelter, in the warmth, patiently waiting for the

feast to begin. However, the strange expression the Dean had adopted when Koulok had run to meet them had aroused his suspicions.

What kind of news could betray the formidable actor that Halcard seemed to be?

Curiosity won out. Harry let go of Ginny's hand and claimed he had a problem with one of his snowshoes to kneel discreetly by the side of the path.

Alone, crouching in the snow, he strained his ears as attentively as he could. Powerful gusts were sweeping the surroundings, and only the crunching of snow under the feet of the students crossing the bridge reached him at first. As his hearing sharpened, he came to detect the vibrations of the rigging of the ship that must have been anchored not far away. Then... as if carried by the wind, almost imperceptibly, Harry finally recognised Halcard's voice.

".. .. sure Koulok? dark silhouettes, you say? two? by .. secret passage of the ... ? ... 'prentis Aurors .. weren't lying... no matter... .. threat, everything as planned."

Harry's blood ran cold when he realised the conversation had ended and that the Headmaster threatened to reappear at any moment behind the nearest curtain of flakes. With considerable effort, he put aside the pain signals his exhausted body was sending him and hastened to cross the bridge after his comrades.

"Where did you get to?" grumbled Ron a few moments later, after Harry had rejoined the group under an arch sheltering an immense metal portcullis. "And what's keeping them? I'm starving."

"Ron!" Harry struggled to whisper despite the little breath he had left. "Halcard... Koulok... I heard what they were saying... I didn't understand everything... but... There are intruders; two intruders in the castle! And... what if it were the Lestranges?"

"The Lestranges?" repeated Ron simply, both incredulous and grumpy.

Harry was burning to recount the detail of what he had just heard, but Halcard, his wolf, and the hunchback appeared right next to them. Passing by, the Dean did not even spare them a glance. His animal, on the other hand, fixed them with appetite using its large bloodshot eyes. Ron was manifestly not the only one with an empty stomach...

The caravan resumed its route and Harry deemed it preferable to postpone their discussion. There were too many pairs of indiscreet ears around them and he did not wish to miss the discovery of their new home in any way. Increasingly hungry, Ron pulled him by a sleeve and they soon joined the head of the line, where Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna were already located.

There, Halcard brought his hand to the hilt of his sword and small yellowish orbs began to twinkle timidly in the middle of the blizzard. Harry quickly understood where these glows came from. Old lampposts had bowed down to meet them, unrolling a sumptuous carpet of gold and glittering snow at their feet.

The narrow path of light thus guided the group of silent students for a few hundred yards, leading them around an ice statue of a remarkably beautiful witch before stopping in front of two oak doors so imposing that Harry felt as if he had been hit by a Shrinking Charm.

The troop immobilised, Koulok grabbed the knocker protruding from a bronze dragon's maw and knocked vigorously. With a loud creak, the wooden leaves adorned with wrought iron came to life. Scarcely had a thin opening appeared between the doors than a flood of winged creatures poured out over the students.

"Fear not, they are merely simple chiropterans!" announced Halcard, a nuance of amusement in the depths of his voice.

But with the exception of a meagre number of daring souls or a few others too exhausted to react, most of the students had already thrown themselves face down, seized by panic.

"Chirowhats? Are they gone?" said Neville, curled up in a ball.

"Bats, Neville. It w-was only bats," repeated Hermione as if to reassure herself.

"Yes, Miss Granger... In this region of the globe, we use these flyers to handle our post. But do not think we have anything against owls; it is merely one of our many customs..."

The immense carved doors finally came to a halt with a dull thud and Harry, who had just jumped like the others, felt deliciously warm and scented air caress his face. A shiver of relief seized him as he realised they had finally arrived at their destination.

With a bit of luck, they would all be at table feasting within a few minutes.

A few steps further, a wide vestibule supported by an alignment of columns carved in the likeness of fierce-looking monsters stretched before them.

"Here, I'm not sure I recognise this one. What sort of species of dragon is it, do you reckon?" asked Harry, rounding a pillar.

In front of them, an animated fresco depicted an enormous reptile. The monster was engaged in ferocious combat with a knight clad in resplendent armour.

"Dunno... I was wondering the same thing," admitted Ginny at the very moment the monster impaled the knight with a headbutt before roasting him with its burning breath, like a common marshmallow.

"Looks like a variant of the Romanian Longhorn," observed Ron, nose now inches from the fresco.

"Except that... in this case, we should rather speak of an *Extra-Longhorn*," noted Ginny.

As if it had suddenly understood they were talking about it, the monster dropped its charred victim and turned its scaly head in their direction. Ron stepped back in haste, as if afraid of getting singed in turn...

"This analysis does you credit, young people. We had almost forgotten that Hogwarts students possessed such knowledge of fantastic beasts," came Halcard's soft voice at their backs.

Like a true ghost, the Dean had appeared behind them and everyone jumped once again.

"Our classes are very good, that's for sure," replied Ginny as soon as she had recovered from the shock. "But there's also the fact that our brother Charlie is a Dragonologist," she added, pointing to herself and Ron in turn. "He works in Romania."

"That promises to be fascinating," replied Halcard with manifest interest. "And you are?"

"Ginny... Ginny Weasley, Sir."

For a brief moment, Halcard continued to stare at her avidly before resuming:

"Dear Ginny Weasley, you can appreciate right here the punishment inflicted by one of our ancestors on one of his most ferocious adversaries. An adversary who was none other than King Ladislas of Hungary himself."

King Ladislas was once again pierced through the stomach by the horn protruding from the middle of the dragon's forehead, and Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had the greatest difficulty in the world suppressing a grimace. The Dean, for his part, seemed to revel in the spectacle.

"Your ancestors were quite cruel," remarked Ginny as the scene started over from scratch.

"If only you knew the whole story... Miss Weasley," replied Halcard with an amused smile.

And as suddenly as he had appeared, he turned his back on them with a swish of his cloak before melting into another group of students in the distance.

"I miss Hogwarts, there's no denying it," concluded Ron, perplexed, before inserting himself into the line of wizards which had started moving again.

Following the strange hunchbacked scout, the procession finally traversed a long corridor filled with dusty cobwebs and soon found itself in what must have been the Great Hall of Durmstrang.

The place was plunged into semi-darkness which gave it an aspect both intimidating and sumptuous. Bathed in the purple glow of moonbeams filtering through a gigantic rose window, two circular tables, inscribed one within the other around what looked like a millennia-old tree, faced the new arrivals. Only a few inches above the cutlery, plates, and other goblets, all so clear and sparkling one would have thought them freshly carved from ice, glittered a myriad of dark nuggets: the students of Durmstrang were all there, gathered, staring at them with undisguised curiosity.

A graceful silhouette Harry recognised without difficulty stood up against the light, theatrically spreading his arms in the blood-red light diffused by the immense stained-glass window.

"Dear students of Hogwarts, the long-awaited moment has finally arrived!" announced Halcard in a penetrating voice that echoed against the thick stone walls surrounding them. "Welcome to Durmstrang!"

There was the sound of a snap of fingers and Harry suddenly felt lighter. The snowshoes and fur that were beginning to encumber him had just

vanished. Torches then flared up here and there in the room, revealing a vast hall with walls covered in baroque tapestries that seemed to date back several centuries. In a remote corner, a motley group of ghosts began to play a strange sonata dominated by harpsichord and violins, whilst the students of Durmstrang stood up in unison to bow in a perfectly synchronised reverence.

"Galloping gargoyles! Did you see that? Whoever stuffed them did a good job; they look like puppets in uniform!" chuckled Ron.

Alas, the remark fell right at the moment the music stopped. Ron tried shamefully to hide behind Harry, without much success. Facing them, the assembly of Durmstrang students stood silently, frozen.

"Either they heard you, and they're about to throw themselves on you to drag you forcibly into the dungeons; or they're waiting for us to take our places at the table," whispered Hermione, shooting him an indignant look. "Strangely, I'd almost prefer it to be the first option... That might spare us other gaffes from the infamous Ron Weasley, known as 'The King'," she added out of the corner of her mouth before initiating the movement.

Harry didn't need asking twice and hastened to follow her lead. Although accustomed to it, he had never been fond of those moments when an invisible spotlight seemed trained on his shoulders. Luckily, he soon found a free seat in a zone occupied by other Gryffindor students, among whom were his former dorm-mates and friends, Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas.

The sound level rose in a crescendo in the hall as everyone took their seats and conversations started up here and there. Not far from the tables, a blaze came to life in a splendid Renaissance-style fireplace which did not delay in spreading a gentle, enveloping warmth.

"Mr Chosen One, good to see you! You wouldn't have the time by any chance?" greeted Dean, casting a mischievous glance at the sparkling gift Harry wore on his wrist.

But Harry had barely had time to stammer a few thanks when Seamus bounded in his chair, overexcited.

"Did you see?" he cried. "Over there, right near the staff table, that's him, isn't it? Krum!"

Harry scanned the assembly twice, but at no moment did he recognise the sallow face topped with thick black eyebrows that characterised Viktor Krum, the star of the Bulgarian Quidditch team.

"Isn't Viktor a bit old to still be at school?"

"Not Viktor. Vassili, his little brother!" intervened Ginny in a low voice. "We hear less about him; Viktor still overshadows him. But he's said to be very talented too. Enough to become the star of the Bulgarian team in the years to come... that's what Gwenog claimed, anyway."

Harry took a slightly more lingering look at Vassili Krum and the obvious struck him then. This young man with messy black hair, a rounded nose, and a vexed expression he had noticed a little earlier could only be a Krum. The similarities were not limited to physical features, however. There was something in his attitude that unmistakably recalled his brother... Vassili presented that same indolence peculiar to Viktor, that sort of natural nonchalance towards the boundless admiration his entourage held for him.

For a brief moment, Harry wondered what could drive someone so talented and popular to display such a morose air, before Halcard stood up once again to announce the arrival from the kitchens of the "delicious cheese fondue, half-and-half style". He then wished everyone a good appetite, and an impressive quantity of pitchers, baskets filled with small pieces of bread, and large bubbling cauldrons appeared on the tables with a soft 'pop!'.

Harry, like a good number of his comrades around him, leaned avidly over the nearest boiling receptacle. A dreadful smell of feet assaulted his face, so much so that he recoiled.

"What is this mixture? It reeks!" exclaimed Ron indignantly, wrinkling his nostrils. "So this is the Durmstrang feast?"

"It reminds me of the smell of the old socks Fred used to hide under my pillow when I was little," remarked Ginny. "Cheeky brother! If I'd known I'd miss it one day..."

Unable to say if she knew what she was doing, or if it was simply because she didn't wish to commit an impoliteness towards their hosts, Harry watched Hermione with apprehension as she speared a piece of bread on one of her utensils to then plunge it into the thick yellowish liquid simmering in the pot.

"Hermione, you're surely not going to do that? It looks even worse than that fish stuff Fleur loves so much, the *baboolla... bilaboose...*"

"*Bouillabaisse*, Ron," corrected Hermione, raising her eyebrows with a superior air before swallowing the large piece of steaming cheesy bread at

the end of her skewer.

In a burst of bravery (stimulated by a ferocious appetite), everyone soon imitated Hermione. Everyone except Ron, who preferred to nibble his dry bread whilst grumbling.

"Mmm, what a treat! I wasn't expecting that!" acknowledged Harry, who was still struggling to believe his palate as the flavours continued to develop in his mouth.

"It'sh creamy...", said Seamus.

"Smooth...", completed Dean whilst ensuring the level of the bread basket didn't drop too quickly.

"And these aromas...!" added Ginny with delight. "It has nothing to envy Fleur's stuff."

Unable to hold out any longer, Ron cried furiously:

"Alright, I get it! I'll taste it, your sloppy cheese!"

From that moment on, as if by magic, Ron ceased grumbling. Soon, nothing was heard from his side of the table but repeated and increasingly hurried gulps.

Stomach full to the brim, Harry felt his muscles relax one by one. The fatigue he had accumulated during the day was beginning to make itself felt and he thought with delight of the cosy beds that must be awaiting them somewhere within the castle walls.

Half-asleep, eyes misty, he let himself watch Chick chirping as he pecked at the small crumbs garnished with melted cheese that Ginny and Luna were preparing for him. Right next to them, judging by their passionate look and the aerial gestures they were describing with their skewers, Ron, Dean, and Seamus were absorbed in the account of a colourful Quidditch match. Neville, for his part, was chatting with a Hufflepuff girl who seemed to be having a certain effect on him...

Subconsciously, Harry thought back to the most striking elements of this long and exceptional day. And to think he had nearly got into a fight just a few hours earlier... The Headmaster of Durmstrang was decidedly a man full of surprises. And secrets...

His curiosity suddenly aroused, Harry cast a discreet glance towards the staff table.

A few yards away, surrounded by colleagues busy chatting amongst themselves, sitting comfortably in a majestic leather armchair, Halcard was sipping a glass of wine. Evidently, he didn't like cheese or didn't consume it, for the ruby-hued liquid filling his glass as well as his personal decanter seemed to constitute his sole meal. A manifest expression of satisfaction stamped on his angelic face, Halcard was staring into the distance, as if admiring something located far beyond the Great Hall.

"Who is he *really*, deep down?" Harry wondered.

As if they had been suddenly dissociated from the rest of the body to which they belonged, Halcard's eyes rolled in their sockets and came to rest on Harry.

"That, precious Mr Potter, you shall not delay in discovering," came a voice right in the middle of his head.

12. DOUBTS AND TENSIONS

"Your dessert... you're not planning on eating it, are you?"

Harry started as if he had suddenly been pulled from a dream.

"What?"

"Your cream meringues, you don't want them?" resumed Ron with the utmost innocence. "I can take them off your hands if you're not hungry anymore; I must still have a bit of room left somewhere."

Harry couldn't believe it. What had happened? Around him, the students seemed to have finished their meal. All except for a few stragglers who were still clinking their spoons against their dishes, looking both delighted and a little dazed.

"Harry, you alright there, mate?"

"Yeah, I just..."

At the High Table, Halcard was once again displaying his satisfied expression and his vacant, motionless stare, as if nothing had happened.

"...anyway, I should have guessed Viktor was being a bit too modest: Durmstrang has nothing to envy Hogwarts; I wonder if it isn't even bigger! Yes, Ginny! I tell you, I'm almost sure I've seen him somewhere before," said Hermione next to Harry, helping herself to a small amount of cream. "Perhaps in an engraving, in a very old book..."

"How would that be possible? The last time we spoke with McGonagall, even she had never heard of the new Headmaster of Durmstrang, let alone *that* guy," said Ginny, nodding towards the Headmaster. "Are you sure it wasn't one of his ancestors?"

"I don't know, I can't explain it. But there's something familiar about him, I'm certain."

"Maybe he looks like a member of one of your weird music bands," suggested Ron, yawning until his jaw cracked. "He's got a bit of a rock star

look about him, I reckon."

The meal finished, discussions continued briskly for a while longer until Halcard announced that it was time for everyone to go to bed. His goodnights wished, the Headmaster charged Koulok with guiding the Hogwarts students to their dormitories before retiring to his own quarters, his enormous wolf at his heels. In single file, the newcomers set off after the hunchback in a religious silence.

Like so many others, Harry struggled to stay awake and wandered through the corridors filled with paintings and mediaeval suits of armour like a sleepwalker. From time to time, he even managed to fall asleep standing up. He would catch himself just in time by stumbling, which had the unpleasant effect of aggravating the injury to his knee.

"Ron... about what I was telling you earlier," Harry said, after receiving a jolt of pain intense enough to chase away the torpor gradually seizing him. "You know, when I heard Halcard talking with Koulok."

"Oh right, when was that?" replied Ron, eyes half-closed. "You mean when you disappeared without warning near the drawbridge?"

"Yes. I stayed hidden, actually, crouched in the snow while they had their little chat."

"You did that? Why do you always have to... Anyway, never mind. Whaaat came of it?" added Ron through a yawn.

"If I understood correctly, strangers broke into the castle while we were climbing the cliff, all together... Halcard didn't exactly state it clearly, but he seemed to be talking about two men, actually. Two, like the Lestranges!"

"Harry, I couldn't even see my own hands at that moment. And it was so cold I thought I was going to lose an ear and end up like George!" replied Ron, half-amused, half-asleep. "How can you claim to have gleaned all that in a moment like that?"

"Sorry? So, you think I'm making this story up out of thin air?" retorted Harry, his sensitivity exacerbated by lack of sleep.

"Not at all. No-no, I know that's not your style..."

Harry stopped dead, too tired to walk and argue at the same time. He waited for the other students to disappear behind a sliding wall then, fatigue taking over, the volcano that had barely awakened in his gut exploded.

"So go on, explain it to me. What is 'my style'?"

Ron massaged the back of his head with a grimace, looking embarrassed. Harry felt his stomach knotting up again.

"The thing is... it's just... How to put it... Oh, sod it! The thing is, you're sometimes a bit paranoid," Ron blurted out all in one breath, as if he had been preparing this speech for a good while. "I'm not saying it's your fault or anything. Personally, if I'd lived through even half of what you've been through, I'd probably have gone completely bonkers..."

"Better and better. You think I've lost my mind? Like those idiots at the *Daily Prophet*, back when I had actually witnessed Voldemort's return?"

"No, not at all... You cut me off!" said Ron, who was beginning to get heated in turn. "What I mean is that you've experienced traumatic things in the past. Things that have marked you... and that affect the way you see the world even today."

Harry remained speechless. Once again, his lifelong friend was questioning him. Was it actually true? Had he become a sort of Mad-Eye Moody Junior? Half-cracked, always on the lookout for the slightest danger that might be lurking, to the point of always overdoing it? Harry stared deep into Ron's eyes in the hope of finding a sign, a little nothing at all that would show him the latter had simply spoken a bit too hastily.

But Ron didn't blink.

"Honestly, hasn't it hit you yet? Dawlish is worried sick about his job. Since your triumph at the Battle of Hogwarts, everyone already sees you at the head of the Auror Department, or even Minister for Magic within a few years!"

"I don't see the connection with the presence of Death Eaters at Durmstrang," replied Harry coldly.

"Of course there is! It's obvious, on the contrary!" cried Ron, shaking his head. "I already suspected it when we got the briefing from Dawlish getting off the train; there was something wrong. But when Halcard turned us away at the cliff, it became even more..."

"Oh really? You weren't exactly acting the clever clogs at that moment, if I recall correctly. A pity you didn't see fit to share your suspicions with us!"

"Stop interrupting me every two seconds. All I'm trying to tell you is that... it's political. Dawlish has sidelined us. Do you understand? There is no mission, no Death Eaters or whatever. He sent us to the other side of the world expecting us to turn back... so he could kick us out of the

programme. Or worse still, so we'd peg it in that blasted storm! Believe me, that bloke is obsessed with the idea of you taking his place, and he seems ready to do anything to keep it. You're working yourself up for nothing, mate."

Harry had never considered things from that angle. To him, Dawlish was just another wrong 'un. One of those people who, like so many others, had it in for him for reason X or Y, without really knowing why.

Caught off guard like this, he suddenly felt foolish. Try as he might to turn the situation over in his head, this version of events held water. How was it possible he hadn't thought of it sooner? Had he been so prodigious in the past that the Head of the Auror Office would come to consider him a rival? Why not, after all... The Dark Lord himself had marked him, Harry Potter, as his equal. The first time when he was just a newborn, the second much more recently, after he had matured into the young adult standing at this very moment in a dark and dusty corridor.

Perhaps Ron was right. Perhaps he was simply much more impressive than he thought...

"Let's say you're right... And now, how do you see things?" cut in Harry as the threads of recent events agitated and crossed in all directions in his head, like a gigantic superposition of spiderwebs.

"Dawlish is in power. I don't see any way to dislodge him, and if we bother him too much, he'll get rid of us. Figuratively or literally, it seems to matter little to him," replied Ron with a shrug. "So we're going to do what he expects of us... we're not going to make waves. We're going to spend this year at Durmstrang, quietly, as if nothing were amiss."

"But if we do that, we're heading straight for expulsion from the programme!" exclaimed Harry.

"Expelled but alive! And with a future ahead of us, despite everything... made possible thanks to the N.E.W.T.s we'll have obtained!"

Ron looked away, as if the portrait hanging next to them suddenly merited his interest. Yet it depicted only an old grandmother asleep, busy snoring so loudly that her lace collar was trembling.

"I didn't think becoming an Auror implied so many sacrifices," he resumed after a moment, "especially in a period that's become so... let's say... *calm*. I think I've had enough of risking my neck every ten minutes. And anyway, it's cooked, Harry. Accept it if my reasoning doesn't suit you. But tell yourself it was over the very moment Dawlish was named Head of

the Office. I really don't know what was going through Kingsley's head when he made that decision..."

Harry stood open-mouthed; he didn't want to believe his ears. Ron's theory about Dawlish was admissible. On the other hand, although he had doubted his friend when he announced he wanted to become an Auror, never would he have imagined hearing him give up like this after coming so far.

The Ronald Weasley he knew was better than that.

"Hey, you two! What on earth are you doing standing there?" cried Hermione furiously, bursting out from around a corner. "I've been looking everywhere for you! We're not supposed to hang about in the corridors at this hour. AND ESPECIALLY NOT HERE, AT DURMSTRANG! Come on, follow me!"

Without another word, all three resumed their route. When Harry was finally able to lie down on his four-poster bed a good half-hour later, in one of those remote towers of the castle that seemed to describe a snowflake that had been stretched out, he had never felt so alone nor so lost. The career advice meeting he'd had a few years earlier with Professor McGonagall, under the mocking gaze of Dolores Umbridge, then High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, kept replaying on a loop in his head. At that time, his Head of House had encouraged him to become an Auror. And since then, Harry had never imagined doing anything else with his life.

He would eventually bring Ron to his senses. He had to, whatever the cost; the Death Eaters were indeed in the vicinity, something deep inside him assured him of it. Besides, Neville had resources. He would be there to help him convince his friend; between the two of them they would manage it, that was almost certain.

"Goodnight everyone," came Dean's sleepy voice from the back of the room. "By the way, this place... What do you reckon?"

"Personally, I feel this last year is going to be grand, lads," replied Ron's voice. "If you want my opinion, these stories about magical illnesses, tortured students, or Grindelwald's imprint haunting the place, it's to dissuade the curious. Here, the food is divine, the beds are twice as big as at Hogwarts..."

"Oh yes... and aren't there some pretty girls this year..." remarked Neville in a distant voice.

Harry let out a long sigh of distress. He carelessly closed the curtains surrounding his bed, turned over, and despite all his worries, sank without delay into a deep sleep.

The next morning, another unpleasant surprise awaited him. Judging by the turned-back duvets arranged here and there in bulk on the mattresses, none of his roommates, be it Ron, Neville, Dean, or Seamus, had waited for him to go down to breakfast. With a pang in his heart, he glanced at his watch to note that he was late and threw himself at his things at top speed.

"Ouch! You young fool! Watch where you put your feet," snapped the magic hat gifted by George, as Harry pulled on his clothes a little too hastily. "And stop looking at me with that bewildered expression, will you? Have you ever seen talking socks before?"

After donning his things in a slightly more orthodox manner, Harry slalomed between the armchairs and other black velvet cushions dotting the floor of the common room and set off at full pelt down the first corridor that presented itself. He hurried through a succession of desperately lifeless galleries, save for a few portraits of haughty and sickly-looking wizards who seemed delighted to be able to sneer in his face whilst he asked them the way.

Just as all hope seemed lost, Harry crossed paths with a strange ghost. Endowed with a tunic with puffed sleeves and a sort of cavalry trouser leading into a pair of spurred thigh-high boots, the spectre kept pulling his wide plumed felt hat over his face whilst Harry asked him how to get to the Great Hall. The intriguing character finally extended a leather-gloved hand towards a staircase facing them. He then clicked his heels with a sharp, military gesture and disappeared, sinking slowly into the floor.

Moments later and Harry was back in the vast room where his comrades were already seated, laughing and bickering.

The memory of the previous day still anchored too painfully within him, he chose to sit a little apart, next to Ginny and Hermione who were discussing wizard music. Despite his poor appetite, he appreciated every mouthful and every sip of the cold meats and pumpkin juice that had been made available for breakfast. He even gradually regained a certain faith in the future awaiting them at Durmstrang, until Ron exploded with thunderous laughter from the other end of the table, following a joke from Dean.

"Thanks for waking me before leaving the common room, Ron," Harry threw out bitterly. "I barely had to run to arrive on time."

One hand in the air, the other on his stomach still cramped by the fit of giggles shaking him moments before, Ron froze with an embarrassed grimace.

"I... I just preferred to let you sleep a bit longer, Harry, that's all. Last night... it seemed to me you really needed it."

"Is something wrong?" asked Ginny, faced with Harry's annoyed expression.

He hesitated to tell the whole story but changed his mind; Halcard had just risen from his armchair, clinking his claw-like fingernails against his wine glass.

"Dear students of Hogwarts, dear students of Durmstrang, in a few moments you will attend your first class of the year. No doubt your excitement and impatience have already reached new heights (*literally*, chuckled Dean to Seamus, nudging him in the ribs). However, we would be grateful if you could grant us a few more minutes before heading to class... The time has come to share an important announcement with you."

Halcard paused briefly, time enough to conjure a parchment before his eyes, and Harry felt excitement growing in him despite his bad mood. An instant later, the Headmaster resumed speaking as the rays of dawn settled on his shoulders. His platinum blonde mane began to sparkle, reinforcing even further the impression of supernatural beauty he exuded.

"It was four years ago now that Durmstrang, Hogwarts, and Beauxbatons gathered to offer a new birth to the famous Triwizard Tournament. An event with the theme of international magical collaboration but also, and above all, progress through competition."

In the hall, Harry noticed that not a single student was moving. Everyone was hanging on the Headmaster's every word. It was as if time itself had stopped, except for Halcard, who continued.

"While most of you were not old enough to attend the last tournament in 1994, some know the outcome. At the time, Durmstrang's finest product was surpassed by a young talent who was not even fifteen. We refer, of course, to the Hogwarts champion, seated right here, amongst us: Mr Harry Potter."

A deafening silence fell as the words "Harry Potter" finished echoing in the four corners of the room.

Harry felt the attention of the entire assembly turn away from Halcard to fix upon him and his scar. All around, excited whispers began to be heard and some younger students even went so far as to stand up on their bench to catch a glimpse of him.

The Headmaster cleared his throat and the agitation immediately became more discreet.

"This year, the extraordinary chance to see the students of Hogwarts and Durmstrang join together is offered to us once again. In order to make the most of this unique opportunity, the Headmasters of both schools have decided to set up a new contest. Yes, you understood me correctly, dear friends... This year, we shall be treated to a new competition on the occasion of the very first Inter-school Quidditch Tournament!"

On either side of the Great Hall, banners representing the Hogwarts crest on one side (a shield topped with a lion, a snake, a badger, and an eagle; the emblems of the four houses), and that of Durmstrang on the other (a double-headed eagle spreading its wings on a crimson background), appeared and unfurled as if by magic. Still in shock, Harry imitated his comrades and jumped to his feet to welcome the news as the Great Hall filled with cries of joy and frenetic applause.

Moments later, a swarm of bats emerged from the darkness of the vault above them, carrying an interminable parchment on which could be read: "Tournament of the Two Schools – Competition Rules". Without further ado, Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione fought a path through the seething crowd already massing around the poster.

As he found himself plunged into the middle of all this effervescence, Harry felt terribly torn. Making the Hogwarts team represented probably the only opportunity he would ever have to measure himself against international-calibre talent in the flesh. But, such an undertaking implied numerous sacrifices... which risked all too certainly conflicting with his imperatives as an Apprentice Auror.

Heart pounding with excitement, Harry scanned the instructions as fast as he could. The tournament seemed to follow rules slightly different from those he knew, in accordance with the latest announcements formulated by the Institute of Magical Sports. Candidates also had a few days to register

for the event, after which the recruitment trials would take place, supervised by none other than... Ginny Weasley, the new Captain.

Harry barely had time to turn around before a whirlwind of red hair threw itself into his arms.

"Oh Harry! It's wonderful, I am..."

"Captain of the Hogwarts Quidditch team! I know, I just saw! Well done, Ginny!"

She pressed her head against his chest and Harry tightened his embrace. Despite a small pang at the thought that he had very much liked being team captain himself in the past, he was happy for her. Ginny was talented, understanding, demanding, and charismatic. She possessed all the qualities required for the post and would make an excellent leader, doubtless even better than him.

"McGonagall couldn't have chosen better," he added.

He graced her with a sincere smile which she hastened to return.

"We're going to surpass ourselves and bring that trophy home!" enthused Ginny, pointing a finger at the splendid crystal cup with a silver base that Koulok had just placed on a pedestal, not far from the tournament rules.

Despite all his efforts, Harry could not suppress the grimace he had managed to contain until now. Doing everything at the same time: capturing the Death Eaters, attending classes, and following Quidditch training, seemed absolutely unfeasible to him. Lost in his thoughts, he took a moment to understand that Hermione had moved to his side and that the little something she was waving under his nose was intended for him.

"Harry... are you there? Here, your timetable for this year."

"Herbology, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Potions, Charms and... Battle Magic?" read Harry aloud as the words, inscribed in elegant Gothic lettering, scrolled before his eyes. "How..."

"It was me; I took the liberty of signing you up this morning. You were taking a while to show up for breakfast, so..." said Hermione in a timid voice. "It's right, isn't it; those are indeed the subjects recommended for an Auror career?"

"Indeed. I don't really know what turn the career in question is taking, but it's perfect, thanks. And you, do you know any more about your future direction since the summer?"

"I'm not entirely sure yet," she admitted, blushing. "And when in doubt, you see..."

"She signed up for every subject on offer again," intervened Ron with a mocking look that was not unlike Fred and George's. "Classic *I-Am-Hermione-Granger-And-I-Will-End-Up-Knowing-Everything*."

"All of them, with the exception of Divination!" noted Ginny, beaming, her new Hogwarts Quidditch Captain badge pinned to her chest.

"I hesitated... But it seemed to me the subject would be immediately less thrilling without Professor Trelawney to animate the class."

"Come off it Hermione, and just admit you never had the Gift... the Inner Eye!"

His timetable in his hands, Harry didn't even notice Ron pretending to faint theatrically. Something on the parchment had just grabbed his attention. There was no doubt about it; they would begin their day with the study of a brand-new discipline, the famous Battle Magic.

13. DUEL AT THE SUMMIT

Ron having finished his dramatic impersonations of Professor Trelawney, the group left the Great Hall through the double doors at the back, following a band of seventh-year Durmstrang students. They surged into a succession of dimly lit galleries—the light from outside struggling to penetrate the thick layer of fog accumulating beyond the windowpanes—before finally arriving at the foot of a wide spiral stone staircase.

The ascent proved far longer and more arduous than they had imagined. This was largely due to the steps, which were sometimes so low one had to take them four at a time to avoid shuffling, and sometimes so high that only a frank leap allowed one to scale them.

Taking advantage of a pause halfway up, Harry risked sticking his head through one of the many arrow slits puncturing their path. Outside, only a few other towers, as tortuous as they were vertiginous, emerged through the misty surface stretching as far as the eye could see; like strange granite plants standing in the rays of a pinkish morning sun.

After climbing what felt like a good three hundred feet more, the group emerged into a vast circular room equipped with yet another staircase that must have led to the roof. The air was cold, and breathing seemed more difficult. Harry wondered at what altitude they could possibly be before he felt his stomach lurch. A violent gust had just hit the tower full force, and the floor had begun to sway whilst the walls whistled unnervingly.

"Zat's 'im, right?" said a square-jawed young man who was already there when they arrived.

Ron and Hermione turned instinctively towards Harry, too used to the effect his entrance could produce on those around him. But they were mistaken...

"Oh yes, Mikhailov... blond, with a two-faced look about him; he fits the image I had of him perfectly," replied another of his comrades, hidden in the shadow of a beam at the back of the room.

Wand in hand, he stepped out of his hiding place. It was Vassily Krum, the boy Seamus had already noticed the day before, on the evening of their

arrival at the castle. With a determined step, he advanced towards Draco Malfoy whilst other students draped in red joined him.

"Rumour has it we have a little Death Eater amongst us this year?" resumed Vassily with a nasty look.

"What does it matter to you what I am?" retorted Malfoy with disdain.

"Rumour has it they think they're superior..." continued Vassily as if nothing had been said. "But that, apart from casting Unforgivable Curses, they don't have much in their bellies. Rumour even has it they tend to snivel... the weaklings."

"Stop, you're bringing tears to my eyes," replied Malfoy, pretending to sob. "Unless it's your breath? Weren't you the one stuffing your face with cheese this morning?" he added as seriously as an inspector in the middle of an interrogation.

Vassily initiated an attack before freezing suddenly, arm in the air. The tip of an impeccably polished musketeer boot had just appeared at the top of the steps of the final staircase. His enormous wolf with fur darker than the night at his side, Halcard descended with a slow, steady step to meet them.

"Come now, Vassily, those are very curious manners you have there. Do not forget that all these people are our guests, young Malfoy included," said the Dean with a small chuckle that suggested the scene had amused him more than it had inconvenienced him.

Without a word, Vassily bowed and stowed his wand. Around him, his comrades continued to stare at Draco with a malevolent eye.

"Excellent. And now, we would be grateful if you would deposit your belongings in this room and follow us to the upper platform. Your books will be of no use to you."

Hermione rolled her eyes as if she had been dreading this moment for a good while. She had always been apprehensive about subjects that strongly dissociated theory from practice. Harry, for his part, felt relieved. Just like Ron and Neville, he had had no school supplies since his arrival. Before climbing the final steps separating him from the summit, he promised himself he would send an owl to the Weasley family as soon as possible to remedy this.

In small groups, the students soon reached the highest point of the tower. The platform Halcard had spoken of resembled a large marble disc.

It was reminiscent in a certain way of the face of a giant clock, whose hours were marked by narrow oak beams that ended their run far out over the void. With every gust of wind that passed, the floor seemed to shift several inches and the entire building began to creak, as if it were on the verge of collapsing.

Although he had never been prone to vertigo, Harry did not feel at ease all the same.

"Do you know who originated this subject we call Battle Magic?" asked Halcard as the students gathered around him to form a shivering circle.

For the first time in his life, Harry saw another hand shoot up as quickly as Hermione's. Once again, Vassily Krum was making himself known. Hermione glared at him defiantly and, seeing Halcard invite him to answer with a nod, she spoke up.

"Contrary to popular belief, Harfang Munter is not the Headmaster who established Battle Magic at Durmstrang. He enforced its practice, but it was Nerida Vulchanova, the school's founder, who was the first to propose this discipline within the academic cycle."

"And why would the latter have deemed it good to act thus?" resumed Halcard in his silky voice.

Again, Hermione and Vassily shot their arms up at lightning speed. This time, however, Krum won out, to Hermione's great dismay as she bit her lip.

"Vulchanova believed that a flourishing people was a people provided, from the youngest age, with every chance to develop," he replied in almost perfect English. "At that time, the teaching of Battle Magic was still reserved for an elite, itself in the service of a privileged minority."

Vassily paused to consult Halcard with a look. His answer manifestly not having given entire satisfaction to the Dean, he hastened to continue.

"Vulchanova came from that elite, but she embraced different ideals. It is partly for this reason that she is said to have founded Durmstrang."

Halcard finally nodded silently. Harry was astonished to note that a tear of soft silver light had begun to trickle down his angelic face, before disappearing, carried away by a gust.

"Of all the disciplines taught today, Battle Magic is incontestably the most complete and the most demanding," resumed the Dean in a tone that brooked no interruption. "Because it calls upon the entirety of your talents

as wizards, it will forge you. Through our teaching, you will discover how to sharpen your reason and how to manifest exits from the most inextricable situations. You will discover how to tame your emotions, and you will learn to draw from them the strength necessary for the accomplishment of your ambitions. You will end up feeling magic like never before... Thus may you perhaps become the greatest wizards of your time, as were Gellert Grindelwald, Tom Riddle, Albus Dumbledore, and so many others before you..."

Around him, Harry perceived numerous excited whispers. He even thought he heard Ron slip a long "Cooooo..." behind his back.

"We shall show ourselves intractable. Excelling in this oh-so-subtle art will cost you many efforts and doubtless a few sacrifices... But follow our advice assiduously, proceed by stages, question your acquisitions sufficiently to consolidate them at the cost of hours and hours of practice, and you will emerge from it greater. Greater even than you would ever have imagined."

Absorbed, Harry drank in the Headmaster's words. Evidently, what these lessons were going to teach them could be of great help during his career as an Auror. He could remember only too well, with admiration, the duel that had confronted Dumbledore and Voldemort at the end of his fifth year of studies. What he had seen that night was in no way comparable to any other battle he had known. Would he one day reach even a tiny fraction of the level of those two wizards?

"But enough talk... Let us move on to a more concrete example," said Halcard, pensive. "We need a volunteer! Unless... Yes... the introductions will be all the more interesting for it... Mr Potter? You heard me correctly; please step out of the circle and approach. An ex-champion such as yourself will be the ideal opponent for our little demonstration."

Harry had the sudden impression that a bucket of ice water had been tipped over his head. Facing him, Halcard had already thrown back his cloak with a sharp movement of his shoulder, exactly as he had done when they were at the foot of the Cliff of the Initiate. His eyes shone with the same determined and murderous glint as back then...

Still in shock, Harry plunged a clammy and trembling hand into his pocket in search of his magic wand. At his side, Ginny looked petrified.

"Oh Harry... Oh no, not that..." breathed Hermione as he straightened up, fear in his belly.

Harry took a step towards Halcard and the circle of students faded from his field of vision, like the wisps of smoke from a candle just extinguished. Facing him, only a few yards away, Halcard placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and bowed with all his grace. His wavy hair mysteriously spared by the gusts, he looked like a god descended straight from Olympus to satisfy who knows which of his supreme designs.

In turn, Harry executed his deepest bow. As he closed his eyes for a moment in the hope of regaining his composure more quickly, he was surprised to feel his heart racing, trembling, wiggling. It took him a few moments to realise it was the little red chick, hidden somewhere under his shirt.

Questions surged at a phenomenal speed in Harry's head. For what reason had Chick suddenly started shivering like that? Was it an omen, some sort of alert? The Headmaster had had such a particular way of pronouncing the words "little demonstration". Something bad threatened to happen...

His magic wand raised to waist height so as to benefit from a maximum range of action, Harry conveyed to Halcard with a simple look that he stood ready. The two adversaries remained thus sizing each other up for what seemed an eternity. Finally, somewhere, in the distance it seemed, the howl of a wolf rang out.

"*Protego!*" yelled Harry as a jet of silver shot from his opponent's wand. "*Protego! Protego!!*"

It wasn't a single hex but a veritable rain of spells raining down upon him. Harry was so concentrated he almost forgot to breathe. Incapable of casting enough Shield Charms to counter all the hexes springing in his direction, he soon found himself dodging, leaping here and there and rolling in all directions.

Cunning and agility worked for a few moments, until Halcard increased the tempo once again. Motionless, hand delicately placed on the pommel of his sword, the Headmaster seemed perfectly at ease. If his impassive face hadn't displayed a few punctual signs of concentration, just before a new salvo of lightning was projected, one could just as well have imagined him serenely enjoying a Five O'Clock Tea.

His defence overwhelmed and two spells having already grazed him a little too closely, Harry had no other choice but to change tactics. The hexes he was facing were so numerous that there was a non-negligible

chance of deflecting several at once. He would therefore abandon his protective charm and risk everything in a final offensive.

Like a conductor who had entered a trance, Harry whipped his wand in all directions.

"Stupefy! Expelliarmus! Reducto! Petrificus Totalus! Impedimenta!" he cast as fast as he could.

Three of Halcard's hexes were deflected in a single stroke, two more were absorbed by the debris raised by a meticulously placed Exploding Charm, and the next two were dodged. His plan seemed to be working; the pressure was lessening, he seemed to be gradually regaining ground.

"Sectumsempra!" shouted Harry, as the Half-Blood Prince's redoubtable spell burst into his mind.

For the first time since the start of the duel, Halcard was forced to abandon his comfortable posture. Finally, he reacted. Finally, he moved. He had just stepped back.

"Prodigious!" the latter exclaimed, as admiring as he was incredulous, whilst drawing his strange blade with its crystalline appearance.

Harry was unable to follow what happened next. With truly bestial velocity, Halcard cleaved the air with a single gesture and Harry found himself thrown into the air by a sort of shockwave. Like a disjointed puppet, he landed heavily, rolled, and slid until he found himself hanging from one of the beams extending over the void, on the periphery of the marble plateau.

Painfully clinging to life, pierced by gusts of icy wind like so many murderous spear thrusts, Harry lifted his head with difficulty to see Halcard's torso appear above him. The Headmaster gave him a broad smile then, with a nonchalant backhand, sliced clean through the beam to which he was clinging.

A strange amalgam of screams of terror reached Harry's ears, then he felt himself sucked down, snatched by gravity. Before his gaze was definitively torn from the top of the tower, due to the rotation his body had initiated despite himself, he managed to glimpse Hermione and Ginny emerging on either side of the Headmaster who was still staring at him, the same sly glint in the depths of his eyes.

The fall accelerated. Harry swirled in the void, helpless, the wind rushing past his ears, the arrow slits of the adjacent towers scrolling ever

faster around him. He had just penetrated a thick layer of clouds and definitively lost all notion of time and space when a sinister voice resonated in his mind:

"You are a very interesting man, Mr Potter..."

"Harry! My God, Harry are you alright? Did you really have to do that?!"

"Calm down, Miss Weasley. Your friend is fine; a few squares of chocolate with good Carpathian milk and he will be back in top form. Come now, up you get!"

Stunned, Harry felt a contact. A hand cold as death had tightened around his arm before hoisting him vigorously to his feet. He staggered for a brief moment, time for his blood to rush back to his head, and finally opened his eyes. By some miracle, he was back at the top of the tower.

"Mr Potter! We must admit it... you are in every way equal to your reputation!" enthused Halcard facing him, arms raised in a sign of delight. "What vivacity! What adaptation!"

"I don't understand," replied Harry as little stars twinkled in his field of vision. "I... You... You beat me, and without putting yourself to much trouble..."

"Obviously," replied the Headmaster with amusement. "But... one step, Mr Potter!"

"One step?"

"You made us step back! That testifies to strong potential! Without going so far as to underestimate you, we were far from imagining you would be so brilliant during this first, shall we say... interview."

Harry couldn't believe his ears; was the Headmaster mocking him once again? If around him his Hogwarts comrades might appear flabbergasted, the Durmstrang students, for their part, seemed highly impressed.

"Oh, I was so scared!" choked Ginny, throwing herself into his arms, eyes moist. "You fell and..."

"Yeah, me too... I really thought that was my last dive. Besides, what am I doing here?"

"The Tower of Duels at Durmstrang is unique in its kind, Mr Potter. It was designed to allow young talents such as yourself to train in the most

extreme conditions. The place is, among other things, equipped with a *Nimbus Liberandum* charm... Yes, Miss Granger? Would you have some complementary information to enlighten us?" said Halcard as, in the ranks, Hermione raised her arm like a rocket.

As if she feared Vassily might steal the limelight again, Hermione explained everything she knew in a single breath. Apparently, the *Nimbus Liberandum* was an enchantment that only the Master Builder in Chief of Durmstrang, a person known by the name of Litovoi, had been able to invoke during the castle's creation, centuries ago. This very particular form of magic had allowed the formation of enchanted clouds which could serve just as well as cushioning pads in case of a fall, or as lifts to circulate between the base and the summit of the tower with total ease.

After having made Hermione blush once again by congratulating her on "the vast extent of her erudition", Halcard offered everyone the chance to celebrate the end of the first Battle Magic class by personally testing the effectiveness of the *Nimbus Liberandum*. The proposal was, however, quickly dismissed as even the Durmstrang students seemed to prefer the option of the treacherous staircase to that of the big jump. Harry did not need asking twice and followed the group with definite relief.

"Weird for a first lesson, don't you think?" said Ron timidly a good ten minutes later, as they crossed the narrow stone bridge leading to their next class.

"You're telling me..." replied Harry, pensive, whilst finishing savouring the small piece of chocolate Hermione had marvellously managed to conjure for him. "I wasn't expecting a quarter of what hit me."

"It was... really very impressive, you know. No idea how you managed to last so long against that bloke. A real deluge of hexes! Sparks and smoke everywhere! You should have seen the others' faces; looked like they'd never met anyone capable of defending themselves as well as you! I'll probably never be able to do a thing like that..." he concluded in a sort of anxious introspection.

"Of course you will, what are you talking about? Stop feeling useless every five minutes. Go for it. Try, try again, and that's all there is to it! Halcard warned us learning would take time..."

Harry hesitated a moment to confide about the voices he had heard in his head each time he had met the Headmaster's gaze but preferred to

abstain. In the end, it was better not to risk reinforcing Ron's thesis of "Harry went bonkers".

"If you say so..." said Ron, pensive. "Anyway, I don't really see what I could do with all that."

"Oh, I don't know... become an Auror for example?" retorted Harry, whom the remark had made jump. "And prevent other Dark Wizards from doing more damage? That is why you signed up for this course, isn't it?"

Ron didn't answer and Harry didn't insist. He would have to play it cool and use patience if he wanted to see him rally to his cause.

The rest of the day passed much more calmly. With the exception of the Malfoy case, who had to endure with increasing intensity the jeers of Vassily and his group of friends. The last class of the day, given by Professor Boulik, definitely marked the start of hostilities between the two students.

Tall, rather puny, the Charms professor had chosen to begin the year with Conditional Enchantments. For their first day, the students had to get a small sugar bowl to deposit two spoonfuls of sugar (and only two) into a teacup placed at the other end of the table.

If the theory might appear simple, the practice was far more complex. Triggering a spell under desired conditions required a lot of concentration and unparalleled analytical skills. Every little action, every little detail, needed to have been thought out with very particular thoroughness if one wished to see it executed properly. Harry was already on his thirtieth attempt (and had just witnessed the lamentable suicide of his sugar bowl at the foot of his table) when Vassily's voice pulled him out of his preoccupations.

"Not great, Malfoy. Your 'Dark Lord' must really have been short-staffed... It's true after all, useless as you are... what did you do for him? Polish his wand?"

Flanked by his comrade Mikhailov, Vassily Krum had moved up a few rows to bring himself level with Draco Malfoy. Installed at the back of the room, the Slytherin was practising alone. Pansy Parkinson had doubtless not signed up for Charms; as for his other Slytherin acolytes, they seemed more distant with him since the start of term, as if his status as a fallen ex-Death Eater had made him a *persona non grata*.

"I didn't know the filth of this backwater had such a sense of humour," replied Malfoy, eyeing him defiantly.

He turned to Mikhailov and, whilst gesticulating like a gorilla, added with an exaggerated accent:

"Sorry, I meant: 'Yumourrr!'"

Absorbed by the contents of a small flying memo he had just received, Professor Boulik was visibly unaware of the agitation gradually taking hold of his class. He left the lecture hall moments later and a new strapping lad dressed in red hastened to join his acolytes.

"Shall we sort 'im out quick? Boulik just took ze bait."

"Hands off! He's mine, Nipovski... I'm doing this with a spoon..."

Harry didn't take long to understand what Vassily meant by that. The student had indeed begun to draw large aerial circles with the tip of his wand before pointing it at Draco, as if trying to catch him with an invisible lasso. At first, nothing happened and Malfoy burst into that mocking, contemptuous laugh that made him so detestable... until all the sugar bowls from the surrounding tables threw themselves at him to beat him savagely with their teaspoons. Overwhelmed by numbers, Malfoy soon found himself shooting sparks in all directions whilst dancing from one foot to the other. All he managed to do, however, was blast a deep hole in one of his shoes, triggering general hilarity.

The spectacle ended with the return of Professor Boulik, alerted by Vassily who had hurried to fetch him. After breaking the charm with a simple flick of his wand, he assigned Draco a full week of detention so he could "consolidate his absolutely lamentable basics in Charms".

"I love that guy! As much as I struggled a bit with his brother, let's say... at a certain time... I find him excellent," enthused Ron a few hours later, dropping into a large, quilted leather armchair that looked particularly comfortable.

"Who are you talking about?" asked Hermione evasively, lifting her nose from an interminable roll of parchment.

The first day of classes was over and Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had just settled into the common room adjoining their dormitories. A large stove-fireplace and a few chandeliers arranged here and there constituted the only sources of light in the room, which made the place rather dark, but not ominous for all that. Outside, through a wide pointed-arch window, a few scattered snowflakes could be seen twinkling for a brief

moment as they crossed the moonbeams, before disappearing into the depths of the night.

"Vassily, of course!" replied Ron, tapping his forehead as if it were obvious. "Malfoy assaulted by a horde of killer sugar bowls. What a brilliant idea, and so beautifully executed!"

"I find him annoying and arrogant," replied Hermione. "It fits the image his big brother Viktor gave me of him."

"He doesn't seem any better than Malfoy," added Ginny, between two pages of *The Secrets of Victory Against the Heidelberg Harriers*, the thrilling account by Glynnis Griffiths. "And anyway, did you see his necklace?"

Perhaps it was linked to their shared talents as Quidditch Seekers, for only Harry and Ginny seemed to have noticed the thing.

"His necklace?" repeated Ron, taken aback. "Well what then, what's so special about it?"

"Vassily has a Deathly Hallows pendant hanging from his neck..." sighed Harry, whose patience was being sorely tested by his Charms homework.

"You mean the 'eye inside the triangle'? So what?" said Ron. "Maybe he just likes the look of it..."

"Ron, you don't display that sort of thing lightly!" snapped Harry. "At least not here, at Durmstrang!"

"I don't see the problem. Luna's dad had a jewel like that too and..."

"And for anyone who isn't just a superstitious crackpot, that symbol is the trademark of Gellert Grindelwald... a wizard at least as tyrannical and twisted as Voldemort!"

As if the exaggerated complacency Ron insisted on displaying since they had set foot in the castle—combined with the difficulty of the work imposed by Professor Boulik—had finally got the better of his nerves, Harry stood up, kissed Ginny under Hermione's surprised gaze, and went to bed.

That night, he had all the trouble in the world falling asleep. Despite himself, his brain refused to obey him and persisted in untangling the ins and outs of the situation. It was only after finally arriving at the poor conclusion that "we just have to wait and see what happens" that Harry finally managed to find sleep.

He dreamed then that his bed split in two and he fell, sucked into the bowels of the mountain upon which the castle rested. Without warning, his fall was interrupted by the intervention of a gigantic bat which grabbed him and carried him to the top of a tower, lost in the middle of the clouds.

It was cold, terribly cold. The monster transformed and Harry found himself nose-to-nose with a wizard who bore an intriguing resemblance to Halcard, with the sole difference that his features were harder and his hair black as ebony. At the very instant Harry recognised a symbol of the Deathly Hallows, engraved on the medallion the man wore around his neck, the latter attacked him and a new duel began.

In its unfolding, the fight resembled the one he had already had with Halcard so much that Harry finally realised he was asleep. As he dodged the innumerable spells bearing down on him, he strove to escape the dream by repeating to himself that nothing surrounding him was real. Yet, once again, his mind refused to let go.

Trapped, baffled, Harry resigned himself and decided to take advantage of the strange state of full consciousness in which he found himself. In doing so, he gradually strengthened his spells, soon crossing limits he had always believed insurmountable. He thus managed to generate a protective shield so powerful it was capable of absorbing several hexes at once. This new advantage did not, however, allow him to checkmate his opponent and Harry had to resort to all his cunning to finally put an end to the nightmare. Concentrating all his efforts into a final Reductor Curse, he aimed at the floor beneath his feet to destroy the tower where the confrontation was taking place. A new fall began and ended moments later, in a terrifying crash...

When Harry opened his eyes again, he was alone, curled up on the ground, face against the icy floor of the dormitory. He had fallen out of bed.

14. SETTLING SCORES

On the morning of his second day of classes, Harry had all the trouble in the world getting out of bed. Entirely stiff from the previous day's exertions, his body seemed to refuse to get into gear and proved incapable of maintaining a stable temperature for even a minute. Frozen to the bone one moment, stiflingly hot the next, Harry somehow managed to find Ron in the common room, and they headed together towards the Great Hall in search of breakfast. Ron had probably not forgotten their altercation from the night before and contented himself with keeping silent throughout the journey. A strategy Harry knew well and which suited him perfectly; he felt neither the desire nor the strength to say anything to him.

"Really... I love this place, it's brilliant!" exclaimed Ron a little later, as if the three croissants he had just devoured had finished convincing him.

"You know, if you like it so much here, you could probably ask to stay over the Christmas holidays," retorted Ginny, whilst scribbling strange sketches on a scroll resting between two slices of bread covered in *Choc-o-Nut* spread. "Your dear friend Vassily would probably be charmed by your priceless company. After all, it's not every day one welcomes the famous Ron Weasley..."

"On the other hand, I don't understand why they leave that decrepit old tree there," continued Ron as if he had been struck by a sudden bout of deafness. "It's almost unhealthy."

Harry said nothing. But for the first time in a long while, he was relieved to note that there were still subjects upon which he and his friend could agree. After all, what was the point of keeping a tree in such poor condition right in the middle of the Great Hall?

"I like it," intervened Luna in her thin voice. "It gives the impression of being in a graveyard. It's just missing a few tombstones."

"What's even weirder," cut in Hermione instantly, though she had appeared deeply absorbed in her reading until then, "is the answer Halcard gave me on the subject."

"You spoke to him about it? What did he tell you?"

"He claims everything has been like this for an eternity... Except that doesn't fit with what Viktor told me about it (Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione pretended not to notice), nor with what I managed to find in *History of Great Wizarding Schools*... In the past, the tree was apparently only in this state in rare circumstances. Unfortunately, the author treats the subject with far too much levity for my taste. It's unlike him... Besides, I think a little visit to the library is in order!"

"Surprising she hasn't gone already, really!" said Ron, as Hermione stood up and left the table. "She must have caught a cold, or something of the sort... Don't you think?"

Not having the heart to respond to what he perceived as a meagre attempt at reconciliation, Harry preferred to remain silent. He found it hard to bear Ron spending his time acting, pretending that Durmstrang was the most beautiful school in existence only a few dozen hours after openly criticizing the place. Noting that no answer would be vouchsafed him, Ron finally let out a long sigh and turned away. Soon, he started a new discussion with the next table, where Dean and Seamus were seated.

Harry was finishing his bowl of cereal when a swarm of bats (mingled with a few rare owls) burst into the Great Hall, flying over the tables at full speed and knocking over a good number of pointed hats in their wake. To his great surprise, he noted that a grey Long-eared Owl had detached itself from the group to circle slowly, only a few feet above his head. Just as he looked up to better observe the scene, the beast descended in an elegant spiral before landing narrowly next to a platter of sugar crepes. Chick gave a little cry of surprise and jumped to take refuge in the collar of Harry's robes whilst the messenger presented himself to him, a small bag and a letter attached to his leg.

Visibly satisfied with his reward, the owl departed a moment later, spreading a trail of sugar in his wake, half a crepe protruding dangerously from either side of his beak. Harry, meanwhile, unsealed his envelope with alacrity. The parchment it contained finally unrolled, he soon recognised the soft, refined handwriting of Mrs Weasley:

Harry dear,

Minerva McGonagall warned me that you had finally arrived at Durmstrang amongst the other Hogwarts students. It goes without saying that I would have preferred to hear the news from you or Ron, but I suspect your training takes up all your time and energy. I have therefore taken the initiative to make your life a little easier. As with Ron, I have taken the liberty of

sending you directly a few things you might need... You will find them in the enchanted satchel attached to this letter.

Work hard for your final year of studies; it is the most important of all!

With all my love,

Molly

PS: It has been a few hours now since our clock at home has been pointing to "Mortal Peril" again regarding Ron and Ginny... I conjure you, do not go running any unnecessary risks! Be very careful and take care of each other; I really do not like knowing you are so far away in that sordid place.

PS 2: I had the pleasant surprise of seeing you in yesterday's Daily Prophet! Apart from Dawlish pulling a funny face, you look very handsome, all three of you, my boys.

PS 3: I insist, be careful!

His reading finished, Harry set down Mrs Weasley's note and took a closer look at the satchel accompanying it.

"*Lumos!*" whispered Harry, shortly after plunging his head into the small bag.

Ron's mother hadn't done things by halves. Besides the school supplies required for his seventh year, she had added a good bundle of laundry smelling sweetly of bergamot, a box of Chocolate Frogs that hopped occasionally whilst croaking, his beloved Firebolt and, above all, his most prized possession... the Invisibility Cloak that had once belonged to James, his father. Harry was amused to note that despite all her exhortations to prudence, Mrs Weasley had still deemed it good to include the precious piece of shimmering fabric in her parcel; the very thing capable of turning the best-behaved students into adventurers with insatiable curiosity.

"Mum sends a package to both of you and nothing for me! What's so good to see in there?" said Ginny, whose head had just burst inside the bag, right next to Harry's. "It's a real Aladdin's cave in here, my word. Oh... and what a handsome young man we have here!"

She kissed him tenderly on the cheek and Harry had the sudden urge to disappear entirely into the bottom of the bag with Ginny, leaving all his troubles behind.

"I see your broom is there too, per-fect!" she added. "I was afraid you'd be without it for the trials, or worse, for the first match! Phew, that's one less worry for me."

Harry felt his heart leap in his chest.

"You know... I'm not sure I can..."

"Shh... I suspected you'd say that. Don't worry, you'll be up to the task facing that Krum Junior, I'm convinced of it," Ginny assured him, fixing him with her beautiful hazel eyes. "We'll just have to work on your deceleration because he won't give you any quarter, no doubt!"

She gave him another kiss and added:

"I'll leave you to it. I have to go and do a reconnaissance of the Quidditch pitch before classes start. Oh Harry, we absolutely *must* win this first match!"

Alone again, head still buried in his bag, Harry wanted to scream with despair. He had likely just let slip his best opportunity to tell Ginny he did not intend to participate in the tournament, for lack of time and energy. Why did he always have to wait until the last moment to handle delicate subjects? "*You know Harry, one should never put off until tomorrow what could be done in the instant,*" a small annoying voice began to sermonise in his head.

"Thanks Hermione, I know, I know..." he heard himself reply under his breath.

Angry with himself, he decapitated a Chocolate Frog that had had the audacity to venture out of its packet. He then extricated himself from his bag and undertook to get to their next class.

Defence Against the Dark Arts, one of Harry's favourite subjects, was taught by Professor Helsing. Of a somewhat chubby build, Helsing projected the image of a library rat who was a little too fond of food rather than that of a fearsome demon hunter. Strutting on the platform whilst regularly stroking the tips of his sideburns with his fingertips, he reminded them of the theoretical basics of the fight against the undead.

Still groggy from his short night, and convinced he already knew more than enough on the question, Harry let himself doze in his chair whilst the rest of the class took notes on the risks associated with encountering Inferi ("human corpses bewitched to serve a Dark Wizard's sombre designs"). The session seemed to last an eternity, and it was only when Hermione suddenly entered into conflict with Professor Helsing that Harry lent a slightly more attentive ear.

The cause of the dispute seemed to concern the professor's assertions regarding the lifespan of vampires:

"How can you claim such a thing? Even Professor Dumbledore had no opinion on the matter!"

"Perhaps, young lady, the late dear Professor Dumbledore simply hadn't had the opportunity to peruse my latest work, which... and I do not blame him for it, moreover (he coughed smugly) ... ahem, is currently in press. I refer, of course, to the thousand-odd pages of proven facts gathered in *The Miracle of the Undeath*. Allow me, therefore, to insist: a vampire, undead by nature, will never last more than three centuries. Get that well into your skull, my dear child!"

For a brief moment, Hermione had remained frozen, mouth slightly open, and Harry had wondered if she wasn't going to explode like a furious Blast-Ended Skrewt. At the last moment, however, her Head Girl badge sparkled on her chest and she finally sat back down before crossing her arms, a vexed pout on her face. Probably thinking he had won the day, Professor Helsing displayed a large satisfied smile and resumed with the most soporific of monologues. Harry fell back into his state of stasis as quickly as he had emerged from it, and Hermione did not touch her quill for the rest of the session.

Harry felt a little more awake when they presented themselves for the next class. Not that the prospect of having to mix all sorts of often slimy or smelly ingredients particularly stimulated him—Potions classes had never been his cup of tea. No, in reality, it was mostly the view offered by the room they had just entered that had suddenly aroused his interest. Far below, bathed in the rays of a sun approaching its zenith, a new Quidditch pitch presented itself to him.

"Impressive, isn't it?" said Ginny, coming to lean next to him, a nuance of apprehension in the depths of her voice.

"Blimey... Halcard wasn't lying when he said those who built this place were aesthetes," replied Harry, breathless.

The pitch was deployed at the foot of a sheer cliff, like a terrace on the edge of a dizzying void. Its surface was dotted with sharp granite spikes and extended over a portion of the crust of the frozen lake that apparently circled the entire school. For a brief moment, Harry imagined the same scene in summer, once the ice had melted, with Viktor Krum diving into

what must look like a sumptuous infinity pool, just as he had dived from his ship into the lake at Hogwarts a few winters earlier.

"Do you understand now what makes Durmstrang players what they are? I mean, the reason why students from here so often end up becoming international stars?"

The prospect of a peaceful swim under a radiant sun faded suddenly from Harry's mind. The scene then appeared to him from an angle as technical as it was diametrically opposed.

"I think so, yes. It's all very pretty to look at, very spectacular... But I don't see any *Nimbus Liberandum* floating in the vicinity. So... a swerve a little too pronounced over the void, or a bad fall onto one of those big rocky thorns, and..."

"And it's death, or close to it," agreed Ginny gravely. "Visibly, these people don't have the same vision of sport as we do. It looks like from their youngest age, they learn to play every match as if it could be their last..."

Whilst his gaze was still lost in the reflections of the glistening ice, Harry felt Ginny's hand rest on his.

"I'm so proud to have been entrusted with the responsibility of the team, of our victory, of all that... I know Quidditch has always been a dangerous sport... But here, the risks aren't the same at all. You'll help me, right Harry? You'll help me make sure everything goes well?"

The unease that had seized Harry must have shown, for she hastened to add:

"Besides, how come you still haven't signed up for the tournament? The list only mentions..."

"Don't worry about that," he cut in, as no false excuse deigned to appear in his mind. "I... just haven't taken the time to do it yet. But it'll be done by this evening, you have my word."

Cornered for good, Harry preferred to accept his fate by postponing his organizational worries until later. Little by little, naturally, he projected himself into what this new commitment represented and soon resumed:

"What about Ron then? Do you plan to recruit him too? He can play divinely when he's confident, but do you really think he'll agree to join the team after seeing *that*? At the last news, the Gentleman no longer wishes to take unnecessary risks for his precious health..."

Harry and Ginny cast a discreet glance behind them. After scanning the room filling with students still drowsy from their Defence Against the Dark Arts class, they spotted Ron a little further away, in the company of Dean and Seamus. All three were leaning over one of the large windows overlooking the pitch. They too seemed plunged into a complete analysis of the site, for Dean kept pointing at the different playing areas.

Moments later and Ron arrived without any possible doubt at the same conclusions as Harry and Ginny. His face had just taken on the hue of the granite wall bordering the window; giving him the appearance of a sort of human chameleon suffering from severe constipation problems.

"He'll have to join us, otherwise defeat is guaranteed," whispered Ginny, returning her attention to the playing area. "For the moment the only contenders for the Keeper position are Grant Page from Ravenclaw and Herbert Fleet from Hufflepuff... suffice to say they don't hold a candle to him. I should manage to convince him. On the other hand, I'm counting on you two to reconcile. I don't know what's brewing between him and you right now but it has to stop. We're going to need exemplary cooperation within the team if we want to stand a chance. Hurry up and sort it out, please."

Without another word, she shot him one of those looks of which she had the secret and went to take her seat next to Luna whilst the Potions Master (a small, benevolent-looking man) made his entrance into the room. Ginny's words still ringing in his head, Harry hesitated to go and sit next to Ron but noted without delay that the latter had preferred Neville's company to his. He had no other choice, therefore, but to settle in the front row with Hermione and unpacked the supplies Mrs Weasley had recently sent him.

Despite a few tenacious worries, the session went as well as could be. Hermione showed herself to be as gifted as ever and Harry was relieved to note that the old resentment she might have held against him in sixth year, back when the Half-Blood Prince's book allowed him to surpass her, had dissipated with time. Despite a somewhat tricky passage consisting of stirring the contents of their cauldron following a helical movement whilst adding pinches of blue powder at perfectly regular intervals, they managed to prepare an exemplary *Wake-All Potion* which earned them the praises of Professor Abrosius. The latter appeared so impressed he didn't even notice when the bell announcing the end of the class finally rang.

"Really, Miss Granger, Mr Potter, what splendid work! At the risk of repeating myself, I am absolutely delighted to have students of your stature in my classes!" he exclaimed, whilst around them the room had already been empty for many minutes. "Even the most overdosed of Peace Draughts would be thwarted by your concoction, there is no doubt."

"It's just that your instructions could not have been more detailed, Professor!" replied Hermione, cheeks flushed. "If memory serves, errors during the preparation of this kind of potion are paid for dearly, and can even lead to irreversible sleep which..."

Helpless, Harry witnessed the scene as if he had ceased to exist. He soon felt a terrible impatience seize him. Hermione had enormous qualities but one had to admit she could sometimes be unbearable. This was notably the case when she started exchanging flatteries with her professors. He had to escape as quickly as possible.

Alas, to his great regret, every time he thought he had spotted a breach likely to allow him to leave the discussion politely, Hermione was seized by a burst of modesty and played the teamwork card. Abrosius would then turn to him as if he had just reappeared and batter him with questions on the quality of teaching at Hogwarts, or even details on the diversity and rarity of the ingredients his store cupboard contained.

Struck by a bright idea, Harry undertook to aim at the nearest shelf blindly, his wand carefully hidden behind his back. One finely executed Summoning Charm later and he was extricating himself from the trap into which he had fallen whilst Professor Abrosius cried out heart-wrenchingly:

"No, not that! Not my Essence of *Snooberradish*! A thousand bats, I'm sure it's another trick of that accursed ghost!"

Leaving Hermione the task of comforting their professor, Harry didn't need asking twice. Soon, he crossed the threshold of the room and bolted as fast as possible.

He had just turned a corner after crossing a first corridor when he suddenly tripped over a sort of large red carpet. Off balance, he rolled, slid, and ended his run straight into a mediaeval suit of armour which ended up tumbling onto his head. Back bruised, Harry got up, determined to understand what this large pile of fabric was doing right in the middle of the passage. Even more so, he wanted to understand why Draco Malfoy's face had suddenly appeared to him as he dived, both hands forward.

It quickly became apparent he hadn't been dreaming. Draco was indeed there, his head and feet protruding from each end of the carpet which had been, it seemed, rolled up around him. With the exception of his eyes, which followed Harry as he approached, Malfoy seemed completely paralysed, possibly Stupefied.

Still reeling from the surprise, Harry stared bitterly at the worst classmate his schooling had led him to meet. The one around whom so many things had ended up gravitating...

He grabbed his wand which was lying at the bottom of his pocket.

"Strange how chance can work things out..." said Harry before pacing around Draco Malfoy, a bit like a bird of prey circling above its quarry. "Not so long ago, the roles were reversed and it was I who ended up Stupefied by your fault, twice in less than a year... Remember, it was during our sixth year. First, you paralysed me upon the arrival of the Hogwarts Express; you kicked me hard in the face; and you abandoned me there, hoping to make me miss the start of term."

He stepped over Draco Malfoy, his feet passing only inches from the Slytherin's face, before resuming:

"Then, a few months later, you let your Death Eater friends into Hogwarts. You then burst onto the top of the Astronomy Tower and disarmed Dumbledore..."

In addition to a certain fear since Harry had leaned over him, Draco's gaze betrayed sudden doubt.

"Yes, Malfoy... That famous night, I was there, too," said Harry, dropping to one knee to get a little closer to his interlocutor. "Do you think Dumbledore would have let you disarm him if—in addition to his advanced state of weakness—he hadn't already been busy Stupefying me to protect me from the idiot brutes you had just let in?"

A veritable terror had been born in the depths of Draco's moist eyes. He moaned painfully, still gagged by the effects of the spell.

"And yet... You may have held Dumbledore at your mercy, and Voldemort and his Death Eaters may have pressured you to finish him, but you didn't do it."

A moment passed before Harry spoke again; he himself did not yet know what was best to do.

"You know, for a long time I thought back to that moment and wondered if I should see it as further proof of your cowardice..."

Draco whimpered harder.

"And then I understood, that strange day last March, when we were imprisoned, Ron, Hermione and I in your Manor, that it was actually the complete opposite. I don't know what could have triggered that turnaround, that sort of upheaval in your personality. Was it having gone so far into worthlessness, into baseness, having explored the limits so deeply without finding what you were looking for, that gave birth to that strength inside you? Hard to say. The fact remains that on that day, you refused to sell me out—to send me to my death—Draco. There were a few relapses afterwards, of course... One doesn't go from the stage of miserable little scoundrel to that of respectable person just like that, with a snap of the fingers. Yet..."

With a steady hand, Harry pointed his magic wand right in the middle of Malfoy's tensed face, who began to cross his eyes and sweat ever more profusely. One could almost see the sweat beading on his shiny forehead.

"You've changed, Draco... It's as if all that did you good. With hindsight, I even think Dumbledore would have been proud of you," murmured Harry in a breath.

"*Finite*," he added, and a stream of orange light seeped into Draco, freeing him from the hex.

With Harry's help, Malfoy extricated himself from the carpet holding him prisoner but did not stand up for all that. Half-lying on his side, he remained leaning on one elbow, head down.

"What happened to you this time?" asked Harry in a tone intended to be lighter, whilst massaging the sore shoulder blade he had crashed onto a little earlier.

"Guess," sighed Draco after a long moment of hesitation. "It's the other one, that Vassily... I stopped at the toilets for a moment and when I came out, he was there, waiting for me with his lackeys. Those imbeciles struggle to grasp that I am no longer a Death Eater, that all that... was before. People don't want to accept it; it's much easier for them to stick labels on things and stick to them."

"That, I can well believe," acknowledged Harry, recalling the many times he had suffered from that sort of injustice himself.

"I've had enough," resumed Draco, whose voice was trembling now. "All of them... They all jump on me at the same time. As if I were the cause of their slightest worry. Bunch of hypocrites..."

Through the blond locks barring his forehead, Harry saw that Draco was frowning insistently. Moments later and a string of small droplets sparkled briefly before crashing onto the cold stone of the castle.

"If it weighs on you so much, why not try to show them, let's say... this 'new person' you say you've become?" tried Harry.

Still hidden behind his veil of blond hair, Draco was shaken by a sneer.

"Ah yes... And what exactly do you want me to show them!" he finally exploded before raising his head, revealing a puffy, tear-stained face. "Go on, Potter! Tell me if you're so clever!"

Harry couldn't help but take a step back in surprise.

"I don't know exactly. It's up to you to find out, well I think..."

In a flash, Malfoy was on his feet. The next instant, he was holding the tip of his wand only inches from Harry's throat. His breathing was jerky and hellfire seemed to dance in the depths of his pupils.

They remained thus for a good while, considering each other in perfect immobility.

"Maybe so..." Draco finally murmured. "Anyway, you keep this story to yourself. Or else..."

Before Harry could even open his mouth, Malfoy had turned on his heel. Two more suits of armour exploded with a metallic crash the moment the Slytherin stepped onto the worn stairs of an old crooked staircase, then a deathly silence fell upon the place.

Alone in the middle of the disorder, Harry felt a strange sensation of emptiness spread within him.

The days that followed passed so quickly that Harry came to wonder if he wasn't still stuck in one of his dreams. Despite a timetable so saturated it offered at most only a few recreational breaks and a fairly limited number of hours of sleep, his doubts regarding his ability to resume his studies were soon dispelled.

The fact that most of the subjects he was enrolled in now overlapped more concretely had something to do with it. Galvanised by a renewed

interest in his studies, Harry surprised himself by rivalling Hermione a few rare times in fields for which he had never had any particular affinity until then; something the latter took some time to accept.

By dint of often hazardous wanderings in the castle, Harry was also beginning to get an idea of the place. The location differed from Hogwarts in many aspects. First of all, its position on the heights of the steep mountain that was the Devil's Horn forced it into much greater verticality. Durmstrang was definitely a formidable cluster of twisted and corkscrewed towers, linked by aerial walkways each more vertiginous than the last. It was, in fact, preferable to keep one's travelling cloak to hand in all circumstances when staying there; for moving from one class to another often meant exposing oneself to the biting cold outside, for the duration of a transfer via one of those numerous ageing stone bridges, eternally covered in a thick layer of snow, garnished with icicles, or plunged into a sort of freezing fog.

The architectural differences didn't stop there. As far as Harry could judge, the common rooms were smaller but also much more numerous at Durmstrang. They often served as a node between two to three dormitories of five to six students, making them, in a sense, quieter and more intimate than their equivalents at Hogwarts. Although these conditions were particularly conducive to the preparation of the innumerable and interminable essays to which seventh-year N.E.W.T. students were condemned, Harry sometimes regretted—unlike Hermione—the bustle that had regularly inhabited the Gryffindor privileged space during his past schooling.

"The students here? I don't know, it's still a bit early to say, isn't it?" Ginny had replied when Seamus Finnigan asked her about her feelings, a few days after the start of term.

While Harry also tended to be wary of hasty conclusions, experience had also shown him that his first impression was often the right one. So far, the locals had appeared to him as insensitive people, as if the hostile environment outside had ended up making them a bit gruff. But behind these sullen airs often hid an immense pride that burst into the open as soon as the slightest competitive activity was undertaken. Vassily Krum embodied a perfect example of this particular temperament.

Be that as it may, never could Harry have dreamed of such an enriching journey.

Everything would have been perfect if Ron hadn't been so distant towards him. Since their recent and yet brief clash about Vassily's locket, the latter had only spoken to him succinctly and on very rare occasions. Most of the time to express banalities such as "Can you pass the salt, please?" or "I wonder if it's snowing at Hogwarts right now too." These rare exchanges aside, Ron had remained stuck in the company of Dean and Seamus as if nothing and no one else had ever existed. Harry was not fooled, however. This kind of behaviour betrayed without possible doubt the deep fear his friend felt at the idea of having to find the Death Eaters who, he was intimately convinced, were wandering somewhere within the castle walls.

On the morning of their second Friday of term, the opportunity to finally have a discussion with Ron presented itself. Three eagle owls had fought their way to the table where the Gryffindors were gathered for breakfast. The beasts were in no way comparable to the feathered wrecks that had brought their summons to Harry and Ron at the Burrow, just before the start of term. This time, the powerful flyers had not stopped for more than a few seconds, the strict minimum required to drop an explosively red letter onto each of the three Apprentice Aurors' plates before leaving immediately, without even bothering to peck at any piece of bacon. Recognising the official seal of the Auror Office, Harry had hastened to unfold the parchment. Neville had contented himself with approaching the whole thing as if it were a simple message from his grandmother Augusta. As for Ron, he had had much more difficulty following the example. The envelope had even had to start smoking dangerously for him to deign to abandon his toast and finally decide to unseal it. Unsurprisingly, the note they found was signed by Dawlish's hand, summoning them to "submit a detailed report on the hunt for the Death Eaters Rodolphus & Rabastan Lestrage as soon as possible".

"I told you so..." said Harry, not without a certain annoyance. "Seriously, how could you believe for a single moment he'd forget us, eh? Just because the croissants are generously buttered here, or because Miss Abbott has nice eyes (he cast an insistent look at Neville who preferred to turn away) doesn't mean we can take it easy..."

"Take it easy? You're joking I hope. Have you seen the pile of homework we've received in one week? No wonder Fred and George chose their seventh year to do a runner! And anyway, what's this story? Neville, is it true you're going out with Hannah?"

"Me? Oh... we only went for a little walk in the courtyard the other evening, nothing special," replied Neville as if he were floating somewhere between two dimensions. "But you're right, her eyes... they're magnificent..."

"Brilliant," commented Harry, on the verge of exploding. "It's true after all, we just have to put that in the report: 'Dear Dawlish, be kind enough to spare us your worries about the Death Eaters. We already have homework up to here, and Neville is about to score. Yours sincerely, etc., etc.'"

Ron burst out laughing, Neville displayed a deliciously goofy smile, and Harry bitterly regretted not having Hagrid's strength, so as to grab one to knock out the other.

"You're right. We just have to tell him to get lost," Ron finally replied, puffing out his chest defiantly. "If he wants them so badly, he can come and fetch his Death Eaters himself."

"Dawlish is one thing, but that's not what worries me so much. I remind you that somewhere in the vicinity, there are two of the most dangerous Dark Wizards in the country wandering free..."

"Oh give it a rest with that!" burst out Ron. "They have the Trace on them. They can't resort to magic without risking detection. And even if they were in the area, how would you expect them to survive more than a week? There's only snow and rock here!"

"That's not true, there are trees too!" intervened Neville learnedly, finger in the air, as if he had just swallowed a cauldron of chocolate garnished with an extremely powerful love potion. "Hey, hi Hannah!"

Ron gave Neville a fraternal slap as he suddenly left to join his beloved and Harry couldn't suppress a sigh.

"Leave him be, go on. And just accept the fact that Dawlish is messing us about," said Ron.

"I'm not claiming otherwise. But at the risk of repeating myself, what I saw in Kingsley's office, plus the mission we were given, added to what I heard on the drawbridge... Honestly! It all coincides perfectly!"

Ron seemed on the verge of losing patience again then, as if it were too painful for him to leave his best friend in turmoil any longer, he finally sat back down opposite Harry.

"OK. Let's assume you're right from the start. You are a Death Eater. Careful now, you're not just any of those accursed Dark Wizards! You are one of the most vicious, cruellest, and most frustrated by Voldemort's fall there is... You've had half the Auror Office on your tail for weeks but you have, it seems, managed to give them the slip... You reach Durmstrang... What do you do?"

Harry hesitated a few moments; he hadn't expected Ron to approach the situation from this angle. Moreover, the enigma constituted by the Death Eaters' objective had already tickled him all week, without him managing to find an explanation for it.

"Me, a Lestrage? Well I... To start with I think I'd be tired, hungry, and cold too! Stuff like that... I imagine I'd go to the kitchens, pilfer a few dishes and then settle in a corner, sheltered from prying eyes. Ah yes, and as soon as I'd regained my strength, I'd get rid of the Trace. Impossible to know who casts which spell within a magic school, even for the Ministry."

"Right. You perk yourself up, you remove the Trace... and then what? I'll tell you what you do next," continued Ron, fixing Harry with a look so serious it was almost unsettling. "You scarper, mate! You disappear! As fast as you appeared, and you run to hole up in a burrow hoping everyone forgets you for the next ten years. In summary, even if your theory about Rodolphus and Rabastan coming to Durmstrang proved correct, assuming we manage to find proof of their passage, and everything... It is more than probable—not to say certain—that they have already left the very moment we're speaking."

"Unless..."

"Unless *what* again?" sighed Ron, throwing his head back with exasperation before crossing his arms firmly.

"Unless the stopover at the school isn't just a way to regain strength, or get rid of the Trace!" said Harry, banging his fist on the table, as if to drive home the point of his sudden illumination.

"I can't take it anymore, sorry to say this but you're completely losing it! Always wanting to have the last word with this or that abracadabra hypothesis... But bloody hell Harry, WHAT DO YOU WANT THEM TO DO HERE? IT'S A SCHOOL!"

Without even realising it, Harry and Ron had stood up; they were now leaning towards each other over the table. Around them, the other students were beginning to cast intrigued glances at them.

"OK, I'M LOSING IT! AND YOU ARE AS STUBBORN AS A HIPPOGRIFF! FOR YEARS THIS PLACE WAS A SCHOOL OF DARK MAGIC," shouted Harry before realizing that half the room was now listening to them. "Do you know how many sinister and malevolent characters were trained here, at Durmstrang?" he added more quietly. "Have you forgotten why Voldemort wanted his teaching post at Hogwarts so badly? He was looking for relics, artefacts, books or I don't know what extremely powerful and dangerous things there... The kind of things one only finds in an old school of witchcraft!"

Ron was now shaking his head frantically; he looked as if he had just received the coup de grâce. After pushing his chair under the table with an absent air, he finally locked his gaze with Harry's.

"Voldemort is in the past. I don't know what's still holding you in that detestable era, Harry, but you'd better draw a line under it. We've ruined our lives enough with these stories and now we have to move forward. In any case, that's certainly what *I* intend to do."

And even before Ron walked away, jostling whoever had the audacity to cross his path, Harry knew he had failed. He had been unable to convince his best friend.

15. UNEXPECTED ALLIES

That evening, Harry took his place amongst his comrades in the common room, making sure to avoid Ron. He flopped ungracefully onto one of the few plump beanbags dotting the floor and pulled a sheet of parchment and his favourite eagle-feather quill from his bag. After hesitating a few moments whether to imitate Ginny, who was slaving over the tough essay Professor Abrosius had just set them: "*Propose three effective potions against the Undead and describe their effects precisely*", he preferred to listen to his intuition and drafted the report demanded by Dawlish. Rather than risk giving too many details, Harry contented himself with presenting the facts he judged most important, and above all, those that seemed least compromising. In summary, he, Ron, and Neville had finally arrived at Durmstrang, they had met the Headmaster, they were getting to know the place, and they fully intended to find traces of the Death Eaters as quickly as possible.

His writing finished, Harry was preparing to leave for the owlery when he was held back by Chick. The bird had likely guessed the purpose of his errand and insisted with vigorous pecks on having the parchment tied to his leg. Tired of having his fingertips nipped, Harry finally gave in. Chirping with all his might, Chick strove to take off a good dozen times, without success. The scroll remained immobile, implacably resting on Harry's knees. Panting frantically with small high-pitched whistles, the tiny bird finally severed the string connecting him to the message with a sharp peck and flew to take refuge on Harry's skull; safe, hidden in the jungle of his messy hair.

When Harry was finally able to leave the common room, his watch showed a quarter to nine. He had a scant fifteen minutes left to get hold of a messenger worthy of the name. Past this deadline, his presence in the corridors would be considered a breach of the rules and liable to punishment. Back at Hogwarts, Harry knew the place well enough to go out after hours without fearing the slightest sanction. At Durmstrang, however, the situation was noticeably different.

Harry took the latest route he had discovered to get to the Great Hall and found the place deserted. Without the noise of student conversations to animate it, the vast room seemed rather sinister. Enthroned in the centre of the two interlocked circles of tables, the great dead tree added a particularly macabre touch to the atmosphere. Seeing it like this, its blackened and bare branches turned towards the vault, one could have mistaken it for a tortured creature at the end of its tether, begging to be released from its torment.

Eager to leave the place, Harry hastened to recall Hermione's last words: *"The owlery? Yes, I went there this morning to send a note to my parents. Take the small opening on the right when you're facing the staff table. Go through the long gallery with all the sculptures. Once you get to the very end, turn right once, then left at the portrait of the hysterical wizard, then right one last time and take the creaky staircase. It's right at the top. Be careful, I think one of the steps is starting to give way a bit."*

The passage Hermione spoke of proved harder to find than expected, however. Not that her instructions lacked precision: the problem lay rather with the castle lighting, which seemed to diminish as nine o'clock approached. Soon, the bright yellow flames of the torches fixed to the walls took on a strangely oppressive midnight-blue hue, and Harry had to risk a brief Lighting Charm to find his way. He finally unearthed the opening he was looking for and slipped through, pushing aside the purple curtains adorned with arabesques barring his way.

Scarcely had he passed them than Harry found himself open-mouthed. He had just entered an immense gallery whose vault was traversed by dizzying arches, along which were aligned countless statues. Intimidated, he walked a few yards on the black and white chequered floor stretching before him before pausing briefly. The echo of his footsteps had something strange about it, as if someone, somewhere, had tried to hide their strides within his own. Having not a minute to lose, however, Harry made an effort to put his worries aside, and resumed his route.

As he progressed, immersed in the midst of all these sculptures in poses each more spectacular than the last, Harry caught himself thinking back to the "Ancient Greece" models his uncle Vernon had once considered storing on his lawn (except that Mr Dursley would never have agreed to put representations of wizards from another era in his beloved garden), before being seized by a fresh unease. As he advanced, Harry could see the violet-blue flames of the torches dancing in the empty eyes of the statues as if they had suddenly been invested with a fleeting soul.

The sensation of being watched gnawing at him reached its peak when he arrived level with a magnificent witch with long hair and a strangely familiar face. At her feet rested a black marble plaque on which was inscribed in fine gold letters:

Nerida Vulchanova 1264 - 1295 Founder of Durmstrang - Through Passion, Blood, Flames, We built this temple of Knowledge and Justice. Rest in peace my eternal love, L.D.

Harry was still reeling from his crossing when he arrived at an unforeseen junction presenting a wide range of possibilities. As he began to doubt his position relative to the itinerary Hermione had described to him, a voice rang out behind his back.

"Blood traitor! Ectoplasm! Go boil your head in dung! Or go get mounted by a unicorn! What are you doing in my home at such an hour?!"

"Er... I'm just looking for the owlery," replied Harry timidly, after discovering that his interlocutor happened to be a puny old wizard with a funnel on his head, sitting at the back of a small portrait that someone had manifestly preferred to hide behind a pair of curtains.

"The owlery? Ah yes, just take a left, my child," said the wizard before falling straight back to sleep.

The hysterical wizard's snoring grew more and more distant and Harry soon reached the top of the tower. Up there, he found hundreds of bats busy dozing, each hanging lazily upside down from a beam in the roof structure. Taking advantage of the rays projected by the immense amber moon rising peacefully above the ramparts, he attached his parchment to one of the flyers under Chick's avid gaze. Just as Hedwig used to like doing in her lifetime, the creature demanded a few caresses before launching into the night, spreading its long skeletal wings. Harry let himself daydream a moment, watching it fly over the frozen lake and the Silver Forest lying below.

As he imagined his own owl evolving in this mountain landscape she would have loved so much, his eyes fell on an intriguing detail: a little further opposite, at the edge of the forest, the branches of certain trees seemed to have been damaged. Just underneath, the snow also gave the impression of having been worked. At least, it did not appear as pure and immaculate as in the surroundings.

Harry leaned forward over the wall as far as he could, to the point where his tiptoes soon left the ground. *"Blimey, it's high! If only I could Apparate*

down there, I'd know for sure in two seconds..." he told himself after catching a slip just in time. But Hermione had already warned him many times... The Durmstrang grounds benefited from the same protective measures as Hogwarts and he was there, stuck stupidly, only a few dozen yards from the answer to the question that had obsessed him so much since his arrival: *"Were Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle really in the area?"*

The deafening tolling of a bell suddenly rang out, piercing his eardrums.

A swarm of chiropterans descended on Harry like a tidal wave of flesh and fur, grazing him, half-clinging and scratching him from all sides in a storm of frantic squeaking before disappearing into the distance in the starry sky, as if by enchantment. Curled up on himself, heart pounding fit to burst, Harry gradually regained his wits. Nine o'clock had struck; hanging about in the corridors was no longer an option on pain of paying a high price. Hermione would blame him personally if his attitude contributed to degrading Hogwarts' image, and Ginny would never forgive him for getting detentions right when Quidditch training was about to start. Yet, he could not resolve to return immediately to the dormitories. An insurmountable force prevented him. He wanted to know. He had to, right now. Very soon, nature would have reclaimed its rights outside and the traces he had noticed risked disappearing forever.

Yes, it was decided; he would go and see tonight. For himself, for Dumbledore, for all those Voldemort and his henchmen had caused to fall on the battlefield. Not having a moment to lose, Harry grabbed Mrs Weasley's satchel dangling from his belt and pulled out his Invisibility Cloak. He would have been quite unable to say what had pushed him to take all this equipment when he was originally heading for the owlery. Ultimately, perhaps he had always known he would end up exploring the school and its surroundings that night.

Fully covered by the piece of magic fabric, Harry cautiously descended the steps of the tower with that same light tread he adopted during his nocturnal wanderings at Hogwarts. Despite their disagreement, he would have liked Ron and Neville to be there to accompany him. Alas, he had to face facts: even if they had been at his side, they would never have been able to fit three under the cloak...

How on earth did Fred and George manage in their heyday to crisscross the school without getting spotted? wondered Harry as he turned the corner of a deserted and dusty corridor. Them too, he would have liked to have there, with him. But George was in London, hundreds of miles away, and Fred

must be wandering somewhere, in limbo or elsewhere... both nowhere and everywhere.

"Oh you know... it wasn't always a walk in the park," suddenly came the Weasley twin's voice in his head. *"George has flat feet... that big lump is absolutely incapable of moving quietly!"*

Harry stopped dead; for a fraction of a second, he thought he had distinguished a shape, or at least a few silvery reflections floating vaguely in the vicinity.

"So what, afraid of the dark?" said Fred's voice again with a nuance of amusement. *"Unless you're hearing things? My poor friend, you're completely losing your marbles! Trelawney would be proud of you... or the opposite, who knows."*

"Fred?" Harry ventured to think after painfully putting his pride aside.

"No coco, I'm George. Oh drat, that's right, that one doesn't work anymore... A pity, it had a knack for annoying Mum every time we pulled it on her."

"How... How is this possible?!" Harry then asked internally.

"Possible what? Will you get off my back with your questions? You wanted a bit of company to find your Death Eaters, there you go. Now, if I were you, I'd retrace my steps and take a left instead. Because the way we're going, we're going to end up in the dormitories. You surely don't plan on going back to stick your nose in a parchment at this hour, do you?"

Harry didn't need asking twice and was able to note moments later that he had indeed taken the wrong path. Questions jostled in his head but he was afraid to think them too loud, for fear someone else might hear them in turn.

"I don't really know the place," admitted Fred. *"A good old Marauder's Map, that's what would have been handy... Any idea where to go now?"*

"The forest was in that direction if I remember correctly," Harry surprised himself by replying mentally. *"Let's try this. Point Me."*

Harry's wand began to spin silently in the palm of his hand. After a final oscillation, it finally froze in the direction of a spiral staircase that seemed to lead to the lower floors.

"What are we looking for exactly?" asked Fred after several minutes of fruitless exploration. *"I don't get the impression there's an exit to the outside around here..."*

Harry felt more tired than ever. The scratches caused by the bats burned his skin, his vision was becoming less sharp, and his feet were starting to hurt.

"I don't know. Couldn't you go through a few walls to see if we haven't got lost again?"

"You take me for a ghost now? Blimey my friend, you should seriously consider a visit to St Mungo's when you get back, you know. How do you expect me to be both inside your little nutcase head and... Hey, did you hear that?"

Harry stopped moving and held his breath. Indeed, something was approaching. Something metallic, something that seemed to be sniffing the air insistently... Gathering all his courage, he pivoted delicately in the direction of the source of the strange phenomenon. A silhouette with strange proportions was advancing from the other end of a dark corridor. Approaching ever closer, the shadow was soon brought to cross the narrow film of moonlight projected by a nearby window. A large dishevelled head dripping with drool then appeared for the space of an instant. Koulok was here, only a few yards away, dragging a sort of twisted shovel behind him and greedily smelling the atmosphere, as if he had scented the proximity of a most appetizing dish.

Eyes fixed on the scene with horror, Harry prudently marked his retreat with a step back, then a second. He was preparing to turn around to leave the premises discreetly when his cloak pulled him brutally backwards. His cry of stupor firmly stifled in his throat, he could only witness helplessly the loss of balance of the candelabra he had just snagged. The large golden chandelier sprawled full length with a deafening crash. After jumping, Koulok let out a blood-curdling scream and rushed straight at Harry, who took to his heels.

"Bloody hell, where did they dig that thing up? Looks like the result of a cross between Filch and a toad, or rather a toadess, is that a word?" said Fred as they crossed the umpteenth junction in haste.

Harry was too busy thinking to answer; none of this made sense. Many times he had tried to trick his pursuer by stopping suddenly at a crossing. Yet, each time the subterfuge had failed and Koulok had chosen the right direction. The Invisibility Cloak apparently had only a limited effect on Koulok. From a certain proximity, the latter seemed capable of detecting the presence of his prey and locking onto it, like a veritable bewitched Bludger. It looked as if he managed to track Harry simply by letting himself be guided by his scent.

The chase seemed to last for hours; Harry felt completely disorientated. He had bolted for so long without daring to look back that it would have been impossible for him to say in which part of the castle he was. All that mattered to him now was putting as much distance as possible between him and the monstrosity pursuing him bellowing. Say what you like, Filch was sneaky and nasty, but he had never given the impression of seeking to catch rule-breakers for anything other than inflicting a good detention on them. This watchman seemed motivated differently, as if his supper depended on it...

Throat and lungs on fire, a terrible pain in his ribs, Harry deployed a final effort to descend the steps of the granite staircase presenting itself to him. A little further behind, Koulok was sniffing and growling ever more urgently.

"No! Impossible... it's a joke!" burst out Harry after risking lighting his wand as a last resort.

The room he had just entered was barely larger than his bedroom at the Dursleys' home and contained for its sole furnishing a single tapestry marked by the years. There was no door, no window or any other staircase that could have served as an escape route, only cold, damp stone everywhere.

A new cry, resembling an explosion of joy this time, rang out on the floor above... The hunchback would be on him any second. *"What will happen when he gets his hands on me?"* wondered Harry, paralysed by fear. Now that he knew he was trapped, a few scraps of past conversations came back to him little by little. Terrifying discussions he'd had with Ron, Neville, and Seamus at nightfall, by the fireside, about the tortures Durmstrang reserved for students who committed the imprudence of breaking ranks. Why did he have to get himself into a mess once again? He could already see Ron advancing with pity to meet him and throwing through the bars of a sordid cell: *"What have you done this time? Couldn't you just go back and do your homework like everyone else, Harry?"*

"What, would Ron really say something that pathetic to you? Standards have slipped since I left, it seems. I'll have to have a word with George," said Fred. *"By the way, when you've finished feeling sorry for yourself, take a look at that brick over there. My little finger tells me it's fishy... and believe me, I've seen fishy things! My little finger too, for that matter..."*

Harry didn't need asking twice; only a few yards above, Koulok seemed to have entered the staircase. Following Fred's indication, he rushed to a

block of stone that was strangely reflecting the light of his wand. There was indeed something, a tiny mark, a sort of inscription. Nose almost pressed against the rock, Harry recognised the eye inside the triangle, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Without really knowing what he was doing, he pressed on the engraving with the tip of his wand. The piece of granite sank into the wall, a whole section of which finally slid open with a din comparable to the rumble of thunder. A wind of freedom then rushed into the room and Harry rushed into the opening without hesitating a moment longer.

Scarcely had he stepped outside than he recognised the place. He was right at the spot where his gaze had rested earlier, when he was still at the owlery. The Durmstrang lake stretched before him, like a vast mirror of ice reflecting the starry vault. Just opposite, the Silver Forest seemed peacefully asleep. Harry launched himself onto the frozen surface which began to crack dangerously under his steps. Maybe he would have time to hide behind a tree before the monstrous hunchback arrived on the scene in turn...

Alas, he had only crossed half the lake when Koulok burst through the secret passage in turn. The hunchback agitated himself on the spot for a moment. He seemed mad with rage, as if the gusts that had started whipping his greasy hair onto his grotesque face had finished exciting him. Harry stiffened under his cloak; he had nowhere left to go. Koulok had demonstrated that he ran faster and, soon, he would throw himself upon him. With a bit of luck, the ordeal wouldn't last long; the crust of ice would give way under their weight and they would both disappear into the depths of the abyss...

Against all odds, the hunchback did not take another step in his direction. After sniffing the ambient air insistently, he bellowed one last time in what seemed to be his way of expressing his frustration and finally disappeared, closing the passage behind him.

"Well, that was a close shave!" let out Fred in a sigh. *"Looks like that thing's sense of smell gets messed up when there's too much wind. I'd be really curious to see his reaction the day you send a Dungbomb in his face. That should be quite a show!"*

Harry didn't dare answer. Given the fatigue accumulated lately, addressing someone mentally whom he knew was gone for good only half-reassured him about his state of health. Instead, he hastened to finish

crossing the lake to finally reach the presumed crossing point of the Death Eaters.

Despite his numerous doubts about the reality of the evening he had just lived, the traces were there; he hadn't dreamed. A small group of people had indeed ventured out of the forest to slip into the castle recently, and all this coincided with what Harry had heard when spying on Halcard on the drawbridge.

"So, happy?" asked Fred in a guttural voice. "Good, because it's high time to scam now. It's not warm here, well so it seems... and besides, your hunchback friend has gone back to patrol up there on the ramparts, look. It's now or never to get back without having to play hippogriff and owl again."

A good while later, Harry had just crossed the threshold of the common room, a few embers still glowing at the bottom of the stove and Ron seeming to snore louder than ever in the next room, when Fred's voice rang out once again in his mind.

"Even if I probably won't be able to visit you again for a while, keep the faith Harry! Never doubt your intuition! Fred Felicis Weasley will always be by your side, one way or another. You just have to believe it very hard... Thanks for this thrilling chase, and take care of yourself... and Ron, and Ginny, well you know what I mean... Ah yes and if you run into Percy... no, actually, I'll deal with that with George instead..."

"Thanks to you," murmured Harry with slight apprehension. "And trust me, I'll watch over them."

This time however, no answer came back to him. Exhausted, frozen, he dropped onto his bed, curled into a ball under a double thickness of soft duvets, and fell asleep immediately.

The next day, it was past ten o'clock by his new watch when Harry finally opened his eyes. Muscles still sore from the previous day's efforts, he took advantage of this first morning off to offer himself a few minutes of respite lazing in his cosy bed. Daylight flooded the small room with a soft clarity and a soothing calm reigned there. Harry deduced that Neville had probably gone for a walk in the surroundings in charming company. For their part, Ron, Dean, and Seamus must already be training for the Quidditch recruitment session which would take place that very afternoon.

Pulled from his reflections on the previous evening by Chick who seemed to have had more than enough of pacing around his navel, Harry

got up for good.

"Oh... hi Hermione, I didn't expect to bump into you at such a late hour. Is everything alright? Is it Ron who... Has he already found a way to bypass the *Kick-Back Jinx* protecting the girls' dormitory?"

"Mornin' Harry. Mmmh not great... Ron you say? No, nothing like that... Atrocious night... Nightmares..."

Each from their own side, she and Hermione had entered the common room at the same moment. Unlike Harry, who had just come out of a regenerative shower, Hermione was still in her pyjamas and her dishevelled hair made her look like a wild beast just returned from a terrible battle. In that moment, Harry wouldn't have been surprised to see her roar like the ridiculous lion hat Luna insisted on wearing every time an important match loomed on the horizon.

"Have you already done the work for Abrosius?"

"Noooooot yeeet," replied Hermione in a jaw-cracking yawn that confirmed her resemblance to the king of beasts. "Give me ten minutes and we'll both get onto it, okay?"

After being impressed by Hermione's punctuality (she must decidedly master the *Scourgify* spell to perfection), Harry congratulated himself on having used his morning to regain his strength. Indeed, benefiting thus from the unforeseen assistance of his friend, it probably took him half the time to prepare his essay than he had anticipated. His paragraph on *Holy Water* completed, he left Hermione to indulge in the fascinating study of *Ancient Runes* and set about preparing his equipment by lovingly polishing every square inch of his Firebolt. A most invigorating meal later, he wedged his broom on one shoulder and joined a group of students departing for the Quidditch pitch.

The sun was still sparkling in the middle of a forget-me-not blue sky when they arrived at the meeting place. Almost all the Hogwarts students seemed to have turned out for the event and already occupied a large part of the stands carved into the cliff itself. Below, the twenty-odd applicants had gathered in front of the wooden huts bordering the frozen lake, which were to serve as changing rooms for the teams. Although the weather conditions proved ideal, an indescribable tension seemed to float in the fresh air bathing the pitch. It must be said that this was the very first time everyone was seeing the four houses unite to form a single team.

Ginny also appeared tense. Seeing her like this, standing on a rock, hands on hips, eyeing her audience impatiently, Harry didn't take long to remember why his mother, Molly, had always been in his eyes the most formidable member of the Weasley family.

"Right, looks like you're all here. We'll be able to get started in a few minutes. Just before this recruitment session begins and we all find ourselves on our brooms, I'd like to make sure everyone is on the same wavelength concerning certain, let's say... more theoretical points," announced Ginny. "First, you must know that the tournament will be played as a best of three. That is to say, victory will belong to the team that manages to win two of the three possible rounds. On top of that, you may have heard that this year marks a turning point in the way Quidditch is played. The Institute of Magical Sports has decided to review the impact the capture of the Golden Snitch had on the game and..."

"Yeah, yeah. Alright, we know Weasley," cut in Zacharias Smith, of Hufflepuff. "Catching the little ball only gets fifty points now and only makes the team win 'if it already has a score advantage greater than or equal to fifty points'. Do you take us for morons or what?"

"No, but it won't be long if you carry on like that Smith. Now be nice and shut up; when we need a coward like you, I'll let you know."

In the middle of the crowd, Harry felt the monster slumbering in his gut waking up little by little. Already at the time of the D.A. meetings (the famous Defence Against the Dark Arts class organisation ingeniously established by Hermione in fifth year), Zacharias Smith had shown himself excessively resistant to any form of authority provided it came from a student other than himself. The latter seemed to feel the irresistible need to show others that his way of doing things was superior. Yet, when the moment finally came to prove himself at the Battle of Hogwarts, the boy had slipped away before hostilities had even begun.

Harry didn't see how someone like him could still claim a position within the team. And seeing him openly criticize Ginny in her first moments as captain made it even harder to bear.

"You act smart because you have the badge," resumed Smith. "We're not fooled you know. Potter and your brother will end up in the ranks in two shakes of a lamb's tail... All just because you hang around with them all day long."

"Those who show themselves to be the best performers will be admitted. Whether for their technique or for their team spirit. Get that well into your skull."

Ginny had spoken with a voice slightly higher pitched than usual. Something was wrong. And knowing the aversion she felt for Zacharias, Harry suddenly came to dread she might let herself go and end up losing control. Making a mistake was one thing; doing it as Captain was another, he was well placed to know.

"Pfft, do you really think we're going to swallow that rubbish? You're going to impose your choices according to your little personal criteria and Hogwarts will end up with the lousiest team seen in years. Listen to me everyone, if victory matters as much to you as it does to me, don't let..."

"WE WON'T GO HOME WITHOUT THAT BLASTED CUP, I SWEAR IT! NOW TELL ME, WHO RECEIVED THE CAPTAIN'S BADGE, SMITH, YOU OR ME?"

"EVERYONE KNOWS YOU ONLY GOT THE TITLE BECAUSE HEADMISTRESS MCGONAGALL IS A GRYFFON..."

Zacharias didn't have time to finish. As he was yelling, half a dozen lightning bolts had shot from everywhere, hitting him full in the face. The next instant, the Hufflepuff player's head looked like that of a large moth dressed in a bright blonde wig.

"Thanks for your help. I was going to... I probably could have handled it myself, but I don't know if I would have got such good results on my own. And I don't know who had the idea for the mullet but it was damn well played," said Ginny raising an appreciative eyebrow. "We'll leave him in this state for a while yet. I'll take care of lifting the spells when his turn to play comes, although I doubt after that he'll still want to join the team."

"Do you plan to let him apply despite everything?" asked Gerald Chambers, a Ravenclaw seventh year. "Maybe we should exclude him, no?"

"So he can accuse me of preventing him from participating? No way. He may be infernal, but he'll get to prove himself, like everyone else."

Alas, it quickly became apparent that Ginny's desire for impartiality risked having heavy consequences. As if spending a few minutes in the skin of an oversized moth had finished inflating his ego, Smith played well enough during his trials to claim the third and final Chaser position.

"I hope you're going to insist Samuels and Rickett work on their backhands, because it's not with such soft strikes that we're going to scare Durmstrang," said Zacharias to Ginny, as the initials "Z.S." had just appeared by themselves on the board of potential recruits. "That's what I'd do, so if you hope to win as much as you claim..."

Harry placed his hand on Ginny's shoulder in a gesture of comfort. A little earlier, she had entrusted him with the Seeker position, a mainly solitary role that would avoid Smith's company most of the time. Harry was grateful to her but couldn't help worrying for her as well as for the rest of the team.

If only Hermione could have cast one of her famous Confundus Charms on Zacharias during the trials...

"Am I too late? Is recruitment already over?" came a breathless voice then.

Harry, Ginny, and Zacharias Smith jumped in unison. Looking gloomy, a brand-new Nimbus 3000 in hand, Draco Malfoy had just joined them on the pitch.

"Yeah mate," Smith hastened to reply. "Sorry but all the spots are taken. Go on, clear off, we don't want a dirty little Death Eater with us anyway."

To Harry's great astonishment, Malfoy said nothing. Although his jaw appeared excessively clenched, he contented himself with turning to Ginny, patiently awaiting her reaction.

"Really, Draco?" she said, both astonished and embarrassed. "Decidedly, it's my day... But everyone has had their chance so far after all, even those who deserved it least (she shot a withering look at Smith who raised his chin defiantly). Which position are you interested in? You've always been a Seeker in the past, haven't you?"

"Yes that's true, but this summer I... I'm here to become a Chaser."

"Chaser eh... Why not after all. Harry, Draco, go join the others and show me what you're capable of in this configuration," said Ginny, suddenly pensive.

"Hey! Why don't I go too?" exclaimed Smith pointing at them angrily.

"Because if Draco plays better than you, *you're* the one clearing off, 'mate'."

16. HE WHO WAS EVERYTHING AND WHO WAS NOTHING

"I don't believe it... What, you're going back? Again?"

"So what? Having a sudden attack of conscience, Ron? Oh, don't worry, I'd completely understand..."

It was nearly midnight. A little over a month had passed since the first Quidditch session and the Hogwarts students had finally found their feet at Durmstrang. Harry had partially covered himself with his Invisibility Cloak. Only his head remained visible, floating macabrely above the carpeted floor of the common room. His excursion the previous day—into kitchens full of hot chocolate fountains, gingerbread cottages, and groves of candyfloss—had proved fruitless; just like his night of exploration the week before, which had led him to force entry into the library, an interminable corkscrew-shaped tower filled with moving staircases and walls lined entirely with bookshelves.

"Oh... Well, if you want to pull another all-nighter... go ahead, mate, knock yourself out," replied Ron, shaking his head as if he had just recognised a lost cause.

"The Death Eaters are here, somewhere," retorted Harry, pointing a uselessly invisible finger at Ron. "I already told you I found their tracks at the edge of the forest not so long ago."

"And I already told you that any old beast passing through could have made your tracks..."

"No, really Ron? A beast of human size, right at the level of a secret passage? Are there no limits to your obstinacy?"

"Will you two stop it? You're making such a racket!"

Leaning over a small table cluttered with scrolls of parchment and thick tomes, Hermione was glaring at them. She had hastened to adopt a studious posture when Harry and Ron had turned in her direction. But the way her eyes shone in the gloom and the delicate glittering thread still connecting her lower lip to her homework suggested a different reality.

"Honestly! Neither of you seems to have grown up at all!"

"Hermione! I'm simply trying to make him understand that he's wasting his time and energy patrolling like this, outside, at night," exclaimed Ron indignantly. "That's all!"

"It seemed to me, however, that you too had committed yourself to the Auror Office..." retorted Harry coldly.

"I committed to flushing out Death Eaters, it's true, but not to chasing ghosts or whatever rubbish Dawlish is trying to make us swallow!"

"Have you at least tried, Ron?" asked Hermione gravely.

"Tried? What do you mean? Of course I've tried! I used my common sense, on several occasions, to arrive at the conclusion that the new Head of the Auror Office was taking us for fools... No need to be brilliant like you to work that out..."

Hermione left her makeshift desk to lie down just a little closer on a sofa, eyes half-closed, hands on her temples. Crookshanks immediately seized the opportunity to jump on her and curl up against her stomach, purring.

"It's true we could have expected better support from the Office from the start..." she said with a long sigh, lazily scratching the cat under its chin.

"You call that support! Dawlish is content to push for results," exclaimed Harry. "Threats of expulsion from the programme have started raining down again in the last few days..."

"Have you spoken to Ginny? What does she think?"

"Ginny has only two things on her mind right now: training for Quidditch, and winning at Quidditch... She's even increased the number of sessions we have each week. We're at three times three hours already, and

I wouldn't be surprised if that goes up again with the first match looming. She puts enormous pressure on herself, but well, I can understand... All that to say I prefer to leave her alone with these stories for now."

"And Nev..."

"Forget it. Neville has definitely left the planet. Hannah this, Hannah that. Let's hope it's the right one this time, at least..."

A gust of wind crashed noisily against the dormitory tower. The stove began to roar louder as its embers suddenly illuminated the room with an orange glow.

"I admit I'm finding it hard to decide," resumed Hermione, frowning. "What you report makes sense, Harry, but remains in the realm of supposition. Ron bases himself on arguments that seem more concrete to me since they've already been proven, alas..."

"Ah! You see! Thanks Hermione!" cried Ron, punching the palm of his hand.

"That said!" intervened Hermione, raising a finger in the air with such vivacity one would have thought her in the middle of a classroom, "I think you could make a small effort and accompany Harry. Learn to be a bit diplomatic... After all, you are friends, aren't you?"

"What? No, that's not possible. I have to write that one down! Miss Granger, Head Girl of Hogwarts, is asking me to break school rules at Durmstrang," sniggered Ron, pretending to grab a quill. "And how would you expect me to go about it, eh? I don't have a cloak to make myself invisible, do I!"

"We've just started covering Disillusionment Charms in Transfiguration; what sort of results have you got so far?" asked Harry hopefully.

"It's not as bad as that idiot Zacharias Smith who can't turn into anything other than a big moth since the events of the first Quidditch session, but it's not great either," explained Ron, looking sincerely annoyed. "I sort of made my nose disappear the other day, I think... Anyway, that's what Boulik said before giving me a nasty tap on the conk with his wand."

"What we could do," said Hermione as if suddenly emerging from deep reflection, "would be to set a deadline."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry and Ron in unison.

"We set a realistic ultimatum," she resumed, straightening up suddenly, to the great displeasure of Crookshanks who scuttled off to lie under the stove, hissing. "Harry, it's already been nearly a month and a half that you've been looking for the Death Eaters all over the place... I propose we help you find them as best we can until the end of the month. If we haven't found anything by then, you agree to stop killing yourself with work and incidentally risking Hogwarts' image by getting caught... What do you say?"

Harry thought intensely. The offer was more than tempting; by wanting to satisfy every one of his ambitions, he had ended up with a truly titanic workload on his back. Just yesterday Hermione had had to wake him twice in Potions, and he had even nearly fallen off his broom during practice later that evening. Truth be told, mid-October was only just looming on the horizon and he was already starting to wonder if he would be able to keep up the pace until the long-awaited Christmas holidays.

"You... You have an idea in mind, don't you?" replied Harry before discarding his cloak and sinking into the nearest armchair. "I know that look..."

He and Ron leaned towards Hermione, concentrated.

Finding themselves like this, all three reunited, sharing the same goal for the first time in weeks, Harry felt a delicious wave of comfort spread through him. Without him really noticing until now, he had terribly missed these moments.

"Very well, if we want to get our hands on the Lestranges as quickly as possible, let's try to ask the right questions," said Hermione. "What is their goal? What are they looking for? And how can we increase our chances of finding them in this place of which we know nothing, or almost nothing?"

"I've already presented my most, let's say... *plausible* theory to Ron... In my opinion, if the Death Eaters came here to Durmstrang, it's to get their hands on a relic or a powerful book of Dark Magic. I admit I don't really

know for what purpose... But let's say if I were them and my objective was limited to regaining strength, getting rid of the Trace and all that... I wouldn't have risked staying at the castle more than a day. And in that case, I would most likely have left using the same passage as on the way in. Because... Why risk looking for another path? Hang on, this is where it gets interesting, or at least troubling... As it happens, the damaged fir branches were all bent in the same direction when I went to check the spot where they passed the first time. And since then, believe me, I've checked the place and its surroundings regularly, and nothing has moved; except that the snow and wind have finished erasing the tracks on the ground."

"Why not... If we imagined for a moment we were back at Hogwarts," said Ron then, brows furrowed, the flames of the stove dancing gently in his pupils. "Where were the most powerful objects located? There was..."

"Godric Gryffindor's sword, in Dumbledore's office! Well—the Headmaster's..." threw in Harry, trying to recall the layout as faithfully as possible. "Along with loads of other valuable stuff too I'd say, like the Sorting Hat..."

"Riddle's Diary allowed access to the Chamber of Secrets via the plumbing," resumed Ron with a hint of nausea in his voice. "But that's the kind of possibility I'd check only as a last resort..."

"Wait, there was another one... yes! Rowena Ravenclaw's Diadem! And remember that one, we had no idea where to find it either just before the battle!"

"And who helped you find the diadem?" intervened Hermione, snapping her fingers suddenly.

"It was the Grey Lady, the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw..." replied Harry, perplexed.

"Exactly!"

"But how does that help us?" sighed Ron, shaking his head suddenly as if to chase away an impertinent insect.

"Ron, who, from generation to generation, from Headmaster to Headmaster, is most likely to remain within the walls of a school and know its every nook and cranny?"

"The caretaker?"

"No, not that drooling brute! I said, *from generation to generation!*"

"Ah er... I don't know. The... the..."

"The ghosts!" cried Harry and Ron in chorus.

Scarcely had he pronounced this sentence than Harry recalled the precious help the *essence of Fred* (that was how he had surprised himself naming the phenomenon) had given him during his first night exploring the castle. He hesitated to share this memory with Ron and Hermione but held back just in time. The risk was too great that they might come to question his credibility or his reasoning... And that was the last thing he wished for at this precise moment.

The discussion lasted a good while longer. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were still refining their plan of attack when the dormitory clock showed half-past two in the morning. Heads still full of ideas, they agreed to interrupt their reflection to enjoy some deserved and more than necessary rest. That night, it was with heavy eyelids but a lighter heart that Harry slipped into his bed.

From the next day, the hunt for the ghosts of Durmstrang was open. Throughout the week, every second of respite and every break period was put to use to gather information. Ron discreetly solicited the help of Dean and Seamus to roam the corridors during the day, Hermione took charge of the library surroundings, and Harry handled patrolling at night, hidden under his Invisibility Cloak.

By dint of outings, his expertise in the art of giving Koulok, the castle's strange and disturbing prowler, the slip soon reached new heights. Since Fred had pointed out that the latter used his sense of smell primarily to track his prey, Harry had learned to spot the slightest exit likely to lead him outside. Once out, he would then use his acrobatic Quidditch training to climb the crenelation of a rampart or a cracked wall, thus leaving no trace of his passage on the layers of immaculate snow carpeting the way. His exploration finished, Harry returned around midnight to find Ron and Hermione waiting for him in a common room cleared of any unwelcome presence.

"Anything new, Harry?"

"Still that wacky old ghost. The one who wanders around with his log strapped to his back because he still thinks he's in the 14th century, at the time of the Witch Hunts," replied Harry, taking off his cloak. "Apart from that, nothing... Well actually, Koulok seems to be running faster and faster. He nearly caught me on the ninth floor, near the hanging gardens for Herbology. Luckily, I stumbled upon some *Mimulus Mibletonia*. You know, that plant Neville brought onto the train—in fifth year I think—the one that smelled really strong. Anyway, the hunchback must have lasted ten seconds before fleeing in turn. I really thought he was going to slip on his own drool, he was in such a hurry to bolt... And on your side then, what did it yield today?"

"Not much either," replied Ron with embarrassment. "Most of the spectres who didn't run away at our approach don't speak English or make no effort to be understood. Finally, as for your saviour, the one who guided you at the start of term, with the strong French accent, the plumed hat and all... nothing. We even tried to find out more from the elves, in the kitchens. Don't even think about it... they seem even more enslaved than back home."

Harry rested his chin on his crossed hands and closed his eyes for a moment. He felt at the end of his tether, both physically and mentally. According to their mutual agreement, he had only one week left to pinpoint proof that the Death Eaters were truly in the vicinity before giving up. Alas, so far they hadn't even been able to carry out the first stage of their plan. What would happen if they failed? Harry could not resign himself to giving up, not after working so hard for so long. Yet, without the precious help of Ron and Hermione, he had to face the facts that his chances of success would be even more limited.

"Harry? Harry! Are you listening to me?"

"Eh? Sorry... you were saying?"

"You're overworking yourself," said Hermione, looking worried. "Please be careful. Your health comes before the rest, you mustn't forget that!"

"How do you expect me to rest when those guys are just out there, wandering around with the intention of committing who knows what horror? While I'm charged with stopping them?"

"You must rest if you want to remain effective in the long run! I'm certain Kingsley would have given you this advice if he were still at the head of the programme of..."

"You mean the Kingsley who appointed that troll Dawlish to take his place?" exploded Harry. "Is that the Kingsley you're talking to me about? I'm the one who'd have two or three pieces of advice to give him, actually! The idiot..."

Ron and Hermione contented themselves with remaining silent. They looked sincerely sorry, which only fuelled the furnace already making him seethe with rage.

"I was saying I found some info on important magical objects at Durmstrang in the library today," resumed Hermione finally, pulling a large book towards her whose cover was falling to pieces. "The tree in a state of rot in the centre of the Great Hall is an Yggdrasil. Well... I'm almost certain."

"And what's special about it, apart from giving everyone the creeps?" asked Ron.

"Well, it apparently grows from what are called *Odin's Tears*. No... don't ask me what that is... The Yggdrasil required a dragon to breathe on its shoots daily to grow. Once adulthood was reached, it would become sensitive to the well-being of the place where it was planted."

"In other words, it's a sort of whistleblower," said Harry.

"Yes, and given its current state, something very worrying is being put in place right here, at Durmstrang. In the past, Headmistress Vulchanova had to be replaced by Harfang Munter for the tree to be found in such a state of decrepitude... And it reportedly only came back to life upon the latter's succession."

"Yeah... excuse me but we've done better since," remarked Ron. "Take our clock at the Burrow for example. It offers the same services whilst being much less cumbersome than a forty-ton dragon."

"I don't recall the famous Weasley clock—however practical it may be—offering fruits with the power to cure any illness whatsoever..."

"Do you think that's what the Death Eaters came to look for here?" asked Harry, suddenly raising his head.

"I'm not so sure... the fruit only keeps its power for a brief moment after being picked. And for the tree to give any, it would first have to be in full health, which would imply that no evil had been in the vicinity beforehand. That's what makes this tree so precious; it strengthens the 'good' whilst depriving the 'bad' of its miraculous benefits. Although I doubt it's the Lestranges' objective, the state of the tree could still be an indicator of their presence, what do you say?"

Harry inhaled deeply before heaving an interminable sigh. He had imagined that the three of them would obtain much better results at the end of their first week of joint research.

"It's a plausible theory, yeah... one more," he grunted finally, getting up. "One more damn theory. I think I've had enough for tonight, come on... sleep well. See you tomorrow."

Alone, curled up under his blankets, Harry took a long time to find sleep that night. As was happening more and more often lately, his brain had started calculating possibilities and projecting eventualities against his will. Durmstrang was a huge place; where could the Death Eater brothers be hiding at this precise moment? Did they change hideouts regularly to confuse the trail? If only they had been at Hogwarts, finding them would have been child's play. There was no hiding place, no nook in the shadow of a tapestry that he hadn't been led to explore one day.

If only...

He was standing at the foot of a dead tree. An immense, gigantic tree, taller than the highest tower ever beheld. Something growled behind his back. It sounded like Koulok. Harry turned around and found himself nose-to-nose with a dragon, disproportionately large too. The monster had a long horn ornamented with symbols in the middle of its skull and was looking at him with appetite. Harry took to his heels. He ran, fast, ever faster. The ground began to shake beneath his feet. The dragon had given

chase, no doubt. Harry's legs seemed to refuse to work. The ground soon ceased shaking and then gave way beneath his feet. The beast had caught him and was taking him with it, no doubt. They were flying, speeding like the fastest of Firebolts. At the summit, Harry felt himself float. The monster had released him, no doubt. The highest branch of the world-tree, the one onto which he had just fallen, suddenly began to vibrate. Harry turned around feverishly. Opposite him, the slender silhouette of a man stood out little by little against the bloody background of the twilight.

"For nothing in the world would we miss these little privileged moments in your company, Harry Potter..."

Without warning, the man attacked, unleashing a veritable rain of hexes. Harry didn't bother to protect himself. He knew where he was; he knew what he had to do. The branch supporting him gave way under the impact of his Reductor Curse and he began to fall, again and again... During his fall, the tree seemed to try to catch him but he managed to avoid it despite everything, guiding himself with arms spread, like a bird. Suddenly... surging from the trunk in the blink of an eye, a mass of blackened branches seized him, like a hideous hooked hand. The vice of bark then closed on his body... His ribs burned painfully and, soon, he began to suffocate.

"Well spotted... But next time you won't get away so easily, little cheater..."

Harry opened his eyes. He was choking; he needed air. The words of the nightmare were still repeating in his skull as if branded there with a red-hot iron. He tried to move, to make his body understand that it was all over, that the dream was finished, but he couldn't manage it. Something was still holding him prisoner. Panic dissipating little by little, he finally understood that he had become entangled in his sheets during the night.

The next day, Harry needed a good half-hour under the lukewarm water of the shower before finally feeling ready for action. Each weekend led into the Battle Magic class given by Halcard, which probably made Monday one of the most demanding days of the week. It must be said that the task had become all the more arduous as the Headmaster, doubtless impressed by the fighting spirit Harry had shown during the very first lesson, had quickly been led to consider him his designated partner.

Determined to surpass himself since he had felt so helpless at the start of term, at the foot of the Cliff of the Initiate, Harry had striven to free his mind from the prejudices and other fears that "parasitized his perception of the true world around", according to his tutor's insistent advice. Without being able to explain why yet, his efforts were sometimes crowned with success. His Shield Charms then had—to use Ron's words—"something surreal about them", and he even managed to make Halcard step back several paces on his best days. Alas, every session ended irremediably with a fall from the top of the tower and he couldn't help climbing the stairs with growing apprehension the following week.

That morning however, something unexpected came to disturb the recent habits of the seventh-year students. Harry had just started on a slice of *panettone* strategically garnished with a spoonful of double cream when Professor Boulik burst into the Gryffindor table. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his cheek kept twitching, giving him a distraught look that contrasted with his usual tranquility.

"Miss Granger? Could I speak to you for a moment?"

"Yes of course Professor, what is it?" replied Hermione in an anguished voice. "I... did my essay on *Portkeys* not satisfy you?"

"It is not about that, Miss, your essay is even better than if I had handled it personally. No, really... Would you have five minutes to spare, please... in private?"

Hermione didn't need asking twice. Cheeks flushed, she stood up and moved away from the table in the company of Professor Boulik.

"What's got into him?" asked Ron, his forkful of bacon and eggs suspended in mid-air. "Did you see his face? He looked mortified."

"Dunno," said Harry. "But it seemed pretty serious, indeed. Maybe it's about Draco. He keeps fighting with Krum at the moment, whether in class or in the corridors..."

"I hope you're wrong... If Malfoy gets his right to participate in the Quidditch tournament withdrawn, Zacharias Smith comes back on the team; and then, we're in trouble. I never thought I'd say this one day but

I'd still prefer to play with Draco; the other one is really just an unbearable pretentious moron."

Harry promised himself to mark the day's date with a cross on his calendar as soon as he returned to the dormitories. Hearing Ron say he wanted to keep Malfoy on his team was something unique.

A moment later, Hermione rejoined them. She looked embarrassed.

"So? What did Boulik want with you?" asked Ron, barely had she sat back down beside them. "Visibly, all that wasn't to invite you to the Halloween ball..."

"I don't understand what's happening to him," she said, shrugging her shoulders incredulously. "He simply told me that this morning's Battle Magic class was cancelled because Halcard was indisposed, or something like that, and that—consequently—we'd have Defence Against the Dark Arts instead."

"Oh right, and that's all?" said Harry. "Helsing's classes are really soporific but there's no need to make a drama out of it. I expected much wor..."

"Well he added something... It was so strange!"

Harry and Ron stared at Hermione wide-eyed.

"He took my hands in his and said: 'Above all, take good care of yourselves.'"

Hermione had just finished her sentence under Harry and Ron's bewildered gaze when a resounding crack suddenly made the walls of the Great Hall tremble. The students, hitherto busy eating breakfast and chatting quietly, turned around in silence. In the centre of the room, from its summit to its base, the Yggdrasil had just split in two.

Moments later, the bell announcing the imminent start of classes rang out and students were pushed to class by their respective professors, without further explanation.

The Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson that followed proved useless, or almost. Although a significant majority seemed unaware of the true nature of the tree sitting in the Great Hall, everyone wanted to know by

what magic the latter could have torn itself apart so suddenly. Claiming to be behind schedule, Professor Helsing deflected all questions on the subject and persisted in talking to them about the great Dark Wizards of the contemporary century. His account of Gellert Grindelwald was interesting but lacked, as Hermione humbly pointed out, tangible proof regarding the latter's actions. And apart from the fact that a sort of shockwave had pierced Durmstrang when Voldemort had delivered the coup de grâce to the ex-owner of the Elder Wand, Harry didn't feel he had learned much when the session finally ended.

In Charms, the subject of the tree seemed to have gently left people's minds. However, Professor Boulik looked so shaken that he narrowly missed teleporting Neville under the icy crust of the lake, on the occasion of a demonstration on the different ways to prepare a Portkey. Fortunately, only moments before touching the old sneaker that was the subject of the experiment, Neville was beaten to it by a reckless fly which ended up dispatched into the depths in his place.

Shortly afterwards, Harry had put aside all his worries and was venturing into the storm alongside his Hogwarts Quidditch teammates for a most refreshing practice session. When he returned early in the evening, covered in melted snow from head to toe, his glasses full of steam, he found the Common Room plunged into most unusual agitation.

"Harry, Ron, thank god you're here! I have to talk to you. I think I know why Halcard didn't give us his class today, why Boulik was so weird, why..."

"Give me a second to breathe, will you?" cut in Ron, grumpy. "For once I'm getting pretty sick of this cold and all this snow, everywhere, all the time! I'm going to change, I'm coming."

On the verge of exhaustion, Harry didn't find the courage to follow Ron to the dormitory to stow his Quidditch gear. He contented himself with sitting as close as possible to the stove and dropping his kit at the foot of his armchair. As he carelessly wrung out his clothes with a few flicks of his wand, his thoughts remained turned towards his last practice. Despite gruelling weather conditions, the team had managed rather well that evening... and provided they continued to progress in this way, they would

doubtless have a chance of winning when the moment of truth arrived. The only shadow on the board came from Draco. Lately, he seemed just as inconsistent as Ron in his performances and tended to play a little too "solo" for his teammates' taste. Useless arguments then broke out from time to time, putting Ginny's nerves to the test. It must be said that obtaining good cooperation from players who had formerly opposed each other, and for so long, was no mean feat...

"So? Go on, tell us," said Ron as soon as he had rejoined them, dressed in his famous midnight-blue pyjamas, the ones whose animated patterns of shooting stars and other precessing satellites Harry enjoyed contemplating so much.

"I learned the news earlier as you were leaving to train, on my way to the library."

"We suspected you weren't on your way to the Quidditch pitch," chuckled Ron just as a comet crossed him from one sleeve to the other. "You do know there are other heated places in the castle besides that cursed twisted tower, don't you?"

"I'll have you know that if I go there so often it's also because one can watch you fly from a small office I dug up, right at the back of the floor dedicated to *Useful Remedies for Unbearable and Treacherously Localised Itches*."

"That's all very touching but... Can we know what possessed you to stop on *that* floor one day?" asked Harry, yawning. "Pure chance, pressing necessity, or..."

"What...? I have no... Oh and sod it! I don't know what's got into you tonight but you two are really impossible! And I thought a bit of exercise would calm you down. All I wanted to tell you is that a student disappeared from the school over the weekend, that's all," concluded Hermione, crossing her arms with a sulky air.

"A *missing* student? And you think that's why the tree..." asked Ron before being interrupted in turn by a lazy yawn.

"Ron, I thought it would be obvious."

"It's true, it could be linked. But I don't see how that helps us with the Death Eaters. Unless... this girl, is she one of ours? Do we know her?" intervened Harry, surprising himself by hoping the missing person was none other than Hannah Abbott, so that Neville would go back to looking for traces of the Lestranges with them.

"No, it's a Durmstrang fifth year from what I was told."

"Ah! Not so serious then."

"Ron!"

"Oh alright, I was joking. You're overdoing it with that old tree. Seriously, this Yggdrasil story smells strongly of children's fairy tales... And as for this student, they'll find her quickly you'll see... Odds are she's whining in the toilets somewhere or some stuff like that. Just goes to show, the teachers here act tough... but in reality, it takes nothing to worry them."

This last remark seemed to finish Hermione off. For her only reaction, she contented herself with levitating her things and went to sit alone in a corner of the room. Reduced to a mass of frizzy hair entrenched behind an impressive mound of parchment, she refused all further contact with Harry and Ron for the rest of the evening. Initially amused by this reaction, the two boys did not take long, however, to regret their attitude. And with good reason; the work they had to prepare for the next day proved far more complex than usual.

It took Hermione a few more days to forgive Ron for his carelessness. Having personally experienced the thing a short time before, and dreading above all that Hermione might stop helping him in his quest, Harry did his utmost to play mediator during the crisis period. Halloween, and by the same token the end of the week, were approaching too quickly for his taste; and despite countless hours of research, clues regarding Death Eater activity within the castle remained impossible to find...

"No, no, no... No Invisibility Cloak. Tonight we party and we relax. Especially you. The last time I saw you with those kinds of bags under your eyes was the day after the Battle of Hogwarts."

"But, it's my very last chance to get my hands on them! Do you understand what that means at least?"

"Oh yes, absolutely! It means that from now on you're going to resume a roughly normal life and stop worrying about all these misfortunes you can do nothing about. Harry, please stop. You've already done more than enough, more than anyone. One last night patrolling won't change things."

Halloween night had finally arrived at the end of an exhausting week filled with classes, nocturnal explorations, and Quidditch practices in ever more biting cold.

"I can't believe I failed," said Harry, head down.

"Failed? You're joking I hope. Do I need to remind you again that *you* are the one who defeated Voldemort? You who saved the wizarding community—as well as the Muggle one—from the worst of futures?" scolded Ginny, unhooking the small bag Harry had just attached to his belt. "You have everything going for you: acrobatic talents for Quidditch, a brain that works well, sensitivity, people who love you... Stop fixating on those damn Lestranges and live a little for yourself now! Come on, let's go!"

With a precise gesture worthy of a great Quidditch player, Ginny threw Mrs Weasley's magic bag over Ron's head as he exited the dormitories at the same instant. Helpless, Harry could only watch his last hope of exploring the castle incognito land impeccably on his bed before being vigorously pulled out of the common room.

"It'll be good, you'll see. Rumour has it there'll even be a real band for the occasion. It'll make a change from the spectral orchestra and its wrong notes."

Prey to a terrible dilemma, Harry couldn't help thinking one last time of the intriguing ghost, the one he had sought everywhere in vain, who was dressed like a sort of musketeer and had guided him to his breakfast on the first day of term. As if she had guessed the direction of his thoughts, Ginny reprimanded him one last time with a little tap of her index finger on the top of his skull and they went to join the others.

On the occasion of the Halloween feast, the Great Hall had been plunged into a dim twilight gloom. The suits of armour had seen their helmets replaced by lit pumpkins which gave them an offbeat, even grotesque look; thin purple ribbons floated gently along the branches of the Yggdrasil, underlining even further the morbid impression radiating from it; and hordes of pixies twirled above the students to tickle them, pull their ears, or chant songs with often incomprehensible lyrics.

A little further away, at the staff table, Boulik was frowning and seemed to be sharing certain concerns with Dame Chloris (who taught Herbology) whilst Abrosius and Helsing were plunged into the heart of a veritable debate. Halcard, for his part, was beaming. Tonight, the long coat he had adorned himself with seemed to have been directly embroidered from a very particular form of liquid gold. An impression doubtless reinforced by the astonishing luminous ripples traversing it from time to time, without him having made the slightest gesture.

When everyone was seated, the monstrous wolf lying at the Headmaster's feet stood up for the space of an instant, time enough to let out a howl, and the dishes materialised right in the middle of a spray of bluish flames. Seconds later and the students were throwing themselves with appetite onto the multitude of cauldrons filled with delicious pumpkin soup, platters of pumpkin and cheese pastries, and bowls filled with surprise sweets that had just appeared. Like everyone else, Harry feasted and was more than relieved to note that all friction between Ron and Hermione seemed to have vanished for good during the meal.

The feast devoured, the tables were replaced by a stage on which the band *Limp Magikstik* appeared theatrically in a thunder of fireworks and other pyrotechnic effects. Ginny invited Harry to wiggle on the dance floor by her side and, seeing his friends (notably Hermione) swaying without a second thought in the middle of the delirious crowd, he finally managed to put his worries aside.

Many tracks later, the band had just started their latest hit title "The (Chosen) One" when Harry suddenly felt nauseous. He took leave of Ginny, too busy whipping the air with her red hair to notice anything, and went to lean against a tapestry on the edge of the party. His head was

spinning more and more, his throat was dry, and yet his face was streaming with sweat, his nose dripping almost to the rhythm of the "boom-boom" drumming savagely against his eardrums.

Harry had just wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve when a strangely familiar sensation reminded him of its presence. A sort of prickling, immediately followed by an incomparable burning sensation... A searing pain, like back when...

"Impossible! He was destroyed!" burst out Harry, mechanically clapping a hand against his scar.

In the surrounding tumult, no one heard his frightened exclamations. A new bolt of suffering crossed his skull from one side to the other, bringing him down to one knee to avoid collapsing. When, still grimacing, he opened his eyes a few moments later, a young man with blond hair emerged in turn from the crush. His pale face expressed profound annoyance and he was massaging his arm as if he had just received a bad blow. The connections were made immediately in Harry's mind, who felt a new electric shock. The young man in question was none other than Draco Malfoy... And on that arm, under that piece of fabric the Slytherin was rubbing so vigorously, was engraved the Dark Mark, the indelible signature Voldemort imposed on each of his recruits.

When Malfoy raised his head and their eyes finally met, the little doubt persisting in Harry evaporated. Tonight, the Lestranges intended to use the party as a diversion. They would strike very soon somewhere, right here at Durmstrang.

Without wasting another second, Harry rushed forward.

"Let go of me, dammit, what's got into you all of a sudden!" growled Malfoy, struggling.

"They're close, they've come out of hiding! You know it as well as I do! Where are they going? What do they want, do you know anything? Speak!" screamed Harry amidst the din, one trembling hand clenched on the Slytherin's collar, the other pointing at the forearm bearing the mark.

"You nutter, you're losing it more and more, it seems. I have a cramp that's all, and now leave me alone!"

With a sharp jerk, Malfoy broke Harry's grip and walked away without dawdling. Soon he had disappeared for good, having plunged into the shifting and frantic mass of overexcited students.

Harry's blood ran cold in his veins. Retrieving his cloak from the dormitories would take too much time and risked wasting this unique chance presenting itself to him after weeks of searching. It was also preferable to forgo asking his friends for help; they probably wouldn't understand... Worse still, they would probably try to hold him back. No. Tonight he would go alone, and he would go uncovered.

Harry left the Great Hall through the first door he could find. Something deep inside him led him to think the burning sensation would intensify as he got closer to the Death Eaters, and for a good while he let himself be guided thus by what he considered a sixth sense.

After managing to cross a narrow walkway with precarious foundations, his scar led him straight to the steps of an intriguing staircase with right angles that gave the impression of never going up or down. It was only when Harry lost patience and let himself return the grimaces of the band of imps occupying the surrounding portraits that the staircase finally deigned to let him access the upper floors. A few turns later and his forehead was blazing again.

Leaning against the nearest wall, Harry gradually regained his wits. He was far now from the concert, whose background noise was nothing more than an indistinct rumble. Before him stretched an interminable corridor bathed in the now familiar violet-blue glow of magic torches. The whole place seemed plunged into a sort of stasis, except for the few snowflakes that sometimes came to spot the whitish beams the moon projected onto the surrounding armour.

Harry walked a few more yards as silently as he could before finally spotting a shape with unusual contours. A sort of indistinct shadow on a carpet, right at the end, at the corner of the corridor... It looked like the branches of the old tree in the Great Hall. Or rather a hand... clenched, hooked, menacing.

Feverish, heart beating like never before, Harry hunched his head into his shoulders and sprinted off. But barely had he taken a few steps than a

voice exploded behind him, making him jump.

"Potter? Hey, POTTER!"

Harry only had to turn slightly to discover Draco Malfoy at the other end of the corridor. Without him suspecting it in the slightest, he had been followed.

"What on earth are you doing?" continued the Slytherin in a tone mixing reproach and worry. "You're not going to tell me you believe in the return of the Dark Lord," he added, looking falsely mocking.

But just as Harry was preparing to signal him to be quiet, Draco Malfoy's face fell. Something had appeared in the Slytherin's field of vision that horrified him. An instant later, Harry's scar burned him to the point of losing his mind. Then there was a flash of red light, something hit him in the back and he fell backwards, helpless.

Breathless, head on the verge of exploding, Harry tried to get up but his muscles seemed to have abandoned him...

"Potter? Did he say Potter? Is it Christmas come early?" said a deep voice with excitement from the other end of the corridor.

"Silence!" replied a second voice, drier, colder than the first. "I see another one right at the end there, he must not escape!"

The walls lit up once again as a new bolt passed, before a loud explosion shook the entire building. Harry felt a deluge of debris—likely the remains of a large crystal chandelier—rain down on him whilst he remained paralyzed, stupidly stuck face down.

A thick silence had taken hold of the place when a strident scream rang out in the distance. Koulok had just set off.

"We're dealing with a clever little one trying to get us spotted. Too bad... let's go."

"But... what if it really was Potter? He's right there! I just have to..."

"Stop, I tell you! Leave the boy. The Aurors would show up immediately... His time will come. Later... We cannot be discovered, not before having found this..."

Harry felt the effects of the spell binding him lift little by little. Around him, he could hear hurried footsteps fading into the distance before Koulok's frantic roars made the atmosphere vibrate again. He had to scam, and fast. Alas, scarcely had Harry hoisted himself onto his trembling legs than he collapsed again. In a minute at most, the hunchback would be on him. And this time, no one would come to his aid.

"Fred? Someone? Help..." he gasped before finally fainting.

Harry felt like he was dreaming. As the howling became more and more threatening, something glowing and cold lifted him by an arm to put him back on his feet. Without him really understanding how, he was led behind a seemingly ordinary tapestry to sink into the darkness of a hidden staircase.

When he finally opened his eyes, Harry found Ron, Hermione, and Ginny gathered around him, looking worried. He was lying on a sofa, his torso propped up by a large pile of soft cushions. Barely a few yards away, the common room stove was purring quietly.

"Well I say... Looks like you had a close shave, once again," said Ron leaning over to pat his shoulder gently.

"Something... something happened, I had gone looking for..."

"The two Death Eaters... Yeah, we guessed. When I came back from the bar with my two tankards of *Butterbeer* and found myself beak-to-nose with a completely panicked Chick instead of my old mate, I understood quickly."

"They were there, I'm almost sure I heard them speaking. They Stupefied me, there... there was Draco too!" said Harry, mechanically rubbing his scar which still twinged occasionally. "And then I escaped. I... wouldn't really know how to say how, to be honest."

Hermione came closer in turn. She had the same face as Neville when they had crossed him several years earlier, as he stood by the bedside of his parents gone mad, at *St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries*.

"Oh Harry... Death Eaters don't resort to Stupefying, you know that very well. They settle for torturing, or killing," she said before shuddering. "You are very lucky not to have been caught tonight. Who knows what

would have happened if you hadn't run into this charming person to come to your aid."

After turning his head painfully, Harry became aware of the strange whitish glow floating at his side. His eyes adapting progressively to this unexpected contrast, he finally recognised the ghost of the musketeer who gave him a wave of his gloved hand.

"You?" gasped Harry. "Blimey! I've been looking for you everywhere for weeks, and it's tonight you reappear... To save me, on top of the rest! It can't be a coincidence. No, I won't believe it."

"Perched on a rampart, gazing at fair Selene, Roused from my dreams, by sudden grief unseen. Mysteriously drawn, I honed my blade with care, And flew to save you, knight of soul so rare."

"Yes, it's coming back to me now. That way of speaking. So weird, so... French... And that outfit. You certainly don't come from the castle. Who are you exactly? And would you mind telling us what brought you here, to Durmstrang?"

At these words, the spectre executed a bow before straightening up, puffing out his chest with style.

"As if Lethe's waters my lips had barely kissed, I woke with no memory, lost in the mist. Deprived of substance, a mere outline tracing, Empty in form, yet a great love embracing... In search of Venus, truth I sought to seek To find the goal of which my soul does speak. Guided by Muses, bold, with purpose posed, With a pinch of snuff, I dusted off my nose."

The ghost interrupted his speech for a moment. Time enough to proudly remove his felt hat and thus reveal the largest nasal appendage Harry had ever had the occasion to observe. Ron seemed to pale; the spectre continued:

"Then, propelled like a ship with canvas vast, Through space I sailed, among the stars I passed. When finally the orb soaked me in its light, Relieved, restored, I returned from the night— A worker bee with final task invested— To solve the crime of passion here nested."

A log collapsed cracking in the stove and the stupefied faces of Ron, Ginny, and Hermione lit up briefly in the gloom.

"If I understand correctly," resumed Harry, increasingly intrigued, "you were sent back among the living to fulfill a sort of 'mission'. And you completely forgot who you were, or let's say are... anyway. Is that right?"

The musketeer bowed, grimacing, as if he had just received a thrust right in the heart.

"I still hear an old friend say that I was all, And that I was nothing; that is my final call."

"It seems you have to accomplish this final task before being finally liberated. And it's a safe bet that it's by doing so that you will recover your lost identity; that's at least what a certain 'H. D. V.' explained in *What Will Take You More Than One Life To Be Discovered* about 'recalled' beings," noted Hermione learnedly, just before catching Crookshanks who was about to venture through their strange visitor.

"And, about this 'crime of passion' you speak of. Are you here to denounce the culprit? Or has the crime not taken place yet and you are supposed to prevent it? We've only just arrived and we're already very busy, but if you tell us more, maybe we can help you despite everything."

"It is in my heart, not reason, the goddess signed. Too much love and sorrow in this place entwined Mingled, so that only hate could remain. Thus, to serve the flame would be my fated pain."

"Do you think he's talking about Neville?" suggested Ron after a long meditative silence.

"That, I'd be surprised," replied Harry quickly. "He doesn't seem sad for a Galleon. No, I regret but I don't see. Not for the moment anyway."

The ghost bowed once again then put his plumed felt hat back on his shiny skull.

"If, as I believe, my arm is of no more use, I bid you farewell, friends, and return to my recluse."

The ghost began a final bow and Harry sat up abruptly. He had to ask; the opportunity might never present itself again.

"Without wishing to abuse your help, there is probably something you could do. We are looking for two Death Eaters—sorry I mean: two Dark

Wizards. Would you by any chance have..."

Harry stopped. Ginny had just thrown herself at his feet and seized his hands delicately. When she raised her head, her cheeks were wet and her beautiful hazel eyes were flooded with tears. She was crying abundantly.

"P-Please, stop with th-that now," she said hiccupping. "The musketeer told us e-everything H-Harry. When he found you, you were wandering in a lost corridor, asking for help, a-a-all alone... like some sort of p-possessed sleepwalker. How do you expect us to help you if you disappear like that without warning? I haven't said anything until now because I know how much you care about making this world a healthier, fairer place. It's truly noble of you and it's one of the traits I love most about you, for years. But things have taken another turn lately. You're taking too many risks, you're not sleeping anymore, you're barely eating. You're not yourself anymore! Drop all this and come back, I beg you..."

Harry felt as if his heart had stopped beating, as if it had slipped from his chest to fall into a bath of ice water. He recognised without difficulty not being in the best of shape lately, because of the ever more demanding pace he had imposed on himself for weeks... But never would he have imagined for a single moment that his dedication could harm his friends to this extent. Alas, that night, seeing Ginny thus devastated because of him, Harry realized that there existed a torture more terrible even than the Cruciatus Curse.

17. RESURGENCE

As winter settled over Carpathian Transylvania, Durmstrang and its surroundings quickly found themselves buried under a double layer of snow, thick and creamy.

Standing a few hundred yards away, the peak of the Devil's Horn overlooked the area as proudly as ever. Recently, the mountain had been reminding its neighbourhood that no snowy peak worthy of the name could be rubbed shoulders with lightly. Regularly, an avalanche would trigger, shaking the foundations of the entire school. Unaccustomed to such events, the Hogwarts students would jump in unison. Some, like Neville, rushed under their desks, while others preferred to hurry to the nearest windows to observe the gigantic cloud hurtling down the slope at full speed, swallowing everything in its path.

Fortunately, and in accordance with what Halcard had announced months earlier, each of the flows had been cushioned by the Silver Forest so far, and the school had only had to endure a few dozen minutes plunged into the artificial and oppressive darkness of the "whiteout".

Harry, for his part, had perked up since renouncing his hunt for the Lestranges. He still had a few incomprehensible nightmares, but, these inconveniences aside, his daily life had proven much more bearable. In a way, the absence of particular signals from his scar and the regular reports generously offered by the "long-nosed ghost" (as the group had agreed to call him just after their first interview) regarding the observed non-activity of the Death Eaters, comforted him in his decision, however difficult it had been to take at the time.

As hoped, his relationship with his friends had markedly improved. He and Ron were hanging out together again as often as possible; Hermione was working ever more assiduously on preparing for the Mock N.E.W.T.s which would take place in the last week of the year; and Ginny, for her part, was worried sick about the first match of the Quidditch tournament which would begin imminently...

"Whatever you do, don't try to follow him if you see him start wiggling his left foot, Harry. Vassily always does that when he's bluffing before diving past the opposing Seeker! Ron—one glass of pumpkin juice, no more—we need a reactive Keeper! Draco..."

"...stay well in my slipstream and don't keep the Quaffle all to yourself," completed Malfoy. "I know, stop taking me for a thick old house-elf... you've been repeating this stuff to us for at least a month."

Hermione, who had obtained permission from the Captain herself to have breakfast with the team, put down her toast and lowered her *Daily Prophet* a few inches to glare at Draco.

"Look at that... Dawlish has blundered again," she muttered only moments after diving back into her reading.

"Let me guess," said Ron, "he found a way to Stupefy himself during a meeting with foreign security services?"

"Not far off. Kingsley must be kicking himself today. Even if he did appoint him back then to woo voters from the opposing camp..."

"Anyway, that explains why we've received far fewer requests on the progress of the Lestrage case lately," remarked Harry whilst applying a final coat of *Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish* to his Firebolt. "Well, we can expect Dawlish to come back charging after the Christmas holidays. Besides, he didn't pick up on it when I told him we were going back to Hogwarts during the break."

"Hermione, I forbid you to distract my players! As for you two, would you mind staying focused?" intervened Ginny, implacable. "I remind you that we're moving out in a few minutes to face an international-calibre team!" she added furiously from the other end of the table.

As the team leader resumed her briefing with the Beaters, Harry felt a fresh rush of adrenaline spread through him. The moment both so dreaded and so awaited had finally arrived. In a few minutes, he would battle it out with the one who had recently graced the cover of *Broomstick Weekly* and *Sevens*; he would face one of the best Seekers of his time; he would measure his own talents against those of Vassily Krum...

Harry stood up at Ginny's call and did not fail to note that Ron had regained the greenish hue he usually wore before any important match. Without being able to explain why, this observation comforted him. After gratifying his friend with a benevolent slap on the back, he deposited Chick on Hermione's head—too busy wrapping herself up in anticipation

of the chill reigning in the stands to notice anything—and closed ranks around Draco who had been strategically placed in the centre of the procession.

As the day of the match drew ever closer, the team had been forced to adopt a very particular formation. It had indeed become frequent for Hogwarts players to be the subject of attempted assaults whilst transiting from one classroom to another, between lessons. To top it all off, the mutual aversion Vassily Krum and Draco Malfoy held for each other had now gone round the castle, and the Slytherin had quickly become target number one for the overwhelming majority constituting the local supporters.

Broom in one hand, wand in the other, the Hogwarts players thus prudently fought a path through the compact crowd of students. The tension was palpable and Harry fully intended to erect the most remarkable Shield Charm he was capable of at the slightest sign of hostility towards his teammates.

The crossing passed without incident, however, until Ginny finally raised her hand to signal a halt, near the imposing double doors supposed to lead them outside. From the back of the procession, Harry felt the surrounding agitation suddenly change nature; as if excitement had suddenly given way to anguish.

"What's going on, why have we stopped all of a sudden?" asked Gerald Chambers, one of the Chasers, originally from Ravenclaw.

"Dunno," replied Jason Samuels, ex-Beater of the Hufflepuff team. "There's someone on a stretcher up ahead... A fifth or sixth-year student I'd say. She... doesn't look good at all."

"Could it be that girl who vanished a while ago? That famous Durmstrang student?" asked Ron whilst standing on tiptoes to see better.

"Or better still... A player from the other team?" whispered Draco, full of hope.

"Hard to say... that one is thrashing about and muttering with her eyes closed."

"Ah... Then it's more likely a new victim of that epidemic, you know... the *Lethargum Tenebris*," breathed Samuels. "Already half a dozen cases at Durmstrang, from what I've heard. My grandfather knew Eltoras Munter well, the first declared case in the UK. Horrible, truly horrible... It's

supposedly a sort of magical illness that pins you to your bed, having nightmares for the rest of your days..."

"It's okay, we can pass," Ginny's voice informed them from the front of the pack. "Come on Hogwarts! Let's go, believe in it!"

The march resumed and Malfoy muttered under his breath:

"Let's hope Vassily doesn't wait too long to get infected..."

Harry followed the movement but his thoughts were elsewhere. If Samuels was to be believed, at least part of what Ginny had reported to them the day before term started, whilst they were travelling to the castle on the Hogwarts Express, was founded. This story of a mysterious epidemic working at Durmstrang troubled him more and more seriously. It must be said that since they had arrived at the school, Harry's nights had no longer been the same. Strange and terrifying nightmares haunted him regularly. And perhaps it was a side effect of the pressure peculiar to the match, but the prospect of finding himself in the place of the unfortunate girl on her stretcher had suddenly horrified him.

A glacial cold pierced them as they crossed the double doors and distracted Harry from his preoccupations. Despite slight acclimatization and several layers of clothing, the climate reigning on the Devil's Horn never failed to surprise him. Arriving at the edge of the pitch, the players were welcomed by a wave of enthusiastic shouts, before engaging in the final preparations under the first rays of a fleeing sun.

Harry was adjusting his glasses on his nose for what must have been the fifth time in two minutes when a terrible roar rang out. Somewhere in the stands, Luna had just made a monstrous chimera-hat roar, triggering thunderous applause amongst the Hogwarts students. Harry suspected Hermione of having added her personal touch to the headgear to amplify its effects and felt cheered. Never would he have thought her ready to encourage Luna's eccentricities for something as down-to-earth as a game of Quidditch.

The start of the match more than imminent, a Hogwarts team all clad in gold lined up facing the crimson band of Durmstrang players. There, everyone could observe the captains as they advanced towards each other to engage in the traditionally long and painful preliminary hand-crushing.

"Bloody hell... Why did I have more pumpkin juice? I already need the toilet," whispered Ron.

"Come on, in a few seconds you won't even be thinking about it."

While Ron hopped on the spot a few paces away, Harry had undertaken to scan the crowd. There was something energising about contemplating this multicoloured mass agitating in a disorderly fashion whilst chatting, laughing, shouting. His gaze soon skimmed the upper levels until it came to rest on Halcard. The Dean and his black wolf were enthroned at the very top of the stands, seated against each other in a wide throne that seemed to have been carved into the rock itself.

While he would have sworn he saw the Headmaster smile at him, Harry became aware that Draco had moved closer to lean discreetly towards his ear.

"Crush that loser Krum, will you? You owe me that much after all, don't you? Especially after saving you, on Halloween..."

The next second, Koulok sounded the kick-off by means of an old rusty cannon positioned in the distance on a rampart.

Harry nearly fell backwards as his teammates took flight all around him. Malfoy decidedly had funny timing... The Slytherin was the only one who knew what had really happened during that strange evening, but the rare times the opportunity to talk about it—that is to say, to finally have confirmation that the Lestranges were indeed at Durmstrang—had arisen, without Ginny or another of his friends being around, he had found a way to slip away...

"And Ginny Weasley takes advantage of the element of surprise to score the first goal of the tournament! 10 to 0," came Dean Thomas's amplified voice from the commentary box. "That girl is dynamite! Believe me, I went out with her!"

Noting with horror that the match had started for real, Harry launched himself into the air. Scarcely had he risen a few yards than a blood-red flash grazed him at prodigious speed. Vassily Krum, the opposing Seeker, had already noticed something on the sparkling layer of ice covering the lake. Incapable of thinking any longer, Harry threw himself in pursuit.

Their cast shadows soon intertwined and the Bulgarian star initiated a dizzying dive. His opponent's cape snapping dryly a few dozen inches from him, Harry finally recognised the faint Ginny had warned him against and pulled up on his handle with all his might. A few crucial moments later, Vassily imitated him and shot up vertically under the clamour of the stadium. With such a late change of trajectory, it was hard to believe he

had got away with it. Anyone else, even a Quidditch champion, would have crashed into the ground...

"Gallop gargoyles, that guy's good!" shouted Ron from his goalposts in a tone both worried and impressed. "Harry, I beg you, hurry up and get your hands on the Snitch! I absolutely have to evacuate this pumpkin juice!"

After regaining altitude, Harry was able to watch a grimacing Ron block a shot with one hand (the other strangely pinned to his crotch) in a spectacular fashion before the lyrics of "Weasley is our King" made the cliff face vibrate. Shortly afterwards, Ginny scored a second goal.

Just like his teammates, Harry would have liked to believe in Hogwarts' superiority. But after the brief demonstration of talent Krum had shown a little earlier, he was forced to admit that things would not be so simple. And with good reason...

Some five minutes later, as if it had finished analysing its opponent, the Durmstrang team radically changed attitude. Hypnotised by the sequences of stunts and other technical moves with which they were suddenly confronted, the Hogwarts players soon found themselves overwhelmed. From where he was, Harry had the impression the opponent had just doubled its numbers. The sky was soon stained with innumerable crimson streaks, as if it had suddenly been lacerated by an immense invisible blade.

The clamours of the Durmstrang supporters rang out, again and again.

The score had just reached the critical limit of 70 to 20 when Harry finally located his target. The tiny winged ball was glittering a few yards from a flag erected on the periphery of the pitch, on the edge of the void. Without wasting a second, Harry released all the power of his Firebolt in a decisive sprint.

The surrounding shouts became more distant before fading completely. There was only him, the fresh wind in his hair, the Golden Snitch... and Krum. The Bulgarian took advantage of a slipstream effect to position himself side by side with Harry. Slightly better placed, the latter disengaged a foot from his stirrup to lean ever further.

In concert, Harry and Krum reached out in a final acrobatic move.

"Come on! Come ooon..."

Even as Harry's fingers were closing on the ball, a Bludger came to deviate the Snitch from its trajectory by a few inches... enough for Vassily

to seize it at the last moment.

The match that had started so well was already over. They had lost.

It was as if someone had just switched on a huge stereo at maximum volume. Harry caught himself just in time on his broom handle and watched bitterly as Vassily Krum did a lap of the stands, brandishing the winged orb above his head in a sign of triumph.

When he landed moments later, still stunned by his sudden failure, Harry found the Hogwarts Beaters, Samuels and Rickett, busy restraining a furious Ginny whilst Zacharias Smith fled into the distance, his head saturated with Bat-Bogey Hexes. Ron took advantage of the diversion offered to him to wiggle awkwardly to the toilets and Malfoy appeared shortly afterwards, the mark of a Bludger imprinted on his bloody nose and a piece of his Nimbus 3000 in each hand.

That evening, every one of Harry's attempts to cheer Ginny up failed, one after the other. A heavy gloom permeated every square inch of the common room and he judged it wiser to retire to his quarters, hoping sleep would seize him without delay. Alas, once lying on his bed he couldn't help thinking painfully back to the match. The images of Krum snatching victory from him narrowly repeated tirelessly in his head until he finally sank, exhausted.

The next day, the account of the "massacre of Hogwarts by Durmstrang" by 120 points to 20 was on everyone's lips, and everyone wondered if a turnaround was still conceivable. Dejected, Ginny excused her team from practice until further notice. Revenge seemed indeed scheduled for a later date, especially as the Mock N.E.W.T.s were approaching...

The tensions linked to the match dissipated little by little and soon life at the castle resumed its course. The students had put aside their skating sessions on the frozen lake (at night, the reflective surface gave the impression of gliding amidst the stars) and the famous "weekly contest for the most beautiful animated snowman" to concentrate on preparing for the upcoming exams. Malfoy still suffered just as regularly the mockery of Vassily and his group (the latest fashion consisted of imitating the Slytherin as he received a brutal Bludger full in the face) and Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny spent most of their time in the library, on the surprisingly unfrequented floor of *Useful Remedies for Unbearable and Treacherously Localised Itches*.

Apart from the few times when Harry and Ron simultaneously used the Summoning Charm on the same volume, tearing it with a loud "crack!" and provoking the ire of the old hook-nosed librarian who reigned as mistress over the place, the first weeks of December unfolded without particular incident.

Soon—and even a little too soon for his taste—Harry found himself traversing the castle up and down to take exams following one another at a frantic pace. After several exhausting sleepless nights devoted to last-minute preparations, he finally found himself before a sadly empty sheet of parchment, on the occasion of their last theoretical test: Potions. Professor Abrosius might have multiplied the innuendos throughout the term, but Harry was quite embarrassed when he turned in his questionnaire... Bolstered by an excellent grade on one of his first essays of the year, and overwhelmed by a colossal workload, the *Holy Water* Potion was a subject he had skipped during his revision.

Four hours of torture later, Harry stuffed his things unceremoniously into his bag and hurried towards the exit to join his friends. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were waiting for him on the other side of the large double doors he had just crossed, plunged into full retrospective:

"I hope at least you thought to say the potion had to be stirred throughout a night of the full moon," said Hermione. "It's one of the most important aspects of the preparation!"

"Yes, it's okay, I said that," replied Ron, eyes rolling upwards, as if his memories were located somewhere beyond his eyebrows. "And also that the potion was very effective against vampires..."

"Well, that's not so bad then. You'll probably get away with an 'Acceptable' this time... But you'd be wrong to be satisfied with it!"

"It's over, we're on holiday now, remember?" said Harry reproachfully, grafting himself onto the group. "And that's not so bad either. No homework, no reports for Dawlish..."

"No reports...? You mean you still bother answering him?"

Harry pretended not to have heard anything. In his eyes, Ron would have done better to keep quiet. He was just as responsible as him for transmitting regular feedback to the Head Auror, even if he visibly didn't see it that way...

"I thought you'd finally accepted the fact that Dawlish has been leading us on a broom ride from the start. You're not going to have a relapse on us,

are you?"

Without saying anything, Harry slung his bag over his shoulder in a bad mood. They left the vast antechamber, one entire wall of which depicted a majestic black dragon, wings spread, adorned with a long horn on its forehead, and set off for the dormitories. They now had to pack their trunks. In a little over an hour, they would be on the train heading for Hogwarts to spend their Christmas holidays there. A decision discussed at length which still divided Harry today.

"Just because I agreed to take a break to focus on preparing for the tournament, the exams, and all the rest, doesn't mean I'm giving up, Ron," he finally replied as they crossed the castle's vertiginous hanging gardens, a place where they had found themselves again a little earlier in the week for their theoretical Herbology test. "Rodolphus and Rabastan are here," he added.

Harry had pronounced these last words with such aplomb that Ron, Hermione, and Ginny gave a slight start. Following Draco Malfoy's intervention during the Quidditch match, his formerly shaken certainties had resolidified. He hadn't mentioned it to his friends yet, however, blaming the considerable workload linked to the mock exams that had subsequently fallen on them.

As Harry recalled the moment the Slytherin had leaned over his ear, as if to ensure the memory would remain engraved forever in his skull, his scar began to prickle disagreeably...

"Here we go again, he's at it again!" sighed Ron. "Don't worry, I'll handle it!" he continued, raising a herald finger.

He grabbed Harry by the shoulders and shook him, as if to cure him by means of some imaginary electric current. But Harry had started screaming until he lost his voice.

"Hey, you alright mate? It... it was a joke, I didn't think..."

"It hurts..." grumbled Harry, doubled over in pain. "It's my scar."

As Ginny and Hermione leaned over him with concern, a new scream rang out.

"PRZY POMOCY! HELP!"

A little further away, the sound of footsteps rang out suggesting a frantic chase. Frenzied panting was soon heard in turn. Then, clothes in rags, face

dirty and terrified, a girl burst out a few dozen yards away, at the corner of the nearest wall.

Scarcely had she noticed them than she advanced in their direction with an exhausted and laboured gait. One of her legs appeared severely injured.

In the middle of all this confusion, the pain had become such that it almost blinded Harry. When he finally regained his senses, Ron was holding the girl in the crook of his arms.

"Help, don't let them come near... please," she implored them breathlessly.

"Who? Who mustn't come near?" repeated Hermione, horrified, casting worried glances in all directions.

"The two men, the Dark Wizards..."

The next instant, she had lost consciousness.

18. A MOST PAINFUL SECRET

"Did you see her eyes? She was absolutely terrified... And the marks along her arms... how horrible!"

"Yes, they probably used the Cruciatus Curse or other hexes of the same kind to try and get the most out of her. Unfortunately, the arsenal offered by Dark Magic isn't limited to just the Unforgivable Curses," said Harry, recalling the painful lesson Dawlish had given him at the end of his Auror tests.

"So... it was true all along. The Lestranges *are* at Durmstrang... I mean, they're *still* there."

"Even I had started to doubt it," admitted Harry. "I was so exhausted on Halloween that everything I thought I'd experienced could very well have been a nightmare. It was Malfoy who removed all doubt just before the match. He thought it would help me play better, to beat Krum..."

Ron was so embarrassed he looked as if he wanted to disappear.

"Harry, I don't know what to say... All this time I... I didn't..."

"Forget it. Let's just make sure it doesn't happen again, alright?"

Ron nodded gravely. Several hours had passed since the girl had suddenly collapsed into his arms, but he still didn't seem to have recovered. After ensuring the surroundings were clear of any unwanted presence, the group had hurried to the infirmary where they learned that the victim was none other than Yulia Ivanović, the fifth-year student who had mysteriously disappeared one weekend at the end of October. Delayed by this unforeseen event, the team had split up without another word so everyone could deal with their luggage before the departure of the Hogwarts Express. Obviously, no sooner had they all met up and settled into a compartment, a little out of the way, than the discussion had resumed with renewed vigour.

"Harry, are you sure you're okay? You're very pale," said Ginny after biting the inside of her cheek. "What you did to us earlier... that wasn't normal."

"It's this blasted scar. I don't think it will ever truly heal," replied Harry, mechanically rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand. "It's as if I were still connected to Voldemort and his followers, even after his death and their defeat... Malfoy seems to have the same problem with his Dark Mark; that's another discovery from Halloween I'm now certain of. Anyway... Hermione, would you mind explaining why we're on the train to Hogwarts when we're finally certain the Death Eaters are at Durmstrang?"

Hermione finished distributing her jars of blue flames to the four corners of the cabin before taking a seat on the opposite bench. The atmosphere reigning in the carriage was still freezing, and a small cloud of steam formed every time someone spoke.

"Do you remember what that girl—Yulia—said before fainting?" she asked, shivering slightly.

"Apart from mentioning two hooded men looking for an object... a sort of 'oracle'—if I remember correctly—I don't see what she could have said to justify our departure."

"She said the object in question was supposed to bear the symbol of the Deathly Hallows, I'm certain of it," intervened Ron, whilst rubbing Hermione vigorously to help her warm up.

"In that case, the Death Eaters would have done better to kidnap Krum..." muttered Ginny bitterly.

"Vassily? Forget about him," sighed Hermione. "I caught him bragging to a group of admirers. It's all an act. He only wears his pendant to show off, and annoy his big brother..."

She leaned forward and considered them one by one.

"No. What I'm getting at," she continued, "is that the Deathly Hallows are the trademark symbol of Gellert Grindelwald..."

Scarcely had the Dark Wizard's name been pronounced than the lamps began to flicker in the cabin. For a moment, no one said a word and everyone looked deep into each other's eyes by the sole light of the blue flames scattered here and there.

"You asked me to trust you and that's what I did," finally said Harry, whose impatience grew with every passing minute. "But given Grindelwald studied at Durmstrang, I still don't see what we're doing here, heading for Hogwarts."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Harry, but I'm simply starting from the observation that several weeks of exploration at Durmstrang have yielded almost nothing so far. And therefore, that it would be preferable to get some distance and try something else. Now, let me ask you a question: who ran Hogwarts and maintained a very close relationship with Grindelwald in the past?"

The answer left Harry's mouth even as it formed in his mind:

"Dumbledore?"

Hermione nodded smugly.

"Dumbledore is dead," persisted Harry, wondering why Hermione always had to choose the worst moment to play guessing games.

"What, you don't intend to send us to desecrate his grave in search of clues, do you?" exclaimed Ron, outraged.

"Of course not!" retorted Hermione fiercely. "On the other hand, I think his portrait in McGonagall's office might be able to tell us more..."

Harry spent the rest of the journey staring into space, watching the landscape scroll by and evolve as they crossed the continent. He couldn't help wondering how the reunion with Dumbledore would go. Hermione's idea was clever but not without risk. The portrait of an ex-Headmaster represented only an incomplete copy of its subject. A copy exclusively based on the knowledge the original had seen fit to transmit to it before ceasing activity...

The train whistled its arrival at Hogsmeade Station the next day, around five o'clock. Just in time for the students to appreciate the beauty of the sun setting in the distance, behind the still-plucked silhouette of the castle.

"Hagrid! How are you?" exclaimed Harry as the giant appeared on the platform, through a large plume of steam.

"Ha, there you are," he grumbled in his deep voice.

"You don't look very happy to see us," remarked Hermione with a wry smile.

"No, not at all. Well yes... Yes, of course! Sorry... It's this building site, it's worrying me. I didn't imagine rebuilding the castle would be so demanding; even for a... let's say a strapping lad like me."

"Age, no doubt..." chuckled Ron mischievously.

"It has nothing to do with it!" thundered Hagrid, making them jump. "Reconstruction would have been finished long ago if it weren't for that... that... Hey! But what is that adorable little thing?"

The giant had just noticed Chick. The bird had comfortably arranged a nest on Ginny's head, as he liked to do so frequently.

"Strange, strange... could it be... No... impossible," said Hagrid in a low voice after the introductions.

The giant had barely bent over the tiny bird when an annoyed voice rang out behind their backs.

"Well, are we going to wait much longer? We've been stuck in this blasted train for over a day, we've had enough!"

Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson had reached their level and were glaring at Hagrid. Harry did not fail to notice that Pansy looked exhausted, to the point where she had to lean on Draco to maintain her balance. Her face was pale as death and deep circles had appeared around her eyes since the last time he had seen her.

Without bothering to answer them, Hagrid raised a hand the size of a frying pan and initiated the walk towards the castle.

"Blimey... I thought the site would have made more progress," exclaimed Harry as they passed the Hogwarts gates, whose grille remained twisted, a morbid witness to recent events.

"That's what should have happened..." growled Hagrid, gaze lost down below, towards the large tent of the Master Builders erected by the lake.

"You know we'll end up knowing what's wrong here sooner or later, don't you Hagrid?" remarked Hermione casually.

They were now sprinting in single file along the park lawn. Soon, they would reach the steps topped by the great oak doors leading to the Entrance Hall.

"Oh sod it! Professor McGonagall asked me to keep these stories to myself, but after all... I don't see what harm there would be in mentioning it to you."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny closed in around Hagrid to save him from having to speak too loudly.

"To tell you the truth, we don't really know what's going on here. The people hired to rebuild Hogwarts seem more than qualified, and yet we're

having all the trouble in the world making progress. It's like... a sort of force blocking our way. An evil force, devilishly powerful."

"Enough to overcome the efforts of a whole team of professors and experts?" breathed Ron, struggling to keep up with the giant's immense strides.

"Yes... I even think I saw it at work, one evening," murmured Hagrid, shuddering. "A great shadow, with huge wings... Looked like a hippogriff, only even more imposing. It flew over the Astronomy Tower, wrapped around it, there was a deafening clap of thunder and the next instant, everything came tumbling down, like a common house of cards... Minerva was furious; lucky no one was hurt. But here she is."

They took a few more steps and Hagrid added:

"I'll leave you in her capable hands; there's still work waiting for me down below. It did me good to spend a bit of time in your company, take care of yourselves, my friends."

The group waved to the giant as he headed back towards his cabin and, moments later, they were all in the Great Hall at the foot of one of the traditional immense Christmas trees, in the company of Professor McGonagall.

"How good it is to see you again," she said with a cordial benevolence that might have made one forget her usual austerity. "So, how were those first few months at Durmstrang? Were you properly welcomed? You look exhausted."

Harry couldn't help thinking that despite the marks the recent mock exams had left on them, everyone looked in better shape than the Headmistress. Hermione seemed to have noticed it too, for her voice sounded unsteady when she spoke.

"We met the Headmaster, Professor. He is a... difficult man to figure out," announced Hermione, mechanically fiddling with her Head Girl badge. "There were some strange phenomena too, notably a case of *Lethargum Tenebris*—that new magical illness... But the Hogwarts students are all safe and sound!" she hastened to clarify.

Professor McGonagall let out a long sigh of relief. Knowing her students were far from her, on the other side of the world, seemed to worry her more than anything.

"Thank you for this comforting news, Miss Granger. I won't keep you any longer then. Enjoy a well-deserved rest. The Gryffindor quarters were spared by the battle; no need to show you the way, I imagine?"

"Professor, please!" cried Hermione as the Headmistress prepared to take her leave. "There is something else, and you could probably help us."

One by one, the members of the group explained how the Lestranges' presence at Durmstrang was now more than presumed. When they had finished, night had finished spreading its obsidian cloak over the enchanted ceiling, the torches arranged along the walls had lit up as if by magic, and McGonagall looked even more overwhelmed.

"Halcard will probably never acknowledge the presence of such intruders in his own home," she murmured as if thinking aloud. "He seems far too proud for that. I shall have to warn the parents. Not long ago, we still harboured the hope of welcoming all the Hogwarts students back here for the second half of the year. But given the progress of the work... I digress; you said you needed help?"

"We would like to speak with Professor Dumbledore as soon as possible."

"That should pose little problem; he teaches Defence Against the Dark Arts now. He is probably in his classroom right now, on the third floor."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny exchanged a surprised look. For a moment, Harry imagined pushing open the wooden door to find the old man with the long white beard and half-moon spectacles he loved so much. But Hermione spoke again and the dream shattered, like a marvellous crystal sculpture slipping from its plinth.

"It is *Albus* Dumbledore we would like to speak to primarily, not his brother Aberforth."

Professor McGonagall eyed them sternly. An eternity seemed to pass before she finally spoke again.

"Decidedly, the great architect of time may struggle to alter his world, but it seems he will never have more than a moderate imprint on you, young people... On your boldness, at least, which is not unlike that of those young wizards I was honoured to welcome, nearly seven years ago. You have my permission; go and find Albus in my office. The password is 'Harry Potter'...", she confided in a quavering voice as her eyes began to shine strangely. "Touch nothing, or you will have me to deal with."

With that, the Headmistress turned on her heel and walked away almost at a run, as if she had suddenly remembered she had something very important to do in a very distant place.

The four companions didn't need asking twice and hurried to the second floor where the Headmistress's office was located. Reaching the gargoyle, Harry timidly gave his name in response to the question: "*Who is the greatest hope of this generation?*" and they were finally able to enter the small room.

The place had changed little since Harry's last visit, a manifest sign that Professor McGonagall hadn't had much time for it since taking office as Headmistress following the Battle of Hogwarts. Scarcely had they taken a step into the small circular room than the Sorting Hat welcomed them with an exclamation:

"Hoho, look who's here! The Future may have given up on its childhood dreams, but it has nevertheless kept its panache!"

The portraits hanging on the stone walls began to whisper as they passed, until one of them finally began to croak:

"Better and better now... Young intruders, right here in the Headmistress's office! Get out of here at once!"

"And how do you think we got in, eh? She gave us the password, idiot!"

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione, shocked.

"What? It's Phineas Black, from Slytherin," said Ron, stating the obvious, as if this final detail constituted an indisputable argument.

The portrait of the former Headmaster was preparing to retort when a sharp, threatening noise filled the room, immediately putting an end to the ambient agitation. It was a sort of hissing, as if a snake lay hidden in the large cabinet adjoining the shelf where the Pensieve shone peacefully.

Slowly, Harry approached the piece of furniture and reached out. He looked hypnotised...

"What are you doing? Stop! McGonagall forbade us to touch anything!"

"Still as curious as ever, aren't you, Harry?" said a voice known to all.

On the other side of the desk, sitting in a comfortable chintz-covered armchair, enthroned in the middle of a painting with a sumptuous gold frame, Dumbledore was watching them attentively, a benevolent smile on his lips.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, dear friends? I hope it is not a mere token of courtesy. I would be sorry to see you waste your youth with such considerations from another age. You will have all the time for that later, believe me..."

"Er... indeed, Professor, we need your help."

Seeing his interlocutor encourage him with a nod, Harry continued.

"What can you tell us about... About your friendship with Grindelwald?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened, as if the question had deeply offended him; an expression neither Harry nor any of his friends knew on him. When the ex-Headmaster opened his mouth, his tone as well as his features betrayed profound disappointment.

"Is this why you came to pull an old man from his sleep, my young friend? To torture him with the most regrettable episodes of his history? An infinity of fascinating subjects was available to us, and yet, you had to choose this one. Really, what a lack of tact..."

"Professor," intervened Hermione, "it's because of the Death Eaters! We wouldn't have allowed ourselves to disturb you if the situation hadn't been so desperate!"

"I will suffer no more of this. And should the fancy take you to return in the coming days, be sure to think twice before crossing the threshold of this room!"

Dumbledore rose from his armchair, claiming he was expected in another frame to play a game of Wizard's Chess, and disappeared without another word.

When the group left the room moments later, both surprised and ashamed, the cabinet had started hissing strangely again.

"So, you had the audacity to plunge Albus back into the most painful of his secrets... You! His protégé, his beloved Potter... Fantastic!" exclaimed Aberforth Dumbledore, eyes sparkling with delight before bursting into thunderous laughter. "I couldn't have been given a better Christmas present! It was high time that old owl reaped what he sowed."

"It's not looking good," remarked Ron in a low voice from the other side of the table, a turkey leg in each hand, the tip of his nose stained with sauce.

The evening of December 24th and the accompanying feast had arrived. The Great Hall of Hogwarts had been garnished with glittering garlands of all kinds, wreaths of pine cones, and enchanted Christmas baubles flying over the banquet declaiming popular carols before crashing sporadically into one another, in a riot of sparks and colours.

Believing that only time could unblock the situation, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had not tried their luck with Albus Dumbledore's portrait since, despite growing impatience.

"I don't think so Ron," replied Hermione. "No, on the contrary. It would be *really* bad if the portrait hadn't reacted, if it hadn't understood what Harry was talking about. That would have meant Dumbledore had never told it about those moments of his life. But he had the guts to do it, obviously! He must have felt the subject of Grindelwald was too important to be forgotten."

"Come now, don't look so glum, Harry," resumed Aberforth after downing a glass of *Ogden's Old Firewhisky* in one go. "Albus will yield, he will yield to you. I know him much better than you might imagine, and there is no greater weakness in his life than the one he has for you."

Harry did not answer. These meagre words of comfort slid off him like water off a lily pad. He couldn't help but see again the terribly disappointed expression on Albus Dumbledore's face at the moment of asking the fateful question. Making a loved one suffer was not easy, even when one was absolutely convinced of the validity of one's approach.

"Actually, if you feel brave enough... I could only recommend you go now," continued Aberforth. "Albus has always had a certain penchant for Christmas magic."

Harry's blood ran cold. He hastily gathered his cutlery on his plate and stood up. Never mind, he would go, even if it meant battling with the portrait all night if necessary. Understanding the turn of events, Hermione and Ginny hastened to imitate him. Ron, for his part, couldn't resist the urge to take a final turkey leg with him before catching up with them at a trot.

"Are you sure we shouldn't ask permission?" whispered Ginny as the group passed the gargoyle.

"I already asked McGonagall for her agreement," replied Harry entering the small circular room. "She told me she understood and that her office was at our disposal when she wasn't there."

The place was bathed in the pale light of the moon. Everything was quieter than usual. As if each of the framed personalities knew why the group had suddenly burst in. As if everyone was waiting impatiently to know the outcome of the discussion, and above all to discover one of Albus Dumbledore's best-kept secrets.

"Merry Christmas Professor," said Harry sitting cross-legged on the cold stone floor, in front of the portrait of the greatest wizard of all time.

From his frame, Dumbledore gave him a benevolent smile. For the occasion, he had donned a red hat adorned with a faux polar bear fur lining which matched perfectly with his long light beard.

"Oh, good evening Harry. Merry Christmas to you too. Did you know I used to devour an entire tray of caramel éclairs in this very room, every eve of..."

"Professor, I must know what you developed with Grindelwald in your younger years," cut in Harry.

Dumbledore recoiled so sharply his headgear fell off backwards.

"How dare you bring that... that cursed subject back to the table! And I thought you came simply to talk about good times!"

"You know very well why I am here," resumed Harry calmly. "You have always known, and you still dread it today. Some time before the Battle of Hogwarts, Grindelwald was interrogated then murdered in his cell by Voldemort. I experienced the scene from a distance, in a dream, at the time. Voldemort was looking for information on the Elder Wand. He ended up finding it in your tomb and I thought that was all. But since..."

"Nothing! Nothing, do you hear me! I will speak of this to no one ever again! These stories have already caused enough harm, misfortune, and tears!"

Harry was about to retort when the strange hissing filled the atmosphere again.

"Come now, Albus... You are well aware that if they are here, the hour is graver even than they imagine," said a cutting voice Harry would never forget. A voice he had learned to hate for nearly seven years, before finally discovering the sad truth.

Without wasting a second, Harry stood up, took a deep breath, and pushed with all his might the cabinet from which the voice seemed to come.

"Harry! HARRY! Stop! We'll get killed if McGonagall finds out we touched her office!"

Hermione's cries of protest were lost in the din caused by the piece of furniture Harry was moving. When he had finished, a heavy silence fell. There, hanging on a section of wall, right where the cabinet had been moments before, the portrait of Severus Snape had just appeared.

19. THE COMPASS OF CHAOS

Severus Snape fixed his dark gaze upon Harry with a strange intensity. His eyebrows rose and fell as if he were torn between contemplative love and profound disgust. The last time Harry had felt scrutinised like this was a few months ago, when he and Snape had found themselves alone, just after Nagini had condemned the professor to a death as unexpected as it was painful. Moments later, Harry had collected a few fragments of the dying man's memory and taken them to the Pensieve to discover that, under the guise of manifest antipathy, Snape had protected him since his earliest childhood out of love for his mother, Lily.

Since then, Harry had respected his ex-Potions Master's wishes. Although he had briefly mentioned the deceased's memories to Ron and Hermione at the end of the Battle of Hogwarts, he had never revealed the details to anyone.

"After all, there are things that inevitably end up being revealed. Is it not so?" said Snape from his portrait.

"For better or for worse, indeed Severus," replied Dumbledore, sighing before nodding quietly, like someone surrendering in good faith. "Oh, and before I forget, good evening and Merry Christmas to you Hermione, Ginny, Ron..."

"Merry Christmas Professor," replied the trio in chorus after a moment of hesitation.

"If I may, you should find yourselves a comfortable armchair before we go any further. The plum velvet confessional to my left was one of my favourites; I wager its upholstery will seduce you too."

Following Dumbledore's recommendation, everyone settled in as best they could. Hermione's choice fell on one of the chairs usually reserved for people summoned to the Headmistress's office; Ginny let herself be tempted by the confessional and Ron sat at her feet, on the sumptuous oriental rug covering a good half of the room. Harry, for his part, preferred to lean against the window ledge overlooking the snowy grounds and Hagrid's hut, not far from the Forbidden Forest.

"Good, very good," said Dumbledore, repositioning himself in his chintz armchair. "And now, where to begin? So far I do not feel you have presented me with the true reason for your visit."

Harry straightened up, but before he could even open his mouth to answer, Dumbledore had raised an index finger, as if to claim a few extra seconds of attention.

"However, I think I still possess enough common sense to guess the situation... If I am to believe my latest exchanges with Headmistress McGonagall, you Harry, as well as Ron here present and Neville, have recently become Apprentice Aurors—for this further proof of your bravery, receive my most sincere congratulations. It is therefore in this context that you accompanied the sixth and seventh-year students to Durmstrang; in order to learn more about the situation of the Lestrage brothers, Rodolphus and Rabastan."

"Correct, Professor," replied Harry.

"And it is thus that you learned these Death Eaters planned to seize a certain object, or should I say a magical artefact, which they referred to as: 'an Oracle'."

Silence fell over the room. Dumbledore had pronounced his last word with a certain gravity that reminded Harry of his private meetings with the Headmaster during his sixth year of studies, when they were both striving to pierce the mysteries of Voldemort's immortality.

Faced with Dumbledore's expectant expression, Harry nodded silently.

"It is no coincidence the Lestranges are at Durmstrang," hissed Snape, turning towards Dumbledore's portrait. "They are looking for a way to bring him back, and they will find it, believe me."

"Bring him back? Who, Voldemort? Again?!" cried Ron suddenly. "And how would they go about it this time? We destroyed all his Horcruxes, Harry defeated him in a duel to the death... and... and the prophecy was fulfilled, for good!"

Scarcely had he finished his sentence than Ron shuddered. Perhaps it was faced with the prospect of a possible umpteenth return of the Dark Lord, or more simply for fear Snape might step out of his frame and assign him a detention for daring to interrupt him.

"How? That I do not know..."

"Oh really, you don't know?" retorted Ginny. "In life as in death, one still wonders whose side you are on..."

Snape turned to Ginny with a growl, like a wild beast that had been speared. With a measured gesture, he brushed aside the greasy lock barring his forehead and his eye sockets appeared, so dark they looked like black pearls.

"One thing is certain, Weasley, you are still the same foolish, impulsive, and insolent girl as in my lifetime," replied Snape. "Your ignorance is, however, proof that Potter knew how to hold his tongue, a remarkable and oh-so-surprising thing..."

In turn, Ginny stared at Snape then Harry with a bewildered air. Harry contented himself with nodding back to her. Although he had been burning for months to tell his friends the whole truth about Severus Snape's story, the time was for a completely different tale.

"Anything else, Severus?" said Dumbledore, a patient smile at the corner of his lips.

"As I was saying before being interrupted by Miss Weasley, I ignore the details of the Lestrangle brothers' plan," resumed Snape coldly. "I can however assure you that their sister Bellatrix had appeared at the height of delight for several months already when I passed away; a delight I had never known in her before, despite our many years of... cohabitation. Although she had given up questioning my allegiance after I delivered the coup de grâce to you, Dumbledore, she ceaselessly regarded me with ever greater arrogance, as if I were not quite part of the plan. It is highly possible the Dark Lord was preparing something else in his lifetime. A new strategy, one more way to ensure his eternity. But I repeat, I know no more."

"An additional way to be eternal, you say? Other than his multiple Horcruxes?" said Dumbledore whilst mechanically stroking his silky beard, eyes lost in the distance. "Could it be that? Hmm, that is very worrying... But after all, that would coincide with the image we have of Voldemort's character, would it not? I suddenly fear I underestimated his prudence. Yes... a prudence peculiar to the little something of Tom Riddle that would have endured in him, throughout the years."

"What do you mean, Professor?" asked Harry.

"Well it could be, Harry, that Voldemort considered the possibility—however implausible it may have seemed to him at the time—that he

would not emerge victorious from the combat opposing you both. It could also be that the interview he had with Gellert Grindelwald in his cell at Nurmengard—and which you mentioned a little earlier—taught him much more than the location of the Elder Wand he desired so much. These are only cold suppositions of course. But according to this eventuality, Voldemort could have entrusted some of his most faithful lieutenants with part of the information just gathered from Grindelwald... so that they would still be able to reverse the course of things should his fall occur."

While everyone digested the news, Harry's brain had started working at a thousand miles an hour. Had Voldemort found another way to maintain his hold on the world? If that were truly the case, to whom would he have turned? To whom would he have dared entrust his most intimate secrets? There were only two possible answers. No, one actually. For Snape had always appeared in his master's eyes as an asset, as a powerful lever, but never as a true subordinate. Voldemort had always found Snape too intelligent and too gifted. Therefore...

"But... Bellatrix is dead! Mum beat her during the Battle of Hogwarts!" exclaimed Ron, who must have reached the same conclusion as Harry.

"That is quite true. Bellatrix Lestrange is no more," said Dumbledore with a sadly amused air. "However..."

"Her brothers survived..." completed Ron, continuing his reflection aloud. "And it is precisely to them that Bellatrix would have spoken of... er... this way to 'reverse the course of things'. What do you mean by that anyway, Professor? Is that what it's for, the Oracle?"

"Your perspicacity does you credit, Mr Weasley. And with your last question we enter the heart of a subject I wished to avoid at all costs until now," sighed Dumbledore with disappointment. "This is what happens when one takes too close an interest in powers beyond us..."

"Powers that would be beyond *you*, beyond *Albus Dumbledore*?" let slip Hermione before blushing.

"Ha! My children," replied Dumbledore with a vexed shake of his head. "If it is proven that I was one of the greatest wizards of my time, I am forced to admit that some of our ancestors showed themselves far more gifted. Anyway... To answer you, let us say it is in the nature of men—be they wizards or Muggles—to seek since the dawn of time the most effective means to upset the natural order. These means, you see, sometimes materialise in the form of powerful artefacts... You personally experienced

this with the Time-Turner during your third year and, in a certain way, one can also say your companions paid the price when you sought to destroy the Horcruxes. Fortunately, as far as one can tell, the creation or even the use of such artefacts is not within the reach of the first comer."

Ron gulped.

"And... this artefact, is it the Oracle we're talking about? Can we know how it works? Or what it looks like?"

"That is an additional problem, for I fear indeed my answer may seem somewhat patchy to you."

"Try anyway, please Professor," cried Harry. "The slightest information will always be useful to us."

"As I just told you, I ignore what this object is truly capable of. Well let's say, *in practice*. But perhaps by explaining to you how I myself was made aware of the presumed existence of such a magical artefact, you will be able to draw the right conclusions; and make better decisions than I did formerly, when the situation demands it of you..."

Dumbledore paused briefly and Harry realised he had stopped breathing, doubtless for fear of missing even a word of what awaited him. He tried to relax a little by slowly emptying his lungs and noted that, behind his back, the moon had continued its progression across the starry vault. Its powerful light now totally flooded the room, spreading over his friends like a ghostly veil and making the intriguing metallic instruments dotting the shelves here and there sparkle. Harry was also amused to note that the occupants of the surrounding portraits had all grouped together, even if it meant piling up to find themselves in the frame closest to Dumbledore or Snape.

"It is said of our memory that it possesses the wondrous faculty of ridding us of the details peculiar to the most painful events of our existence, and yet... The first time I heard the term 'Oracle' to designate something other than those intermediaries giving access to the divinatory word of Apollo in ancient Greece, goes back a very long time. Incredible as it may seem today, it was a time when I was still young and full of life. Ironically, my mother had just died following one of my sister Ariana's numerous losses of control and I had suddenly found myself in charge of the family home. You can believe me, despite all my love for my little sister, I lived very badly the fact of finding myself thus trapped at our home in Godric's Hollow. Trapped, at the very moment I obtained my

twelve N.E.W.T.s—grade 'Outstanding'—and my career was finally finding the momentum it deserved. Trapped, while an ocean of opportunities, each more exhilarating than the last, opened up to me, in every corner of the globe... I was young, you understand. I had until then never committed a serious error, nor known true failure, and then..."

Dumbledore seemed to choke up and his eyes began to twinkle behind his half-moon spectacles.

"Professor?" asked Hermione gently after a few moments.

"Forgive me. I may have accomplished so many extraordinary things, and taken up at least as many insurmountable challenges... You cannot imagine how difficult it is for me to give this account, with everything it could imply today... Ha! What a mistake I made that sad day. If only I had had the courage to finish you off, Gellert..." murmured Dumbledore as if he had suddenly lost himself internally.

"We didn't come to judge you, to condemn you or... or anything like that, Professor!" cried Harry. "Mistakes or not, you can always count on us. We'll do what it takes to stop Voldemort accomplishing his plan, you have our word."

Thereupon, Chick, who had just extracted himself from a pocket of Harry's robes to hoist himself onto his shoulder, let out a loud chirp resembling encouragement.

"Oh... My friends..." choked Dumbledore again. "If only you measured the import of your words."

"We've already defeated Voldemort once, you know what we're capable of. Come on Professor, tell us what happened... Gellert Grindelwald appeared on your doorstep one fine morning while you were trapped in Godric's Hollow. And together you defined the foundations of what you would later call 'the Greater Good'. Is that right?"

Dumbledore spent a few more seconds adjusting his spectacles on his aquiline nose and took a deep breath. Ron cast a brief glance in Harry's direction before surreptitiously giving him a thumbs up.

"Alas, what you say is entirely correct, Harry. I was about your age when Grindelwald gave me the wonderful surprise of introducing himself as my new neighbour. For the first time in my life, my path crossed that of the equal I had sought so much during all those years. He was tall and so handsome, endowed with gifts as exceptional as mine, and a thirst for greatness I understood only too well... We soon maintained many

fascinating discussions.... And what was my joy when I discovered that this second half had, like me, heard of the legends time had little by little woven around the Deathly Hallows; those mysterious magical objects, so powerful they were said to be capable of modifying History itself!

We threw ourselves body and soul into the hunt for these Hallows; convinced they would make us the architects of a new order, of a new world governed by the Greater Good..."

"And you managed to do all that from home?" exclaimed Ginny, surprised.

"I think I guess the gist of your thought, Miss Weasley. To be honest, I must say no. Well... At first, the temptation was too great and I joined Gellert. I acknowledge with shame today having abused Ariana's trust by subjecting her to Sleeping Charms. We then took advantage of these rare moments of... of 'deliverance' to Apparate and thus roam the five continents in search of clues. I must say these memories still manage to make me nostalgic today. You can believe me, inspecting ruins, forgotten tombs, and other forbidden archives alongside a young wizard as talented as Gellert Grindelwald had something irresistible, something terribly bewitching about it. No wall, no lock, no riddle was equal to our combined talents. Unfortunately, one evening—and this is where you were getting at I suppose—while I had slipped away, my sister had an unusually violent fit. I returned just in time to put an end to a bout of madness that could have cost her her life and resolved on the spot to cease my excursions. As you can imagine, my companion had all the trouble in the world accepting this decision. With hindsight, I still wonder today if he hadn't already thought of Ariana's death and the freedom that eventuality would have offered us, so we could devote ourselves to our projects on the Greater Good; be that as it may, we managed to distribute tasks well enough in the weeks that followed, so that our enterprise could subsist. Gellert continued his explorations across the world whilst I applied myself to the study of the historical documents he brought back to us. Little by little, we gained ground, the clues became more precise and success seemed ever closer. And that was when he found it... It was unthinkable, we ourselves struggled to believe in this luck as sudden as it was unhoped-for."

As Dumbledore finished his sentence, the silver light the moon projected into the office suddenly lost intensity.

"Come on, it's just a little passing cloud," grumbled Phineas Black from the back of his portrait, as other eyes turned towards the window.

"Continue! Continue then Dumbledore! I've had more than enough of all these squatters, we're suffocating here!"

Positioned to the left of Dumbledore's painting, the portrait of the ex-Headmaster and ancestor of Sirius was indeed as full as could be. At times, only his lips surrounded by an abundant grey beard could be distinguished from the pile of robes and pointed hats saturating the ambient space.

"Come to think of it, Severus, you owe me! I helped you track the movements of Potter and his friends last year. Would there not be a little free space on your side, so I can join you?"

Snape gagged slightly.

"Alas, although your company is always most agreeable Phineas, I fear we are too cramped here too. It is regrettable dear friend, truly..." he replied with a nasty smile while his own frame was occupied only by him and him alone. "But enough of these trivialities. Albus, you were saying? Your partner, what did he find?"

Harry cast a final glance at the worrying ink-black cloud spreading above the castle, swallowing the stars one by one and now also a good portion of the moon, and returned his attention to Dumbledore.

"What he brought back... It was a set of runic notes," said Dumbledore, staring fixedly, after a moment of hesitation. "A manuscript from another age, from before the Great Regression, according to my humble estimates."

"A codex?" tried Hermione timidly.

"Just so. And not just any codex, Miss Granger. A codex *Oraculum Libertatis*."

Hermione, Snape, as well as several former Headmasters and Headmistresses, let out a stunned exclamation. Harry, Ron, and Ginny, for their part, exchanged intrigued looks.

"I don't understand," ventured Harry. "What is this story of 'great regression'? And what is the connection with the Deathly Hallows you were looking for? Or with the Death Eaters' objective?"

While the portraits were swept by increasingly loud waves of excitement punctuated at times by an "It's stupefying!", a "Properly astounding!", or even a "What do I say? It's abracadabresque!", Dumbledore remained frozen, gaze locked on the oriental rug covering the floor.

"I wish to clarify that at the time, Grindelwald and myself were not fully aware of what we had unearthed!" he suddenly exclaimed in a loud voice,

as if seeking to justify himself. "It was only after two weeks of relentless effort attempting to decipher the contents of this thing that I finally understood. To put it briefly, Harry, this highly complex manuscript was a sort of recipe. A protocol filled with magisterial magical formulas dedicated to the creation of an artefact called 'Oracle'. The object was presented by the codex as a sort of all-powerful solution, capable of reversing the course of things, of being above the paths nature had always imposed on man. Needless to say, it was exactly what we needed to realize the Greater Good. Except that..."

Dumbledore's portrait darkened suddenly. His face disappeared into the darkness to be summarized soon only by the small shining points of his spectacle lenses and the pupils of his eyes. Moments later, a black cloud, dense, impenetrable, had crossed the panes and filled the entire office.

"*Lumos!*" whispered Harry as Chick took refuge in his collar, chirping with concern.

From his wand escaped a weak whitish glow that barely allowed him to distinguish his fingertips. Harry strained his ears and could hear his friends imitating him. Soon a first, then a second light appeared nearby. Very weak, too; they seemed diluted, as if they had suddenly all found themselves plunged right in the middle of a swimming pool full of India ink. Harry thought for a moment of the effects of the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder he had used at the dawn of his fifth year at Hogwarts, when Dumbledore's voice rang out somewhere in front of him.

"Ron? Ronald Weasley? I know you are close by."

"Professor! Yes, I'm here! I can hear you, what..."

"The lighter-shaped Deluminator I gave you, do you have it on you?"

There was the sound of clothing being rummaged through, a series of clicks, then Ron said disappointedly:

"Yes, I have it. But it doesn't seem to be working, at least not in these conditions."

"Lift the flap, join your wand to the Deluminator and hold them both firmly. With *two* hands, I insist."

"Er, very well... There, I'm ready Professor. And now?"

"I suggest you close your eyes, it should be quite brief."

"Okay..."

"*Fiat Lux!*"

Driven by curiosity, Harry, who had kept one eye half-open, thought he saw the darkness being torn apart shred by shred by a sort of incandescent orb before finding himself blinded once again. Scarcely had he closed his eyelids than the imprint of a grimacing Ron appeared to him, arms stretched above his head.

"Woah! I didn't know that thing could do that!"

"You released the energy the Deluminator had accumulated over its last uses," explained Dumbledore. "However... I did not expect we would have to use it in such circumstances. Hogwarts... An astonishing force has been at work here, for a few months."

As Dumbledore spoke, Harry gradually regained his wits. Everything around him seemed to have returned to normal. Everything, except the windows which remained opaque and shadowy, like the portholes of a submarine lost in the depths of the abyss.

Hermione soon conjured a few blue flames which she imprisoned as usual in a jar found on a nearby shelf. Everyone extinguished their wands and the office found itself plunged into an intriguing atmosphere dotted with cerulean reflections. Chick climbed back up prudently to nestle on Harry's head, who settled on the floor with the others, around the flaming receptacle.

"Curious, indeed..." approved Snape. "Darkness of such intensity... A form of magic very rare nowadays, from another age. Such a thing requires extraordinary control of matter and energy..."

"Which no Master Builder possesses today," completed Dumbledore pensively. "Now, would you be so kind as to cast the *Muffliato* charm on each of the entrances and exits of this room please? Yes, the windows too, Harry, thank you. What I am about to tell you, I am not very proud of. And I would prefer to avoid it falling into the wrong ears... This very recent and strange magical manifestation inspires me with little confidence."

"And them, are they reliable?" asked Ginny pointing at the occupants of the surrounding portraits.

A thunder of protests erupted in the room.

"What an outrage! By what right do you dare question my integrity you little..."

"That is enough, Phineas. Miss Weasley's question is most understandable. And unlike me, she is unaware of how terrified you are by the mere prospect of reprisals from me."

After a few timid grumbles, Phineas Black's head finally sank into the mass of ex-Headmasters and Headmistresses come from the four corners of the room not to miss anything of the story.

Shortly after, Dumbledore nodded, as if approving a speech only he could hear. He straightened up in his armchair and finally stood up. Hands clasped behind his back, he circled for a few moments then approached as close to Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny as his own portrait allowed him.

"Gellert and myself... it is this Oracle that is at the origin of our separation. The argument with my brother Aberforth and the death of my sister Ariana were in a way only a consequence, disastrous as it may have been.... When I understood what the *Oraculum Libertatis* codex required for the creation of such an artefact, I stopped everything..."

Dumbledore hesitated.

"Do you remember the procedure for making a Horcrux, my friends?"

"Y-You... You have to kill someone," replied Hermione, mouth dry. "It triggers a process of fragmentation of the soul in the killer. That's... that's how a portion of that soul can then be transposed inside an object which becomes the Horcrux."

"That is perfectly summarized, Miss Granger. And could you then imagine any atrocity *worse* still?"

Ginny hesitated a moment.

"Worse than killing, or fragmenting one's soul?"

"Worse," agreed Dumbledore without hesitation.

"Professor..." intervened Ron, embarrassed. "Would it be possible to... I mean... Can you steal someone else's soul?"

Harry shuddered. How could Ron be the source of such thoughts? And above all, could there exist anything more infernal than Horcruxes, or more terrible than having one's soul devoured by a Dementor's kiss?

"One can say you have come a long way, all of you," said Dumbledore in a tone as grave as it was admiring. "Alas yes, Mr Weasley, you are almost there. Besides an imposing quantity of extremely rare ingredients, the

essential material for the creation of the Oracle is absolutely priceless. And it is indeed a human soul that is in question. But not the soul of the wizard conjuring the spell... No. The ritual consists of murdering the target of one's choice then constraining their soul to invest the desired object. The action must be performed at the very moment the soul prepares to separate from the lifeless body: at the expiration of the last breath."

The unease that had seized Harry moments before turned into profound repugnance. Murder alone constituted an unforgivable act, but some had pushed vice even further. How much time and energy had it taken them to achieve their ends? And, in doing so, how many lives had ended up being sacrificed?

"Cruel... Cruel, but very interesting, Albus," said Snape, sunk into the back of his Wingback chair, arms crossed. "You know more about this subject than than what the copy of *Secrets of the Darkest Art* occupying the library shelves a few years ago suggests very succinctly... I imagine the ritual allows enslavement of the recovered soul, but I am not sure of the rest, or how..."

"As soon as physical contact is established with the Oracle, the soul imprisoned within finds itself compelled to guide its 'master'. It is then bound to put at his disposal all the intellect and magical power it possesses. Yes, Severus. I too found this artefact interesting, at one time. But believe me, the more I learned about it, the more monstrous I found it... It destroyed so many things that were so dear to me."

Scarcely had Dumbledore pronounced these words than the shelves and the dozens of metallic instruments they contained began to shake. On the walls, the portraits swung, sending a few ex-Headmasters flying into neighbouring canvases against a backdrop of hysterical screams. Soon, it was the heaviest cabinets and the entire office that wobbled dangerously as a terrible crash rang out somewhere outside. Chick chirped louder and Harry clung as best he could to the nearest piece of furniture.

Moments later, the oscillations faded.

"They have returned. They have started again," said Snape disdainfully, dusting off his tunic with a sharp flick.

"I fear so, Severus," replied Dumbledore.

"Hard blow for dear Minerva to begin her career as Headmistress in such circumstances," added Phineas sniggering. "Billions of blistering blue

barnacles, Armando! It's my own person you're trampling, I'll have you know!"

Harry and Ginny got back on their feet whilst Hermione extended a helping hand to Ron. The latter had sacrificed his balance to prevent the jar of blue flames from tipping onto the carpet.

"What a racket! My god but what was all that? I mean who are you talking about, Professor? Who started again?"

"Enemies of Hogwarts, manifestly. Alas, to my knowledge their identity has not yet been unveiled. You would do well to go down to find out more, Miss Granger," he added turning to her. "Minerva McGonagall could well need the help of the precious right hand you represent."

Hermione straightened up proudly in the bluish gloom. She cast a brief glance at Harry which seemed to signify: "*You'll tell me, right?*", then she lit her wand and hurried to leave the office, taking care to hug the walls, in case the tremors resumed.

"Now, listen to me well, you three. Time is short," resumed Dumbledore, his tone even graver. "I never knew if Grindelwald had made this famous Oracle. When I noted that the prospect of murdering 'as many people as necessary' left him totally indifferent, I broke off our liaison. We argued, we fought. My brother came out injured... my own sister died from it. Many years later, I finally found the courage to face my demons. I stood with all my being against the one who had been my dearest friend. On the day of our duel, in 1945, I was personally convinced I was running to my own doom. Rumours of the time said Grindelwald drew his power from artefacts of unequalled potency. He was said to be unbeatable... indestructible... Many saw in him the incarnation of an evil god, of Death itself. Believe me, that day, I expected to face a Grindelwald armed with much more than the famous Elder Wand... I drew on all the resources at my disposal, I made the best use of my extraordinary talents. And, finally, at the end of an interminable duel, I won the victory. Irony has it that, only moments after my triumph, I committed presumably what would be the greatest mistake of my entire existence... I let Gellert survive. I acknowledge it humbly before you tonight: I was not yet ready to see this man die, nor with him this part of my history. I argued with the authorities, claiming Grindelwald should live, if only a little longer. I proposed he be incarcerated for the time of interrogation, so the wizarding community could repair as best it could the wrongs he had committed, and be in a position to defuse the numerous traps he had sown in his wake. I

was the only one who could extract confessions from him, and I knew only too well what they would mean for him... for us. Ultimately, I never found the strength to visit him. And that is how Grindelwald rotted in his prison, patiently awaiting his revenge..."

The prospect of the Dark Wizard moping in his cell imposed itself in Harry's mind. He saw him again, pitiful, half-lying on a filthy bunk on the floor. He had dreamed of the scene again during the summer, a few months earlier.

"Professor..."

"Yes, Harry?"

"After your death, when... when I witnessed Grindelwald's assassination. I... It's something coming back to me only now, surely because of our discussion... It had never really struck me before..."

Dumbledore eyed him curiously.

"Moments before Voldemort killed him, Grindelwald was laughing until he lost his voice. I first thought prison had driven him mad. But actually, maybe he was really happy. Like someone who..."

"Like someone who had suddenly been offered the perfect opportunity to achieve his revenge?"

Harry nodded, embarrassed.

"That is a telling detail. Knowing Gellert as I knew him, I truly doubt he ever abandoned himself to the comfort of madness. He was far too proud and determined for that."

They remained thus in silence for a few moments. As Dumbledore stroked his long white beard and the surrounding portraits began to whisper again, Harry felt foolish for having thus underestimated one of the most skilful wizards of his time.

"You mustn't blame yourself, Harry; this information would certainly not have been useful. At least not in other circumstances than those bringing us together today. Although it is very tempting, it is impossible and vain to seek to control everything... That said, and all things considered, I do indeed think Grindelwald's attitude at the moment of his death is cause for concern. The subtle art of illusion never held any secrets for him. He was always one step ahead."

Harry hesitated to mention the rest of his dream. The part where Ginny had become a bloodthirsty monster that had thrown itself on him to bite

him. Even in his diminished portrait form, Dumbledore could probably have given him some explanations. This dream, like so many others lately, had seemed so strangely real to him...

"Is something wrong, Harry?"

It was Ginny. She had placed a hand on his shoulder and was looking at him with apprehension. The blue of the flames reflecting in her beautiful brown eyes.

"No, everything's fine," lied Harry, taking her hand in his. "I think we know a bit more now: Bellatrix's brothers are looking for an artefact Grindelwald supposedly developed decades ago. They think they can find it at Durmstrang, and it's up to us to stop them."

"Even after all that they still try to serve Voldemort," said Ron, pensive.

"Like so many others," added Ginny, nodding towards Snape's portrait.

There was a long heavy silence. Finally, with a resigned gesture, Snape rose from his armchair and approached. The vein running up his forehead had begun to swell and his eyebrows were twitching slightly. Leaning over them thus, considering them from the full height of his frame, he appeared at least as frightening as he might have been in life.

Harry wondered if some of the most powerful occupants of the surrounding paintings were capable of casting hexes through their canvases. In doubt, he tightened his fingers on his wand.

"Te-ll them, Potter," articulated Snape, slowly detaching each syllable. "Tell them the details. I consent to it now. And now leave us. Go. Find the Lestranges and put an end to their activities, otherwise all this will have been for nothing."

"It will be done, Severus," replied Harry, both relieved and honoured. "Count on us, good night."

"Farewell," replied Snape before walking out of his frame, his dark cloak following in his wake like the filaments of a jellyfish.

With that, the other occupants of the portraits bade them farewell and the trio began their departure. Ron and Ginny had already left when Chick became agitated and started chirping. His little cries sounded like a song Harry found vaguely familiar.

"My friends..."

A voice imbued with sadness had risen from the back of the room, Dumbledore's.

"I deplore that once again the heavy task of repairing my mistakes falls to you—although knowing it is in your hands constitutes a real relief... Now, one last detail if you permit, then I will let you go in search of a more than deserved rest... Who knows, perhaps this detail will have its use during your search. This artefact, the Oracle, Gellert had given it a name; a very particular name. He called it the *Compass of Chaos*..."

"

20. THE MASTER OF DEATH

The darkness was still unusually dense when Harry, Ron, and Ginny descended the granite staircase leading from Dumbledore's office. As he struggled to distinguish the next step by the timid light of his wand, Harry felt fatigue drop onto his shoulders like a block. He couldn't be the only one in this state, for Ron was soon seized by a long yawn which Ginny was quick to imitate.

"Rum character, that Dumbledore," said Ron in a sleepy voice as they advanced cautiously down the second-floor corridor. "I mean, a bit temperamental, really."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"Well... the other night, he sent us packing as if we were nothing but dragon dung."

"It was certainly weird," said Ginny.

Harry had been surprised too. Dumbledore's reaction had disconcerted him so much he had barely slept a wink that night.

"It's been running through my head quite a bit," he finally admitted, starting down another spiral staircase. "I started thinking back on everything we learned about him last year, after his death, and I came to wonder if we ever really knew him."

"I see what you mean... not easy to accept that Dumbledore might not always have been exemplary."

Somewhere behind him, Ron stumbled in the darkness.

"Ouch! What is that broom doing in the middle of the corridor? Damned Peeves... By the way, do you think Hermione was right?" he added a moment later. "Do you think Dumbledore foresaw he would have to revisit this story of Grindelwald, the *Greater Good*, and the *Compass of Chaos*? To the point where he transmitted what was necessary to his portrait before dying?"

"From what I think I know of him, it wouldn't surprise me," replied Harry. "He must have felt this story wasn't quite finished. So, even if he wasn't very proud of it, I imagine he preferred to do what was necessary. Grindelwald may have been a master in the art of being one step ahead, but he certainly wasn't the only one."

"In any case," said Ginny, "given his reaction the other night when you touched on the subject, Harry, it's not as if Dumbledore went around telling this story to the first comer. Which fits with the image of the extraordinarily wise and cautious man we knew."

"Some example of wisdom..." said Ron. "It's even hard to believe he was like that in the past... obsessed with power, to the point of forgetting his family. Frankly... who would have thought it?"

Harry remembered a similar experience he had had in sixth year. When he had committed the indiscretion of rummaging through Snape's memories. He had felt horrified and betrayed when he saw his father, James Potter, and his godfather, Sirius Black, whom he held in very high esteem, mistreating Severus Snape most gratuitously, simply because he had crossed their path at the wrong moment.

"I suppose we're all entitled to our share of mistakes, especially when we're young," he finally thought aloud.

Ron burst out laughing somewhere behind him.

"You're a card, Harry!"

"What?"

"You're definitely Dumbledore's man. Through and through, mate," he added, giving him an affectionate slap on the back.

Harry found nothing to reply. It was, however, with a certain pride that he traversed the long, dark corridor stretching before them.

As they reached a junction, the torches fixed to the walls relit with a sharp crackle. The darkness surrounding them then dissipated slowly, as if sucked outside.

"Blimey, did you see that?" cried Ginny, after leaning out of a nearby window.

An immense black entity was withdrawing, floating above the castle in the reviving moonlight. At times, the thing seemed to undulate, like a gigantic veil of darkness. The next moment, however, it gave rather the

impression of a swarm of small particles animated by their own movement, but united by a single will.

"What is that thing now?" said Ron, eyes wide. "Is that what plunged us into darkness?"

"Looks like it," replied Harry, shuddering.

The trio remained there observing the intriguing phenomenon until it was reduced to a small speck that finally melted into the starry vault. Without being able to say how long they had stayed leaning on the window sills, a clock somewhere struck three times and they resumed their route.

A little lower down, and ever more sleepy, they reached the Great Hall. The place was deserted, with the exception of two silhouettes busy discussing in low voices near the staff table. It was Hermione and Professor McGonagall. Both were covered in grimy dust and looked deeply shaken.

"I cannot understand how this could have happened again," sighed the professor, shaking her head in denial as the group joined them. "The building site: an entire wing, ruined. The materials: vanished! Months of work gone, in the space of an instant!"

"Anyone hurt?" asked Ron timidly whilst dusting off Hermione's robes.

"Nothing Madam Pomfrey cannot fix... But still, what a disaster!" replied Hermione, looking sorry. "When I arrived on the scene you couldn't see much. And then suddenly..."

"The veil? Did you see it too?" exclaimed Ginny.

Hermione and Professor McGonagall nodded gravely.

"Looked more like a swarm to me," said Hermione.

"That is what it seemed to me too, Miss Granger. Whatever it was, it was a very powerful manifestation of Dark Magic. Ha! To destroy with such ease the work of the best Master Builders in the country... The History of Magic has known only a handful of wizards capable of such a thing. But as far as I know, none are still alive to this day..."

The professor brought a hand to her forehead and began to sway alarmingly. Despite her advanced state of fatigue, Hermione showed herself reactive enough to slide an armchair right under the Headmistress's backside with a flick of her wand.

"An exemplary Summoning Charm, Miss Granger; your quick-wittedness will always impress me."

While Hermione's face turned crimson, the Headmistress resumed:

"First the building site, and now these stories of *Lethargum Tenebris*, or Death Eaters infiltrating Durmstrang—where I strongly fear I shall be obliged to send you back as soon as term starts... When on earth will this sad era end? What do you think, my dear, is the risk still acceptable at the point we have reached? Should I close the school for good?"

Hermione looked on the verge of fainting in turn when she realised the Headmistress herself was asking her opinion.

"It seems to me Hogwarts has known more difficult times in the past," she replied after taking the time to reflect carefully. "I'm thinking notably of the opening of the Chamber of Secrets... and the murder that followed."

"We strongly considered the possibility of closing the school at that time, as you most probably know," replied McGonagall whose face had regained some colour. "And I do not wish to wait for one of my students to be infected or grievously injured to act."

"No, indeed, Professor... In that case, how about warning the students and their parents? They could decide to stay knowingly: by being more vigilant, or simply return home."

McGonagall remained silent. She seemed to be thinking intensely about the proposal received.

"Hermione is right, Professor," Harry allowed himself to say. "A little more transparency wouldn't hurt in times like these. And too many people have got into the habit of following without thinking... almost no one takes responsibility anymore, nor cares to know what will truly be good for everyone and for the group."

"Yes, and we see where that led us these last few years," added Ginny. "Voldemort was nothing, but he managed to rise again, and he ended up seizing the Ministry, the school, and even our history, in just a few months..."

Ron approved spiritedly and Professor McGonagall straightened up in her armchair, mechanically tapping her fingernails on the wood of her wand.

"I see. Thank you, each of you," she replied, considering them one by one through her square spectacles. "It is both gratifying and reassuring to note that the future rests in the hands of young people such as yourselves. I shall take the necessary measures tomorrow. Now, to bed everyone! This day has lasted too long and the time has come to take some rest."

McGonagall stood up as if she were thirty years younger and the group began to leave. Harry took a few steps with his friends and stopped suddenly. It might be late, but the opportunity was too perfect not to seize.

"Professor, despite the late hour and fatigue, there is one last thing we need to talk about. It concerns you too," he added addressing Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

They stared at him curiously.

"It's about Snape..."

Under astonished eyes, Harry told the whole story in one go, taking care to give the details he had kept to himself until now, since the Battle of Hogwarts. He told how Snape had committed the irreparable in his youth and precipitated Lily Potter's murder by Voldemort; how regret had nearly destroyed him before Dumbledore intervened and gave new meaning to his life; how, through unalterable love for the only woman he had ever cherished, he had, for the rest of his life, protected Harry and worked for Voldemort's downfall in the shadows, at the risk of being criticized and even hated by those his path would lead him to cross.

When Harry had finished, Hermione and Ginny were shaking with violent sobs.

"Decidedly, it's the night of revelations," said Ron, eyes shining with tears, hugging Hermione against him.

"I-It's... It's cra..." stammered Ginny, sniffing, "it's crazy, Ha-Harry. E-Everything... Everything your m-mother's love could have as an impact on the w-world for a-all... for all these years."

"Love..." replied McGonagall before blowing her nose into a large tartan handkerchief. "Love is a magic of which we are still far from having unravelled all the secrets. Be well advised never to underestimate its power, my children..."

The remark sent Harry back into his memories. He recalled the times when, lately, during his Auror exams, his mother and Ginny had appeared to him as in a dream to save him when he was on the brink of death. He

wondered for a moment if these strange phenomena could be linked when Professor McGonagall exclaimed:

"Snape! The portrait! My god, and I condemned it! I must go and move that cabinet before going to bed. As for you, I repeat for the last time, to bed!"

"For the furniture, that won't be really necessary, Professor," said Harry, suddenly realizing he had forgotten to put the Headmistress's office back in place before leaving.

"Do you mean to say that... Potter! Will you never change?"

"What can I say, the magic of curiosity, Professor," retorted Harry mischievously whilst hastening to follow his friends towards the Gryffindor quarters. "Good night to you."

Shortly afterwards, they arrived in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady guarding the premises. She was massaging her stomach painfully and let out a plaintive moan when Hermione announced the password "*Sanguis Draconis*". The painting swung open on a belch punctuated by lumpy gurgles and they soon found themselves all four in the Gryffindor common room.

Noting the place was deserted, Harry took advantage of the fact that his memory was still fresh to tell Hermione what she had missed in Dumbledore's office.

"Thanks for the summary, and above all, thanks for sharing the truth about Snape with us, Harry," said Hermione closing her eyes briefly, head resting against Ron's shoulder. "I would never have believed it if anyone else had tried to tell us."

"He gave us a hard time but... he was a hero in the end. Well, in his own way..." said Ron who still seemed to have trouble believing his ears.

As they separated to join their respective dormitories, Ginny held Harry back by the arm.

"It can't have been easy keeping all that to yourself over the summer, while everyone was cursing Snape in turn," she whispered in Harry's ear. "And I'm proud you found the courage to speak about your nightmare to Dumbledore," she added before kissing him tenderly.

Harry returned her kiss but immediately felt unease and guilt rising in him. He hadn't been that brave. He hadn't had the strength to go all the way. He hadn't mentioned what happened in the second part of the dream

in question, the one where Ginny had appeared to him as a bloodthirsty monster.

That night, despite the fatigue burning his eyes, Harry had trouble finding sleep. Ideas swirled in his head. Alone behind the curtains of his four-poster bed, he felt like a tiny boat, lost in the middle of a vast stormy ocean. He thought back to everything Dumbledore had revealed to them. He thought of this famous *Compass of Chaos* which seemed to arouse as much fear as interest, and finally fell asleep imagining what the duel between his beloved former Headmaster and Gellert Grindelwald might have been like.

The next morning, Harry was woken by sounds of tearing paper. After turning over in his sheets sighing, he resolved to open one eye to realize that Neville, Dean, and Seamus had already left. Scanning their beds, Harry was only half-surprised to note the mess reigning there. Duvets had been carefully scattered on the beds and the floor around had turned into a battlefield littered with torn gift wrappings and half-knotted ribbons.

"Yeah, brilliant! A year's subscription to *Broomstick Weekly*! Great present Harry, thanks!" came Ron's voice nearby. "Come on, get up quickly... wait till you see what George got us!"

With the previous day's events, Harry had almost forgotten Christmas. He wrapped himself in his duvet and slid out of bed to sit on the cold stone floor. His sleep giving way to growing excitement, he began to unwrap his parcels.

He was barely on his second when Ron started grumbling.

"Oh... and there, 'all gone'. Already finished... It always goes too fast, if only it could be the same when we're in class. Anyway, I'm not going to complain: good haul this year, once again!"

Harry lifted his head from his pile of presents and struggled to believe his eyes.

"Ron, are you sure you're okay?"

"Couldn't be better, why do you ask?"

"The package, there, that's almost the length of your bed, are you saving it for Easter or...?"

Ron stared at him with a look that said "*Hey, we don't joke about that kind of thing you know!*" then leaned over his four-poster bed. When he straightened up moments later, however, his face expressed so much

incredulity and delight that Harry thought he was seeing the Ron of their very first year at Hogwarts again.

"By Merlin's beard! I've never received such a huge present, do you think it's really for me?" exclaimed Ron, hoisting the large English green package ribboned in silver onto his mattress. "Look at the size of the monster! I wonder who..."

He froze suddenly, as if he had just been petrified by a Basilisk.

"There's a note, it says: 'Victory at All Costs'. Blimey, it's signed 'D.!' Ah no sorry, 'D.M.'... the second letter had peeled off a bit."

"'D.M.!'?" repeated Harry, taken aback.

"No idea," said Ron shrugging before throwing himself avidly on the wrapping.

A few moments passed during which Ron disappeared into a storm of green paper, then...

"Waaaaaoooooooooh! Impossible! Pinch me, I'm dreaming!"

Beatific with admiration, Ron pulled a brand-new Nimbus 3000 from its box.

"No. There must be a mistake, who could possibly...?" said Ron contemplating the magnificently carved wooden handle, "'D.M.'? I mean, I don't..."

"Draco Malfoy?" suggested Harry without really believing it.

Ron burst out laughing so hard he fell backwards onto his mattress.

"You're joking! That little brat wouldn't buy a *Butterbeer* for his friends—assuming he has any—so me, Ronald-Blood-Traitor-Weasley..." chuckled Ron before sitting up, as suddenly as if he were emerging from a nightmare.

"Malfoy... Malfoy hates Vassily Krum... Do you think he'd be capable of..."

"Of buying you a broom to increase his team's chances against Durmstrang? Slytherins are always ready to do anything to win, I'm not telling you anything new. So yes, it's entirely possible Malfoy gave you a Nimbus 3000 as a Christmas present. If that's the case he'll have done well, because your face right now is really worth seeing."

Ron remained dumbstruck, his magnificent brand-new broom resting on his knees, his hands caressing the handle hesitantly. He seemed prey to a terrible dilemma when the jacket of his favourite pyjamas (the one depicting the cosmos and which Harry liked to contemplate so often whilst daydreaming) began to undulate mysteriously.

"What, a problem? You... you think I shouldn't accept?" suddenly asked Ron worriedly, noting that Harry was staring at him perplexedly. "Ah, that!" he added, lowering his chin to the fabric covering his chest, "it happens that it starts shaking on its own. I think it's when two neutron stars collide... it tickles a bit, but not enough to wake me up at night... Er, and you by the way, did you get anything from him?"

It quickly appeared that, besides the fantastic dragon-skin tunic gifted by George ("Reputed to offer unrivalled resistance to cold."), the *Faux-Pygmy Puff* scarf from Ginny ("The softest and warmest scarf there is!") and the *Quill of Delight* from Hermione ("No other quill will confer such writing pleasure."), Ron wasn't the only one to have received a present from Malfoy.

Although Harry's package was smaller, it was no less exceptional. It was a set of manuscripts having belonged to Niki Bravehunt, former Quidditch champion in the 1970s. Harry took a look and soon found himself absorbed. The notes therein seemed to describe in detail a whole bunch of enchantments allowing tuning and improvement of his broom's dynamic response. According to certain diagrams, Harry would soon be able to make his Firebolt an even more formidable tool, capable of turning with such vivacity that he would probably have to consider much more intense physical preparation if he wished to keep up.

Time passed without Harry noticing anything. Noon approaching, he tore himself reluctantly from Niki Bravehunt's parchments, donned the latest jumper Mrs Weasley had knitted him, and followed Ron towards the Great Hall. His stomach was rumbling and he longed to sit down to enjoy the Christmas feast whilst discussing the events of the previous day and morning.

Just settled alongside their Gryffindor peers, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had just broached the question of Malfoy's extraordinary gifts when Professor McGonagall clinked her glass and spoke. In a solemn tone, she explained to the assembly how threatened the situation of Hogwarts and its students was, whether by the recent attacks on the building site, by

suspicions of magical illness, or by the now confirmed presence of the Lestranges at Durmstrang.

The news had more effect in the ranks than Harry could have imagined. Through the few conversations that reached his ears, it finally seemed to him that he wasn't the only one to have gained in maturity over the previous year. No one seemed decided to give up and drop classes under threat, whatever its origin might have been.

Professor McGonagall sat back down and the Christmas feast, with its avalanche of steaming dishes and pitchers of chilled pumpkin juice, did not delay in materialising under the delighted cries of the students. While Harry filled his plate with three different kinds of pies and a succulent-looking piece of roast, the discussion on Draco Malfoy was started again by Ginny. According to her, hope for a victory in the second match was permitted again, provided the other team members—who had gone home for the holidays—had also received a new broom, and provided of course they redoubled their efforts during their upcoming training sessions.

Between bites, Harry questioned Malfoy with a look several times, without success. Nose in his plate, blond hair barring his eyes, Draco looked preoccupied.

A little later, as desserts were about to be served, Harry even witnessed an astonishing scene. Hand bleeding, crystal glass in pieces in front of his still-full plate, Malfoy stood up under the uncomprehending gazes of his comrades and left the table without a word.

"Is it Krum Junior making him like that?" said Ron, who had just turned around in turn to see Malfoy walking away towards the dungeons. "If that's it, I hope they'll continue bickering for a while yet. I wouldn't say no to other gifts like that!"

"Ron!" exclaimed Ginny, making Chick jump as he pecked at pastry crumbs on the edge of the table. "I'll have you know that for the moment, if Malfoy has a problem, the whole team has a problem!"

"What if it was linked to the Death Eaters?" suggested Hermione. "Maybe he's upset because their presence was made public? Or maybe they tried to contact him using the Dark Mark?"

"He claims he's changed," replied Harry, thinking back to his discussion with Draco in a Durmstrang corridor; shortly after freeing him from the spell holding him prisoner, trussed up in a carpet.

"I imagine we'll never really know what goes on in his twisted little head," added Ron, discreetly spearing a last piece of Peking duck from Hermione's plate. "One thing is sure, this afternoon, no homework! I have to try this new broom!"

Stomachs generously filled by one, or even a few slices of custard tart for the boldest, Harry, Ron, and Ginny left the table and went to get changed for a "digestive" Quidditch session. Hermione, for her part, preferred to indulge in a quieter and otherwise more intellectual activity. She thus branched off towards the library whilst they went back down to the pitch.

Encouraged by Hagrid who had come out for a walk with Fang, the session above the pitch dusted with a fine layer of snow started as well as could be. Bundled up in the new dragon-skin jackets George had just given them, Harry, Ron, and Ginny were amazed to note how indifferent they now were to the outside temperature. Although very hard and rigid in appearance (it looked like an assembly of lava plates traversed by streaks of molten material), the garment acted like a sort of second skin, breathable in the most intense moments, insulating as soon as the muscles were less solicited.

Enthused by this unexpected new asset, Ron took only a few hours to tame his Nimbus 3000. As the sun set quietly over the castle, he even managed to block a shot hanging upside down, his two feet firmly wedged in the "*MaxiGrip*" stirrups of the broom.

Pleased with themselves and eager to take a well-deserved hot shower, they crossed the park and went back up to the castle discussing strategy for the upcoming trials. A moment later, as hot water flowed deliciously over his skull and shoulders, Harry recalled the best moments of the day. His muscles relaxing little by little, certain questions came back to him. Questions he would have to address without delay...

"Un-believ-able that Nimbus 3000! And George's jacket completely changes the game. A bit more and I could breathe fire!" exclaimed Ron, a towel around his neck, his hair still damp and carefully dishevelled, as if he had just got off his broom. "You should have seen that Hermione! What progress today!"

Harry had just rejoined Ron, Hermione, and Ginny in the common room. All three were squeezed onto the large sofa facing the fireplace; Hermione at one end, half-busy leafing through a thick volume; Ron and Ginny browsing the Christmas edition of *Broomstick Weekly*.

"Speaking of progress," said Harry sitting in an armchair close to Hermione, "the 'Great Regression' Dumbledore told us about yesterday, does that ring a bell for you?"

Until then too concentrated to react to stimuli from the outside world, Hermione finally lifted her head from her book and displayed a satisfied smile.

"You didn't really give the impression of discovering the subject," added Harry, as if to justify his interruption.

"I only had a vague idea, but the library taught me a bit more today..."

She put her book on a nearby stool and grabbed Crookshanks in passing to place him on her lap, as if he were nothing more than a big teddy bear.

"Without being an expert, I can tell you that the Great Regression is an era in the History of Magic, Harry. A transition period dating back several thousand years."

"Hey, I've heard of that too!" said Ron, lifting his nose from his magazine. "When we were on holiday in Egypt, with the family."

Ginny approved in turn.

"That's true, the guide mentioned it when we visited the inverted pyramid of Cheops, just above its twin, the one Muggles can see. It was so beautiful!"

"That wouldn't surprise me," replied Hermione. "Those Egyptian wizards had the reputation of forming the very heart of a very advanced civilisation. 'Pre-Great Regression' is actually said to have been a prosperous period; some even suggest it was close to Class II according to Nipouyov's categorisation. But these are only suppositions..."

Ron heaved a long sigh.

"Hermione, would you mind translating for normal people please?"

"Sorry. In other words, it means our ancestors were supposedly largely more evolved than us."

Harry mechanically reached out to allow Chick to join Crookshanks. Even as the tiny bird jumped between the cat's ears, information was slotting together in his head, raising new questions.

"If they were so advanced, why didn't they leave us more traces than that?" he asked after a brief moment of reflection. "And that famous Codex Dumbledore talked about, the one he and Grindelwald found? It..."

"It would be one of the extremely rare testimonies of that era, yes. And I don't know why our ancestors of the time showed themselves so reluctant to transcribe their history... No one knows, just as no one knows what triggered the Great Regression. Crazy as it may seem, no book in the library mentions it!"

"So much for the Codex and this story of 'Great Regression'," resumed Ron, brows furrowed. "But there's still something bugging me. Basically, weren't Dumbledore and Grindelwald supposed to be looking for the Deathly Hallows?"

"Yes, exactly."

Ron scowled.

"What, 'exactly'? They look for the Hallows and they stumble upon an old out-of-date grimoire. Great! But would you mind explaining the connection?"

"Do you really not realise? Ron, with the Codex, they found the key, the source, the ultimate manual! In a way, they found even better than what they desired."

Ron frowned even harder, to such an extent now he could have passed for a distant cousin of Filch.

"Honestly Ron, it's obvious!"

"You know I hate it when you start with 'it's obvious'..."

"Dumbledore told us last night! He described the Oracle as an all-powerful artefact, which would even allow its possessor to transcend their condition as a human being. The rest, you told me yesterday: just before his confrontation with Dumbledore, you told me the magical community had begun to perceive Grindelwald as..."

"As the incarnation of Death," completed Harry, suddenly seeing the troubled expression Dumbledore had displayed at that moment of his story.

"Yes. Now, another thing: why do you think Grindelwald was interested in the Hallows?"

"Because they were very powerful, of course," affirmed Harry.

"There's more to it than that!" retorted Hermione. "One mustn't underestimate the symbolism! Remember: in the story of the Hallows—I mean—in the Tale of the Three Brothers, who makes the overpowering

wand, the resurrection stone, and the invisibility cloak? Who makes the famous Hallows?"

"Death?" replied Harry dubiously. "Grindelwald dreamed of becoming the Master of Death?"

Hermione nodded gravely.

"But..."

"Grindelwald wanted to become the Master of Death, a being powerful enough to impose his vision of the 'Greater Good' on the whole world. While he was working on it with Dumbledore, the Codex presented itself as an unexpected alternative with far greater potential than the Hallows."

Everyone digested the news for a moment, until Ginny closed *Broomstick Weekly* with an annoyed gesture then shook her head.

"Wait a sec..." she said, "I'm willing to accept Grindelwald appropriated the symbol of the eye in the triangle believing himself the Master of Death, but you're not going to tell me he made the Hallows himself! They date back several centuries; he wasn't even born!"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm just trying to connect certain facts with the myths that influence us more or less consciously. I'm trying to highlight certain fantasies peculiar to the character. Because the better we know him, the better our own chances of success will be. And let's be clear, while we can fear Grindelwald made his own Oracle, the Compass of Chaos, to guide and support him in his quest for the 'Greater Good', I'm not claiming for all that that it was he who developed the Hallows. Just as I don't believe either that, according to the version of the tale, Death in person suddenly came out of the woods to gift the Hallows to three brothers who crossed his path, at the bend of a swollen river. I think rather that the one described as 'Death' by the legend would in fact have been another particularly gifted and vicious wizard, but that's another story..."

Ron emitted a sort of moan and curled up on himself. Chin inches from his knees, he began to rub his scalp vigorously.

"OK, great all that," he mumbled after a few moments, head still buried. "So Gellert Grindelwald's childhood dream was to be the Master of Death, no less. After finding and deciphering the codex with Dumbledore's help, he ran off and used it to create his Compass of Chaos. From there, he must have felt overpowered and probably realized a few wishes particularly close to his heart for years, like seizing the Elder Wand. Thereupon, he took power over the world little by little, spreading doubt and fear around him.

Wonderful, really... The trouble is, I can't see how that helps us find the Death Eaters."

Hermione pouted, annoyed.

"I don't know exactly, Ron..." she admitted. "But I think these are details that count, don't you?"

Harry was half-lost in his thoughts, connections making and unmaking themselves in his mind at a dizzying pace. Outside, a gust threw a few ice crystals tinkling against the windowpane and the fireplace began to roar lazily beside them.

"I think I have a lead," said Harry suddenly. "It's worth what it's worth, but..."

Despite the fatigue accumulated during their recent Quidditch session, he felt an irrepressible need to move. He stood up and began to pace around the sofa from which Ron, Hermione, and Ginny watched him with curiosity mixed with hope.

"I don't know if you remember... It was shortly after the start of term. I was looking for traces of the Death Eaters when Koulok chased me, one night. While fleeing, I ended up in a not very big room. At first glance, I was trapped and I really thought it was over, that he had cornered me for good... But looking a bit closer, I spotted a stone bearing the symbol of the Deathly Hallows."

"Incredible you found the cool to analyse every piece of the wall, and notice that in such a moment," cut in Ron, still half-prostrated. "If it had been me, Koulok would probably have caught me and chopped me into pieces to garnish his soup."

In reality, it was the essence of Fred that had helped Harry that night. Harry preferred to avoid talking about the strange phenomenon, however. Professor McGonagall might have seen it as further manifestation of the magic of Love, but it was not the time for another debate. He contented himself with continuing as if Ron had never interrupted him.

"When I pressed the symbol with the tip of my wand, it started to glow and a secret passage opened. That's how I was able to escape Koulok and cross the frozen lake to check the Lestranges' tracks, at the edge of the Silver Forest."

"You think..."

"I think we must look for other stones like that one, other clues bearing the symbol of the Deathly Hallows," affirmed Harry, eyes plunged into the flames dancing in the hearth, a few steps away. "Maybe that will allow us to advance. After all, if the Death Eaters are at Durmstrang, it's because Grindelwald returned there once adult; to carry out certain experiments there, to hide certain things there, or perhaps even both..."

Harry turned around and saw that Hermione, Ron, and Ginny looked just as worried as he did.

"One last point, before going to sleep on these fine words," grumbled Ron, shuddering. "If Grindelwald really created and used the Compass of Chaos in his quest for power, why didn't he keep it on him? Why wouldn't he have used it in his duel against Dumbledore?"

Everyone looked at each other with embarrassment.

"Good question... I'd like to tell you the Compass became unusable at some point, because it was damaged, or whatever, but something tells me the answer isn't that simple..." said Hermione after a heavy silence.

21. A DISTURBING WELCOME

The week separating Harry from his return to Durmstrang felt impossibly short, devoted almost exclusively to homework and revision for the end-of-year N.E.W.T.s. Still in shock from the unexplained phenomenon that had seen a good portion of the Hogwarts construction site suddenly evaporate, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had witnessed the spread of the wildest rumours.

"The last one I heard is that Peeves is behind it all," said Ginny with annoyance as they walked their daily route to the library. "What a bunch of Nifflers..."

"Peeves? Rubbish," sighed Hermione wearily. "And what motive have they found for him this time, pray tell?"

"I think it's the Hufflepuff fourth years starting that one. They say it's Peeves's way of expressing his displeasure with McGonagall."

"A bit excessive, even for Peeves! And why, is McGonagall giving him grief?"

"Apparently, she found a way to combine Snape's *Langlock* with a particularly nasty Bat-Bogey Hex—or something similar involving kicking backsides. Rumour has it she casts it on him every time she catches him acting the fool, which is to say, ninety-nine percent of the time..."

All four burst out laughing and resumed their trek to the library. Hours of relentless work later, they emerged and crossed the grounds in the freezing night to have tea with Hagrid, as was their current habit.

Frustrated by the construction site resetting to zero, the giant was often in a sullen mood that didn't suit him. Grumbling at the slightest provocation, he added ever more impressive quantities of whisky to his mug—or rather, his bucket—as the visits went on.

"That's the second time that thing's done this to us!"

"Hagrid, what if it's the manifestation of a rare creature?" Hermione suggested gently. "You know, like the mythical realm-swallowing monster

—the Oscarane—that appears from time to time to absorb everything in its path. They say their insides can hold entire worlds!"

"A small Oscarane then, a baby? Maybe, Hermione, but in that case, the beast is a right nasty piece of work. It even made our materials disappear... All that time, all that energy, all for nothing... FOR NOTHING!"

"Let's hope it doesn't come back to attack other parts of the castle," Ginny said anxiously.

"So far, strangely enough, it's only gone after the building site," Hagrid finally added in his deep, rumbling voice, before turning to grab another bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky.

Harry, like the rest of the group, tried his best to cheer the giant up. He and Ron had even recommended taking a few days off to clear his head with Charlie, the Weasley brother who lived in Romania and spent most of his time with dragons. In vain. Only Chick seemed capable of the feat of pulling Hagrid out of his gloom. Without really knowing why, the giant seemed to find an old friend in the little creature.

Hagrid wasn't the only one behaving strangely. Ever since the presence of the Death Eaters at Durmstrang had been made official, Neville seemed to be avoiding Harry and Ron as if they were carriers of Spattergroit.

"You must smell a bit strong," Harry had said to Ron later that evening, after Neville had dodged them once again.

"Be nice and spare me your ginger jokes, Harry. I don't really know what's bitten our smiling charmer. Just the other day, he walked down the dormitory stairs backwards; it looked a bit like dancing. He looked happy, I was happy for him... and then he noticed me and practically tripped over a rug trying to bolt."

"Hard to believe it was out of embarrassment, actually," Harry acknowledged evasively, before diving back into his Charms essay: *On the Practical Application of Conditional Enchantments*.

The day of the return to Durmstrang arrived under a grey sky, punctuated by irregular showers of snowflakes that speckled the robes of the students lined up on the platform. To Harry's great relief, many had answered the call, despite the repeated warnings from Professor McGonagall earlier in the holidays.

As the carriages filled with passengers and luggage, the Hogwarts Express whistled, and a large plume of steam covered the station approach. Despite

the deliciously soothing presence of Chick, Harry felt his heart clench. He glanced back to soak in the aura of his beloved school one last time, nodded to Hagrid and Professor McGonagall, then hoisted himself into the nearest carriage. Inside, he followed Ginny's red mane, and they both eventually settled into a compartment with Ron, Hermione, and Luna.

They were still busy heaving their trunks into the luggage racks when the compartment door slid open a few inches; just enough to reveal a young woman with pleasant features and blonde hair falling to her shoulders.

"Neville, over here! I think there's still a bit of room," said Hannah Abbott through the gap. "Well... if you don't mind squeezing up a bit for us?"

Neville appeared in turn, his cheerful face suddenly draining of colour.

"Oh, er... hi," he said after a moment's hesitation. "They... they removed some carriages from the train, did you notice?"

"McGonagall thought it might save us a few hours of travel," Hermione ventured. "Given that it's only the sixth and seventh years going..."

The group welcomed them warmly, and Neville went to sit at the far end of the compartment, next to Hannah.

"It's been a long time!" she exclaimed, beaming. "I'm glad to spend some time with you all."

"True, we've rather lost touch since the D.A. meetings in fifth year. But I see Neville has managed to keep an eye on you..." Harry replied with a smirk.

While his waxy complexion turned bright red, Neville grimaced tightly and grabbed Hannah's hand, as if to give himself courage.

"So... rumour has it the Lestranges are at Durmstrang?" he dared after a brief silence.

"That, I believe you've known since we joined the Aurors," Ron replied with a forced little laugh. "Come on, relax, mate. I was the one who suggested Harry leave you alone," he added with an approving nod.

"I mean, you're certain of it now. Aren't you?"

"Let's just say the odds are more than high, sadly..." Harry answered. "Dumbledore told us a lot at Christmas."

And they told Neville and Hannah the whole story. How Grindelwald was suspected of having created the *Compass of Chaos*, an artifact of insane power that would have made him the equal of Death itself; and how Voldemort and his Death Eaters had been made aware of its existence shortly before the Battle of Hogwarts.

"By the way, why didn't Voldemort go looking for the Compass himself?" asked Ginny at the end of the tale. "I'm not sure I understand."

"I have a theory about that," Harry retorted. "Let's say Voldemort was never the type to rely on others; it was always in his nature. And I think the prospect of relying on the Compass, on an 'Oracle', was less appealing to him than possessing the Elder Wand."

"What's more," added Hermione, raising a finger, "he wouldn't have had much time to devote to that particular search. Remember: he got hold of the wand, and right after that, we broke into Gringotts. That's when he realised we knew about the Horcruxes, and it turned all his plans upside down."

"That was so cool, the Gringotts job..." said Neville dreamily, before jumping with a surprised yelp.

Just like the last time, the train had suddenly begun its ascent. Reaching mid-height, between the ground and the greying ceiling of clouds, the Hogwarts Express banked before beginning a long turn towards the East. The tension of takeoff still present, Harry felt his insides knot as the castle and the neighbouring village of Hogsmeade slowly disappeared from his field of vision.

Would he ever see them again? The path he and his friends were now embarking upon promised to be fraught with danger.

"I'll never get used to it: flying trains, broomsticks, that sort of thing... It really isn't for me."

"In that case, you couldn't have joined us at Gringotts—I remind you we escaped on a dragon's back," Ron announced, puffing out his chest with pride. "This time, though, no more excuses. We need you."

"Yes, and we'll have to prepare a report for Dawlish," added Harry. "Something tells me that with the holidays over, he won't take long to come down on us."

Head lowered, looking a bit ashamed, Neville turned to Hannah. He must have expected a reprimand, for he looked surprised when she gently

stroked his cheek with the back of her hand.

"They're right. After everything they've done, the Lestranges deserve to be locked up. And even more so by you, Neville, so be brave. I believe in you," she added before kissing him.

The rest of the journey passed peacefully. As the Hogwarts Express cut through the air at full speed, Luna scanned the sea of clouds stretching beyond the compartment window in hopes of spotting *Schmuluks* (a sort of sky-dwelling dolphin that dived from cumulus to cumulus, spurting jets of steam from their blowholes); Neville and Hannah slept, wrapped in a touching embrace; Hermione alternated between Ancient Runes and her Head Girl rounds ("Brrr, it's a chore... I get vertigo every time I have to cross between carriages," she had confessed, returning dishevelled and completely frozen); Ron bit his lip, absorbed in his copy of *Tests to Help You Dazzle at Parties, Vol. IV*, fresh from Percy for Christmas; and Harry and Ginny immersed themselves in Niki Bravehunt's manuscripts, looking for the best way to tune their brooms for the upcoming Quidditch trials.

When they were finally on the verge of arrival, many hours later, Harry's watch read midnight. The train followed the same sort of winding path as the first time, skimming the snowy peaks that rose along its route, occasionally blasting through thick snowdrifts in sprays that glittered in the fleeting light of the compartments. As the distance separating them from Durmstrang shrank, Harry felt increasingly impatient. Had the Death Eaters taken advantage of the quiet of the Christmas holidays? Had they managed to pierce the secrets held within Gellert Grindelwald's old school?

Still lost in thought, Harry was suddenly snapped back to reality. Through the window, in the corner of his eye, a massive surface looking like old dented sheet metal began to glow with a menacing light. As they sped along, the glow soon filled the entire compartment, intensifying until it became almost blinding.

Harry understood and braced himself, grabbing Ginny's hand to squeeze it as hard as he could: the immense frozen cascade of the Initiate's Cliff was right in front of them, reflecting the glare of the locomotive's headlights straight into their faces. Worse still, judging by the speed and angle of approach, the Hogwarts Express was barreling straight into it. Impact was imminent.

Just as Harry squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation of the collision, the train changed course. The Hogwarts Express reared up towards the sky, and

Harry felt flattened, compressed by the G-force. Opposite him, amidst a mixture of cries of apprehension, Ron, Neville, and Hannah slid off their seats to land limply at his feet. In the time it took to realise they had just scaled the Initiate's Cliff in record time, the train levelled out horizontally before landing heavily, sweeping tonnes of snow around it and carving a trench a good twenty feet deep.

Moments later, the slide ended in a metallic screech that made their hair stand on end, and the locomotive gave birth, as if with relief, to an interminable "PSSSH-HH...".

"Given the choice, I'd have preferred to climb that bloody cliff on foot," said Ron a few moments later, sprawled on the floor like a starfish. "So, I'd give the driver a two out of five, because you have to admit that last-minute rescue had a certain style..."

"Oh, I felt more like I was on a reverse slide," Luna replied in her airy voice. "It was very amusing!"

Hardly had she spoken these words when the carriage emitted a lugubrious metallic groan. The next instant, all the train's lights went out with a sharp crack.

"Amusing... like *that*, you mean?" grunted Ron reproachfully.

His eyes adjusting slowly to the gloom, Harry felt his heart leap in his chest. The veil of powder raised by their arrival had settled. There, filtering from the top of the impressive cornice the train had just sculpted, shone an emerald green light he knew all too well. *The Dark Mark*, Harry told himself. The signature of Voldemort's faithful... Had it been cast over Durmstrang? Were they too late? Had Rodolphus and Rabastan LeStrange got their hands on the Compass of Chaos?

Nauseous, Harry simply pointed a finger at the emerald halo now flooding the compartment.

"My God, do you think it's...?" gasped Hermione, a hand over her mouth.

The words stuck in Harry's throat. He was suddenly too afraid to speak them. As if his answer alone had the power to seal their fate. As if it had the power to make their worst fears concrete, and bring the Dark Lord back from the dead once more.

"I have to go and see," Harry exclaimed. "I need to know for sure, now!"

He rushed at the compartment door, but barely had he poked his head into the central corridor when something slammed into him full force.

"Ouch! Potter! Honestly, what possesses you to barge out like that?"

Still half-dazed, lying in the middle of the corridor, Harry recognised the tall, thin silhouette topped with blonde hair that characterised Draco Malfoy. After rubbing his chin with a groan, the Slytherin lit his wand with an impatient gesture. He seemed more than annoyed, and his features were unusually drawn, like back when he had worked for months to infiltrate Voldemort's followers into Hogwarts.

Without a word, Malfoy loomed over him to his full height and grabbed him firmly by the collar. Instinctively, Harry sought his own wand. But moments later, he felt himself vigorously pulled forward and was already back on his feet.

"What game are you playing, Draco? It's them, isn't it?" exclaimed Harry, still half-stunned.

He pulled away from the Slytherin, took a step back, and added:

"If you tell us where they are, we can save you from the worst of it."

"Them? The worst? What are you talking about, Potter? I've been in the worst for months already!"

The compartment door slid open and Ron appeared.

"That's what we're talking about," he replied in Harry's stead.

With a gesture, he pointed to the cornice illuminated in green.

Malfoy considered them both with a tight smile and finally burst out laughing.

"Come on, come on..." he said after a few seconds, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. "I didn't come for that."

"We did, actually," Harry replied firmly, gripping his wand.

Again, the door slid open and the rest of the compartment—Hermione, Ginny, Luna, as well as Neville and Hannah—spilled out onto them.

"Woah, calm down..." Malfoy said, alarmed, suddenly surrounded. "You think what? That the Dark Mark is projecting that light from up there?"

"I don't yet possess the gift of seeing through walls of snow, Malfoy. You, on the other hand, have a little souvenir that should tell us more."

With a nasty sneer, Harry made a show of rubbing his forearm.

"It would be a good start if you were capable of seeing further than the end of your nose," the Slytherin replied in his drawling voice. "No, Potter. If it reassures you, my *little souvenir*, as you say, has remained quite quiet since last Halloween."

"He's lying!" cried Neville. "You... you can never trust Slytherins."

"You can never trust Slytherins!" repeated Draco, mimicking Neville as if he were a four-year-old.

"That's enough, all of you!"

Hands on her hips, Ginny glared at them fiercely.

"What are you doing here, Draco? And why give us all those expensive gifts at Christmas if you're going to be such a git just a few days later?"

"I'm not the one living in a rat hole, Weasley. And don't go thinking those were gifts... Trinkets, at best. I needed a new broom and they had a 'buy three' offer, so I took the lot, that's all. Actually, I came to ask for a bit of help. But deep down, I knew you noble Gryffindor hearts were no better than the rest. God knows what came over me."

With a violent shove of his shoulder, he pushed Neville aside, muttering something like, "If you want something done right, do it yourself," and stormed off down the corridor, still flooded with greenish light.

He had almost reached the end of the carriage when Hermione called out to him.

"Draco! Draco, what is it? What's wrong?"

Malfoy stopped dead as if hit by a Stunning Spell. He remained there, motionless, back turned to them for several seconds. Finally, at the cost of what must have been a harsh internal struggle, he called out in a strangled voice:

"It's Pansy. I don't know if she hit her head during the landing, or what... but I can't wake her up."

Hermione gave a gasp of surprise. Harry wondered if her reaction was due to concern for a student under her responsibility, or rather the fact that Malfoy had exceptionally shared his fears with them. Regardless, the news was received seriously. Together, they decided that Hermione and Ron would go to help Pansy in the rear carriage (Ron feared a Slytherin trap and insisted on joining her). Meanwhile, Harry and the rest of the team would clear a way to the surface to verify the presence of the Mark.

As the two groups separated, heading in opposite directions, Harry noted they weren't the only ones worried about the intriguing emerald atmosphere permeating the place. Along the carriage, many students were pointing fearfully at the green rim glowing at the top of the snowbank; others were pressed against the windows, twisted into grotesque postures, likely hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever the wall of snow above them was hiding.

They soon found the nearest exit, and Harry felt more nauseous than ever; a green light rippled at their feet, projected by the window of the large steel door facing them. *Please let it not be them, please let it not be the Mark*, he repeated incessantly in his head. He leaned his full weight on the handle but, as he feared, the door didn't budge an inch. It was frozen shut, probably jammed by the cubic metres of compressed snow on the other side.

"I'm afraid we'll get buried if we blast it too brutally," said Harry, turning back to the group. "Anyone have an idea?"

While Ginny, Neville, and Hannah shook their heads, Luna stepped forward.

"I'll handle it!" she said. "Tipping it into non-being should suffice."

There was a silence during which everyone looked at her blankly.

"Well yes, non-being, the whole thing! Look: *Evanesco!*"

Before Harry could do anything, a dark flash had shot from Luna's wand towards the door, making it vanish with a soft *pop*.

Behind it, the snow façade cracked for a moment but didn't collapse on them.

"And there we are!" she said with satisfaction. "Now, we just have to dig through the wall gently."

After congratulating Luna for her presence of mind, the group used a subtle blend of Reductor Curses and excavation spells to clear the tonnes of snow separating them from the surface. When they were finished, a thick cloud of powder floated around them like an opaque veil encrusted with precious stones.

One hand raised to ward off any potential collision, the other gripping his wand, Harry hurried through the curtain of glittering crystals. As he progressed, the emerald glow grew ever more intense, and he felt his heart racing. He wasn't far now. In a few moments, he would know.

Without warning, the landscape suddenly became clearer. Harry had just emerged onto the slight slope overlooking Durmstrang. Mouth agape, he stared at the spectacle unfolding in the sky, right above the castle's twisted towers. Ginny soon extracted herself from the trench and the cloud of powder enveloping her.

"A polar aurora!" she exclaimed amidst the green glow. "It's so beautiful..."

As if the phenomenon had been able to hear her, its brilliance intensified until it became almost blinding. Chick poked his head out of the neckline of Harry's robes and gave a small chirp of admiration.

"And to think, all this time I thought..."

"You thought? But what *did* you think, young Potter?" came a voice from behind him. A voice with a pitch so perfectly neutral—neither feminine nor masculine.

Harry turned to discover Halcard, the hunchback Koulok, and the huge black wolf at their feet. All three were looking down at them from the snow cornice raised earlier by the Hogwarts Express. Wrapped in a sumptuous silk cape with pearly reflections, Halcard descended to meet them with the grace and agility of a feline. It looked as though he was floating, his steps barely grazing the snowy surface.

"Well then," he said once he reached them.

He pulled up his collar, rolling his eyes until they settled on Harry.

"What did you think? Or rather, fear, Mr Potter? For judging by that look of yours, it is terror we are dealing with, not mundane disillusionment."

It took Harry a few moments to find his words. Without being able to explain what it was, something unexpected had happened when Halcard spoke.

"I thought it was the Dark Mark, Professor," Harry finally replied, pointing to the aurora undulating like a serpent in the obsidian sky. "I imagine I don't have to explain to you what that is."

"This welcome gift—artificially put in place by us to celebrate your return—confused with a sign of Evil? Did our delicate aurora inspire horror in our dear Auror-in-training? Decidedly, Mr Potter, your imagination plays nasty tricks on you. We can only hope that the altitude, or perhaps the Carpathian air, is not the cause."

Harry had the distinct impression Halcard was mocking him but judged it prudent to remain silent. Something else was occupying his mind, though he still couldn't say what. Chick must have sensed his unease, for he snuggled against Harry's cheek. In the cold of the night, his warm down emitted a comforting steam, and Harry gratified the tiny bird with a few strokes by way of thanks.

Moments later, students emerged one by one from the freshly dug snow trench.

"Miss Granger! What a joy to see you again," shouted Halcard, moving to meet her, his monstrous wolf dripping saliva at his heels. "A thousand infernal bats! Miss Parkinson does not look at ease..."

Lying arms by her sides, complexion livid and eyes half-open, Pansy was levitating above the ground at the level of Hermione's hip.

"I don't know, Professor," the latter replied feverishly. "According to Draco Malfoy, she fell into this state shortly before our arrival. I had to resort to a *Mobilicorpus* charm to move her without risking handling her directly. It was the best I could think of."

"Excellent, Miss Granger, excellent..."

Halcard knelt for a moment beside Pansy to inspect her, then summoned Koulok to carry her to the hospital wing. Malfoy, who was with them, showed some reluctance but eventually agreed. The hunchback and the two Slytherins left ahead of the others towards the castle. At the same moment, Halcard demonstrated his exceptional magical powers once more by clearing the tonnes of snow hindering the Hogwarts Express's takeoff with a single sweep of his sword.

The train was thus able to resume its flight. It began a tight turn beyond the castle towers and whistled in a generous plume of steam as it passed Malfoy, Koulok, and Pansy, already reduced to dark silhouettes, oscillating in the distance and contrasting with the radiant brightness of the snow, which seemed almost radioactive.

"I don't see what's 'excellent' about the situation," grumbled Harry to Ginny. "And what is this idea of conjuring an aurora borealis over the castle in a context like this? I find him increasingly fishy, this Halcard."

They were in the middle of the caravan of Hogwarts students, led a few dozen yards below by the master of the place, his wolf, Hermione, and Ron. At times, the luminous phenomenon took on fuchsia hues above their heads, offering a sumptuous spectacle.

"He doesn't inspire confidence in me either," Ginny confided in a low voice. "And I've just realised something that never struck me until now. Probably because there were too many new things to take in at once. Did you notice it, too? When he speaks?"

"There is a detail that caught my attention, but I can't put my finger on it," admitted Harry, trying to recall his very recent discussion with the Headmaster. "Actually, the more I think about it, the more I feel nothing fits with him. Every one of his gestures is both violent and gentle; he has neither the appearance of a man nor a woman... Same for his voice."

"Yes, and that's not all. Earlier, when he was talking to you, I noticed he was the only one not producing any breath mist."

In his mind, Harry rewound the scene of his last exchange with Halcard once more before stifling an exclamation.

"Well spotted, that was it! But in that case..."

"In that case, he's as cold as death, or something of the sort," Ginny resumed with utmost seriousness.

Perplexed, they continued their walk in silence.

They were approaching the drawbridge, with its massive chains whitened by frost, when Ginny spoke again:

"Now that I think about it, have we ever seen him eat anything? At every meal, he drinks his wine on his own, but that's about it."

"His wine, or anything else with the same colour. A potion, or even..."

"Or even... blood."

"The Headmaster of Durmstrang, a vampire?" murmured Harry, incredulous. "I doubt the parents would accept that; same for McGonagall."

Ginny simply answered with a sceptical look as they crossed the courtyard. As they passed, the lamp posts bowed one by one in a graceful curtsy, wrapping them in their golden light. Harry's brain, meanwhile, kept calculating at high speed.

"No, it's impossible," he finally said aloud, continuing his train of thought. "Vampires can't show themselves in broad daylight; we saw that again in Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Yes, Harry!" whispered Luna's voice behind them, making them half-jump. "And if you're interested in the subject, I can even lend you the

special issue on *Porphyric Hemophilia and Vampire Transformation* that Daddy just had published for Christmas!"

Harry politely refused. He was already cruelly short of time. He couldn't afford to waste any more flicking through the pages of a wacky magazine whose sources were all more dubious than the last. Furthermore, whether Halcard was a vampire or not was only a detail in the twisted puzzle he had been struggling to complete since his arrival at Durmstrang. All he could conclude at present was that Halcard was a strange and mysterious being. A being who seemed fully aware of the Death Eaters' presence within his castle, without it worrying him unduly.

This last point particularly troubled Harry. What degree of knowledge did Halcard possess regarding the Lestranges' plan?

The procession soon found itself before the immense double oak doors facing the statue of Nerida Vulchanova, the founder. From the front of the line, the big black wolf gave a howl, and the carved leaves opened of their own accord with a creak. The students welcomed the warmth inside the castle with relief, and soon, the Great Hall as well.

Seated before a plate of meatballs garnished with a copious portion of chips, Harry shared with Ron, Hermione, and Neville the suspicions he and Ginny had recently formed regarding Halcard.

"It's far from nonsensical, what you're saying," Hermione approved at the end of the tale. "It could even explain a lot of things."

Mouth full of potatoes, Ron stared at her quizzically. Hermione downed her glass in one go and took a deep breath:

"The fact is that Nerida Vulchanova's line died out centuries ago. You can believe me; I must have checked in a dozen different books. So, that story McGonagall told us a few months ago, saying the new Headmaster of Durmstrang was actually an heir of the founder; well, it didn't hold up anymore! Unless, of course, McGonagall was misinformed—which isn't like her—or the heir in question was centuries old."

"Which would make Halcard a good candidate," added Ginny, "provided he really is a vampire."

"Yes! Because, as I keep trying to get Professor Van Helsing to admit, no one so far has precisely established the lifespan of vampires."

"How is it we know so little about them?" asked Harry between bites. "Bloodsuckers aren't exactly common, but still."

"I know!" cried Ron, brandishing a chip in triumph. "It's simply because everyone who tried to study them died of old age before getting the answer!"

"That could be..." replied Hermione. "But writings tend to say it's because their subjects of study—the vampires—always end up disappearing, or escaping them, at one point or another. It's actually the only valid argument Professor Van Helsing has presented to me on the matter. Even if I'm personally more tempted to believe the minority of researchers who estimate that vampires simply end up withdrawing to take their own lives... When you think about it, eternal life can't be much of a gift."

"Take their own lives? When they'd be among the only ones unable to die of old age? That's rubbish!" choked Ron.

"And yet... For some, the absence of constraints is the enemy of art," Hermione retorted learnedly.

While the table digested this latest information, Harry risked a glance behind him, towards the staff table. Apart from his colleagues, a mound of black fur curled at his feet, Halcard was sipping his wine and looking amused, as if he had found himself in the middle of a most entertaining conversation.

"There remains the question of the light," Ginny resumed. "Halcard doesn't seem the least bit bothered when he's thrashing us from the top of the Dueling Tower during Battle Magic lessons. Yet, all that happens in broad daylight."

No one knew what to answer, and it was in meditative silence that they rose a little later to head for their dormitories.

Their last day of holidays, the Sunday preceding the start of term, was far less tranquil than Harry might have imagined. That very morning, while he had been tempted to discuss Quidditch strategy with Ginny and the other team members finally reunited, Hermione had descended upon him. After an hour of getting his ears bent and hearing catchphrases like "You've already accumulated enough backlog as it is, with your nocturnal excursions last year," or "June, and its exams, will knock on your door much faster than you imagine!", Harry had abdicated. Half-angry, he had spent the better part of his day nose in his books, finishing essays. He had

even—Hermione proving truly implacable—ended up getting a bit ahead on the coming week's lessons.

The next morning, during breakfast, while Ron was declaring with a rebellious air that they would never make him "one of those quill-and-parchment junkies", reality caught up with Harry like a whip crack. In a storm of small cries and frantic wing beats, the results of their mock exams dropped one after another onto their plates. Hands trembling, Harry unfolded the small parchment bearing the Durmstrang seal to discover he hadn't achieved a pass mark in any of the subjects covered. To top it all off, a ranking of the students had been established, positioning him in what must have been the bottom third.

"Don't worry too much, Harry," said Ron, who had obtained three of his five mock N.E.W.T.s. "That's exactly what mocks are for. And you probably would have got an 'Outstanding' in Battle Magic if the subject had been examined during this last session too."

"You had to expect it a bit at the same time, didn't you?" added Hermione, pinching her lip with a sorry look. "At the end of last year, you spent almost half your lessons sleeping because you were so exhausted. Oh, Harry... This time we'll go about it differently. We'll get there, and you'll pass. I promise."

But these words of comfort had only a meagre effect on Harry's morale. Barely had he received his results than he suddenly felt looked down upon by the other students in the class, as if many of his weaknesses had suddenly been exposed to broad daylight. Something he would gladly have done without.

His mood was still just as foul when they arrived at the top of the Dueling Tower, a good ten minutes later. It was still very dark, and despite a most physical ascent and his new dragon-hide jacket, the freezing atmosphere of the Carpathian winter made him shiver.

When Halcard and his wolf finally joined them, the sun was still only a flaming rim outlining the distant surrounding mountains.

"As of today, we are getting to the heart of the matter," he said, pacing the ranks, his wolf sniffing the students' feet here and there with appetite. "Non-verbal casting now becomes mandatory. We do not want to hear a single incantation! To prevent fraud, each of you will inflict a *Langlock* charm upon yourself before the start of your duel. Do not try to

circumvent this rule; we would know, believe us, and you would be severely punished."

A few disapproving grunts erupted among the students. Harry, for his part, greeted the news with an exasperated sigh. This year, Battle Magic had become the only discipline in which he excelled. Alas, this new constraint turned everything upside down. Casting a non-verbal spell in the middle of combat was pure prowess, and it was the very last thing he felt capable of at that moment. Why on earth did the start of term have to be so rough?

"Come now, to work!" cried Halcard, clapping his hands. "Hurry up and find an opponent; we start in a minute. No! No! And no! Look here, not you, Potter! Come over here instead. It is *us* you will face, as usual."

Harry felt all hope abandon him. It was too much. Too much for one bloody morning, he told himself.

Resigned, Harry stepped into the gloom towards the centre of the circle described by the tower top. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny watched him pass with concern. Once in place, he pointed his wand at his throat and felt his tongue stick to his palate, as if it had been pulled upwards by a large magnet.

Against the glowing backdrop of the Carpathian range, the professor bowed deeply. The scene might have appeared aesthetic had it not reminded Harry of a nightmare he had had a few weeks earlier. With the difference that, in that dream, he was standing on the branches of a gigantic tree when the duel began.

Mind numb with apprehension, Harry took some time to realise Halcard had straightened up. The professor opened hostilities following a most aggressive strategy Harry had learned to recognise. Often, his first three salvos of lightning bolts fused at an exceptionally fast pace. To have a chance of surviving, it required no less than two dodge steps executed with precision, as well as a carefully placed Shield Charm. It was a sort of test, a sizing-up that Halcard enjoyed provoking. Whoever survived it deserved to be fought seriously.

Although extremely destabilising, Harry had eventually understood that this opening gambit cost Halcard a lot of energy. Indeed, when he managed to withstand it, he could generally count on a few minutes of respite before the next major assault. Harry therefore made a first, then a second leap to the side, and invoked his Shield Charm without uttering a

word. But the dome that appeared to protect him was so weak it looked like a simple curtain of cloth. Battered from all sides, violently propelled by Halcard's spells, Harry knocked over several students training nearby as if they were common bowling pins. Finally, carried away by his momentum, he could not escape a terrifying fall from the top of the tower.

Halcard gave Harry no second of respite. As soon as the latter was brought back to the summit by one of the magical clouds patrolling a hundred yards below, the exercise resumed. Harry fell, again and again, unable to overcome the first assault. Each duel resembled the last. A deep frustration developed, gradually giving way to a stronger feeling.

"Enough!" cried Harry, beside himself. "I've had enough, I can't take it anymore."

Exhausted, he let himself fall to the ground.

"Enough? Certainly not. You will have all the leisure to rest when you are dead. In the meantime, stand up!"

Short of breath, Harry simply shook his head.

Halcard brought a hand to his mouth and let out a strident whistle. The nearest students immediately stopped fighting and soon turned towards Harry. As far as he could see, their faces betrayed a certain anxiety. Had he crossed the line? Was he about to receive a punishment for insubordination?

There was a sound of metallic chain, Chick emitted a frightened chirp, then Harry felt a hot, damp breath land on the back of his neck. Rage imprinted deep in its large purple eyes, maw wide open, curled back over whole regiments of murderous fangs, Halcard's wolf was preparing to devour him.

Without even noticing, Harry had got back up.

"Well, you see that you can!" chuckled Halcard. "Perfect, where were we?"

"Don't act as if you'd lost the thread!" flared Harry. "You've been practising the same opening since the start! And in case you hadn't noticed, I can't parry it. I hope you're having f... argl!"

Halcard had raised a finger, and Harry's tongue had suddenly frozen in his mouth.

"I beg your pardon?" sneered the professor, cupping a hand to his ear provocatively.

Harry felt his blood boil in his veins.

You, you're going to get it, he brooded internally before fixing Halcard with defiance.

To his great surprise, a voice answered him, somewhere in his head:

"Is it anger your soul is sweating at this hour? Let that fury slumbering within you speak, young man. Things will only be more entertaining."

Harry's fears regarding non-verbal spells, regarding his opponent's implacable strategy, everything had disappeared. Nothing else mattered to him now but making Halcard swallow his smug smile.

As predicted, the triple salvo of lightning arrived. By means of contortions bordering on acrobatic gymnastics, Harry dodged then placed his shield with perfect timing. Despite its apparent fragility, the spell held firm, enough at least to absorb his opponent's last curse.

The ball was in his court.

Without being able to explain what was happening, Harry gave Halcard, as well as the whole class who had stepped aside to watch them in silence, one of his finest duels. Something in him had begun to change. Fuelled by his spite, his mind showed astonishing vivacity. Harry felt connected to his wand as if it had always been an integral part of his body. Throughout the fight, his spells flowed at a rhythm he would never have thought possible back when he voiced them aloud. Twice, when Halcard had cornered him over the void, at the end of a beam of the tower, Harry had refused failure. From the depths of his being, a refusal, a sort of "No.", had resonated in his head. He had then managed to push his opponent back enough to regain the marble floor of the tower.

The fight must have raged for nearly twenty minutes, and Harry was at the end of his tether when the sun finally rose above the surrounding mountains. Halcard seized the opportunity. As if he were capable of flight, he made a leap that propelled him several yards to the side. Instinctively following his movement, Harry pivoted and soon found himself blinded. He desperately cast a defensive charm when something cold insinuated itself into his skull, freezing, petrifying his mind.

A voice he knew well then rang out inside him:

"Parried... and checkmate, dear Mr Potter."

Harry felt something slam into his chest before finding himself brutally thrown backwards. As he slid across the marble floor, half-paralysed by the

effects of the spell, time seemed to stop for a fraction of a second. A few dark silhouettes appeared to him, standing out in the dazzling clarity of dawn. Halcard's blade glinted one last instant, as did the medallion of his monstrous wolf and a few spectacle lenses belonging to the surrounding students, then Harry felt his stomach heave as he was sucked into the void, and tipped once more from the top of the tower.

"You... You cheated!" Harry exclaimed a few minutes later, beside himself.

"Come now, come now. You fought admirably, Mr Potter," said Halcard, looking genuinely delighted, while grabbing him with an icy hand to help him down from the *Nimbus Liberandum* that had just returned him to the tower top. "These holidays have done you good! We did not expect such a performance from you today."

"You infiltrated my mind! You used Legilimency to parry my Shield Charm!"

"Of course we did. You exceeded our expectations; it was only natural to go a little further; to estimate as accurately as possible how much your faculties had progressed."

Halcard raised his hands as if stating the obvious.

"Did you see, you others? Did you see how much faith can elevate you?"

"Faith, Professor?" said one of Vassili's close friends with a sinister look. "Like with rreligion?"

"Yes... and no, Gorgovski. The faith to which we refer is faith in yourself."

Vassili displayed a superior look and his comrades gave a nasty laugh.

"Not to be confused with that fallacious faith exuded by those whose ego overflows," added Halcard, casting a pointed look in their direction. "For it is obviously not by belittling those around you that you raise yourself up."

Vassili's face took on a pinkish hue that had nothing to do with the morning rays.

"Quite the contrary, it is on your capacity to measure your surroundings and your place within them with accuracy that your strength also rests.

Why does Potter, who figures at the bottom of the rankings, manage to do all this and not you, Gorgovski?"

Looking boorish, Gorgovski started.

"Wot? I didn' say nuffin!"

"Perhaps not. But you think rather loudly all the same, young man," retorted Halcard, bending down to pat his wolf on the neck. "Well, it turns out your comrade is full of resources. When he arrived at the top of the Dueling Tower this morning, Mr Potter was discouraged. Exasperated, even, when we forbade the use of spoken incantations."

Halcard raised his head towards Harry, as if to question him silently, and Harry felt himself blush despite himself. Never had he envisaged Halcard being capable of scanning such a spectrum of surrounding thoughts, let alone with such precision. He promised himself to be more vigilant when in the professor's presence before blushing even harder: Halcard's face had just been punctuated by an amused smile.

"Take a leaf out of his book. Potter achieved a veritable tour de force this morning," resumed Halcard, straightening up. "He put aside his fears, his doubts, or rather, he transformed them into a source of energy from which he drew throughout the duel. For you see, despite his poor results in the mock exams, Potter possesses an asset that few of you present here possess to this day. He knows himself. He knows, when he finally accepts to stir the depths of his soul, when he accepts to put aside the futile preoccupations that plague him, what he is capable of."

Harry nearly choked. Without even realising it, it was as if he had just been X-rayed by a frighteningly effective instrument. Never had he felt so seen through, except, perhaps, during his one-on-one sessions with Dumbledore.

After gratifying him with a light pat on the shoulder, Halcard sent Harry to rest for the remainder of the session. Drained for good of what little energy he had left, Harry didn't need telling twice and went to sit on the periphery, on one of the stone battlements bordering the top of the tower.

While the sun warmed his back pleasantly, he was joined by the big black wolf who came to settle at his feet, as any good pet might have done. Half-reassured, Harry had a sudden thought for Hagrid. Despite everything that had just happened, the latter wouldn't have hesitated a second to plunge his hands into the monster's curly coat to cuddle it.

The beast and he remained thus side by side for a good while, watching the merciless duel Draco Malfoy and Vassily Krum were fighting before their eyes.

It was nearly noon when Halcard announced the end of the lesson.

"It's not fair!" cried Ron as they descended the interminable and winding staircase of the tower. "I was doing much better before they imposed those bloody non-verbal spells on us."

"It's only a question of discipline," retorted Hermione, who had finished her session by brilliantly disarming one of Durmstrang's best students. "You must stay focused on your objective, on that and nothing else; and you must believe in it. That's all!"

"I don't see how I could stay focused for nearly four hours straight without eating. Remind me to take second helpings at breakfast next time we have Battle Magic."

"As if you needed us for that," said Ginny.

Ron's mood indeed improved throughout the meal. He even displayed a cheerful face when the time for Transfiguration arrived in the early afternoon. The room had been cleared of the chairs and tables usually distributed in rows facing the dais, in view of the lesson awaiting them: human transfiguration. Gathered in pairs, the students received the objective of giving their partner the appearance of a desk of the same kind as those on which they generally took their notes.

Although demanding, the session turned out to be most amusing.

"You look like you've been doing this all your life, you know!" shouted Ron as Harry got down on all fours in preparation for the transformation.

While Harry made a mental promise to give Ron a good kick up the backside as soon as roles were swapped, he felt his limbs stiffen and suddenly elongate.

"What is that thing?" cried Ginny, who was practising with Hermione right next to them. "Did you cross it with a yeti, your desk?"

"Oops! Sorry, mate, I wanted to make you a slightly 'cosy' desk but it didn't really work out well. *Finite!*"

Harry felt an intense tickling as the long hairs that had sprouted all over him retreated back into his skin. A few seconds later, he had regained his appearance and his body, though numb, was responding to him again.

"So, what's it like being a piece of furniture at the forefront of the new aesthetic?" asked Ron, passing a hand under Harry's arm to help him up.

"I think 'weird' is the term that fits best," replied Harry, scratching vigorously where his hair had taken the longest to withdraw. "I was totally immobilised, like after a Stunning Spell, but without the painful shock that goes with it. On the other hand, it looks like your spell has flared up my stiffness," he added with a grimace.

After some three hours of relentless attempts, Harry had the satisfaction of having almost entirely achieved the objective. Only one leg of the "Weasley Desk" obtained still displayed the striped pattern of Ron's socks.

The bell sounding the end of their first day was welcomed with joy and good humour. Even the animosity opposing Malfoy and Krum turned to laughter when one ended up with a wooden leg and the other with a metallic nose a good twenty inches long.

Evening came, an interminable homework session behind him, Harry blessed the moment he could finally draw the curtains of his four-poster bed and lay his head against his pillow. It was nearly one in the morning. Through duels and repeated transfigurations, his muscles were on fire, and the headache that had taken him since his duel with Halcard still hadn't let go. Half-consciously, wrapped in his duvet, Harry felt himself drift off; lulled by the subtle brushing of snowflakes hitting the windows outside, in the freezing cold of the night.

He felt himself tip over before falling into absolute blackness, first slowly then faster and faster. An indigo star eventually appeared in the distance while Harry struggled as best he could, falling ever lower—or higher, perhaps—in this universe of disturbing emptiness. Without intensifying, the indigo glow grew little by little until it took the size of a coin, then a hoop, and finally a large circular basin.

Doing his utmost to minimise the imminent impact, Harry contorted himself with all his might. He landed in the basin quite straight, feet first. The liquid into which he had just sunk treated him as if he were a sort of air bubble, and Harry didn't need to swim to find himself very quickly at the surface. There, he found a cylindrical islet barely big enough to accommodate him but onto which he managed to hoist himself without difficulty, so much did the liquid repel him, as if it had sought to get rid of him.

When Harry had finally regained his breath and his wits, he became aware of the heavy silence that had taken hold of the place. Only the scraping of his feet on the ground remained audible; the rest, including the slight lapping that had accompanied his ascent, had disappeared. Harry didn't take long to understand: incredible as it might seem, the basin had frozen; or rather, its contents had solidified. The matter surrounding him now gave the impression of flat, smooth marble. Dark marble, run through with veins of indigo accents recalling the reflections of the wavelets still present moments before.

"None of this makes any sense," Harry heard himself think aloud. "And where do these reflections come from? Where did the light from earlier go?"

As if the strange universe in which he had found himself had heard him, a soft dark blue glow, slightly purplish, appeared above his head.

"Let there be light. Ask, and you shall receive, young Potter," said a familiar voice.

The glow descended slowly vertically, straight onto Harry who recoiled. The thing approached, and Harry distinguished what must have been a large pair of wings glowing in the darkness. Then there was a sharp sound as the strange luminous phenomenon landed, raising a large cloud of inky blackness in its wake.

The cloud dissipating little by little, Harry thought he recognised a silhouette. There, only a few yards in front of him, a shadow resembling that of a man was straightening up.

"What light do you need? With which guide do you wish to commune?" said the man.

With a leisurely step, he advanced towards Harry, who backed away further.

"You want to help me? Is... is that it? That's very kind of you," said Harry.

As the silhouette advanced gently in his direction, Harry narrowed his eyes. This man had already visited him in a dream before. But once again, his face appeared as nothing more than an indistinct shadow, so blinding had the indigo light emanating from his chest become.

"Our hand is extended to you," acquiesced the silhouette.

Harry thought he saw a hand with long, hooked nails rise in his direction, and a shiver of terror ran through him.

"In the world I come from," cried Harry, half-strangled by fear, "services are rarely free!"

The luminous shadow seemed to be gaining ground, and Harry broke into a trot, without really bothering to look where he was going.

"The company of your soul will be amply sufficient," said the shadow, quickening its pace in turn.

Harry was running now. Short of breath, the patterns of the marble floor scrolled under his eyes at an ever-faster rhythm. He dared not look back, for fear of discovering how much ground the thing had gained on him; or what would happen if it caught him.

"Come back..." went the thing in a wail to curdle the blood. "Come back!"

"You're the one coming back from the dead! Leave... me... alone!"

WHAM! Harry had hit a hard surface full tilt and landed on his backside. It was a wall. A wall that seemed to extend all around the vast room into which he had fallen. He was trapped.

Jaw aching, stars dancing in his field of vision, Harry narrowly avoided the clawed hand that had deployed to seize him. He veered off and started running again until he was breathless. There had to be a way out somewhere, a solution that would allow him to escape this nightmare.

"It is a waste of time; no exit exists. We built this place so that, this time finally, you would not manage to give us the slip," said the man's voice.

Harry ran, ran, and ran some more. But as he became familiar with the place, the threat of the thing was confirmed. There was nothing, no door, no breach, no trapdoor, no secret passage he could have used to flee. And, meanwhile, the shadow advanced on him with a serene, implacable step.

"Join us, young man. Great things await us."

Harry had reached a new dead end. He glanced over his shoulder and discovered with horror that the shadow was still behind him, a few dozen yards away.

"Damn it, if only I could transform into a chair, a table, a piece of wood. Anything that would let me blend into the scenery!" Harry told himself quietly.

Wand above his head, he tried to cast the spell he had learned earlier in the day. In vain. And the shadow still approaching; its arms, its hooked hands deployed, ready to seize him, ready to seize his soul...

Harry made a leap to the side to avoid contact with the thing and ended up tripping, sprawling full length on the ground. Face pressed against the freezing marble floor, a crazy thought came to him. If only he could transfigure himself, if only he could become—be at one—with the rock! And as he concentrated with all his might to disappear in any way possible, while the rattle of the thing became ever more distinct, he sank.

He was lying in water, or rather in the curious liquid into which he had plunged upon arriving in the room. Barely a few inches above him, on the other side of an invisible barrier, the blinding shadow had immobilised. It sniffed the air insistently, snorting grossly. A bit like Koulok, when he tried to spot a student who shouldn't have been out of their dormitory after dark.

Harry dared not move a muscle. Without being able to explain it, he seemed perfectly capable of breathing despite his immersion in the liquid. On the other side of the interface separating them, the thing recoiled. It seemed destabilised.

Harry felt his heart accelerate in his chest. What if in this part of the dream, in this lower zone where he wasn't supposed to be, the walls that had hindered his escapade earlier didn't exist? What if the long-sought exit was just a little further away?

Cautiously, Harry extended his arms and folded them along his body to propel himself. He felt himself drift, pressed against the strange interface separating him from the world above.

He was moving away; he was going to make it. He knew it. As he slowly approached the enclosure, his heart began to beat harder and harder. So hard that his pulse soon echoed against the interface.

The shadow turned, uttered an inhuman wail, and rushed in his direction. Harry paddled with all his might; the limit of the enclosure was not far now. Above him, he could see each of the man's strides imprint a circular wave on the surface of the liquid in which he struggled.

He was close, so close.

The man knelt and began to strike the ground like a madman. With each of his blows, the interface cracked as a sheet of ice would have done.

He seemed to hesitate, then finally added:

"It was you, you alone. You were strangling... yourself."

22. ON THE TAIL OF GRINDELWALD

For fear of losing Ron's newfound trust, and seeing how his friend's face fell as he recounted his nightmare to his dormmates, Harry was careful not to explain that this wasn't the first time he had dreamed of such a scene. He took particular care to conceal his conviction that it was the very same person visiting him again and again in these disturbing dreams. A person whose resemblance to Halcard was unsettlingly close.

The week continued as painfully as it had begun. Tuesday evening, as well as a good part of the night, was devoted to writing the report for Dawlish. It was with pasty mouths and eyes red from lack of sleep that Harry, Ron, and Neville entrusted their precious work to Hannah's little tawny owl. All the information gathered at Hogwarts was in there, along with an eloquent conclusion detailing just how alarming the prospect was of two of Voldemort's worst lieutenants getting their hands on an ancient artifact that had belonged to Grindelwald.

On Friday morning, Dawlish's reply was dropped unceremoniously into their respective bowls of cereal. To everyone's surprise, the Head of the Auror Office had returned their report, having simply crossed it out with a large red X. The rest of the message was of the same ilk. Further down in his letter, he had awarded them a series of grades, each worse and seemingly more arbitrary than the last.

"What kind of scam is this? How come you got 'Acceptable' in 'Teamwork' when we got a 'Dreadful'?" cried Ron after he and Neville, who could hardly believe their eyes, had swapped letters. "What teamwork? We didn't see you all last term."

"It's the only decent grade I got. But it really makes no sense, I agree. Sorry, Ron," Neville replied, looking embarrassed. "I must be the one he hates the least, or something."

"Or he's hoping to stir up trouble," observed Hermione, outraged. "It's incredible that Kingsley could appoint someone like Dawlish to head that department. It's as if we never really knew Kingsley, either. Honestly, I struggle to understand it."

Worse still; at the end of his letter, Dawlish had issued them a formal warning: "for lack of conclusive results". Something which, as Ron explained, risked sticking to them for the rest of their days; for a second warning sounded the death knell for any career at the Ministry, whatever it might be.

If Ron and Neville received the bad news with despair, Harry was surprised by the ease with which he managed to transform it into fuel for the fire already burning within him. Perhaps it was linked to the fact that his start to the term had been far less comfortable than his friends'.

In any case, *Dawlish and his stupid threats can go to hell*, Harry brooded a few hours later as he headed to Defence Against the Dark Arts. *The Lestranges are about to unleash something far more serious than a warning out of nowhere.*

The lesson on "hybrid beings" proved more interesting than Harry had anticipated and even managed to hold his attention for a good while. Professor Van Helsing kept warning the class about the high uncertainty accompanying the union of two beings from genetic families that were too distinct. To hear him tell it, it was so difficult to determine the characteristics and viability of the offspring of such liaisons that they were often forbidden.

While Van Helsing listed the rare cases of hybrids recorded over the last three centuries, Harry had a thought for Ted Lupin. The orphan son of Nymphadora Tonks (a Metamorphmagus capable of taking almost any appearance without even a wand) and Remus Lupin (a wizard who had become a werewolf at a very young age), the child had every chance of turning out to be one of a kind. Ted was also Harry's godson, and leaving the classroom, Harry had only one thing in mind: to offer the next generation a better future, as devoid of Dark Wizards as possible.

So, when the weekend came, Harry redoubled his efforts: whether hunched over his homework at three in the morning; during Quidditch practice the next day, Saturday afternoon; right up until the long-awaited Long-Nosed Ghost burst into the common room on Sunday evening.

"You, at last!" cried Harry, jumping up with a start despite his aching muscles. "I was beginning to lose hope."

It was past midnight. Outside, the wind was driving thick snowflakes against the tower, making the windows rattle in their frames. The ghost

had appeared in front of the stove, the firelight lending a benevolent warmth to his usual whitish hue.

He favoured the group with a small bow, but his head was still lowered when he spoke:

"Like Perseus facing Medusa in days of yore, Into these troubled lands I slide, across the floor. Blindly, backwards, for a force most malefic, By unknown magic, halts my flow specific."

Harry felt his heart clench in his chest. Since returning to Durmstrang, it had been almost impossible for them to devote more than an hour or two a day to searching for traces of Grindelwald. There was so much to do: lessons, homework, revision, practice. And when it wasn't all that, they still had to waste time informing an idiot boss who had nothing better to do than put obstacles in their way.

But if Dawlish was an idiot, what about him? Him, Harry Potter, who had harboured the hope that a moody ghost would return sooner or later with the solution, or at least a decent lead.

"Nothing new for us then?" said Hermione, disappointed, after a brief silence.

With a military gesture, the spectre clicked his heels and puffed out his chest.

"Madam, know that despite the loss of my flair, To satisfy you is my primary affair. Thus, your valiant *Prodromos* returns to his quest. We must keep hope, and put this search to the test."

Then, as if this lack of results constituted a stinging failure, he bowed without warning and began to disappear little by little into the floor, like a candle melting in fast-forward.

"I hope he didn't take it the wrong way," Hermione worried. "I just wanted to make sure I'd understood everything. He has a funny way of speaking sometimes."

"If you're having trouble understanding him too, that reassures me," sighed Harry.

"Wait!" cried Ron, interrupting the ghost, of whom only the feathered hat was still visible, floating a few inches above a rug. "The other day, you said you went as far as Venus. You meant the planet, in space, didn't you?"

The spectre's large plumed hat dipped and rose gently, in a sort of shy nod.

"Well, I wanted to know... I mean, I've been wondering for a while now, assuming you managed to get up there by propelling yourself with your breath, once you were there, how did you get back? You were surrounded by vacuum and you wouldn't have had any air left to propel yourself again. So, how?"

"Dear friend, once more I used the laws of physics. Nothing exotic, 'tis simply ballistics! Floating in the cruel infinity of space, I caught a comet, and held its embrace. I sailed the void towards our mother: Earth. The rest you know, for you no mystery lies there!"

"Almost makes you want to be a ghost," said Ron dreamily as their visitor vanished for good. "Just to see all those beautiful things."

"It's nothing beautiful for me, but it's Pansy's face right now that I'd like to see," said Ginny. "In theory, her dormitory—hers and her Slytherin gang—should be right underneath us. Seeing three-quarters of a ghost dangling from the ceiling at this time of night must be quite a shock!"

"Oh, I doubt she can witness the show," retorted Hermione. "She was very ill; they kept her in the hospital wing. We shouldn't see her in class until the start of next week."

"Good thing, after all. Draco was really terrible at practice yesterday. So if getting his girlfriend back can do him some good, it can only benefit us too."

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Maybe what, Harry? I certainly hope he plays better! You wouldn't want us to take Smith back on the team, would you?"

"Maybe there are more serious things. Maybe we should organise ourselves better to find these bloody Death Eaters," replied Harry, head in his hands. "At this rate, I'm afraid they'll slip through our fingers. Them, and the Compass."

"You're being a bit harsh there, I think! We're already doing everything we can, I'll have you know," cried Ron. "If I sleep five hours a night at the moment, that's better than good. Six, and it's a proper lie-in!"

Neville's head emerged from a pile of books and blankets resting near the stove on a club armchair. Chick and Crookshanks, who had fallen asleep nearby, jumped up in a concert of cheeping and reproachful meows. Dislodged, they rushed without delay towards a far quieter shelter: Hermione's armchair.

"Harry's right," said Neville. "If what you told me is true, the risk is too great for us to leave the field open to the Lestranges like this."

"But we're not going to skip lessons!" cried Hermione, raising her hands to the heavens, provoking the indignation of the mass of down and fur just curled up on her lap. "The teachers would notice, we'd be expelled immediately! And without access to the castle, we'd have no chance left at all."

"That wouldn't be such a big problem," Harry retorted. "I've already found a secret passage that lets us come and go discreetly. You know, down below, just under the Owlery."

"That's not what I have in mind. I don't think there's any need to miss Quidditch practice either," Neville hastened to add as Ginny crossed her arms fiercely. "I want to see Hogwarts triumph over Durmstrang in the tournament as much as you do."

"Maybe if there were more of us..."

"I doubt that's the solution," cut in Neville. "We can't let the whole school in on our plans. We'd lose what little control of the situation we have; we're risking enough as it is."

"In that case, what do you propose?" asked Harry and Ron in unison.

"I've thought about it a lot, you know. All week, and even before, when we were still on the Hogwarts Express."

Wrapping himself in a triple layer of blankets as if preparing to brave the High North, Neville stood up and began to pace the common room. As he did so, he presented a plan whereby Hermione would handle everyone's homework after classes. She would also be responsible for preparing lesson summaries and organising special practice sessions once a week, so that everyone could improve their grasp of the seventh-year techniques. Meanwhile, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and potentially Luna would busy themselves searching the castle from top to bottom for traces left by Grindelwald. At night, after curfew, one or two people would continue the search under Harry's Invisibility Cloak while the others revised or prepared for future excursions.

Neville's plan was put into action the very next day. While the first few weeks that followed didn't yield many discoveries, everyone noticed a vast improvement in their daily quality of life. The experiment even proved beneficial for Hermione. By forcing herself to formulate lessons more concisely and leading the practical sessions, her mastery of the curriculum

increased tenfold. She even discovered how much she enjoyed teaching. An activity for which the group complimented her many times, so gifted was she at helping others understand and learn (to her great pride, Ron even went so far as to shout one evening: "Hermione! That's brilliant! If, instead of spending all my days listening to those rambling old fogeys, I'd had you as a teacher, I could have passed my O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in fifth year!").

Harry, too, could feel the benefits of this division of labour. Alas, in his case, the time saved thanks to the new organisation didn't allow him to increase his sleep quota. He would have loved to take even a few hours of rest away from his worries. A cosy bed, a sofa, even a simple armchair would have done the trick. But the problem wasn't so much the quality of the furniture provided by Durmstrang. His sleep was increasingly tormented. Often, Harry would drift off only to find himself plunged into the strange circular room, chased by that monstrous man whose face remained hidden behind a halo of purplish light.

At first, Harry simply reproduced the moves that had worked for him in a previous nightmare. He would lie on the ground then pass through the floor like a ghost to find himself under the interface, immersed in the intriguing liquid that treated him like a large air bubble. He would then swim fast enough across the basin to reach the boundaries of the dream before the thing had time to catch him. A long fall would follow, and he would wake with a start in the dormitory, pyjamas soaked in sweat.

Escaping the dream, however, became increasingly difficult. Over time, his opponent had shown adaptability. Every time Harry managed to reach the basin by disappearing under the strange marbled floor, he could feel the monster trying to insinuate itself into his head, as if trying to see through his eyes to locate him more quickly.

For fear of discovering what awaited him if his aggressor laid hands on him, Harry had gradually developed a sort of counter-move. When he felt the monster trying to intrude on his mind, he imagined a scene different from the nightmarish reality he was experiencing. Instead of seeing the monster head-on, its clawed hands and blinding light advancing towards him, he deceived it by picturing the shadow of its back. The thing was then disoriented for a moment, and Harry took advantage of it to flee. The manoeuvre was difficult to execute, however, and the subterfuge didn't always work. Each time, it was a close shave to avoid the man, or rather the thing, intercepting and catching him.

Fortunately, during this time, the group's research was progressing.

The first two serious leads were found in quick succession by Ginny in mid-February. They were tiny marks, barely visible, carved into the stone, which she spotted no doubt thanks to the visual acuity she had developed through Quidditch training. Galvanised by this unexpected success, Harry found a third Deathly Hallows symbol the following week, then it was the turn of Luna, Neville, and finally Ron to find a new clue.

"So, Ron, your find last night?" asked Harry impatiently, blowing into his hands to warm them.

"In the Trophy Room, believe it or not!" cried Ron, pleased with himself. "To think it was right under our noses all this time."

Weary of spending their days and nights cooped up revising and exploring, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna had gathered in the late afternoon in a small courtyard in a remote corner of the castle. The place had the advantage of being rarely visited and offered a splendid view of the surroundings. Below lay the frozen lake, pleasantly reflecting the shy rays of the setting March sun; then came the Silver Forest, with its expanse of firs covered in a coat resembling thick cream; and finally the peak of the Devil's Horn, as proud and formidable as ever.

"The Trophy Room, on the fourth floor of the central tower? You're joking? I must have walked past it three times!" cried Neville in a burst of frustration.

"You needed a hawk's eye to get that one, mate."

"A buzzard's eye, you mean..." retorted Ginny with a mocking smile. "So, go on, where?"

"You see the display cabinet, the one containing that old trophy stamped 'H. D. V.' awarded to the very first Triwizard Tournament champion? Well, on a flagstone behind the cabinet. I pressed the Hallows symbol and a section of the wall slid open."

"And the Compass wasn't there, I imagine?" said Harry, despite a flicker of hope.

"No, definitely not. If it had been, you can believe I wouldn't have waited for classes to finish to give you the details. No, there was a passage. It led to a small square room. Grindelwald's old office, I reckon. Grim. Everything was black—the furniture, the walls, everything. And then I had the fright of my life once inside. The panel closed, and when I lit my

wand, a strange elongated skull sitting on the desk started speaking to me in an incomprehensible language."

"Perhaps it was the language of our ancestors," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Those from before the Great Regression, who made the first Oracles."

"Quite possibly. On the parchments spread out on the desk, it was often scribbled: 'Codex - something!'" exclaimed Ron. "I think we can see this as further proof of what we're almost sure of now: Grindelwald conducted research in every direction to make his Compass of Chaos!"

As Ron brandished a victorious fist, the sun passed behind the Carpathian peaks, tinting the landscape with a bloody veil.

"It doesn't add up," muttered Harry. "There's one missing..."

"The last path is missing," intervened Luna in a calm, dreamy voice, "the last passage. We're only at six for the moment."

"What do you mean?" said Ron and Neville in unison.

"One, two, three, four, five, and six."

"Thanks Luna," said Ginny, "we can still count."

But Luna ignored the remark and continued on her roll.

"The secret passage under the Owlery, to enter and leave the castle; the one in the secret library, with the nasty books; the one in the office Ron just found, to study in peace; the one in the torture chamber, where Grindelwald must have experimented on other students; the one in the Pensieve room, with all the broken vials; and the passage near the hanging botanical gardens, blocked by a magical cave-in we couldn't clear," Luna listed, unfolding her fingers one by one. "That makes six, not seven. One is missing!"

"What makes you say Grindelwald created seven secret passages? Why not eight, nine, or thirteen while we're at it?"

"Because seven is the Number of Power," replied Luna as if it were obvious.

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Ron, before doubling over in nervous laughter. "You know, Luna? No offence, but I don't think Grindelwald was as superstitious as the average *Quibbler* reader."

"She's not wrong," intervened Hermione.

Everyone except Luna looked at Hermione as if she had just announced the Earth was flat and she planned to lead an expedition to prove it herself.

"I agree with Luna," she insisted. "You don't embark on the quest for the Deathly Hallows, you don't seek to be the equal of Death, without being a little superstitious. Voldemort, who had a different vision of omnipotence to Grindelwald, also believed in the importance of the number seven. They weren't the first, they won't be the last. Believe me, you only have to see how much that number has influenced our history over time. They even talk about it in *New Theory of Numerology*."

Assuming Luna was right, and having no other leads, the group continued their search. This decision, although inevitable, was hard to accept. There was nothing to say the Lestranges hadn't already found the Compass. Furthermore, Koulok, who seemed to suspect something had been brewing for a while, represented a growing threat to those who ventured out of the dormitories at night under Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

Another week of relentless work passed. Despite sleep levels at an all-time low, combined with the burden of hunting Death Eaters and traces left by Grindelwald, Harry held on. Knowing that, around him, his friends were giving their all constituted a real bulwark for his will. Supported by Hermione, Harry even began to perceive his lessons differently. through diligent application, the curriculum appeared less and less like a patchwork of notions stitched together by twisted logic. The details gradually sharpened along threads of continuity whose subtlety had escaped him until now.

"Why did it take them all this time to tell us that," grumbled Ron, "can anyone tell me?"

They were leaving one of the best Charms lessons Harry had ever attended. On their way to the common room, the stained-glass windows, depicting scenes of wizarding life dating back centuries, dimmed gently as the late March sun set beyond the school walls.

"I felt stupid too," admitted Harry as the torches on the walls flared to life around them with a great *WHOOSH!* "'The wand, an artifact for channelling the Wizard's magical power'," he repeated aloud, using Professor Boulik's terms. "It's so logical! And yet, I'd never thought of it before."

"Exactly! That explains why some young wizards manage to cast spells without even a wand," said Hermione learnedly. "They are capable of

magic intrinsically. But without the appropriate artifact, there is a significant risk they express it in a brutal and chaotic manner."

"Speaking of chaos, the Compass—would that be one of those artifacts that channel the bearer's magic?" asked Ron, returning a military salute to a suit of armour as they turned a corridor corner.

"Good question," replied Hermione. "It's surely much more than that. Actually, I imagine the Compass more as a source in its own right. Dumbledore said the soul trapped inside had no choice but to 'make its intellect and magical power available' to whoever wears it."

"I wonder what materials you need to create that kind of object," said Ginny thoughtfully.

They emerged into the Great Hall and quickened their pace as they reached the level of Yggdrasil, blackened and cracked all over.

"Material charged with evil power, surely," answered Ron. "Yew wood for example, according to what Boulik just told us."

"Yew confers upon its bearer a certain power of life and death..." recited Hermione, repeating a passage from their last lesson word for word.

"Hey, not so fast you two! My wand is yew, I'll have you know," exclaimed Ginny with a sudden worry that didn't suit her.

"The perfect proof by example," retorted Ron with a smirk. "Allow me to introduce Ginny Weasley: She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Argued-With-Or-You'll-End-Up-Bald. A terrifying scourge," he added as if announcing an imminent plague.

Harry and Hermione burst out laughing. After a short moment of hesitation, Ginny joined in, then all four set off again towards the common room.

That night, Harry was on watch. Snuggled against Ginny on a sofa near the stove, it was nearly ten o'clock when he finally finished rereading *Holy Water: From Preparation to Power over the Undead*. Harry closed his *Advanced Potion-Making* manual and wrapped himself up to his neck in his Invisibility Cloak.

"You'll be careful, won't you?" said Ginny, regarding him gravely.

Perched in Harry's messy hair, Chick let out a sharp little cry.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Ginny, but you're still struggling a bit to imitate your mother. Of course I'll be careful!" replied Harry. "I even

have a choice ally tonight, see?" he added, pointing to the top of his head.

In a burst of pride, Chick began to wriggle, cheeping even louder. Harry gave Ginny a final conspiratorial wink and crossed the common room. On the way, he waved to Ron and Hermione who were revising too. Ron, lying on a large beanbag; Hermione, sunk into a wide quilted armchair, with a sleeping Crookshanks acting as a throw.

Now fully hidden under his cloak, Harry was about to slip under the large arabesque-covered tapestry that served as the exit door when intense pain nailed him to the spot.

Just like last Halloween, a few months back, his scar had just woken up.

"Bloody hell!" burst out Harry, blinded by another flash of pain.

Half-stunned, he dropped to his knees. Chick began to cheep like a devil and, soon, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had gathered around them.

"As if I needed this right now," cursed Harry, freeing himself from the cloak in which he was tangled.

"Oh, Harry! You're really pale, is it your scar? Has it started again?"

Harry simply nodded.

"It's a very particular magical wound. It's possible you have relapses from time to time. You're giving a lot of yourself at the moment, you're very tired..."

"Hermione, that has nothing to do with it! My scar hurts because the Death Eaters are more active than ever!"

"Do you think they found it, the Compass?" said Ginny.

"I don't know. All I can say is it hurt very badly all of a sudden."

"A while ago, you could read Voldemort's thoughts with your scar," said Ron after some hesitation. "Couldn't you... concentrate, just to see what the Lestranges are doing right now?"

"That was something I was capable of back when a fragment of Voldemort was inside me," replied Harry with disgust. "As far as I know, that's all over."

"Try anyway, will you?"

On the verge of sending Ron back to his revision with a rude retort, Harry felt Chick's soothing warmth dull his pain.

"Why not, after all."

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and concentrated on the powerful pulse beating like a drum right in the middle of his forehead.

After a few minutes, however, he had to face the facts: he was unable to see or hear anything special.

"It's useless, that part of the link has been broken, it seems. And I'm not going to complain about it."

As Harry grabbed Ron's hand to get up, the room was suddenly flooded with a silvery glow. Appearing through a nearby wall as if it were a waterfall curtain, the Long-Nosed Ghost greeted them with his usual bow.

Looking a bit hurried, he hastened to declaim:

"Good evening, have you found that Mephistopheles, Whom you sought ceaselessly, without ease? Prepare yourselves, friends, fair Venus sends me here. In this moment, in this place ruled by fear, Dark things are brewing, evil is at play! Near the figures lies the shortcut, the way."

The ghost then invited them to follow him with a wave of his hand. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny barely had time to exchange a puzzled look before the spectre was already disappearing behind the tapestry.

"Hey, you, wait!" cried Ginny.

"Merlin's beard, he's moving like the wind. What's got into him?"

"We'd better warn Neville and Luna," said Ron. "If the spectre is telling the truth, if he intends to lead us to the Lestranges or... to the Compass, all six of us won't be too many."

"Ginny and I will handle it," replied Harry as his scar throbbed again. "You catch up with the ghost. And make sure we can find you without leaving too many obvious clues in your wake."

With that, Ron and Hermione disappeared in turn behind the tapestry, whose interlaced patterns rippled for a moment, long enough for Harry to realise that Ginny had already dashed off too. Knocking over a pile of large volumes left out by the other occupants of their common room, Harry rushed towards the boys' dormitories. Without caution, he woke Neville who was snoring quietly and threw his clothes in his face, explaining the situation as he did so.

"This time it's for real then?" gasped Neville, half-breathless, before pulling on his trousers. "Oh my god... Hannah was right, I never should have had seconds of that prune dessert tonight."

Neville still dishevelled, they rushed out of the common room at full speed. A simple granite corridor stretched before them, flooded with the blue-violet glow diffused by the torches once curfew had passed.

"Did he really say there was a 'shortcut' near an 'alley of figures'?" wheezed Neville painfully as they ran side by side. "What does that mean?"

"I don't really know," replied Harry, "that old fool always has to speak in riddles... What! Chick, watch out!"

It was the first time since Harry had met Chick that he saw him take flight. He had grown a little. So much so that watching him flit about, Harry had the image of a small scarlet sparrow, his downy plumage reflecting the surrounding light with the brilliance and iridescence of a peacock's tail.

Now leading them by ten yards or so, the bird eventually perched on a stone ledge, near one of the many torches suspended along the walls. As Harry and Neville approached, Chick began to cheep softly.

"What's wrong with him?" said Neville, breathless, "is he getting tired too?"

"No, it looks more like... Oho, well done Chick!" cried Harry. "Look, he's showing us the way! He found one of Hermione's clues."

Indeed, on a brick next to Chick, concealed by the torch's indigo heart, was a short segment of bluish flames like only Hermione knew how to produce.

"We need to turn at this intersection," resumed Harry. "We're on the right track."

Guided by a Chick who couldn't have been prouder, Harry and Neville ran for a few more minutes before running into the rest of the group.

"Shh, not a sound!" Ginny whispered to them with a finger to her lips.

She and the others, Luna included, were standing in front of one of the imposing double oak doors leading to the Great Hall. Crouched before the access, they looked worried. Frightened, even. Beside them, the Long-Nosed Ghost, who had finally ceased his infernal race through the castle, seemed to be waiting for Ginny to give them her instructions.

Harry buried a hand in his robe pocket in search of his wand and strained his ears. Besides the thundering beating of his own heart, he perceived a metallic sound, a sort of scraping.

"Koullok!" he exclaimed in a half-voice. "If he manages to smell us, if he sniffs us out, we're done for!"

"He's going to h-hunt us down... And this time, he'll see our f-faces!" added Neville in a hiccupping whisper. "The cloak will never be big enough to hi... to hide everyone."

As if that were the signal he had been waiting for, the ghost raised his head, his nose suddenly projecting its light onto them like the neon of a gaudy sign.

"The passage lies ahead, on yonder side, Fear not this toothless wretch, this mouth so wide. He is my task; you must pursue your way, The true evil is yours alone to slay."

Frowning with his impressive appendage, he drew a long rapier from his scabbard and threw himself through the wall, uttering a war cry.

There was the muffled sound of a few threats pronounced in old French, that of a piece of furniture being overturned, then the mingled cries of the ghost and Koullok faded into the distance.

"The way is clear," breathed Ginny, head in the gap of the double doors. "Let's go!"

23. THE ROOTS OF YGGDRASIL

Cautiously, on tiptoe, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna entered the Great Hall.

"You should get your wands out," whispered Harry, moving forward warily.

"Where are we going now?" asked Ron. "The ghost did say 'opposite', didn't he?"

"Yes. On reflection, when he spoke to us of the 'Alley of Figures'," replied Hermione, "he must have been referring to that immense elongated room. You know, the one with all the sculptures of the former Headmasters."

Hermione's interpretation was doubtless correct, for the access to the room in question was indeed a little further on, directly opposite their position. Discreetly, they made their way through the two interlocking circles formed by the Great Hall tables. As he did every time he passed through here outside of free-roaming hours, Harry couldn't help but gaze at the magnificent crystal place settings, resembling precious works of art carved from ice, which the elves had already laid out in anticipation of breakfast the next day.

Reaching the centre, they skirted the great dead tree, casting anxious glances all around.

"By the way, regarding Halcard, and the fact he's a vampire capable of living in daylight. I might... I might have an explanation," murmured Neville in a shaky voice. "You see that tree? I investigated it a while ago. Did you know it's an Yggdrasil?"

"You seem to forget we spend our time with Hermione, Neville," whispered Harry.

"So you know about the fruits?"

"The ones that are magical? And are capable of curing almost any form of life? Yes, yes, Hermione told us about that too," said Ron with a tinge of superiority in his voice.

"And about the roots, and the sap?"

Harry and Ron stopped, taking a moment to consult Hermione with a look.

"What? You don't know?" breathed Ron indignantly after a moment.

"I can't know everything, can I!" snapped Hermione in a tone that risked giving them away. "And besides, why should it always be up to me to know everything in the first place? I'd like to be able to count on you to teach me these things too, you know!"

"Me? What's the point? I'm not the one with ambitions to become Minister for Magic!" retorted Ron in an exaggeratedly pedantic tone.

Just as Hermione looked about to roar, Neville intervened.

"Easy!" he whispered. "What I know, I got from a little-known herbology book Professor Sprout gave me for Christmas."

They had now crossed the two circles of tables. The entrance to the sculpture hall wasn't far, right next to the large fireplace which projected the same indigo glow onto them as the torches along the walls.

"In the evenings, to help me sleep, Daddy used to tell me about them sometimes," said Luna suddenly. "He said the roots of an Yggdrasil were so powerful they could reach down to the centre of the Earth... to the Realm of the Dead."

"That's what I read too!" breathed Neville, impressed.

The mocking smile that had appeared on Ron's face transformed into a worried grimace.

"Quiet, we're there!" hissed Ginny reproachfully. "I'll remind you that if we get caught now, *we're* the ones who'll end up in the Realm of the Dead."

Harry lent Hermione a hand, and together they pushed aside the heavy crimson curtains barring their way. A moment later, the black and white chessboard of the sculpture hall stretched out before them, almost as far as the eye could see.

"And now? This place is huge, and there must be close to fifty statues. Where do we start?"

"Ron, stop looking at me like that!" growled Hermione. "I don't know where to go. You can look too, you know!"

"Oh, right... if a bloke can't even look at you anymore," replied Ron, raising his hands in surrender. "Right then, let's see: Piotr Gamp, 1515-1527," he added, planting himself in front of the sculpture of an old man busy scrutinising the contents of a test tube. "Gamp... Well, well, isn't he the reason we can't conjure food?"

"It's not *because* of him," fumed Hermione. "Gamp is known for being the first to identify the laws of Elemental Transfiguration, as well as their five exceptions; of which conjuring food from nothing is one..."

"That's all very well, but it doesn't tell us where to find the ghost's passage," said Ginny impatiently.

Both hurried and worried that the Long-Nosed Ghost's diversion might stop working, Harry broke away from the group and dashed down the aisle. He had passed through here dozens of times since arriving at Durmstrang; it was the only way to the East Wing of the castle. Through here, one accessed the Owlery, Potions classrooms, the kitchens... but never had he noticed the presence of any passage. What had the ghost told them before fleeing so precipitously?

"Venus, he spoke of Venus," Harry muttered to himself. "He's always talking about Venus."

The idea came to him after passing the statue of Harfang Munter (a small wizard with a sneering demeanor), just as he reached the sculpture of the sumptuous witch and founder of Durmstrang: Nerida Vulchanova. Despite the coldness of the marble depicting her, her appearance could perfectly have matched Harry's idea of a goddess of love. The inscription on her plinth, signed L.D., only reinforced this impression:

Through Passion, Blood, and Flames, We built this temple of Knowledge and Justice. Rest in peace, my eternal love.

Shaken by a shiver of adrenaline, Harry called the rest of the group to the rescue.

"She really is beautiful, it's true," appreciated Ginny a few moments later. "But I've looked everywhere, I don't see any symbol of the Hallows, or anything else that might reveal a passage."

"Just a moment," said Hermione, sliding her bag off her shoulder. "I'd like to take a look at *Great Wizarding Schools: A History*. There's a whole chapter dealing with Nerida Vulchanova."

After half-disappearing into her bag, Hermione emerged with a heavy volume in her hands.

"Let's see... Durmstrang... Nerida... Vulchanova... Ah, here it is."

Imitating Luna, Harry leaned curiously over Hermione's shoulder to better see the contents of the chapter on the founder. Meanwhile, Ron, Ginny, and Neville inspected the statue from head to toe.

"There's really nothing, you know," said Ron. "If you want my opinion, it's a piece of marble work—particularly well done, yes—but that's all."

"It's not the same," murmured Luna.

"The same what?" sighed Hermione. "Obviously it's the same; this engraving is a carbon copy of the sculpture standing before us! *Great Wizarding Schools: A History* is more than reliable; it has never let me down."

Luna shrugged.

"The engraving and the sculpture are the same, but in your book, it says Nerida Vulchanova was left-handed, that she was even the one who abolished the rule forcing apprentice wizards to hold their wand in the right hand."

"So what," sighed Hermione, "her wand is clearly in her left... Oh drat! There is something wrong, indeed."

"She was left-handed, you say?" asked Neville, positioning himself in front of the witch's bust.

Gently, Neville tried to pull on the marble wand of the statue. To general astonishment, the object slid out without particular resistance.

"Gallop Gargoyles! Right, get ready, I'm swapping."

Barely had Neville placed the wand in the sculpture's other hand when a dull rumble was heard. The representation of the founder then animated for a few seconds, long enough to give them a bow that looked surprisingly like Halcard's.

The next instant, the plinth on which Vulchanova stood slid backwards, revealing a narrow stone staircase.

"Near the figures lies the shortcut," recited Hermione, repeating the ghost's words. "Now we just have to find out where this leads us."

"Right... We... we just have to go, don't we? We're sure we have everything we need with us?" asked Neville.

"Sure or not, it's time we discovered what's hiding down there. *Lumos*," added Harry in a breath before plunging first into the passage.

Trembling with excitement, Chick firmly wedged in his shirt collar, Harry raised his wand above his head and descended step after step with caution. Everything around him was soon pitch black: the ceiling, the walls, the uneven steps... It was a bit like walking down an invisible staircase in the middle of the void of space. A peculiar space, whose only stars were the illuminated tips of his friends' wands, which Harry could see every time he turned to cast a worried glance over his shoulder.

The unfathomable darkness stifling their progress lifted a good ten minutes later, when they finally emerged onto a flat, slightly sloping surface. They were now in the tunnel of a sort of cave carved out of ice.

"Whoever dug this tunnel must have really had something important to hide," remarked Ron, contemplating his distorted reflection in a frozen wall with curiosity.

"Yes, we must be at least three hundred feet below the castle!" exclaimed Ginny in a cloud of breath.

The path soon widened enough for them to stand side by side. Packed into a compact group, they followed the winding path revealed by their wand light for quite a while. As they went deeper, Harry couldn't help thinking about the Lestranges. Were they nearby? Had they already ventured into this oppressive cavern?

No monster, no Dark Wizard, no stalactite fell upon them, however, when the path suddenly ended at the foot of an almost perfectly vertical wall of ice.

"What?" exclaimed Harry, sweeping the area with his wand beam. "All that for a dead end?"

"It doesn't make sense," said Neville, before running a hand nervously through his hair in a fluid gesture worthy of a model.

"The ceiling is much higher here. It looks like an antechamber," replied Luna softly, stroking the frozen wall with her fingertips.

All six of them began to scrutinise the surroundings, square inch by square inch. It was difficult to see anything, even for Harry and his sharpened Seeker senses. The atmosphere remained dark, and the walls

presented numerous irregularities that could easily have been mistaken for letters or patterns. To top it all off, the ice constituting the walls was translucent. The veins and other cracks running deep within it added their share of false information to identify.

"Here, I've got something! Symbols!" exclaimed Ginny, eyes narrowed, after a few minutes of scrupulous study.

"Well done, Ginny! What... are you sure? I don't see anything special."

"Put yourself in my place and position your wand like me. I think you have to shine the light a certain way for the signs to appear."

Harry had to kneel facing the ice wall and lower his wand almost to floor level to understand what Ginny was talking about. Small inscriptions had indeed appeared, glowing in the cobalt blue depth of the ice.

"They're runes!" cried Hermione a moment later, after Harry had made room for her. "Late thirteenth century, I'd say... Wait, I must have what we need."

Without another word, Hermione dropped her bag at her feet. She then disappeared inside it, as if she had taken a staircase to a lower floor.

"Women's bags and their mysteries," said Ron philosophically, noticing Neville's dumbfounded expression.

"I can hear you, I'll have you know!" came a muffled voice from the bag. "But where has it gone? I was certain I put it here. Ah perfect, here it is... I'm coming up!"

Hermione reappeared out of her magical satchel with a thick book, its cover covered in incomprehensible symbols.

"Would you mind extinguishing your wands? Too much light distorts the appearance of the symbols."

Darkness closed in around them as one by one they pronounced the incantation "*Nox*".

"What does it say, Hermione?" asked Harry. "Can we help in any way?"

"I... It's strange, I wasn't expecting this. Unless I've made a mistake... it looks like the inscription represents a kind of... sequence. Yes, that's it, a sequence of numbers."

"Really?" said Ron with sudden interest. "And is that supposed to tell us something?"

"I don't understand, a value is missing, it seems. There appears to be a form of logic to obtain it, but I can't find which one. Look..."

Hermione straightened up and proceeded to trace the numbers she had just translated onto the ice wall.

Hardly had she finished when phosphorescent lines appeared on the surface and expanded to draw a large arched double door. As the details of the hinges and a sumptuous representation of a tree appeared in turn on the panels, the cavern began to shake. Sharp ice spikes, resembling fangs, materialised above and below the door, like the maw of a terrible monster, ready to shred any intruders.

"Oh! The cave wants to eat us, it seems," said Luna with delight.

"It's... very inviting," commented Neville after swallowing hard. "I dare not imagine what happens if we don't provide the right value."

"'0, 1, nothing, 2, 3, 5'," read Harry aloud. "What on earth could there be between '1' and '2'? '1.5'? There's a '4' missing too, weird..."

A heavy silence fell again. So much so that one could almost hear everyone's brains whirring.

"Hey, wouldn't it be... Listen, I reckon it's a '1' we need to add to the sequence," said Ron, crouching, chin in hand, his eyes shining like glass marbles in the light of Hermione's lone wand. "Yes, that's it: '0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5'."

"Are you sure, Ron?" asked Hermione, taken aback. "What makes you think that..."

"They're the first terms of a rather particular sequence also called the Fibonacci sequence. I... I know it. And in this sequence, each term is the sum of the two preceding it."

Harry did the calculation quickly in his head. "0 + 1" did indeed make "1", just as "1 + 1", "1 + 2", "2 + 3" indeed made "2", "3", and "5".

"Brilliant!" cried Hermione with wonder.

"Doesn't beat a good old Parseltongue unlocking, but it's not bad, I admit," replied Ron with all modesty.

"You just have to reproduce the equivalent of '1' in Ancient Runes 'from the late thirteenth century'," said Ginny in a prim tone before bursting out laughing. "Hoping Ron-Ron's answer is correct."

Harry held his breath as Hermione traced the corresponding symbol on the ice wall with a thousand precautions. As soon as she finished, the fangs recoiled slightly.

"What, is that it?" said Ron, disappointed. "The door is still closed."

"Wait, I think a new inscription has appeared!" breathed Hermione, crouching, face almost pressed against the frozen surface.

Chick gave a soft cheep of encouragement as she dove back into her rune translation volume.

"Right, it's a new series. This time, it looks like it's the last term we need to find."

Concentrating, Harry watched her inscribe the numbers "0, 1, 2, 5 and 12" with the tip of her wand, and launched into a new internal struggle with the figures, interlocking and undoing possibilities in his head. There was indeed a hidden logic behind this set of values; he could almost feel it. Yet, every time he seemed to brush against it, it slipped through his fingers.

"I think I've got it," said Ron again after a moment.

There were several sighs. Some translating relief, others indicating rather a form of frustration.

"But how do you do it!" exclaimed Hermione while Neville and Luna moved closer to Ron to congratulate him heartily.

"Would you mind inscribing '29' please," replied Ron as if it were nothing. "It's the same logic as before actually, except that this time, the second term in the sum has been multiplied by two: '0 + 1 * 2' makes '2', etc..."

Once more, Harry checked the rest of the calculation in his head while Hermione affixed Ron's answer to the frozen surface. " $1 + 2 * 2$ ", " $2 + 5 * 2$ ", and " $5 + 12 * 2$ " indeed gave "5", "12", and "29". Since when had Ron become a master of mathematical problems? As far as Harry could judge so far, Muggle-born children generally started as favourites compared to their wizarding counterparts when faced with this kind of exercise. So how? he kept asking himself.

Once again, the ice fangs retracted slightly, but the door didn't open for all that.

"A new inscription," said Hermione. "This should be the last! That's what the runes seem to indicate anyway... '2, 3, -1, 2, -2, -1, -1', up to us to find the last term."

Everyone went back to thinking in a tense silence.

Unfortunately, after what seemed like an interminable time, even Ron had to admit defeat.

"I can't get it, I tell you. No point looking at me like that!" he added, threatening to get angry for real.

"But you have to find it!" cried Harry. "The ghost warned us: 'Evil acts', something serious is happening, right there, just behind that door!"

"Is there nothing we can do to help you?" asked Hermione, visibly sorry.

"I have some Bubotuber pus if you like," said Luna. "You have to apply it directly to the scalp. It doesn't smell very nice, but it's excellent for concentration!"

For a moment, Ron seemed on the verge of making Luna swallow her vial of Bubotuber pus. Distraught, he finally let out a deep sigh.

"Here, take Chick with you," said Harry, gently extracting the bird from his collar. "He often helps me relax, even when it seems impossible."

"I don't know... I don't know," groaned Ron in despair. "Alright then, pass him here. And... give me a quill and a bit of parchment too, it can't hurt... No-no, I'm fine, Luna, thanks."

Lightning fast, Hermione took materials out of her bag and handed them to Ron. Everyone then stepped away from him a little, careful not to make the slightest sound.

At first, Ron grumbled and crossed things out furiously. With Chick perched on his shoulder, however, he soon came to sit in meditative silence. Meanwhile, Harry couldn't help thinking about the Death Eaters and the Compass of Chaos. If they arrived too late, he would never forgive himself.

A good ten minutes more must have passed when Ron stretched with a grimace.

"Hmm... that was really twisted, but it followed the same pattern as the two previous sequences, so... Try with '-2'," he said, trying to hide a satisfied smile. "Once again, each term was the result of an operation between the two previous terms. Only, here, the operation in question changed periodically: a subtraction, an addition, a multiplication, a division; then a subtraction again, etc..."

Harry wanted to confirm Ron's calculations internally but all his attention was focused on Hermione. Without wasting another second, she had knelt down and was already carving the answer into the frozen facade.

"There. I've written '-2', and... we're still not dead," she sang in a small, nervous voice.

Slowly, the ice fangs recoiled, and Harry wondered if the facade wasn't about to close on them to impale them in a single terrible bite. There was a click, like the sound of a bolt being thrown; the menacing spikes retracted to disappear into the wall, and the double door finally opened.

"Fantastic!" cried Neville and Luna.

"Well done, bro," complimented Ginny.

"Oh, Ron, that was ab-so-lute-ly brilliant!" exclaimed Hermione, throwing her arms around his neck. "You're the best!"

"I'm the best?" said Ron before consulting Harry with the bewildered look of an owl suddenly woken from its sleep.

"Certainly, were you still doubting it?"

A moment passed during which Ron seemed to appreciate himself from a new perspective, as unexpected as it was glowing, then...

"I'm the best!" he added, a falsely pretentious smile printed on his face, while making a show of smoothing his hair like Neville.

"But honestly, where did you learn all that?" asked Hermione, loosening her embrace.

"Say, looks like the doors are closing," murmured Luna thoughtfully.

"Well, as far as I know, I've always liked logic games, chess, that sort of thing... To top it all off, and it's no small thing to say, Percy had the good idea of giving me the latest volume of 'Tests to Help You Dazzle at Parties' for Christmas," he added, "so there's your 'where'. Actually, in his book, they explained that the Fibonacci sequence was directly linked to the Golden Ratio. Did you know that value inspired the greatest Master Builders in history? They used it to improve the aesthetics and reliability of their creations."

"And there he goes, Ronnie-the-Little-Genius is off," said Ginny with a smirk. "It's crazy, you'd really think we were listening to Percy and his fascinating speeches on standardising cauldron bottom thickness."

"According to what I read, the Golden Ratio is also correlated to what they call Chaos Theory..." continued Ron, whom nothing seemed able to stop. "I wonder if the person who prepared these riddles also knew about all that."

"THE DOORS ARE CLOSING!" screamed Neville and Luna at the same moment.

Ginny made a show of clamping a hand over Ron's mouth and they rushed into the opening. The group reformed without another word, following in Harry's footsteps.

The atmosphere reigning beyond the double doors was surprising in many respects: the walls surrounding them were still made of ice, but the temperature there seemed noticeably less low than before. Even more intriguing, a powerful and slow irregular "thump-thump" vibrated the atmosphere around them, resonating right into Harry's ribcage. The sensation was peculiar and gave the impression of moving within a huge living entity. As if, by descending so far, they had approached the heart of the mountain on which Durmstrang rested.

"Blimey, look at that!" cried Neville, open-mouthed, a few seconds later.

"Merlin's beard, what is that?"

"It looks like... a bit of a snake," remarked Harry.

A long sinuous body, covered in what looked like blackened scales, crossed the frozen gallery stretching before them from side to side.

"Oh no... not that. Don't tell me there's a Basilisk or something down here too," groaned Ron.

"It's not a snake!" protested Neville, approaching the protrusions cautiously. "They're roots!"

"Roots? You mean..."

"The Yggdrasil..." murmured Luna. "It looks like it's crumbling, is it..."

Neville reached a hand towards the piece of bark but held back at the last moment.

"I dare not touch it. It... it's dying. The Yggdrasil is dying."

Harry remembered with anguish the story Hermione had told him and Ron months earlier about the legendary tree. Could the state of the Yggdrasil really reflect the peril faced by the school and its occupants?

Eager for answers, Harry gathered his courage and started walking again.

A little lower down, they reached a wide opening. Framed by a tangle of decaying roots, bordered by two columns overloaded with interlaced patterns, the entrance led to a dark, circular-looking room with a domed ceiling.

"Harry! Harry, wait for us, it could be dang..."

Hermione's words stuck in her throat as she entered the room.

"My god... Are we there?" she resumed after a few moments, incredulous.

"You... you think the Compass is up there?" asked Neville in turn.

A sumptuous pearlescent pedestal sat in the centre of the room they had just entered. The twisted structure towered over them by a good twenty feet, something at its summit shedding a timid golden light on the ice vault hanging above them.

"It would be the ideal place," breathed Luna.

"There's only one way to know," replied Harry.

With concern, Ginny watched him as he ventured onto the spiral staircase wrapped like a snake around the pedestal. After balancing for a moment on tiptoe, she proceeded to follow him.

"There's Golden Ratio in those proportions, believe me," appreciated Ron in a loud voice, pointing at the structure with his wand tip, while Harry and Ginny climbed the steps.

After casting a final glance below to gauge the height separating him from the ground, Harry reached the top of the pedestal. There, he found a sort of shallow basin filled with a liquid resembling water. In its centre soaked an imposing glass bell jar from which a faint diffuse glow escaped.

Clinging to his wand, Harry moved closer. He noted with astonishment that the ripples in the liquid caused by his steps were only partially reflected when they reached the surface of the dome. To his great surprise, he discovered a moment later that they also propagated through the intriguing interface, though at an infinitely slower speed than in the open air.

"What do you think could be in there?" asked Ginny, circling the cupola.

"If only we could see more clearly... Hang on a second: *Lumos Maxima!*"

No sooner had Harry brought his wand close to the glass surface than its light began to diffuse progressively through the dome, a bit like a slow-start lightbulb. Beyond the glass interface, crystals resembling tiny suspended ice particles lit up before their eyes, revealing the most beautiful woman Harry had ever beheld.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Harry. "This place... is it some sort of mausoleum?"

"Yes! And our Sleeping Beauty looks unmistakably like Nerida Vulchanova," murmured Ginny, fascinated.

The founder of Durmstrang lay before their astounded eyes, peacefully stretched out on a bed of silk, there, only a few inches behind this dome that seemed to protect her from everything, including time. Harry was seized by an irrepressible desire. If only he could join this fascinating beauty, if only for the pleasure of brushing the skin of her angelic face with his fingertips, or stroking the long silver hair covering her bare shoulders...

Harry understood even as his hand, as if bewitched, hit the transparent barrier of the dome; Nerida Vulchanova had been a Veela, or at least the blood of those irresistibly attractive creatures must have flowed in her veins.

"We... we've found the real Nerida, the founder!" announced Harry in a loud voice to the rest of the group remaining back a few yards below.

"Really?" came Ron's voice. "And tell me, your 'real Nerida', she wouldn't happen to have big clawed paws instead of hands, would she?"

"What? No-no, her hands, well... she's magnificent, from head to toe! Veela type, I'd say. Why do you..."

"If it's not Nerida, it would probably be a good thing to know quickly who—or rather what—left these horrible marks all over the place, from the walls to the ceiling..." replied Ron. "Because if the culprit is still hanging around, I wouldn't give much for our chances."

Concentrated as he was on his discovery, Harry hadn't noticed that the dome protecting the founder had amplified the light emanating from his wand. The circular room in which they stood was now as bright as day. Quickly scanning the surroundings, Harry noticed that the roots protruding from the walls were much more numerous in this room than in the previous corridor...

That was before he realised that many of the "roots" in question were nothing other than large gashes, carved right into the walls.

"How horrible! What on earth could have happened here? It looks like a battlefield!" gasped Hermione after stifling an exclamation of stupor.

"Looks like claw marks," gauged Harry, feeling his stomach contract. "But it would take a huge monster, what could have..."

"A dragon?" suggested Ginny hesitantly.

"A big, big dragon then," added Ron, busy evaluating the depth of a gash several yards long. "A Longhorn, yes... Could be the work of a Romanian Longhorn."

A few steps away, Hermione planted herself in front of a root from which a thick crimson liquid was flowing.

"Severed during the fight, presumably," she observed thoughtfully. "It really looks like blood," she added with a grimace of disgust, pointing to the viscous trickle.

"Don't touch it whatever you do!" cried Neville from the other end of the room.

"I had no intention of doing so!" retorted Hermione, jumping.

"It's Yggdrasil sap; I wanted to tell you about it earlier, when we were still in the Great Hall," he said before moving closer. "It's... it's sacred."

"Sacred?" repeated Hermione with a pout, as if the word had grated on her ears.

"The Yggdrasil is much more than a simple magical tree; it's also a being of great purity. They say it draws its energy from the bowels of the world, that it purifies the 'Essence of the Beyond' to help the living it deems worthy by offering them its miraculous fruits."

"Ah... And what would happen if, say... a wizard with bad intentions, an undead, or something like that managed to seize one of the fruits?" asked Ron.

"Hard to be sure, but according to the books, his days would end very quickly, if not instantaneously," replied Neville. "That said, there is still a way for that kind of person to draw on the Yggdrasil's strength..."

"Let me guess," said Hermione thoughtfully, "the method wouldn't happen to involve using the sap?"

Neville's face darkened, as if he had suddenly been overcome by great sadness.

"You have to wound the tree," he said. "Its bark may be extremely resistant, but it remains possible for someone or something sufficiently powerful and determined. The sap then flows and its power, although different and less refined than that of the fruits, becomes accessible. But seizing the life fluid of a being as good as the Yggdrasil, defiling its 'sacred' envelope to achieve one's ends, is... is an act so monstrous it would condemn one to a damned existence," added Neville in a voice stifled by fear. "At least, that's what I read."

Intrigued by Neville's account, Harry narrowed his eyes to better distinguish the split root dripping below, right in front of Hermione. Who would have imagined that so much could depend on a few drops of that scarlet liquid?

"By the way, when we were in the Great Hall, didn't you have something to tell us about Halcard? Something related to the tree, specifically?" remembered Harry.

Neville nodded gravely and hunched his shoulders.

"It's only a hypothesis, but... let's say if Halcard were a vampire, then I think he might well be using the power of the sap. It would surely allow him to withstand sunlight, and much more besides."

"You mean... by drinking it?" exclaimed Ron, sticking out his tongue as if he were about to vomit. "Drinking the sap?"

"Of course not, Big-Nose, by smearing it on his snout as if it were face cream," said Ginny, rolling her eyes. "Honestly, a bit of common sense; obviously he's a vampire, and obviously he drinks it! Vampires do that sort of thing; vampires feed on the blood of others."

There was a tense silence that even Ron, though more than tempted to retort to Ginny, didn't dream of breaking.

Moments later, slight scraping sounds drew Harry's attention to the other end of the room. Luna was waving at them.

"Hey, everyone, over here! I think I've found the seventh sign... the Deathly Hallows symbol we were missing!"

Still perched atop the pedestal, Harry couldn't help contemplating the founder one last time before descending to join Luna. Barely had his eyes rested on Nerida's silhouette than all his preoccupations, all his doubts and

other worries, dissipated immediately. So much so that he almost hesitated to let the group continue without him. Ginny eventually pulled him vigorously by the shoulder, giving him a look heavy with meaning, and he hurried down the steps after her.

When they arrived at the bottom moments later, Neville and Luna were activating the Hallows symbol, sliding a massive section of wall aside. Behind them, at the same moment, the bubble surrounding Vulchanova dimmed almost completely, as if the light Harry had brought earlier had finally found a way to escape the protective dome.

Prudently, the group advanced through the secret passage and everyone shivered.

"There is... something evil... in the air," breathed Luna.

"As if an atrocious event took place here," commented Neville.

"Apart from a strong smell of burning, I don't feel anything special," said Ron after inhaling deeply.

"That's probably because you have Chick with you," replied Harry. "I couldn't explain how, but his contact has something soothing about it, definitely."

"It feels like the inverted version of the previous room," remarked Ginny then.

The place appeared to Harry in a new dimension, and he noted without delay that Ginny was right. They were in a circular room again. This time, however, dark, volcanic-looking rock replaced the light stone that had lined the floor and walls until now; the bark of the few Yggdrasil roots protruding here and there seemed to have melted, as if after prolonged exposure to a terrible furnace; finally, the raised pedestal housing Nerida Vulchanova was replaced here by a sort of spiral pit, several yards deep.

"An angel's mausoleum on one side, well... if you ignore the signs of struggle," said Hermione, "and this..."

"This foretaste of hell..." completed Harry with anguish.

"It's here," said Neville, moving towards the pit, "it must be here that Grindelwald made the Compass."

Spread out in a semi-circle, they leaned one by one over the shadowy abyss. A strange shape sparked occasionally from the depths.

"Hard to say precisely what it is from this high up," said Ginny, frowning, her lit wand brandished over the void.

There was a new silence, this time broken by Harry:

"I'll handle it; I've been waiting for this moment too long," he said in a tone much more determined than he actually felt.

His heart raced in his chest as he circled the abyss looking for the best place to start his descent. He had barely crouched down, his wand clamped between his teeth, when a lugubrious moan resonated in the room. Everyone jumped, including Harry who slipped but managed to catch himself just in time.

"It's the Yggdrasil, it's trying to warn us!" exclaimed Luna. "Harry, whatever is down there is dangerous, you shouldn't go!"

"Er... might as well tell you straight away... That noise, just now, wasn't a warning from the tree or whatever. It was just my stomach, actually..." said Ron, both embarrassed and amused. "I... I'm hungry, and earlier someone pinched the last slice of prune tart I was saving for dessert."

Neville gave an embarrassed pout and smoothed his hair mechanically. Hermione, for her part, let out a long indignant sigh.

"Ronald Weasley, honestly! How can you think about eating at a time like this?"

"Well what? I'm hungry, that's all! Racking my brains also hollows out my stomach. And I don't see why we should make such a fuss about it, do you Chick?"

"It seems his presence (she pointed to Chick who had started warbling in the palm of Ron's hand) is having a bit too much effect on you," retorted Hermione. "Harry, I'm coming with you; I have a whole library of books on artifacts to hand," she added, patting her satchel, "it might be useful."

Cautiously, Harry and Hermione began their descent to the bottom of the pit. Between two half-controlled slides, Harry couldn't help looking up to ensure his friends were still there, up top, waiting for them. Very quickly, however, the faces of Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna amounted to nothing more than the small white dots of their eyes twinkling in the darkness.

Harry knew they had reached the bottom of the cavity the very moment his footing went from volcanic rock, irregular and abrasive, to a slightly curved surface, smooth and slippery like ice.

"Incredible," murmured Hermione, who had just arrived at the bottom of the pit, "this zone has been totally vitrified. It must take terrible heat to achieve that!"

"And could you explain to me how the tree managed to survive?" replied Harry.

He moved aside, revealing a root with blackened scales twisted upon itself protruding from the ground. The tip of the root ended horizontally, roughly at the level of Harry's navel, and supported a thick slab of stone run through with glowing red veins, like rubies.

"That looks remarkably like a display stand," said Hermione.

Harry moved ever closer, his face suddenly speckled by the reflection of the stone's red striations. An inscription, positioned at the bottom of a large circular hollow carved into the mass, caught his attention:

FOR THE GREATER GOOD

"It's what I feared," said Harry, straightening up.

"What? You... you've already managed to decipher the symbols?" asked Hermione, gripped by sudden panic, her Ancient Runes book open in the crook of her arm. "I don't understand, these signs correspond to nothing I've studied so far."

"That's because you're looking too deep. They aren't ancient runes; it's simply text written backwards... and it speaks volumes. Look, it says 'For the Greater Good'."

"Backwards? And that's all Grindelwald found as a encryption method? I never imagined he would stoop to that kind of trick."

"It's not a trick. I think rather the inscription is backwards because it's a sort of crucible," said Harry, pointing his wand at the central part of the block. "Yes, that must be it," he added, following his train of thought, "this stone base is the mould Grindelwald used to forge—and probably also store—his Compass of Chaos. But evidently, it's no longer there. We're too late, as I feared..."

Hermione seemed to be thinking at full speed.

"Have we been beaten to it?" she said bitterly after a few seconds. "The Compass might be elsewhere, in another room of the castle or..."

"Elsewhere?" replied Harry without real conviction. "We found Grindelwald's seven secret chambers; if it's somewhere else, it's because it's in the hands of the Lestranges... gone, vanished... We're too late, that's all."

As his words echoed up to the group waiting above, Harry felt an enormous guilt wash over him. The weight of whole weeks of searching suddenly crushed him, and his scar throbbed again. He felt hot and cold at the same time; his back had suddenly become clammy and his armpits soaked. He felt himself sway for a moment; his wand slipped from his grasp and he slid to the floor, without really realising it.

He had failed.

Would Voldemort return again? Would he hunt him inexhaustibly until he finally outlived him, like some evil hydra? If that were to be the case, he, Harry Potter, the so-called "Chosen One", would be the only one truly responsible. Why did that prophecy (or rather that curse, thought Harry), which had started clinging to him before he was even born, have to be spoken one day? Why did it have to be that, among all those possibilities, among all living beings, it was on *his* shoulders that the heavy burden of triumphing over the Dark Lord fell?

Ever darker thoughts were spreading through him like venom when a new flash of pain shook him from head to toe.

"Harry! Harry, are you alright?"

"It's not over," stammered Harry, picking up his wand. "I refuse to believe I've failed, not after all this..."

"Oh Harry. No, you're right, all is not yet lost. The Death Eaters, they must be around here, somewhere. The Long-Nosed Ghost, Venus—unless it was Nerida herself, by some magic beyond me—they brought us here, they warned us: 'Evil acts'. We wouldn't be here if we didn't have a card to play too."

"Just remains to know which one," retorted Harry, who felt more lost than ever.

"'Evil acts', 'evil acts'..."

She began to pace around the root and its stone base, unconsciously rolling her wand between her knuckles. Higher up, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna seemed to have understood the gravity of the situation; none of them dared say a word.

"'Evil acts', yes, but where?! Where does evil act?" said Hermione in a quavering voice, as if Harry's despair were contagious. "Where must we..."

Putting a little too much energy into her turn, she slipped on the vitrified floor and caught herself just in time on the root.

"Ouch! That's all I needed!" flared Hermione, half-lying on the ground, hip aching. "For heaven's sake, if only we could know where the Death Eaters are hiding, we'd have at least a small chance of stopping them!"

The strange "thump-thump" resonating in the background since they had solved the number sequence riddle suddenly intensified. The ground began to shake and small stones soon tumbled down the slope of the pit, bouncing in all directions.

The tremors kept intensifying over the seconds that followed...

"Hermione, what did you do?" exclaimed Harry, rushing to her to help her up. "We have to get out of here, everything's going to collapse!"

"But, I didn't do anything at all!" cried Hermione as the tremors gained intensity, putting their balance to the test.

The blackened root supporting the base began to move and twist upon itself with a rocky grinding sound before rising into the air, like a gigantic plant growing in fast-forward.

Instinctively, Harry squeezed Hermione's hand as hard as he could and grabbed a scale of the root which continued to emerge from the ground. Carried by the interminable growth of the plant, they ascended one by one the yards separating them from the top of the pit. Around them, the walls of the room shook and large chunks of rock detached before tumbling down the cavity with a crash.

Harry's shoulders and forearms were on fire when the root stopped just above the rest of the group.

"You can let go! Go on, we'll catch you!" shouted Neville in total confusion.

But barely had Harry had time to prepare himself psychologically to jump when the tip of the root made a sharp horizontal turn. Now straddling it like a sort of enormous vegetable broomstick, Harry and Hermione hung on with all the strength they had left as their vehicle sped straight for the nearest wall.

There was a deafening crack; Harry managed just in time to protect his face, then, thrown into the darkness, he felt himself tumble, roll, roll some

more, and finally hit a hard, granular surface with a brutal impact.

24. AN OFFERING TO THE FERRYMAN

"He's there! I see him!"

"Hey, you alright, mate?" came Ron's voice, echoing slightly. "You got bucked off later than Hermione; we were wondering if we'd ever find you."

Without any sense of up or down, Harry tried to sit up. Judging by the sharp stinging sensations he felt, his knees, elbows, and a good part of his back had been grazed during his fall. Fortunately, the rest of his body seemed intact.

"Is Hermione okay?" asked Harry, slowly regaining his wits.

"I'm still in one piece," she replied from a little further away. "Hard to believe after all that, but I am very much alive."

"Sorry for dragging you into this. The... the root went completely mad. Then it pulled us through the wall and then... then nothing."

"Look at it this way: you saved me. It was that or be buried alive, or squashed by all those falling rocks."

They were in a rocky tunnel about six feet in diameter. Just a few steps away, the end of the root that had pulled them through the wall earlier stood quietly motionless, as if it had been in that state forever.

With a sigh of relief, Harry noted that Ginny, Neville, and Luna hadn't been injured too seriously. Like him, they seemed only to have been scraped up a bit when events had escalated.

"The Yggdrasil didn't act by chance," corrected Neville, pointing to the rocky corridor stretching out before them. "Something happened down there, when you and Hermione were at the bottom, I'm sure of it."

"If that's the case," commented Ginny, raising her wand, "we'd best stay on guard, and keep our voices down."

"Remember," whispered Harry, "if we have a chance of finding the Compass, it should be a sort of disc, a bit bigger than a Galleon. Neville, your intuition was right; the Compass was definitely made at the bottom

of that pit, I'd bet my life on it," he added as Ron gave him an intrigued look.

The path soon narrowed around them, so much so that they had no choice but to proceed on all fours, one after the other. His knees might have been burning as he advanced, but it was his head that hurt Harry the most—or rather, his scar. After years of fighting Voldemort, it was the kind of throbbing pain he had learned to recognise, and above all, to dread.

A strange noise, like a muffled wail, echoed around them, distracting Harry from his worries.

"That wasn't my stomach this time..." Ron justified himself with a grumble.

Under other circumstances, the remark would certainly have made Harry smile. However, a new echo had reached him amidst the panting and scraping of their knees on the rough ground, and his blood had suddenly run cold in his veins.

A little later, it was with only partial relief that Harry extracted himself from the oppressive section of the tunnel. Lugubrious voices now reached them distinctly, as if rising directly from the depths of the Earth. Fear in their bellies, huddled against one another, they advanced as discreetly as possible. Regularly, a new rock would loom in the darkness and they would jump, as if it were a nightmarish creature ready to attack them.

"There, I see something!" Ginny finally cried in a hushed voice.

They were now on a sort of natural balcony where a multitude of stalagmites served as a guardrail.

Harry approached and at first thought he was hallucinating.

"Wands! Put out your wands!" he whispered, signalling the rest of the group to join them as quietly as possible.

Below, in the centre of an occult symbol around which a myriad of small candles gravitated, two hooded figures were busy performing a strange ritual.

"The Lestranges!" murmured Ron, lying flat between two stalagmites, Chick silently camped on his head.

Half-stunned, both by his recent setbacks and the pain in his scar, Harry could hardly believe his eyes. The Dark Wizards he had hunted for months were finally before him, just a few strides away. Although he had projected himself into this moment dozens of times, never had he imagined he

would find them here, in the middle of nowhere, in the bowels of the mountain on which Durmstrang rested. The meeting was so different from what he had envisaged, so unexpected, that Harry suddenly felt thrown off balance.

Down below, the taller of the two dark figures stepped forward to face one of the roots protruding from the cave wall. He pronounced a sort of incantation, accompanied by a sweeping movement of his wand, and the blackened bark of the root cracked with a sound to make your hair stand on end.

"They're attacking the Yggdrasil!" fumed Neville, getting up in a haste. "We're not going to let them do that, are we?"

"Wait!" cried Harry, holding him back by the hem of his robe. "This might be our only chance to find out how they plan to bring Voldemort back."

"Have you even considered they might bring him back *now*, right before our eyes?" asked Hermione anxiously. "What would we do then?"

"If Voldemort left himself a way to return, then I want to know what it is," Harry retorted firmly. "Better to face it now than never. I don't intend to live the rest of my days with this threat hanging over my head."

Scarlet sap was now flowing abundantly from the root, spreading at the Death Eaters' feet like a bloody puddle.

"They're not actually going to do *that*..." choked Ginny with disgust.

"I'd say they're trying to create a sort of link," commented Luna calmly.

While the reddish tide now covered the ground all around the esoteric diagram, the two figures had bent down to collect a little sap in the palms of their hands.

A few moments of hesitation later, they raised the liquid to their hoods before coughing and shivering.

"The Yggdrasil is already far too weak; they're bleeding it to death, we have to stop them right now!"

Neville broke free from Harry's grip. He had only taken a few steps when a deep, powerful voice exploded in the cavern, cutting him dead in his tracks:

"Who are you, heathens... Who dares disturb the Ferryman of Souls?"

A large skeletal face had just formed on the surface of the bloody pool, right in front of the Death Eaters.

"It's the Essence of the Beyond..." said Luna in a barely perceptible whisper. "They've made contact."

Crouched in the gloom behind a ledge of the cornice, Hermione considered her for a brief moment with a vexed pout. Most of the time, Luna Lovegood's stories were pure fantasy. In this moment, however, she had to admit there might be some truth even in some of her wildest ideas.

Further down, the Dark Wizards recoiled slightly, then the shorter of the two drew his wand with a threatening gesture.

"I'm the one asking the questions here," Harry could hear from the back of the cave. "In the past, you have..."

"The Ferryman cares not for such insolence!" cut in the death's head with a raucous growl.

The Lestranges flinched.

When the shorter one resumed, his tone seemed to have lost conviction:

"Years ago, you helped..."

"Enough!" thundered the skeletal face, almost flattening them to the ground with the sheer force of its breath. "This ritual is beyond you; none would attempt to seek my counsel without being prepared for the Sacrifice..."

The face faded, dissolving into the purple pool, and the crimson sap surrounding the Death Eaters began to churn. Soon, it was as if they were both on a tiny boat, lost in the middle of a terrible storm.

"Now's the time, drop it!" shouted the taller Lestrangle as waves of blood-red sap raged around them. "Give him the Master's ring, Rabastan! Or else..."

Moments later, the figures had disappeared, swallowed by a thick curtain of boiling foam.

"Well... I wouldn't have liked to end up like that. But at least our problem is solved, right?" commented Ron in a low voice.

"Ven... Vengeance," gulped Neville, fists clenched, eyes misty.

But the scarlet tide had suddenly receded, revealing two dark masses soaked from head to toe. Inexplicably, the Lestranges had held on.

"Interesting... yet that possession was what you held most dear, mortal," said the skeletal face, taking form again in the middle of the crimson basin, "more even than your own life... Your payment is accepted. What do you desire to know that might have been whispered one day between the realm of the dead and that of the living? Nothing escapes the Ferryman."

Convulsing, Rabastan, the shorter of the Lestrangle brothers, tried to straighten up. A spray of sap ran down his chin as yet another coughing fit seized him. He finally wiped himself with the back of his sleeve before painfully getting back to his feet.

"Years ago..." he said, breath wheezing, "you helped someone to... (he choked again) to craft an artifact of exceptional power..."

"Continue, mortal," said the skeletal face, "continue but be quick! I cannot leave my post for too long."

"This artifact, it... it could help me fulfill my Master's last wishes."

The face closed its fleshless eyelids over its empty sockets for a moment, as if trying to listen to something happening beyond the cave they were in.

"Yes... I see... I know... Your desires turn towards the Oracle... towards the Compass, once fashioned by that manipulative scoundrel Grindelwald. I did lend him a certain form of assistance some decades ago, it is true..."

The two hooded figures nodded timidly.

"So be it," said the face with a nasty sneer, "know in that case that the object of your desire lies beyond your reach."

"What!?" screamed Rabastan in what seemed to be a burst of uncontrollable rage. "You had your payment; I gave you my ring!"

"However..." resumed the Ferryman as if nothing had happened, "if my hearing does not deceive me... and if certain actors remain faithful to their reputation; yes... there might come a short period during which you would have your chance to seize it... You... you or your brother, here present."

"When?" cried Rabastan, clasping his hands as if in prayer. "When will this opportunity arise?"

"Patience, your hour will come... it will be the longest day, for you as for so many others, Rabastan Lestrangle... But I must leave you now; the Ferryman has tarried too long."

The sap began to swirl, erasing the face, wrinkle by wrinkle.

"Wait!" cried the other Lestrangle. "What about Potter? Is that mangy dog still after us?"

"Potter..." grumbled the Ferryman. "Harry Potter? Your best enemy? He is so excited at the idea of laying hands on you that his heartbeats are almost deafening! Of course he chases you... he is right here, watching you, just from that ledge..." added the Ferryman before disappearing with a cackle into the lapping that still softly agitated the basin.

Harry felt his stomach drop as if an anvil had landed in it.

The few fractions of a second that followed linked together at breakneck speed. The very moment Harry realised the Death Eaters had spotted him, flashes of green light were already shooting in their direction.

"They're running! They must have got here by another passage!" shouted Ginny as the stalagmite protecting her was pulverised, blasting a cloud of dust and rubble into their faces.

It didn't take more for Harry, whose blood was boiling.

"Harry! No, wait!" came Hermione's voice amidst the explosions.

In a reckless move, he threw himself over the granite balcony in pursuit of the Death Eaters.

He was visibly not the only one to have acted on impulse, for Neville landed moments later at his side. The latter seemed changed, as if the reality of a face-to-face with the Lestranges had suddenly awakened another aspect of his personality, the very one he had revealed during the Battle of Hogwarts nearly a year earlier.

"*Stupefy!*" yelled Neville, overtaking Harry. "*Impedimenta!*"

His spells narrowly missed the tall, stocky figure running some twenty yards ahead of them. The impact of the hexes on the ground nevertheless kicked up a shower of shards that lacerated his legs.

"*Oppugno, OPPUGNO!*" replied the Death Eater over his shoulder after roaring in pain.

The candles that had been levitating peacefully around the esoteric figure until now animated to swoop on Harry and Neville like a swarm of furious beasts.

Harry could feel them hitting him, burning him from all sides, making him stumble in his frantic race. But he held on. In that moment, nothing

in the world could have shaken his fighting spirit. He would put an end to the Death Eaters' deeds; he had to, at all costs.

Without really realising it, Neville had dashed with him into a new cavernous tunnel. Harry had managed to rid them of the swarm of bewitched candles by invoking a Shield Charm, but the Lestrangle brothers had taken advantage of it to gain a lead. The trouble was, it was now almost impossible to get a clear enough line of sight to hit them with a spell, so winding had the path become.

At times, the Death Eaters would ambush them around a bend and the fighting would resume. The battle then raged in total confusion. Rocks exploded one after another, their pieces flying, whirling, ricocheting in all directions. Sometimes, whole sections of the wall would come loose, missing crushing one side or the other by a hair's breadth.

The Lestranges well deserved the "Terribly Dangerous" label Harry had read under their posters months earlier in the Auror Office. They acted like two men who had already been through every trial a life of torment had to offer; with nothing left to lose but the slim hope of one day granting their beloved master's last wish.

Despite the element of surprise and the power of the Unforgivable Curses the Death Eaters were firing off liberally, Harry and Neville retaliated each time with such ferocity that their opponents were forced to retreat, continuing their endless flight.

"Surrender, you're DONE FOR!" cried Neville, out of breath, many minutes of running later, when the Dark Wizards had finally stopped at the foot of a pile of rocks blocking the exit.

"Yes! Sur... surrender!" panted Ron in turn, following close behind.

The rest of the group arrived in the instant that followed. Harry was about to order the Lestranges to lay down their arms when they burst into hysterical laughter. Still covered in scarlet sap from head to toe, they looked like two madmen fresh from a slaughter.

"Surrender? Oh, but *you're* the one with an appointment, boy."

"An appointment with Death!" added Rabastan, the shorter of the duo, a wide smile printed on his pockmarked face.

With unexpected delicacy, he described a strangely complex movement with the tip of his wand. The rocks blocking them began to glow with a greenish light and rose into the air to distribute themselves in the little

space around them, like the parts of a mechanical system in an exploded view.

Harry tried to fire a hex at the Death Eaters, but the pieces of rock floating here and there constantly disrupted his line of sight. So, barely had he had time to take a few steps forward than the Lestranges had disappeared, there, just on the other side of the pile of stones, reconstituted in record time by Rabastan's mysterious enchantment.

"I hope you have something of value to offer the Ferryman... You'll see, he drives a hard bargain!" said the second Lestrangle before roaring with laughter again, as if seized by a new fit of madness.

He then poked a bit of his arm through a small opening remaining between the freshly piled rocks and pointed his wand at the group. An orange flash shot out and illuminated the tunnel where Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna still stood for a second. The shot ended its course against the vault hanging over them with a loud *CRACK!*, then the entire tunnel began to shake ominously.

"Never mind the Death Eaters, let's get out of here!" exclaimed Ginny as a veritable deluge of rocks rained down on their heads. "Everything's collapsing!"

But hardly had she finished her sentence when the section through which they had arrived collapsed with a crash, sealing the only exit left to them.

Harry suddenly felt paralysed. He had been so close to the goal for a handful of minutes... and in his haste, he had once again lured them, his friends and himself, into what seemed to be a trap prepared long ago. By his fault, this night which was supposed to mark their victory with the capture of the Lestranges seemed well on its way to ending in catastrophe.

"Move!" exclaimed Ginny, waving her arms as if to dispel the dust now saturating the atmosphere. "*Reducto!*"

Her Reductor Curse only reinforced the chaos reigning by projecting a new volley of sharp stones in all directions.

"Ouch! Galloping gargoyles, are you mad or what?" cried Ron. "I took a shard right in the face; you could have killed me!"

"I was trying to get us out of this, I'll have you know!"

"By precipitating the next cave-in? Not very clever... Ouch!"

"What, what is it now?" hissed Hermione, busy groping along the sides of the gallery in search of an exit that might have escaped them.

"Chick pecked me! Ow... bloody hell, again! What's got into you?"

Chick seemed seized by a real panic attack. He was attacking Ron's hand, clinging to it, trying to lift it by digging in his tiny claws...

"Chick's gone mad!" bellowed Ron, jumping on the spot as the ceiling above them sagged visibly. "What do you want, for crying out loud?"

Just as Harry tried to catch him as he would have a Golden Snitch, Chick flew off, dodged the stones falling from all sides, circled Hermione several times, and finally returned to land on Ron, cheeping and hopping more than ever.

"He's trying to tell us something," said Luna, leaning over the tiny bird. "It has something to do with you, Hermione."

"No, really? Sorry, but I think we have more urgent matters!" replied Hermione before rushing to probe another section of the tunnel.

Chick took off again to pursue her like a veritable bewitched Bludger.

"Ouch! Honestly, Chick, what's gotten into you!? What, what about my bag?"

"Maybe... Maybe he wants us to hide inside it, Hermione!" suggested Harry in a moment of lucidity. "Is that it, Chick?"

Chick let out a loud chirp and shot straight up.

"What? If everything collapses, there's no guarantee my enchantment will hold! And even if it does, we'll be trapped inside for good! With no way out and no possibility of conjuring food, I remind you. At best, we'll end up starving to death..."

While Ron's face turned a spectral grey, a huge chunk of rock detached from the vault to smash at their feet. The ceiling had sagged another foot.

"We have no choice anyway, come on, quick!" urged Ginny. "Luna, you go first."

"Wow! Hermione, this is fantastic! It's like a dream!" said Luna while only her head still protruded from the bag.

Next came Ginny's turn, then Hermione's—despite herself—then Neville's. Ron was in the process of sliding inside the bag when the vault cracked once more, threatening more than ever to crush them. Preferring

not to tempt fate any longer, Harry dived headfirst as Ron's flaming hair disappeared into the depths of the magical bag. He barely passed through a narrow trapdoor, tumbled down the few steps of a wooden staircase, and ended his run in a pair of legs he identified without delay as Ginny's.

It was the first time he had been in Hermione's private library. The place was as magical as Luna had suggested moments earlier. The size of a large study, the walls of the room were lined with volumes of all kinds, aligned along dozens of shelves and held firmly in place thanks to an ingenious system of metal rods. In the centre of the room, on a thick rug looking as soft as it was welcoming, one of those large chairs like you find in dental surgeries had been set up as a reading station. A nostalgic tribute to Hermione's parents, no doubt, thought Harry.

"Where... Chick isn't with you?"

"I don't know," replied Harry, checking his pockets as well as the collar of his wizard robes. "Looks like he stayed up there..."

They looked up, hoping to see him appear at any moment through the trapdoor overlooking the staircase. In vain.

A deafening racket then enveloped them and the floor began to pitch brutally, throwing them from one shelf to another like rag dolls.

"That's it, buried for good..." said Hermione bitterly.

Paler than ever, Ron tried to comfort her by timidly taking her hand when the entire room turned upside down again.

They slid once more from one corner of the room to the other to end up painfully piled on top of each other.

"Why doesn't it stop!?" exclaimed Ginny after the group had weathered a few more tumbles.

"Maybe the ground collapsed with the landslide and we were dragged down too—well, I mean the bag containing us was dragged down..." replied Ron.

"In any case, the trapdoor doesn't look like it's been damaged," observed Luna after the floor finally stabilised. "Your magic is truly exceptional, Hermione."

"It's true it's a good start..." conceded the latter, flattered. "But that doesn't mean the way is clear for ot..."

"As long as it stops moving, I'm fine with anything," cut in Neville, doubled over, as if about to empty the contents of his stomach.

Luna knelt by his side and began to pat his shoulder blades awkwardly.

"What's the risk if we try to open the trapdoor?" asked Harry.

Hermione shrugged.

"At the point we're at, you know..."

The trapdoor stubbornly refused to open, and Harry had to resort to a powerful Levitation Charm to lift it. When he finally succeeded, there was the sound of a stone tipping over, then thin trickles of dust, like miniature waterfalls, fell onto his skull before running down his neck.

"Wha... No! Ch... Chick!"

The bird lay there, stretched out before his eyes, right next to the bag from which Harry had only half-extracted himself. Clearly, they were now on the other side of the pile of rocks, that is to say, on the side by which the Lestranges had managed to escape. Chick lay on his side, his usually sparkling inky eyes half-closed, his breathing so slow that his life seemed to hang by a thread; and Harry understood. He had saved all six of them. At the moment the vault had collapsed on them and Harry disappeared last into Hermione's magical bag, Chick must have grabbed and hoisted the satchel by the sole strength of his talons and small wings. Then, with an effort that had exhausted his last reserves, he had dragged it through the narrow opening the Death Eaters had used to cast the spell meant to doom them.

Chick deposited as carefully as possible in the breast pocket of his tunic, Harry helped the rest of the group extract themselves from the bag. Covered in bruises from head to toe, they hurried silently up the cavernous tunnel.

They progressed for a while towards the surface, until they emerged onto a balcony with strangely familiar looks.

"Hey, haven't we come out at the level of the hanging gardens from Herbology, by chance?" said Neville, pointing to a glass roof nearby, reflecting the peaceful glow of the moon.

It felt so good to be in the open air that the freezing cold outside seemed almost mild to them. So much so that everyone took the opportunity to take a long breath, concluded by a deep sigh of relief. Barely had they advanced a few more steps when the passage through which they had

arrived closed, sliding gently shut behind their backs. An inscription on the nearby facade sparkled for a fraction of a second, catching Harry's attention.

He had been here before, he had seen this mark...

"Blimey!" he exclaimed after scrutinising the surrounding stone.

"The fifth symbol!" cried Ginny, who had followed his lead.

"Fifth out of seven..." Luna remarked humbly. "Just goes to show, there may be superstitious people, but there are mostly a lot of sceptics."

"But yes... the passage Neville found, the one leading to a cave-in we never managed to clear..." Hermione joined in, half-lost in thought. "Precisely because... because the Death Eaters had bewitched it!"

"Wait!" exclaimed Ron in a large plume of steam. "You mean the Lestranges were hiding somewhere behind those rocks all this time?"

Hermione wanted to answer him, but a raucous cry tore through the night at the same instant.

Perched from the full height of the hanging gardens, they spotted two dark figures fleeing across the frozen lake, much further down. A third silhouette, broad and shrivelled, emerged in turn from behind a wall. It was chasing them. It even seemed to be gaining ground, compensating for the handicap imposed by its limp by regularly leaning on the frozen crust with an elongated shovel-shaped tool.

"Koulok..." murmured Harry, eyes locked on the scene, as if the force of his will could influence the outcome of the chase. "You're faster than them, come on... catch them!"

In the distance, they could see the Lestranges turn around long enough to fire a series of multi-coloured bolts at the hunchback. Koulok cared only about the green-tinged jets which, without a doubt, were none other than Killing Curses. He deflected them with his shovel, which must have been enchanted, otherwise it would probably have disintegrated. The rest, he let bounce off him, as if his skin benefited from the same protective properties as that of giants.

The distance separating the Lestranges from Koulok was now no more than ten yards. Hope was reborn second by second in Harry. Beside him, Ron had raised a fist in the air as if to support the hunchback, and Hermione was leaning so far forward she was on the verge of tipping over.

Suddenly, the large stocky Death Eater caused an explosion that shattered the surface of the lake, precipitating Koulok into its midnight blue abyss.

Shortly after, the hunchback extracted himself shivering from his icy bath as the silhouettes of the Lestranges began to spin on the spot and disappeared with a resounding *CRACK!*

"Disapparated, outside the school grounds... If you ask me, we won't be seeing them again anytime soon," remarked Ron in a tone Harry found hard to interpret, so much could it have been a sign of relief as the manifestation of deep disappointment.

25. LETHARGUM TENEBRIS

"Potter... I said, Potter!"

"Wha... yes, Professor Abrosius?"

"I asked you a question, young man! Where is your head today?"

"Dragon ventricle..." whispered Hermione, hand hiding her mouth.
"Tell him you need dragon ventricle!"

"Do you intend to waste our time and make me repeat myself?"

"Certainly not, Professor. I think dragon ventricle will do the job perfectly," Harry replied with feigned simplicity.

"Ah... you are with us at last. Excellent answer, Potter!" exclaimed the professor, turning back to his blackboard. "Dragon ventricle does indeed possess the prodigious peculiarity of reinforcing the effect of the majority of potions. In that case, why do we not use it more often, you might ask? Well, for the simple and good reason that it is an ingredient as rare as it is expensive! I myself have only three of these marvels in my personal stores, and... MR KRUM! MIND YOUR OWN CAULDRON RATHER THAN MR MALFOY'S!"

Gathered in two groups of three in the very back row, far from the quarrel that had just erupted only a few yards from Professor Abrosius's dais, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna were deep in conversation about the Lestranges. The day before—or rather early that morning—after watching helplessly as the Death Eaters fled from the castle's hanging gardens, they had returned to their dormitories completely exhausted. Harry, covered in bruises and a mixture of sweat and dust that made him look like a troll, had barely managed to tuck Chick into a pocket handkerchief before collapsing onto his bed. He had been woken only a few hours later by Dean and Seamus who, despite their astonishment at finding him so dirty and grazed, had judged it best not to bombard him with questions.

He had just enough time to dash for a shower before heading to class, stomach sadly empty, to meet his friends.

"Are you really sure?" whispered Ron to Hermione, Ginny, and Luna. "How can anyone live for whole months holed up in a cave?"

"There was a sort of chamber, with bedding and supplies, I assure you," said Ginny.

"But when did you see all that?" cried Harry. "I'm starting to think we spent our evening in a parallel dimension."

"Keep it down!" hissed Hermione.

The quarrel pitting Vassily Krum against Draco Malfoy once again had paused, and the *Muffliato* spell they had cast around themselves earlier so they could chat in peace had its limits. Hermione was well placed to know; she had used it many times the previous year while they were trying to evade Voldemort's snatchers.

"You might not have noticed because you were running like lunatics after the Death Eaters, but we lost you at one point," replied Ginny in a tone suggesting a certain reproach.

"There were tunnels going in every direction; hard to find your way without a map," remarked Luna, making a few notes on her parchment.

"What, so you really think they were under the castle from the start?" resumed Harry, greatly annoyed by this prospect.

"Hard to say since when... A good while in any case, that's for certain... judging by the maze of tunnels they dug."

"All that to get their hands on the Compass? These guys are mad," said Ron, scratching his head with the tip of his eagle-feather quill.

"Given that Voldemort got his information from Grindelwald just before killing him, I think they must have expected to find it underground, actually. Rightly so, in fact, if we believe the plinth with 'For the Greater Good' we found in the pit, in the room next to Nerida's tomb."

"But it didn't work!" intervened Harry, as if to reassure himself. "They clearly said they were still looking for it when they interrogated that sort of... weird face, in the pool of sap..."

"The Ferryman, the Essence of the Beyond..." murmured Luna absently.

"If you want my opinion," continued Hermione, straightening up on her stool, "they probably looked for the Compass for a good while. But finding they were getting nowhere, they fell back on the alternative of a

ritual that could help them. My god, we're losing it... Ron, pass me the slug powder quickly, please."

Ron, who was sitting between Harry and Hermione, levitated the jar of slug powder from one end of the table to the other, right over their heads.

"Obviously, the ritual required a lot of sap... It can't have been easy to get hold of an Yggdrasil root big enough," muttered Neville looking vexed from the next table. "Maybe that's also why they dug so much."

"Deciding to resort to the ritual can't have been easy either," remarked Luna as if she had suddenly woken up. "It was terrifying, just seeing it from a distance!"

Abrosius made a quick pass through the ranks and they had to be quiet for a moment. Long enough to note that their potion of the day, the Meditation Decoction—an intermediate step required for a Focus Potion—seemed well on its way to becoming the failure of the year.

"What bothers me," said Harry as their mixture took on the consistency of mushroom omelette vomit, "is that... if the Lestranges don't have the Compass, and it's not on its plinth either, then... where is it? The thing they invoked during the ritual seemed to say it was far from here."

"It didn't say that!" retorted Hermione fiercely, snatching the ladle Harry was semi-consciously stirring back and forth in the cauldron. "It said the Compass was 'inaccessible', or something of the sort," she added with a shrug.

"I don't really see the difference," admitted Ron.

"Well, it means the Lestranges can't have it for now, nothing more, nothing less."

"Ah yes, of course. Seen from that angle, everything is immediately clearer..."

Hermione shot Ron a dirty look and they didn't exchange another word all morning. Harry, too tired and having become an expert over time on Ron-Hermione relations, chose not to worry about it.

Subsequent events soon proved him right, Chick's awakening at the lunch break finally managing to defuse tensions. Overjoyed to see the little ball of reddish down moving and cheeping again, everyone offered the hero of the previous day a portion of their meal. So much so that by the time dessert was finished, Chick waddled (not without difficulty) to Harry's breast pocket to slide into a most deserved nap.

Unlike the majority of his classmates, it was with growing apprehension that Harry saw the end of the week approaching, and with it the start of the Easter holidays. After receiving a most depressing letter from Dawlish at the start of term, he didn't see how he, Ron, and Neville would manage to justify the Death Eaters' escape. If the situation had seemed promising for the space of a night, their hopes had since completely vanished. *How to find them?* Harry asked himself on a loop. *How to get hold of two Dark Wizards vanished into the wild and free of the Trace, when tracking them within Durmstrang itself had been so complex?*

The only solution Harry saw to this increasingly uncomfortable situation was to tell the truth. Being honest was something one could hardly be blamed for. And Hermione, who was revising two armchairs away in the common room when Friday evening came, agreed with him.

"Explain it to him," she said, lifting her nose from her parchments. "Tell him everything, in detail."

"Do we have to go as far as describing how much we think his head is full of dragon dung, too?" asked Ron, whom writing the message had made grumpy. "Because in that case, there'll be plenty of detail, believe me."

"Don't tempt me, Ron," said Harry, hunched over the parchment destined for Dawlish, quill in hand. "Anyway, we'd probably better admit we were forced to enroll in the school curriculum to ensure a place in the castle..."

"Woah, woah... Are we really forced to go that far?" cried Neville.

"Do you see a better way to reach the conclusion that we need help?" retorted Harry, annoyed.

"No, but... if we give that information, who says he won't expel us for good?"

"That's what he's been looking to do from the start anyway," replied Harry, losing his temper in turn. "We did what we had to do; if he wants to strike us off the program, that's up to him."

"Ah, thanks for proving me right," said Ron, slumped with his chin resting on the arm of Harry's chair. "In life, you have to force things... but not too much either."

"We've been playing his little game long enough; we're at Durmstrang, we found the Lestranges who are looking for Grindelwald's artifact, they

escaped us, we can't go out freely to find them, we need help; that's what we're putting."

Ron clapped his hands as if celebrating a victory while Neville watched Harry write the letter line by line with a worried look.

"Impeccable, that'll teach him!" complimented Ron a few minutes later, rereading the letter. "The Quaffle is in his court now."

But when it came to entrusting the scroll of parchment to Pigwidgeon, Harry's anger had subsided a little and a terrible guilt had frozen his insides. In his lifetime, Dumbledore would doubtless have recommended he follow his instincts and pursue the Lestranges to the ends of the earth. In that case, why did he feel this need to stay at Durmstrang? Was it a way of playing it safe, of giving himself the possibility of taking his N.E.W.T.s in case Dawlish deprived them of their Auror careers? Or was there something else in the back of his mind pushing him to act this way? Something that slipped away every time he was about to put his finger on it?

Doubt was still gnawing at Harry at the start of their first Saturday of the Easter holidays. Indeed, he watched with horror as a large reddish parchment fell between his cereal bowl and Hermione's, opposite him. It took him a few moments to realise the letter in question couldn't be the much-dreaded reply from Dawlish. Their messenger wasn't one of those Eagle Owls reserved for the Head of the Auror Office, but a large bat that snatched a piece of bacon before taking off again with a strident cry.

"Wozzat then?" asked Ron between two forkfuls of scrambled eggs.

"It's the *Gazeta Volšebnogo Soobšestva*," replied Hermione, clearing space on the table to unfold the scroll.

"Bless you," said Ron before burying his nose back in his plate.

"Word for word, it means 'Magical Community Gazette', or something like that," continued Hermione. "Professor Boulik recommended it to me."

"I didn't know you spoke the local language," said Harry, impressed. "When did you..."

"Oh no, don't think that! It's just that the N.E.W.T.s are in a little over a month. So I dove back into our lessons on conditional enchantments and... I got a bit carried away."

"Ah..." said Harry, suddenly remembering the imminence of the exams.

"...and I ended up developing a simplified translation spell. Well, for now it's only a draft."

She signalled Harry to imitate her and leaned over the newspaper.

Despite nearly eight years spent living as a wizard, Harry still couldn't get over it. After describing a sort of square in the air, Hermione's wand began to project a light frame of amber light. Illuminated by the spell, the characters, initially printed in Cyrillic alphabet, changed into their Latin equivalent before rearranging themselves to form intelligible words.

"The country gains darkness," read Harry aloud, looking at the headline on the front page. "What the..."

Hermione gave a little embarrassed laugh.

"Yes... as I told you, the spell isn't quite perfected yet. It translates the words, but it doesn't adapt their placement in the sentence. So if the dialect in question uses declensions, you end up with this kind of result."

"It's already fantastic!" exclaimed Harry, astounded. "So we shouldn't understand 'The country gains darkness', but rather 'Darkness is gaining on the country'?"

"Yes! Absolutely!" Hermione replied with a radiant smile.

Carried away by curiosity, Harry couldn't help but continue reading. He wanted to know what, in such times of restored peace, could imply such a worrying title.

"It's far from ideal but we can already understand the meaning of most sentences," resumed Hermione as he scanned the parchment line by line. "Oh, and I don't intend to stop there, you know. I think if I manage to get my spell to assimilate words translated in both languages, I'll manage to solve this grammar problem."

"Harry, I think Chick would like a bit of bacon too," said Ron. "Harry? Are you sure you're okay, mate?"

"What? Oh yes, yes... here, Chick."

His loot obtained, the bird flew towards Ginny and Luna, a piece of bacon nearly twice his size in the corner of his beak.

"It's just that... it talks about us: 'Halcard, of Durmstrang Heir, reinstates Battle Magic', and it also talks about a 'Lethargum Tenebris'," resumed Harry. "That rings a bell, but I can't remember why..."

"Ah yes, hang on," said Ron, grabbing Hermione's cereal bowl. "Wasn't it Rickett or... or rather Samuels who told us about that? Yes, yes! There, I remember, it was just before we got massacred by Durmstrang at Quidditch. He presented it as a kind of magical disease."

"Yes, that's what they seem to be saying here too: 'A magical disease funnily linked to Grindelwald'. I think we should translate that as 'strangely', but the idea is there."

"Several students have been affected, here too," confirmed Hermione. "All from Durmstrang... McGonagall is worried sick; she must send me an owl a week just to make sure no one has been infected. RON! Those are my cereals!"

"Well, in your newspaper, they seem to explain that in addition to a few cases in the rest of the world, it's the region as a whole that is very affected. They count dozens and dozens of cases; it apparently started about a year ago..."

Harry was still absorbed in reading the newspaper when two hands landed on his eyes, suddenly making the article disappear.

"Time to go! We have practice," came Ginny's voice from above him. "I hope you've thought about our strategy; Halcard has finally confirmed the date of the second match to me, it'll be for the first week of term. Up you get, we have work to do! You too, Ron!"

Ron savoured a last piece of bacon, threw his Nimbus 3000 over his shoulder, and ruffled Harry's hair in passing, as if to say "Come on, let's go."

Harry followed him without a word. Together, they passed through a double door at the back of the Great Hall and soon found themselves outside, bathing in the eternally freezing air that enveloped the Devil's Horn, the peak on which Durmstrang rested. As they descended the steep path winding along the cliffside towards the pitch, Harry kept thinking back to Hermione's newspaper.

What he had found in the article about the *Lethargum Tenebris* had shaken him. Now benefiting from over twelve months of hindsight on the epidemic, the various experts interviewed by the *Gazeta Volšebnogo Soobšestva* seemed to understand a little better what this new evil consisted of. If the question of a magical disease or a curse was still open, Grindelwald's name appeared frequently throughout the lines. A multitude

of nightmares terrorising victims night after night were also mentioned. Even more worrying, it was written that some unfortunates had found themselves plunged into a deep coma, or had even lost their lives after screaming for hours, as if suddenly seized in a frightful internal struggle.

The trouble, Harry told himself as he trod the frozen crust of the Quidditch pitch, was that at least part of these symptoms was far from unknown to him. For months now a monster had haunted his nights, obsessed with the idea of Harry "joining him". If Harry didn't understand very well what this reunion might mean, he was on the other hand certain that the creature in his dreams reminded him of Halcard. Halcard... that professor and headmaster around whom so many unhealthy suspicions gravitated, the latest being him as a vampire feeding on the sacred resin of the Yggdrasil.

As if the worries caused by the Death Eaters, the N.E.W.T.s, or the Quidditch Cup weren't already enough...

They took off under a timid sun and the cold, although particularly biting, took a moment to pull Harry from his preoccupations. The session began with a technical warm-up consisting of stringing together accelerations, decelerations, tight turns, dives, and steep climbs. The goal was to test the latest adjustments made by Harry to everyone's brooms, according to the detailed instructions from Niki Bravehunt. Everything went well, even if it was obvious they were still far from the level the Durmstrang team had shown in the first match.

Next came the passing session with the Quaffle, and things degenerated without delay.

"I feel like telling you to go get stuffed, Chambers. And you'd do well not to forget who allowed you to replace that dripping old mop of yours with a state-of-the-art broom... Pathetic," threw out Draco Malfoy after Gerald Chambers, one of the team's three Chasers, complained once again about the Slytherin's selfish behaviour as soon as he was in possession of the ball.

Ginny had to intervene and, at the end of a verbal joust that was an opportunity for everyone to get a dressing down, Harry wondered if the team would ever manage to maintain sufficient harmony until the second meeting with Durmstrang.

"What do you want me to tell you... He makes me despair," said Ginny a few hours later, after Harry and Ron brought the subject of Malfoy back

to the table during dinner. "He's playing worse and worse. It's true, I don't know what's wrong with him... and Zacharias Smith taking advantage to try and get back on the team... it makes me sick. RON, DO YOU REALLY HAVE TO STUFF YOUR FACE ALL THE TIME?"

"Be nife to your big bruvver and don't project your worries onto him, pleathe," retorted Ron with his mouth full in a tone intended to be calm, before swallowing. "I've got my own stress to handle, I'll have you know; it has a bad effect on my sleep, so I have to eat to compensate."

"What... pardon?" intervened Hermione suddenly, who had eaten almost nothing of the meal, so absorbed was she in rereading *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 7*. "Are you suggesting that 'He who dines, sleeps'?"

"Yes... yes, absolutely," replied Ron after a moment of reflection, as if the phrasing seemed attractive enough to be approved.

"Interesting, so the converse would be true..." concluded Hermione absently before retreating behind the veritable leather rampart that was her book.

Dessert finished (to encourage the students, the elves working in the kitchens had prepared succulent French toast), they went up to the dormitories in anticipation of yet another interminable revision session. Doing so, Harry wondered if he shouldn't try Ron's greedy regime. After all, when he wasn't busy fleeing in nightmares from that strange monster whose face remained hidden behind dazzling indigo light, he had to fight in dreams with formulas or other incantations studied in class. He would then wake up the next morning as if his head had barely touched the pillow.

The days might have been getting longer, but the first week of the Easter holidays flew by at lightning speed. To avoid sinking into madness, as many of his seventh-year classmates threatened to do with the proximity of the N.E.W.T.s, Harry had come to follow a sort of routine each day. Every morning, fairly early, he crossed the common room, often waking Hermione in passing (immersed in the previous day's revision, she sometimes fell asleep on one of her innumerable piles of parchment); he then went down to the Great Hall animated by the sleepy conversations of the first hungry students, walked through the long sculpture gallery (each time, Nerida Vulchanova's statue seemed to him to sag a little more, as if an invisible force applied itself to pulling her down), and climbed the spiral staircase leading to the Owlery. Reaching the very top, he let Chick stretch his wings a little and race with the owls and other messenger bats

leaving or just returning from a mission. Meanwhile, Harry scanned the surroundings using a pair of Omnioculars (magical binoculars he had procured a few years earlier at the Quidditch World Cup) in search of possible signs of life from the Lestranges.

If the operation never revealed anything special, it had the merit of soothing the reckless part of Harry, the part that would have been ready to abandon everything to chase the Death Eaters, even blindly. In this light, the discussion he maintained from time to time with the Long-Nosed Ghost also relieved him (noting the periodic nature of Harry's schedule, the latter dropped by near the Owlery). Their exchanges were never very long, but knowing that another being (even if he had the annoying tendency to express himself as enigmatically as possible) was scouring the castle and its surroundings in the hope of ridding it of the evil gnawing at it, constituted more than welcome support.

The rest of the morning, Harry vented a good part of his stress by training for Quidditch. Lunch swallowed, he joined Ginny, Hermione, and Ron in the common room or, depending, in the library, around a round table on the overly quiet floor of *Useful Remedies for Unbearable and Treacherously Localised Itches*. There, he locked himself in a veritable mental prison for hours on end, to cram formulas, stories, and other kinds of magical logic into his already saturated skull.

"No, no and no. We'll never get there like this!" declared Ginny during the next Quidditch session.

Once again, the synergy between Beaters and Chasers had proved ineffective. Yet, given the score difference separating them from Durmstrang, this cooperation remained more essential than ever.

"What now? I'm sick of him!" flared Gerald Chambers. "He's the one messing everything up, every time! If it goes on like this, I quit!"

"Yeah, that's right, quit... or quit whining rather, Chambers," retorted Draco Malfoy. "Your mummy isn't here, you know? So be nice, shut it, and use your two left hands to pass the Quaffle to those who know how to play."

"Stop! STOOOP! That's enough now!" exploded Ginny, descending to their level, her wand pointed at them. "I'm the one who's sick of it... SICK OF IT! Harry? HARRY!"

"Yes, Ginny? I can hear you... I'm right here..."

"We're swapping."

"What?" said Harry, taken aback.

"Congratulations, you've just become a Chaser. From now on, I'll handle catching the Snitch. You, Malfoy, and Chambers, you do something good for me by the end of the session, or I quit everything, and I dissolve the team."

Malfoy gave a petty smile.

"I dare you..." he added in a barely audible whisper.

"Don't push it, you don't know what she's capable of," Harry slipped to him in a low voice, pulling up level with him. "Come on, we have a match to prepare for."

It took Harry a moment to realise what Ginny had just done. The strategy was much finer than it appeared, and he even suspected her of having half-acted earlier when she got angry and made her threats. He certainly didn't know all the subtleties of Chambers' style yet, even if he had had enough opportunities to see him train to form an opinion of him. On the other hand, seven years of mutual aversion with Malfoy, of perpetual conflict, had taught them to know each other; far better even than most people who considered themselves friends.

All they had left to do, Harry told himself as he sped along on his broom, was to fight on the pitch as well as they had done since they met. Except that this time, or rather for the first time, they found themselves on the same side.

After a moment of adaptation as well as a good hour of dodges, shots, and passes, Ginny descended towards the frozen crust of the pitch, humbly wearing the satisfied expression of one who has just performed a true miracle. Taking Harry out of his solitary Seeker role to make him the team's third Chaser, alongside Malfoy and Chambers, had indeed allowed for a fantastic metamorphosis. Of course, they still had a lot of work to do before the match looming on the horizon, and they would once again have to adjust Harry and Ginny's brooms to adapt them to the swap of positions; but after such a session, it was undeniable that they were back in the race, to everyone's great relief.

"I'm starting to believe we have a chance if we carry on like this..."

Harry had pronounced these words with a certain nonchalance a few days after the role swap was made official. He and Malfoy were in the changing rooms, both finishing getting changed following another promising Quidditch practice. The encouragement was intended to be

seemingly innocuous. But deep down, Harry hoped to tighten the bonds uniting them, if only for the duration of the tournament.

"For that, I'd have to manage to pull off that bloody Wronski Feint first," replied Draco Malfoy wearily.

Sitting on a bench, one boot half-on, the other already removed, he looked more tired and dejected than usual.

"That's because you're anticipating it," Harry replied, pulling on his jeans. "If you want to pull off the feint, you have to manage to put aside your fear of crashing."

"Fear? Me, Potter? Give it a rest... you just need to adjust my footrests properly; I'm still understeering too much."

"I've already spent enough time adjusting your broom as it is, and your footrests have nothing to do with it," Harry retorted sharply, stung.

But as soon as the words left his mouth, Harry regretted them.

"You... you mostly give the impression of being a bit too tired, if you want my opinion," he added in the most neutral tone he was capable of.

"That... you said it, Potter," Malfoy simply replied.

He struggled for a moment with his boot, the lacing of which remained presumably too tight to let go. Losing patience, and probably yielding under the influence of Harry's intrigued gaze, he finally took out his wand and blasted the shoe.

"I really needed that on top of the rest!" brooded Malfoy the moment he finally managed to rip off the still-smoking boot with a brutal gesture.

Noting that the situation threatened to degenerate, Harry headed for the changing room door.

"You should get some rest," he said before leaving.

But barely had he crossed the threshold when Malfoy added behind his back in a dark voice:

"I can't. I can't do it."

Seized by a strange premonition, Harry stopped dead.

"What do you mean, 'you can't do it'?"

Malfoy straightened up and scanned the surroundings, as if to ensure no one would overhear their conversation. His face was grave. And discovering

the dark, swollen bags under his bloodshot eyes, Harry realised Draco was in much worse shape than he had perceived until now.

"So what, what does it matter to you, after all?" finally sneered Draco with a smile tinged with sadness.

"I don't sleep either. Or very badly. Whether night or day. I... I have..."

"...nightmares," completed Malfoy abruptly.

They stared at each other for a moment without blinking. Outside, a storm seemed about to break, for a gust suddenly infiltrated with a sinister whistle between the wooden slats constituting the changing rooms.

"How long has it been?" asked Harry, retracing his steps to sit on the bench opposite Malfoy.

By way of answer, the Slytherin simply lowered his head, his platinum blonde hair almost entirely hiding his face from Harry's eyes.

"I... I had a weird dream this summer," resumed Harry in a new attempt. "But it's mostly since we arrived at Durmstrang that my sleep hasn't been the same."

"October... November..." finally replied Malfoy, ignoring Harry's last words. "It... that thing, it hasn't let go of me since."

"That thing?"

Somewhere outside thunder began to rumble. Harry raised his head for a moment in surprise.

"I don't know what it is," said Malfoy, "it walks, it runs, it flies, it... it speaks... At times, it almost looks like a man... Pansy has the same problem, I'm sure of it," added Draco. "But she doesn't talk about it... she doesn't talk about it anymore."

"Why's that?"

"Because it's better that way, Potter, unless you're looking to get into big trouble."

Malfoy's attitude had suddenly changed. All at once, he appeared angry, even threatening, whereas his tone had evoked doubt and fear moments before.

"I don't understand," said Harry defensively. "What would be wrong with..."

"Did you know Pansy's mother lived in the area before coming to London?" cut in Malfoy in his drawling voice.

The changing rooms filled for an instant with blinding white light as another lightning bolt struck a tower nearby.

"No, I..."

"Must be six months ago, she started having weird nightmares too. Her idiot husband got scared and as a result, she ended up in St Mungo's. I remember it well, it was at Christmas."

"That's the lesser of two evils, it seems to me," replied Harry. "The Healers there are pretty good."

"How naive you can be," cursed Malfoy. "What happened when they realised they didn't understand what she was suffering from, in your opinion?"

"Well..."

"They isolated her. They cut her off from everything, and then they studied her; like a common guinea pig."

"But... it was probably to cure her that they..."

"Cure her? Seriously? All those guys want is to show off. They want to be the first to report this or that 'unprecedented' data on this bloody *Lethargum Tenebris*. The rest..."

"Wait, did you say *Lethargum Tenebris*? And so what, you're afraid Pansy will suffer the same fate? That's madness! McGonagall would never allow her students to serve as test subjects," Harry retorted spiritedly as thoughts stormed in his head.

"Oh no? And you think McGonagall's word would weigh much if it were learned that Malfoy Junior was infected in turn? They'll do everything they can to get me, believe me. All those frustrated people the Wizengamot disappointed by letting me walk free last summer."

For a brief moment, silence fell again. Harry was plunged back into his painful memories of the Ministry and the hearing. He saw his neighbour weeping hot tears as the charges began to rain down.

The Malfoys had done so much harm...

"You won't tell anyone about this story, is that understood?"

"I do as I please, Malfoy."

"Talk about it, and it'll be as if you'd let me go to Azkaban last July. Unless, of course, you did all that back then to get yourself a bit of publicity. Mind you... that's how you have to go about it when you want a career at the Ministry..."

"Shut it!" flared Harry, standing up abruptly. "I did what seemed right to me, you know that very well."

"Your word, Potter..." insisted Malfoy, standing up in turn, suddenly towering over Harry by a good four inches. "Your word as a Gryffindor."

It was in a heavy silence that Harry and Malfoy stepped into the snowstorm that had suddenly descended upon the Devil's Horn. They walked up the path leading to the castle side by side, bundled up in their wizard robes.

As they climbed, buffeted by ever more violent gusts, Harry had the unpleasant impression of being paralysed. But the sensation wasn't due to the cold burning his face. For him, the logical sequence of events would have been to share what he'd found in the local gazette and his recent discussion with Malfoy with his friends; particularly Hermione, upon whom fell the heavy responsibility of the health of Hogwarts' sixth and seventh-year students. Too many intriguing and threatening elements had suddenly become connected not to relate them.

The trouble now was that Harry had promised. Malfoy, with his pathetic air and his speech, had convinced him. Thinking about it, the Slytherin wasn't entirely wrong; seeing how influential figures at the Ministry tended to believe themselves above the law, it was quite possible some would jump at the slightest opportunity to send him to Azkaban, or to a torture chamber disguised as a hospital room.

A new question had, in fact, come to place itself at the top of the pile of things to deal with that Harry reorganised regularly in his mind: "What to do with one's values in a moment like this?".

Looking grim, he and Malfoy separated after exchanging a vague nod, then Harry hurried to join his friends seated in the Great Hall.

"You took your time," remarked Ron, who had already started his second helping.

Harry evaded by claiming Malfoy had kept him to discuss Quidditch and teamwork. Alas, his lie worked only too well and had the effect of delighting his classmates, which contributed to reinforcing his unease.

"I'm really happy, Harry," Ginny was still rejoicing an hour later, as they took their places on the library's movable platform supposed to carry them to the floor of *Useful Remedies for Unbearable and Treacherously Localised Itches*, for a new revision session. "I was sure I was making the right choice by grouping you and Malfoy together. Your teamwork has real potential."

"Sure is a good thing," approved Ron. "Makes tomorrow's start of term a bit less bitter," he added with a vexed pout.

They spent the rest of the day in the library, entrenched behind their books while the storm raged outside. At times, Hermione would offer a few explanations at the request of Harry, Ron, or Ginny. The other two would then interrupt their reading to take notes on various subjects, ranging from the importance of planetary positioning on the purity of Holy Water potion, to the influence of the magicological sign on the alternative form Animagi (wizards capable of transforming at will into a specific animal or insect) could adopt.

"Any news from the Long-Nosed Ghost, Harry?" asked Ron with the firm intention of talking about something other than their lessons as they went back down to the Great Hall for dinner.

"Not much new. He sympathises with our cause; he looked genuinely sorry to hear the Lestranges had slipped through our fingers the other night. He... he claims the evil continues to grow at Durmstrang."

"Maybe the Lestranges came back on the sly?" suggested Ginny.

"Impossible, I go up to check the state of the entrances every morning. Well... impossible, maybe not, but unlikely in any case."

"And Dawlish, still no answer from him?" asked Hermione, her words echoing against the walls of the long statue gallery adjoining the Great Hall.

"No, nothing," said Harry, in a mixture of exasperation and relief.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he's preparing a dirty trick for us," said Ron. "Another one..."

"Reason the more to pass your N.E.W.T.s," intervened Hermione wisely.

"We know, Hermione, thanks, why do you think we're working so hard right now?" grumbled Ron.

As usual, Ron's mood improved as his stomach filled. Very generous that evening, he shared many of his dishes with Chick under the disapproving gaze of Hermione and Ginny, who accused him of fattening the bird.

Harry, for his part, spent the major part of the meal deep in thought. He was thinking of Halcard who, dominating the assembly of students from the staff table, his curly beard at his feet, had raised his wine glass while casting him a pointed look, as if to toast some event.

In the evening, they returned to their school assignments; not in the library, but in their common room. The storm hadn't calmed and large clumps of snowflakes were frequently dashed against the tall casement windows surrounding them. Sometimes, a lightning bolt streaked the sky and a few heads would lift here and there, before diving back into sheaves of parchment yellowed by candlelight.

Though concentration was almost palpable around him, Harry had all the trouble in the world making progress on Professor Van Helsing's essay on "Vampire Affinities regarding Self-Transfiguration". Tomorrow, classes would resume, and he would once again have to face Halcard. Few people could understand how much that lesson, stimulating as it might be, distressed Harry. He was the only one having to face the Battle Magic professor in single combat; the only one to weather his frenetic assaults, be they physical, magical, or even spiritual; the only one to fall so frequently from the top of the Dueling Tower to be caught ever lower by an unhoped-for cloud.

Noting it was useless to struggle any longer, Harry resolved to go to bed. It was no later than eleven at night when he stood up to say goodnight to Ron and Hermione, and kiss Ginny. His goodnights said, he slipped into the dormitories, changed, and gave Chick a few final strokes with the tip of his index finger. Finally, lulled by the crash of gusts breaking against the castle walls, he fell asleep.

Harry woke suddenly. The atmosphere was abnormally cool, it seemed to him. No doubt because his sweat-soaked pyjamas had remained stuck to his back when he sat up. Somewhere, was it outside? someone had screamed; he was almost certain of it.

He remained like that for a moment, propped on his elbows, ear cocked. But apart from Neville's snores, mingled from time to time with the whistling of the wind, the situation seemed normal. Had he dreamed? Was that cry the fruit of his imagination? wondered Harry. Everyone around him seemed to be sleeping soundly; perhaps he had just had one more bad dream, after all.

Harry wanted to lie back down but stopped. Despite the surrounding chill, he had the unpleasant impression of suffocating. Moments later and

his forehead had become burning hot.

Decided on a change of air, he slipped out of the dormitories on stealthy feet, followed closely by Chick who must have sensed something was wrong. Reaching the common space still dimly lit by the ashes of the stove, he headed for the bathroom. What he needed before resuming his night was a bit of cold water.

Moments later, in a quiet splashing, a dark stream poured from an oxidised copper tap to fill a basin carved right into the stone. Leaning forward, Harry massaged his face, his muscles relaxing gently on contact with the liquid. His ablutions finished, he played half-consciously for a few moments with Chick who had started paddling in the sink, before recoiling with a start. A young man looking exhausted was contemplating him with astonishment, there, right through the spotted mirror facing him. His eyes circled with purplish halos were red as if he had rubbed them for hours and deep furrows had dug themselves under his eyelids.

It took Harry a moment to understand who this pitiful reflection of himself reminded him of. He looked like Draco Malfoy.

"Harry, is that you? Are you alright?"

"You scared me!" breathed Harry in a reproach directed at Hermione, whose head had appeared in the door gap. "Since when do girls have access to the boys' bathroom, anyway?"

"I'm Head Girl, don't forget," she replied, tapping a badge pinned to her nightgown. "With all the responsibilities that implies, I have to have the right to a few extras. And you, what are you doing here?"

Harry hesitated. He wouldn't have a better opportunity to confide his worries to Hermione.

"Something woke me in the middle of the night..."

"Ah, you too. Sorry, Harry. It seemed to come from the floor below, so I went down to look. It's Pansy Parkinson, a nasty nightmare apparently, nothing more."

"So I didn't dream it," said Harry while Malfoy's words, "Your word, Potter. Your word as a Gryffindor" rang in his head.

Still hesitant, he forced a smile and added:

"For a moment, I really thought I was going mad."

"Pressure, you know," said Hermione in an assured tone intended to be comforting. "It's an important year, and we have a big week ahead of us; you even more so, with the match. Come on, let's go back to sleep."

After wishing Hermione goodnight for the second time in a few hours, Harry returned to his four-poster bed. As if to protect himself from some threat that might have hovered over him, he drew the curtains surrounding him. Head buried in his pillow, he met Chick's gaze, who seemed to be observing him reproachfully.

"I promised! And no one is going to Azkaban or anything else because of me. No one except the Death Eaters..." he murmured to the bird staring at him silently with its ash-coloured eyes.

Sleep took him as the magic formulas studied the day before agitated one after another in his head. Little by little, his mind drifted towards memories of the crazy night that had nearly marked the capture of the Lestranges. Like a spectre, he saw the ritual scene again, floating above the basin of bloody sap. However, at the moment of invocation, it was not the Ferryman's face that appeared below. In the purple liquid, dozens and dozens of small tense faces took shape, chanting Harry's name in a frightening concert of supplications.

When Harry opened his eyes again, it was not to find the canopy of his four-poster bed. Without really knowing how, he had once again landed in the circular room, the very one he had escaped from so many times.

"Harry Potter... What a joy to find you again."

As usual, the nightmare's curious host awaited him, his face remaining hidden behind a powerful indigo halo. He bowed gracefully in a way that recalled Halcard's gestures and spread his arms in a sort of invitation. Noticing the hands with interminable hooked nails awaiting him, Harry judged it preferable to flee without bothering to reply.

Through experience, he knew what he had to do and set off at full speed towards the nearest wall.

"You are a gifted young man, Harry," said the thing before setting off in pursuit.

Harry soon reached the edge of the enclosure. There, he allowed himself only a brief moment to assess the distance separating him from the monster and lay down against the icy marble floor.

He had to pass through the stone. Once underneath, he would find himself in that strange breathable liquid that treated him as if he were an air bubble, and he could then swim to the limits of the dream. He would then let himself fall into the void to wake up with a start in his bed.

"I have to pass, I have to pass," repeated Harry quietly, doing his best not to pay attention to the sinister scraping of the thing approaching. "I must be one with the marble, melt into it."

The monster was only a few yards away, claws out, when Harry finally felt himself dragged downwards.

Like an ethereal being, he tipped under the interface.

"These powers, these gifts that constitute you..." growled the thing before noting with annoyance the disappearance of its prey.

Immersed, pressed against the surface he had just crossed, Harry could see the creature searching for him with a staggering step. It soon wavered and continued its hunt on all fours, the dark silhouette of its head at ground level, still hidden behind the bright and unalterable blue-violet light.

As discreetly as he could, Harry began to paddle with all his might. Sooner or later, the thing would try to insinuate itself into his mind to see through his eyes and know where he was.

He had almost reached the borders of the dream when it tried its move. Prepared, Harry closed his eyes. He tried to chase the image he still had of the creature, crouched just above him, on the other side of the interface. But while he strove to picture a scene that would have routed his pursuer, a detail kept returning, incapacitating him, blocking him, like an anchor hindering a ship's departure.

Just before he closed his eyes, the light source limiting the creature's appearance to that of a large nightmarish shadow had appeared to him more distinctly. It looked like a circular object, no bigger than a Galleon; no bigger than that imprint Harry had found in the bowels of the mountain, a few weeks before, and which he suspected more than ever of being the mould in which Grindelwald's Compass of Chaos had been forged.

Plunged in thought, Harry realised too late that the thing had found him. Without him having time to kick one last time to escape, the beast struck the interface so hard that its hooked hand passed through. Its claws

agitated for a few moments in the liquid, right under Harry's nose, before sinking in to close on his throat.

"These powers, these gifts... they attract us!" Harry could hear as he struggled vainly, while an ink cloud obscured his vision.

Stretched out full length, face down, Harry regained consciousness on contact with a frozen floor. His limbs were stiff, as if he had struggled for hours, and his throat burned terribly. He massaged his neck for a moment before straightening up suddenly. He had left the vaulted room in which the creature had caught him. Around him, maybe ten yards away, a crowd of dark and indistinct shapes whispered incomprehensible words in a sort of restrained excitement.

"Come now... Will you finally consent to demonstrate the real extent of your gifts to us, Harry Potter?" said a familiar voice behind his back.

Standing in the centre of the troop encircling them, the thing awaited him. Despite the blinding indigo veil bursting from its chest, Harry could guess its outline; straight, proud, at once human and monstrous.

"How many times must we still make you fall? How far must you be pushed so that finally you reveal yourself?"

Before he could do anything, the creature made a sharp gesture and Harry slumped under the blow of pain. Something had just hit him in the thigh.

"Entertaining as it may have been, our little game of hide-and-seek ends. You have only to face us like a man, Harry Potter."

I'm still dreaming, I'm still asleep, told himself Harry internally; despite the trickle of warm blood he could feel snaking down his leg.

"A dream?" said the thing as if it had read his thoughts, "a dream coming true... Just as so many dreams will soon come true, thanks to you."

The thing raised its frightful clawed hand again and Harry reacted instinctively:

"*Protego!*" he cast.

A powerful protective shield appeared, just in time to deflect the creature's assault. The spell, a sort of invisible blade, crashed onto a nearby flagstone, slicing it clean.

Harry thus realised he was firmly holding his magic wand and that he was no longer in pyjamas, but very much in wizard robes. Still

disconcerted by this discovery, he reacted too late to the thing's offensive and soon found himself wounded in his other leg.

"Show us!" cried the creature. "Show us, before it is too late, for only the victors will be spared..."

The monster was initiating its next attack and Harry concentrated with all his might. His best Shield Charm was all that could spare him a new injury. But as he prepared to pronounce the formula "*Protego!*" internally, his fingers clenched to breaking point on his wand, his feet slipping in his own blood, the thing had once again insinuated itself into his mind and a deafening scream had resonated in his skull.

"No, not Harry! Have mercy!" a woman's voice had said—the voice of Lily Potter, his mother.

"I forbid you to... That memory is mine!" screamed Harry as his protective charm was parried and his robe turned crimson at his left shoulder. "MINE AND NO ONE ELSE'S!"

Anger won out over reason. Without paying any more attention to the alarm signals from his bruised body, Harry charged head down.

To his great surprise, however, the collision with his aggressor never happened. With the imminence of the impact, the latter had suddenly lost all consistency. It had decomposed into a swarm of small snakes that fled sliding on the ground, in a concert of mocking hisses.

"So what? We're running away, we don't want to catch me anymore? COME BACK AND FIGHT, YOU COWARD!"

The reptiles stopped dead. For a moment, they regrouped to form only a gross tangle of gleaming and undulating scales. The mass began to grow, to stretch from the ground, and the agitation shaking the shadow-filled crowd in the background redoubled in intensity.

"I have read in your heart and your heart is mine, Harry Potter."

Carried away by his fury, unless it was panic fear, Harry felt himself tremble despite himself.

Face as pale as Death, two narrow slits for nostrils and a pair of pitiless eyes set with vertical pupils; the tall, thin silhouette, draped in a long black cape that caressed his back sweetly; Lord Voldemort had just materialised before his eyes.

"It's impossible... No, it's... it's a joke, it's rubbish!" choked Harry. "I'm in a dream, none of this is real; Voldemort was destroyed, I broke him. I

broke him like I'll break this crude charm... AND LIKE I WILL BREAK YOU, WHOEVER YOU ARE!"

Laughing, arms raised triumphantly as if he had just been touched by divine grace, Voldemort gave a gasp of surprise upon discovering the immense flaming rock Harry had managed to project from the tip of his wand. There was a terrible explosion, the ground shook enough to lose balance, then a new curtain of black ink swallowed the scene.

"Bravo, Harry Potter," concluded the thing's voice. "What gifts, and what progress... We are almost there."

"Still, he never should have gone so hard on him. He pushes the limits every time, it's going to end badly!"

"I know, I'm hesitating to speak to McGonagall about it. But on the other hand, this teaching—barbaric as it may be—is part of local customs!"

"I don't care, next time, I'm getting involved."

"Not sure that's a good idea... Anyway, it's late, we'd better go. Rest well, Ron."

"Goodnight Hermione, goodnight Ginny. Don't worry, he'll get over it. And we're here to keep him company, Chick and I."

Body heavy as if turned to lead, Harry managed to open one eye as his senses awakened. He was lying on what must have been a bed, in a room that didn't look very familiar.

"Ah shame, you just missed them," said Ron from the bed just to his left.

His head was covered in a large white bandage through which a dark red stain showed.

"Mate, talk about a rough start to term, that was something," resumed Ron in response to Harry's dumbfounded expression. "Halcard didn't spare you, but you fought back like a boss!"

"What am I... Ouch!"

"Stay still, you mustn't overdo it if you want to heal."

"Then explain to me what happened, will you?" replied Harry with a certain impatience.

All he could distinguish from the few head movements his neck brace allowed was that they were in a room darkened by thick curtains, full of spare beds lined up against the walls. The place looked like an old hospital, and Harry, having visited it clandestinely a few weeks earlier while looking for clues all over the castle, finally realised it was the Durmstrang infirmary.

"What, you're joking?" said Ron, half-amused. "You were against Halcard in Battle Magic this morning. And all by yourself you blew up a good chunk of the practice platform, at the top of the Dueling Tower. You're not going to tell me you don't remember!"

"Battle Magic... Halcard, you say?"

"Of course! Who else? As far as I know, you're his one and only opponent since we started this class, last year."

Without warning, a crowd of memories had burst into Harry's mind. Though they remained blurry in that moment, the feeling they inspired was tangible. It was something unpleasant, like a deep fear, an inexplicable anguish.

After hesitating a moment, he plunged in.

"Ron... I remember going to bed Sunday night, the eve of the start of term. I remember having a series of nightmares more real than life, I remember facing a kind of infernal creature that visits me in dreams almost every night, and you're telling me I got up this morning, Monday, to go up to Battle Magic class, as if nothing had happened?"

Ron's admiring smile inverted into a worried pout. With his bandage and the timid lighting of the candlestick placed between their beds, he looked almost like a human-sized garden gnome wearing a toadstool hat.

"Pardon? I... yes, you came to have breakfast, you weren't very talkative that's for sure, but I told myself that was understandable given what awaited you; Monday morning is the hardest time of the week for everyone, but *we* don't have to train against the prof in person. And then the lesson started and..."

Increasingly worried, the boom-boom of his heart racing until it resonated painfully in his skull, Harry had to force himself so that the striking moments of that dream so real he had just lived finally resurfaced. If Ron was telling the truth, and he didn't look like he was joking, there were necessarily common points between the dream and his so-called destructive exploit at the end of the lesson.

"So, I blew up the practice pitch?" resumed Harry after a good minute of internal struggle.

"Partly yes, with an impressive spell, a sort of miniature meteor straight out of your wand. That's how I landed here, with you. Halcard dodged the blow by transforming into a kind of big bat—he's an Animagus evidently—but Hermione, Ginny, and I were in the trajectory and we were quite incapable of imitating him. So I pushed them out of the way but... Anyway, there you go," he concluded, pointing a finger at his turbaned skull.

"And I...?"

"We found you in the rubble, passed out," acquiesced Ron gravely.

The situation was even worse than Harry had imagined. It wasn't the first time he feared hurting his friends unconsciously. Back when Voldemort was still alive, a strange link had been established between them. So much so that Harry had believed he was attacking Ron's father. He had seen himself attacking him while the Dark Lord had taken possession of his favourite snake, Nagini, to explore the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic incognito.

The simple fact that this kind of event could happen again was enough to make him nauseous.

"Voldemort... You didn't see Voldemort, we agree on that?" gasped Harry as the elements of the nightmare became clearer in his head. "And them," he added, pointing to the apparently unconscious students lying on their beds in the farthest corner of the room. "I hurt them too?"

"No Harry, relax mate. I don't know if it's hunting the Lestranges that's acting on your subconscious, or what, but I can assure you that no Death Eater, and even less Voldemort, showed up at Battle Magic class this morning. If it can comfort you in any way, I'm the only one you messed up. From what I understand, those lot are unfortunates who contracted that magical disease, *Detergum Tenebris*, or something like that."

For a brief moment, Harry felt relieved. True, he had just lived through a trying moment, and he had even sent his best friend to the infirmary despite himself. But his real fear, that of having to admit the return of the most powerful Dark Wizard of his time, seemed momentarily dismissed.

However, a crucial detail continued to nag at him.

"It's called: *Lethargum Tenebris*," he corrected abruptly, "and I am now certain it is not a magical disease. Actually... it's a curse!" he added under the impact of a revelation.

"Magical disease, curse... what does it change anyway?" sighed Ron, gently resting his head back on his triple layer of pillows.

"Magical diseases appear more or less naturally; a curse is the work of a wizard."

"Listen to you, you sound like Hermione," chuckled Ron before wincing in pain as he had just aggravated his wound.

Ron might laugh, but a quasi-irrefutable hypothesis had suddenly constructed itself in Harry's mind. The question of "why" might remain blurry, but the veil hiding the "who" had just been pierced. But the very moment he was about to share the fruit of his reflection, Draco Malfoy's words began to ring once more in his head: "Talk about it, and it'll be as if you'd let me go to Azkaban last July." Harry opened his mouth, but no sound came out. His throat was dry and burned terribly. Then, as if he had guessed his intentions, Chick leaped from Ron's shoulder to nestle against the little flesh his neck brace didn't cover.

"It is a curse, and I know who cast it," said Harry finally in a voice so loud he surprised himself. "He torments me in a sort of world of his creation, at night when I sleep; just as he torments Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, and all those poor devils lying over there."

Ron seemed suddenly paralysed. Mouth wide open, he stared at Harry dumbfounded.

"I... Malfoy? He went so far as to talk to you about that? I must say... I... I happen to have slightly strange bad dreams too, lately," he conceded, mouth pasty.

"That only half surprises me," replied Harry, fixed on his reasoning, "we're certainly not the only ones. I don't know why he's after us, what he really wants, he's obsessed with this story of 'gifts'. Every time I meet him, he stays hidden behind a light that stops me seeing his real face. But..."

Lying on his bed, Ron was suddenly seized by a fit of fidgets. To a lesser extent, the students lying at the back of the room seemed to be stirring too.

"Yes," he murmured, "yes... that rings a bell. A tall bloke, quite disturbing..."

"...but last night," resumed Harry as if nothing had happened, "I managed to glimpse the object that had been blinding me from the start. It was something round, imagine that, the size of a Galleon, exactly like the imprint we found between the roots of the Yggdrasil, under the castle."

"...with long hair, and rather familiar manners. He reminded me a bit of..."

"Ron! I can see only one so-called heir of Durmstrang who could know the secret passage to Nerida Vulchanova's mausoleum. If, for some reason, Grindelwald made his Compass of Chaos there and then went back to bury it; then I suspect that person of having found it. That's who I fought against last night, or rather this morning. It's..."

"...Halcard!" they concluded in unison.

They stared at each other, petrified by this sudden realization.

Was it really possible that a being with such unhealthy intentions, about whom so little was finally known, could accede to the headship of Durmstrang in such a short time? *After all, why not*, thought Harry. Wasn't the primary goal of the Compass—assuming it was indeed in his possession—to offer its user the means to upset the established order?

Harry and Ron were shaken. So much so that they couldn't have said when or how the sick students lying at the back of the room had sat up on their beds. Head down and hair messy, eyes closed, arms dangling, the fifteen or so students sharing the infirmary with them that night began to murmur in a crescendoing hum.

Stuck on his own bed due to the bandages binding him, Harry had to content himself with straining his ears. Despite his efforts, the snatches of words reaching him remained incomprehensible.

"Can... can we help you?" dared Ron, eyes shining with fright.

The question had its effect on the sick who fell silent immediately. They remained thus, motionless, like an assembly of grotesque puppets; until resuming a few moments later in a morbid chorus:

"Desired. Adored. Feared... Abandoned. Fear our awakening, enemies of the Greater Good. For we have returned."

Their orison finished, they fell back silently onto their sheets as if the latter had sucked them in; as if the nightmare had suddenly called them back to it.

26. THE MALFOY SKEET

The night Harry and Ron spent in the infirmary was undoubtedly one of the longest of their lives. Harry, who wasn't supposed to move if he wanted to get back on his feet quickly, had to content himself with watching Ron hastily work on their protection. Spurred on by fear, it had indeed only taken a few waves of his wand for the latter to move their beds to a remote corner of the room. Ron had then whispered enchantments meant to hide them from their roommates. It was with the duvet pulled up to their ears and bated breath that they had followed the episodic bouts of sleepwalking from which the victims of the *Lethargum Tenebris* seemed to suffer.

Although no other hostile intent had shown through in the patients' attitude, Harry (like Ron, judging by his late snoring) preferred to wait until the first rays of sunlight filtered through the curtains to surrender to the long-awaited rest.

Stomach painfully empty, but body in much better shape, he woke around seven in the evening. The nurse, a gruff old man, came to their bedside. Without gentleness, he examined them both, manipulating them with his rasping hands while explaining with a strong Eastern European accent that, in his day, students were endowed with a far superior constitution. Suspecting a possible link between Halcard and his interlocutor, Harry judged it wiser not to let anything slip regarding the disturbing actions of the other patients in the infirmary. If there was one person, however, in whom he was now decided to confide, it was Hermione.

After a disappointing detour via the Great Hall (dinner had visibly finished a while ago), they tried their luck in the library, on the floor where they now habitually met to study until curfew. They found Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna who threw their arms around their necks as soon as they entered the small study room, set up in one of the tower's many alcoves.

"Harry, Ron! Oh, I'm so sorry!" exclaimed Hermione, hair messy as if she had just come out of a fierce battle. "We thought about visiting you, but Professor Van Helsing's essay on the exceptional abilities of hybrid beings took us longer than expected. What a headache!"

"At the same time, between torturing ourselves with revision and going to see you, the choice was quickly made," said Ginny cynically. "It's good to see you back on your feet anyway."

In the distance, the sun was retreating behind the Devil's Peak and the shelves surrounding them were tinted red for a moment as they loosened their embraces. The days were getting longer with the coming of summer, yet, strangely, Durmstrang and its surroundings remained as cold as in the depths of winter, if not more so.

"We... we did put a bit of food aside for you, though," said Neville, embarrassed, revealing a few chicken sandwiches piled under a napkin.

But despite the hunger burning their stomachs, Harry and Ron remained impassive.

"Are you really cured?" asked Luna, faithful to her annoying habit of staring at her friends as if seeing them for the first time.

Ron nodded and glanced over his shoulder.

"Is there anyone else here?" he asked solemnly. "Other students? A teacher, maybe?"

"Pardon? No, no, it's just us; this floor isn't very busy. That's why I like it so much," added Hermione, surprised. "Why? You... you don't look well, either of you."

"It's about Halcard, and probably much more than that," replied Harry.

Sitting at the large study table, Chick on his shoulder, he told them the details of his nightmares. He told them about that mysterious and strangely insistent being; right up to the parallel of the fight he had semi-consciously fought against Halcard at the top of the Dueling Tower.

"In my dream, the one I was fighting wore a medallion that immediately made me think of Grindelwald's Compass. I'm sure of it," Harry finally concluded.

He had finished his tale and the torches had returned to their indigo colour, a sign that the free-roaming period was over.

"And... What if you were possessed?" asked Ginny, moving closer to him as if to probe him.

"I doubt it," retorted Harry.

He shook his head a little too vigorously given his still-fresh wounds, and grimaced before resuming:

"I still remember most of my actions. It's more like... like I continue to act elsewhere, when I'm asleep."

"Except that yesterday morning you weren't elsewhere but right with us, at the top of the Dueling Tower," intervened Ron. "And that giant fireball you conjured in your dream, I can tell you it was very real," he added, pointing to the bandage protecting his wound.

Hermione made them jump by dropping heavily onto her seat. The story seemed to have devastated her, so much so that tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

"My god, it's awful..." she sobbed. "I've had some rather disturbing nightmares lately too. I... I thought I was the only one! With all this pressure, I'd convinced myself it was nothing."

She paused briefly, as if to give herself time to admit the reality threatening them.

"The students are in danger, we're all in danger, I have to warn McGonagall. The poor woman, she's already overwhelmed. Between this, the castle getting attacked again last week, all those materials disappearing..."

"She'll bring us home," mused Ginny aloud.

"Quite possibly... And I was hoping we'd finally take our N.E.W.T.s..."

"And I that we'd win this cup..."

"Do you really think the *Lethargum Tenebris* is caused by Halcard?" asked Luna, visibly affected by her friends' desperate looks. "It could just as easily be..."

"I just told you," cut in Harry bluntly. "The one I was fighting in my dream corresponds to Halcard in reality. You saw it yourself."

"In that case..."

"In that case, the Headmaster of the school we've been in for nearly nine months is a psychopath armed to the teeth—or rather to the fangs—if he's

a vampire," corrected Ron before finally allowing himself a first bite of his sandwich.

Worried, they judged it better to keep their suppositions to themselves. The situation had been tense enough lately, with the imminence of the exams and the second Quidditch match. A few exchanges later and they headed back to their common room. Curfew had been in place for a good hour already and they chose to hurtle down the staircase with its hundreds of uneven steps rather than take the usual movable platform (its mechanical creaking would have threatened to give them away). Chick proved to be a particularly effective scout and they managed to return to their quarters without hindrance. On the way, hushed discussions went well. Despite the fear he now inspired, everyone wanted to know Halcard's true identity, Harry first and foremost.

The next day began with the pleasant observation of a dreamless sleep. In better shape, although still far from fully recovered, Harry met up with the others. Together they headed to the Great Hall for breakfast. On the way, Ron didn't fail to observe that Hermione was pale and bleary-eyed. She explained that she would have been quite unable to fall asleep before warning McGonagall. Something she had finally resolved to do by preparing a scroll of parchment, then going discreetly to the Owlery around three in the morning.

"You shouldn't have gone alone," Ron was still lecturing her as they entered the Great Hall, animated by the usual hubbub of students.

"I'm Head Girl, I remind you. If there's anyone authorised to patrol at night, it's me."

"That's not the point! You know very well that..."

As they approached the two interlocking circles of tables around the Yggdrasil, discussions ceased. A silence that gave the impression the temperature had dropped ten degrees suddenly fell upon the hall. Harry didn't have to wonder why for too long. On all sides, students were casting fearful glances at him, as if he were some sort of wild beast, a ferocious monster threatening everyone's safety. His recent demonstration of power at the top of the Dueling Tower had visibly marked more than a few. Even Vassily Krum, usually hard to impress, was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Great atmosphere," breathed Ginny, sitting on the nearest bench. "Bodes well for Sunday's match."

The tension was still palpable when they ventured into the corridors towards the Potions laboratory for their first lesson of the day. Unsurprisingly, an altercation broke out on the way between Malfoy and Krum. The clash was short-lived, however. The simple fact of Harry showing his face among the students gathered in front of the scene was enough to calm things down, and disperse the crowd.

"Fantastic, mate. If you'd showered in dragon dung this morning it wouldn't have had as much effect," said Ron with a smirk as they started up the flight of stairs preceding the laboratory.

"And you haven't eaten much this morning; how about a little flaming rock to fill your stomach?" retorted Harry, stung and still surprised by the new aura he exuded.

Once in class, Professor Abrosius decreed that they had studied the theory of Holy Water potion enough to tackle the practice. The exercise proved highly complex. Each preparation had something unique about it and following the recipe to the letter provided at best only the first half of the solution. The second lay in the brewer's ability to interpret the swirls and other wisps generated by the potion. One then had to react by stirring the mixture adequately, or reciting passages from a work deemed "inspiring" in a low voice.

About half an hour before the end of the session, Harry was congratulating himself on having chosen a letter written by his mother to Sirius as a reference work. His mixture had all the expected texture. Ron couldn't say the same. Unfortunately for him as for so many others, Dean Thomas had decided to recite certain paragraphs from his favourite Quidditch book to his potion. After an hour, his mixture had ended up catching fire before exploding lamentably, contaminating the preparation of his nearest neighbours.

Hermione, for her part, had just finished with a good lead. She took advantage of Professor Abrosius passing to congratulate her to ask him about Halcard, casually.

"How our Headmaster asserted his right of accession to the castle, you ask, my dear? Well, as far as I know, he presented irrefutable proof to the authorities. The property in his possession, he hastened to confirm that Durmstrang would continue to serve as a school for the local youth. A very generous gesture on his part if you ask me, otherwise I certainly wouldn't be here to tell you this story today!"

"It's rather vague, and it doesn't explain how Halcard acceded to the post of Headmaster," replied Hermione thoughtfully.

As if the breadth of his erudition were suddenly called into question, the professor hastened to add:

"Our Headmaster was appointed only—allow me to insist—only after passing a series of extremely thorough exams with flying colours," he said, raising a finger. "What is more, the ease with which he rehabilitated the Dueling Tower constitutes in itself indisputable proof of his uncommon magical abilities, or indeed of his kinship with the founder."

"His kinship with the founder?" Harry couldn't help but pick up in a cavernous voice, for he was leaning over his cauldron.

Flattered to note that his speech was arousing growing interest in the room, Professor Abrosius smiled with delight.

"But certainly, Mr Potter. The Dueling Tower was in an advanced state of ruin when Halcard took charge of it. Only an exceptional master builder could have done what he did. And you are not unaware that the founder Nerida Vulchanova was herself a builder beyond compare."

Hermione jumped on her stool at the announcement of this last piece of information.

"In that case, what do you make of the many accounts claiming Nerida Vulchanova called upon the talents of an extraordinarily gifted master builder to construct her school?" she asked, frowning.

"Ha! The candour of youth will always surprise me. No offence: balderdash! Nonsense, those stories, my child... My proof is that only the statue of Lady Vulchanova remains in the hall, in the alley dedicated to the figures who marked the history of this school. If such a Master Builder had assisted Lady Vulchanova in her task, believe me, he would be dead by now," coughed the professor with an amused air; "and his statue would have appeared; it is part of the ancient and unalterable enchantments dictating the evolution of this place!"

Faced with this last incontestable argument, Hermione scowled. As if to come to her aid, Neville raised his hand:

"And what about the Yggdrasil then?"

"And what about it, 'what about the Yggdrasil', Mr Longbottom?"

"It... A dragon must have breathed on its seed for it to grow. How did Vulchanova go about taming a dragon?"

Hard to determine the real reason that pushed Professor Abrosius to cut the conversation short. Whether because it threatened to escape him or, as he pointed out, because other students hadn't finished their preparation and needed quiet to concentrate. The fact remained that Harry left the class a few minutes later doubly satisfied: they knew a little more about Halcard, and he was certain to receive an excellent grade soon for the quality of his Holy Water potion.

"You didn't go easy on Father Abrosius," remarked Ginny a few hours later.

Their day of classes as well as the Quidditch practice that followed were over. Sitting in the warmth near the stove of their common room, Ron had fallen asleep from exhaustion on Hermione's shoulder. Opposite, on the slightly stiff two-seater sofa they had come to appreciate, Harry and Ginny had discussed strategy and brooms all evening. So much so that they had just decreed a break couldn't hurt them.

"I want to learn as much as possible about Halcard," replied Hermione, sliding a cushion under Ron's head. "If we manage to prove he doesn't belong here, the evil inhabiting this place will end; and we might have a chance of taking our N.E.W.T.s."

"I still struggle to understand why he would do all this," said Ginny, gazing into the embers of the softly purring stove.

"For simple sadistic pleasure?" suggested Hermione. "He wouldn't be the first to decree that those around him must suffer, simply because he can't accept himself."

"I think we should see it more as a sort of test," replied Harry, stretching. "Even if I have no idea of the goal of his approach... and his style leaves something to be desired."

He stood up and stroked his cheek for a moment with his fingertips. A scar was now there, a remnant among many others of the last duel he had fought against Halcard.

"It doesn't look so bad on you. Actually, it makes you look even more irresistibly brooding," retorted Ginny as if to play down the situation.

With a grimace not unlike Mad-Eye Moody and his innumerable tics, Harry kissed Ginny and took leave of his friends. Once on his bed, he dabbed the rest of his wounds with Murtlap Essence to speed up recovery and put on his pyjamas. Finally, Chick curled against his sore cheek, he fell asleep.

Although Harry's nights passed without incident, his end of the week was not restful for all that. The very next day, Hermione nearly burst into tears during breakfast. Professor McGonagall's reply to her distress call had reached her. In a few lines punctuated by an imposing full stop, the Hogwarts Headmistress had drily contented herself with reminding everyone that they must, more than ever, assume their responsibilities. A way of making Hermione understand she was on her own, which Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna found intriguing. Hurt, Hermione had nevertheless digested the news with fatalism. And in the following days, it was with unflinching resolve that she cut short every brawl breaking out between the supporters of the two Quidditch teams.

As the second match approached, excitement grew in the castle to the point of becoming stifling. Ginny's nerves were raw and she threatened to explode at any moment. In the same way Hermione took advantage of every break to go to the library, Ginny slipped away increasingly often to the vicinity of the Trophy Room. It was, she said, "one of the only quiet places in the school where you can hear yourself think." But Durmstrang was so vast that Harry suspected a somewhat different reality. Having been Gryffindor team captain himself at one time, he imagined her rather taking advantage of the room to meditate for tens of minutes on end, eyes riveted on the sumptuous cup of eternal ice that would reward the tournament winners.

The time she didn't devote to addressing prayers to the gods of Quidditch, Ginny spent alongside her teammates. Whether in the corridors or in class, no one was safe from a surprise Q&A session on how to react to such and such a game situation. Most astonishing in Harry's eyes was the fact that none of her flying comrades had yet rebuffed their captain. Even Draco Malfoy, though renowned for his pronounced taste for discord, seemed to refuse any manifestation of annoyance. He mostly contented himself with nodding and answering briefly, while the dark circles hollowing his pale face testified to extreme fatigue... For if they hadn't discussed the subject for weeks, Harry suspected him of suffering from much more than the pettiness of Vassily and his troop. At night, it was a safe bet he was still suffering the assaults of the nightmarish creature.

The Sunday of the match finally arrived. It was a beautiful day even if the air temperature gave no hint of the arrival of summer. Despite the excitement of the supporters surrounding them, Harry and his teammates descended the steep path leading to the pitch without saying a word. Harry was still limping slightly from the aftermath of his duel with Halcard, Ron

wore his usual sickly pallor, Draco looked like the walking dead, and Ginny was frowning so much that the mass of spectators parted of its own accord in her path.

After a briefing that served more to reassure the captain than to present any last-minute strategic details, everyone grabbed their broom. Finally, one after another, they left the changing rooms in single file and soon found themselves under the sun flooding the frozen crust of the Quidditch pitch.

Perched alongside his wolf from a stand overlooking the crowd, his sumptuous black and gold satin cape floating in the wind, Halcard stood up and spread his arms as was his custom every time he prepared to speak.

"Dearest students and residents of Durmstrang, welcome!" said Halcard. "Welcome to the second meeting of our Inter-School Quidditch Tournament!"

A little lower down, in the stands carved right into the cliff, the announcement was greeted by a torrent of joyous exclamations, amplified whistles, waving banners, the rumble of drums, and the terrifying roar of the sort of chimera Luna was wearing as a hat. With all the homework and the imminence of exams, the match was the perfect opportunity for everyone to take their minds off things.

Harry, however, did not feel the same surge of enthusiasm as his classmates. It was rather with a certain resentment that he witnessed the speech. Somewhere, under the refined lace overflowing from the Headmaster's collar, was undoubtedly the Compass of Chaos.

"Today..." resumed Halcard in a loud voice as the two teams positioned themselves opposite each other. "Today marks a turning point in our competition. Perhaps we will know our grand winner this very evening... Or perhaps we will be able to rejoice in the prospect of a third and final round, which will finally decide between our two fantastic schools!"

A new thunder of cheers set the cliff face ablaze. Meanwhile, below, the captains had stepped forward to shake hands. While everyone watched this first contact avidly, Vassily Krum created a surprise by letting a grimace of pain show. Harry didn't take long to understand: Ginny was wearing the dragon-hide gloves given by her brother for Christmas. And it was a safe bet George had added his personal touch by concealing a subtle Grip of Steel charm in them.

Halcard didn't seem to have missed the scene either. He was still devouring Ginny with his eyes when the whistle blew.

"Give your best! Play as well as you can," he added enthusiastically as the players propelled themselves into the air. "For only the victors will be spared."

Harry thought he was dreaming. He was certain he had heard those last words somewhere before. But as the answer gradually took shape in his mind, the Quaffle passed like a red cannonball a few yards away. Without wasting another moment, Harry dived into the fray.

The adjustments he had so meticulously developed and applied to his broom had made his Firebolt a veritable flying scalpel. At first, the hardest part had been keeping up with the infernal physical pace required by this pushed-to-the-extreme version of his mount. However, with the hours and hours of training imposed by Ginny, one had to admit Harry couldn't have turned up to the match in better form.

After elbowing his way past two tough opponents, Harry seized the Quaffle. Then, as if touched by divine grace, he sliced through the air as well as the Durmstrang defence with indecent ease.

Somewhere above him, Vassily Krum was shouting incomprehensible words angrily. The wind whistled, the goal hoops approached. Harry cocked his arm and threw with all his might. The opposing Keeper, a big bloke with square shoulders, threw himself across... too late.

"ONE MINUTE!" shouted Dean Thomas, once again match commentator. "ONE MINUTE SINCE THE MATCH STARTED AND HARRY POTTER ALREADY SCORES THE FIRST GOAL!"

Brandishing a fist, Harry flew over the stands under the wild clamour of the Hogwarts students.

"Fantastic, Harry! Keep it up!" Ginny called to him in passing.

In the distance, Ron gave him a thumbs-up. The other players on the team passed by to give him a few pats on the back, except for Draco Malfoy who contented himself with giving him a nod.

The thirty minutes that followed took inexplicably the same turn. It looked like Vassily Krum's team was discreetly holding back. While he and his teammates seized this opportunity to score a few more goals, Harry had come to wonder what crazy strategy could lead Durmstrang to feign such fragility.

Leaning over his magical megaphone, it was Dean who found the answer inadvertently, and who thereby turned the tide of the game:

"Incredible, just LOOK AT THAT! They're literally backing away from Harry! It's... it's as if they were afraid of him, HAHA!"

It was so obvious Harry should have suspected it. Since his confrontation with Halcard, everyone outside his closest friends had started avoiding him, fearing him, dreading him. Unlikely as it might seem, the players were no exception to this new rule. Except that with his last comment, Dean had just pushed the humiliation suffered by Durmstrang a notch too far. Losing a Quidditch match was one thing; seeing one's pride tainted at home was another.

The game immediately took on a new dimension. Suddenly, it was no longer just about scoring points but flying as if one's life depended on it. The Durmstrang team hadn't just regained its fighting spirit; it had become dangerously brutal.

Still euphoric from the lead Hogwarts held, Ron soon felt the pressure mount. Two crimson silhouettes were barrelling towards him, one with the Quaffle in the crook of his arm. With a gesture he claimed the audience's attention and gripped his broom handle firmly, concentrated. In the distance, the stands responded by chanting the famous tune "Weasley is our King" with such gusto one would have thought the supporters ten times more numerous.

The spectators' screams reduced to the equivalent of a buzzing background noise, the shot arrived. Ron counter-feinted skilfully, at least well enough to deflect the shot which rebounded against the central goal hoop. Moments later, however, Vassily Krum feigned a dive for the Snitch and took advantage to deal him a violent blow to the stomach. Out of breath, eyes full of tears, Ron had no chance of seeing the second shot coming.

Using a clever mix of talent and treachery, Durmstrang caught up at full speed. So much so that at the announcement of half-time, the scoreboard already read 60 – 40, to the advantage of the home team. The pain in his shoulder scar freshly awakened by a Bludger from Mikhailov, Harry rejoined his teammates as best he could to discover they were in no better state than him. Scratched cheeks, split lips, everyone seemed to have taken their share of bad knocks. Ron perhaps even more than the others.

"We'll never last another half in these conditions," said Gerald Chambers as soon as they had collapsed onto the changing room benches. "Those guys are cheating!"

"And Halcard signalling the referee not to intervene, what game are they all playing?"

"It's not cheating. They just stopped flying like kids," retorted Draco Malfoy coldly, eyes redder and puffier than ever. "They play rough. That's how it is here, that's how it is in life, that's all."

"Because you think you're mature when you cross the pitch without making a single pass, maybe?"

Tired, half-stunned, Harry turned painfully towards Ginny. They were already under enough tension and in bad enough shape to suffer yet another outburst. Alas, as the seconds passed, ever more scathing remarks flew from either side of the wooden hut in which they had gathered. All hope of reconciliation, and thereby cooperation, seemed to vanish little by little. A few words from the captain could have fixed that. But Ginny, a trickle of shiny blood running from her forehead to her chin, seemed lost in thought.

"...you ungrateful little git. I want this victory as much as you do. And pass or no pass, if that wardrobe Nipovski wasn't blocking me, we'd have scored double the points by now."

"You're playing solo because you want revenge on Krum, Malfoy. That's simply why you want to win," joined in Jason Samuels, one of the team's two Beaters.

"And Nipovski is on you because Krum told him to be. He's leading you by the nose and you're not even capable of realising it. You're playing his game like a stupid puppet," added Chambers.

"We're going to lose because of you, Malfoy. What am I saying? We've lost, because of you!"

Ginny slowly raised her eyes, her gaze still lost in the distance, until it met Harry's. She then straightened up suddenly:

"What are you talking about? Shut up, all of you! I said, SHUT IT!"

Draco Malfoy, Jason Samuels, and Anthony Rickett, who had stood up with the manifest intention of fighting it out, froze on the spot. Ginny's anger was a far more formidable evil than a few retorts brimming with bad faith.

"Draco, you're going to charge at that Nipovski."

"Pardon? Ah, yes... Excellent strategy, Madam Captain..." retorted Malfoy. "And then what... I impale myself on him? That guy must be one and a half times my height, not to mention his weight!"

"You want to beat Krum? Perfect. So you charge at Nipovski and you duck at the last moment," maintained Ginny drily.

Draco Malfoy made a show of suppressing an insolent giggle.

"Better and better now, she's lost it..."

"Shut it, I said. As for you: Jason, Anthony, you're sick of Draco, aren't you?"

The two Beaters lowered their eyes, looking a bit ashamed, before nodding vaguely.

"Very well. In that case, when Draco has the ball and approaches the hoops, hit a Bludger at him; with all your might."

A new intrigued silence fell in the changing rooms.

"Draco will flatten himself on his broom at the last moment," resumed Ginny, "Nipovski won't see anything coming, he'll take the Bludger in his place... and will just have to treat himself to a new smile. All's fair in love and war."

Looking grim, the players looked at one another. No one had ever tried shooting at a teammate before, at least not voluntarily.

"And... And if we miss? That would be really embarrassing."

Ginny was about to answer when a voice rose from the back of the changing rooms:

"You'd miss a chance to shoot Malfoy in the back, Rickett?" said Ron as if he had suddenly returned from the dead. "You'd really be the last of the losers."

He rummaged in his pocket for a moment before pulling out a Weasley brothers' nougat which he handed to him.

"Swallow that. Your nose—it'll stop the bleeding; and let's go," he added. "I can't wait to see the 'Malfoy Skeet' technique in action. The time has come to deliver, Draco."

Ron stood up grimacing and headed for the exit with a rolling gait, in an unintentionally comic imitation of a western hero.

"Harry, one last thing."

Only they remained. Ginny had stopped him as he was preparing to leave the hut in turn.

"Do you remember what happened the other day, when you faced Halcard at the top of the tower?"

"But, the match... Is this really the time for that?"

Ginny stared at him with such intensity that Harry felt no alternative but to answer.

"You mean, the flaming rock thing?"

"Precisely. Do you remember how you went about it?"

"Ginny honestly, I know you want us to win at all costs, but... casting an offensive spell? In the middle of a Quidditch tournament?"

"That's not what I asked you," she replied calmly.

Perplexed but relieved nonetheless, Harry agreed to revive that painful memory he had been trying to bury deep inside for nearly a week.

"I don't really know. It was... it was a bit like casting a Patronus," replied Harry after a few moments.

"Like casting a Patronus?"

"Yes... Yes, that's it. Except instead of focusing on the happiest thoughts of my life, I was focused on really hard things; on the worst," he finally realised with a sigh.

"Interesting..." said Ginny, more intimidated than anything else. "Is that all you remember?"

With a knot in his stomach at the idea of discovering what new horror he might have committed that day, Harry raised his eyebrows by way of answer.

"When you threw that meteor at Halcard, you screamed. You let out a sort of war cry. It was frightening and fantastic at the same time. And if you could reproduce that cry today, without throwing the rock that goes with it, I'm certain it would revive the fear in the Durmstrang players and... well, you get the idea."

Harry was still troubled when he rejoined his teammates on the frozen surface of the Quidditch pitch. He did his best, however, to put his worries aside and concentrate on the match. Better not leave his most intimate

preoccupations within reach of a being capable of reading them. A being such as Halcard, whose dark silhouette was outlined at the top of the cliff.

The second half resumed under subdued light. Despite the soothing beauty of the sun setting beyond a veritable ocean of snowy peaks, the Durmstrang team proved more ferocious than ever. Without a doubt, Vassily Krum had used the short break to pump his team up to the max, and incite them to ever more violence.

Harry felt as if plunged into the heart of an intense battle. The castle, the stands, and the mountain landscape had disappeared. Only the Bludgers and Nimbus 3000s, allied and opposing, whistling around him without interruption, mattered. Ginny and Vassily Krum were fighting a merciless battle above their heads to seize the Snitch, the Quaffle passed from hand to hand at breakneck speed, and Ron, more decided than ever to fight it out, protected his hoops with surprising boldness.

A good twenty minutes passed before the 'Malfoy Skeet' technique was finally attempted. Hogwarts and Durmstrang were then neck and neck, with a score of 90 to 90. Increasingly tired and injured in his right hand, Gerald Chambers managed to pass the ball to Harry who transmitted it in turn to Draco after executing a Sloth Grip Roll of the finest effect. True to habit, Malfoy launched himself at full speed towards the enemy hoops. However, he quickly found himself pinned by two Chasers and had no other choice but to charge towards Nipovski, who had interposed himself once again.

In the stadium, all commotion had suddenly died down as Draco Malfoy, Quaffle in hand, charged into the trap set by the opposing team. Without even realising it, Harry had frozen in the air, eyes locked on the scene.

Mikhailov, who was prowling nearby, took advantage of this moment of inattention to fire a Bludger at him.

"Harry, move!" shouted Anthony Rickett, appearing out of nowhere.

Bat held high, Rickett hit the Bludger coming at them hard enough to dislocate his shoulder. The small black ball shot off in the opposite direction, straight at Malfoy, and seconds began to pass like minutes.

In the distance, in the air, Draco Malfoy approached Nipovski. Impact with Durmstrang's most massive player was ever more imminent. Resolved to crash for good, Draco clutched the Quaffle to him and hunched his shoulders. At the last moment, even as impact with the imposing

Durmstrang player was inevitable, the Bludger whistled over his blonde neck.

The ball ended its course right in Nipovski's jaw. The surprise and shock were such that the giant fell backwards. There was a moment during which it looked as if Draco had been swallowed by the crimson mass of Durmstrang players, until he emerged under the clamour of the spectators, like a cannonball.

"INCREDIBLE, HE MADE IT OUT IN ONE PIECE!" came Dean's amplified voice from the stands. "AND... AND HE SCORES TOO, IT'S CRAZY! 90 to 100, to Hogwarts!"

While Draco Malfoy flew over the crowd of spectators to wave at them, Nipovski spiralled gently down, like a dead leaf. The few minutes of the match that followed confirmed that the giant was no longer in a fit state to play. Harry scored two goals in quick succession as if the defence had been non-existent. Then came the turn of Chambers, and Draco, once again. Without its wall of muscle, Durmstrang found itself deprived of one of its most precious assets.

The score was 90 to 140 in favour of Hogwarts when Harry was distracted from the game by a golden glimmer, very close to the stand occupied by Halcard. His heart skipped a beat at the thought it might be the Compass of Chaos, shining in the twilight clarity. The seconds that followed proved him wrong, however.

"The Snitch! Krum has spotted it, he's being tailed by Ginny!" commented Dean. "If he catches it, the score will be tied; if Ginny grabs it, however, it's victory for Hogwarts!"

With growing bitterness, Harry watched the two silhouettes speeding almost side by side, each flattened on their broom to limit drag. Until now, this fight had always been his. Never would he have imagined what his teammates might have gone through then, every time he had launched himself against the opposing Seeker in this decisive duel. If only he could do something...

The answer found him even as Vassily Krum reached out towards the Snitch. Without wasting a moment, Harry filled his lungs and screamed with all his might. The cry probably didn't have the terrorising aspect it might have had at the top of the Dueling Tower, facing Halcard, but the traumatising memory it had left was enough to disturb the Durmstrang Seeker.

"KRUM, IT'S KRUM! NO, NO-IT'S-GINNY-WHO-GRABS-THE SNITCH! AND WHO SECURES HOGWARTS' VICTORY! DRAGON'S BREATH, WE WON!"

Ron appeared at Harry's side as if by magic and hugged him breathlessly.

"I don't believe it! We did it! We beat the future cream of the crop of international Quidditch fair and square!" he cried, eyes moist.

The tiny golden ball still in the palm of her fist, Ginny soon joined them, followed closely by the rest of the team, Draco included. Together, they descended to land triumphantly in the crowd of Hogwarts supporters who welcomed them with open arms. Halcard spoke briefly to congratulate the winners and announce a third and final match to take place after the exams. Finally, night falling on Durmstrang, the students lit their wands and went back up to the castle in a long sparkling procession, punctuated by laughter and songs.

On the way to the Hogwarts quarters, hilarity was at its peak. None of the team players managed to set foot on the ground. The heroes of the day were carried, heckled, acclaimed. As he was swung in all directions, Harry reflected that it was indeed the first time he had seen Draco so happy. Seeing him like this, beaming despite the fatigue and numerous bruises overwhelming him, he surprised himself thinking the Slytherin could have been someone completely different had he not been raised among the Malfoys.

Despite the cold reigning in the castle, the party continued in the long circular corridor leading to the various common rooms. Having slipped away recently, Dean and Seamus soon reappeared with a stock of Butterbeer "borrowed from the kitchen". Although Hermione firmly disapproved of the approach, that wasn't the reason that pushed her to put an end to the festivities.

Ron was imitating Nipovski, faithfully reproducing the moment he had taken Rickett's Bludger in the face, when she grabbed him firmly by the arm.

"Hey! What's gotten into you? We won, I remind you; we have the right to relax a bit! There's no way I'm revising tonight!" exclaimed Ron, struggling.

"It has nothing to do with that," replied Hermione, outraged. "Come with me, I need you," she added to Harry. "And let's leave Ginny out of this... Better she enjoys her victory in all innocence."

Intrigued, they followed her without arguing through the crowd that had formed a little further on, around Draco Malfoy.

"Ah, it's you," said Draco, discovering their presence with a slightly disappointed look, as if they had come to steal his glory. "Hell of a match, eh?"

"Would you mind leaving us a moment please?" said Hermione, addressing the rest of the students.

Despite some protests, the crowd dissipated to reform a little further away, around Ginny, Jason Samuels, Anthony Rickett, and Gerald Chambers.

"So what?" exclaimed Draco Malfoy impatiently.

"Well... it's about Pansy. She's not well, not well at all. I-I... I just found out!" added Hermione defensively.

Mechanically, she began to fiddle with her Prefect badge.

"There... She fell into a coma during the match. I'm really sorry, Draco, but I'm afraid she has *Lethargum Tenebris*," she concluded with anguish.

27. WARNINGS

"What?" grimaced Malfoy. "I thought she'd gone to get changed, to celebrate the event."

"And what makes you think it's *Lethargum Tenebris*?" asked Ron, embarrassed. "The match was intense, even for the spectators; maybe she just... fainted."

"We tried different spells, different smelling salts to wake her, but nothing worked. She just lies there, sometimes muttering strange things..."

Draco leaned against the nearest wall, head lowered and fists clenched. For his part, Harry felt sickened by the injustice of the situation. He hated Pansy, but found it intolerable that Draco Malfoy should be so poorly rewarded by circumstances, especially after showing such bravery against Vassily and his team. Perhaps the most unbearable part was that Harry felt the time had come to grant Malfoy his second chance.

"So what?" growled Draco ferociously after a long silence. "What do you intend to do to fix this? You're the Head Girl, after all."

Hermione seemed to falter.

"What do I intend to do? I... I don't really know," she admitted in a trembling voice. "I've already reported the gravity of the situation to Hogwarts, you know."

"Perfect, in that case..."

But Malfoy's detached tone rang false.

"...in that case," he resumed, "I imagine McGonagall has ordered our immediate repatriation. That is it, isn't it?"

Subtly, the tension had ratcheted up a notch. It was as if Hogwarts' victory over Durmstrang had happened years ago.

"Answer me, Granger. Unless you don't have the guts to admit that old bat couldn't care less about the health of Slytherins."

In a flash, Ron had stepped in.

"Leave her alone," he ordered coldly.

"And there we are... Do you understand now?" said Draco fatalistically, turning to Harry. "Gryffindor, Slytherin, the Wizengamot, no difference; all they want is power for power's sake. Unsurprisingly, your dear McGonagall is no exception to the rule."

It took Harry a few moments to understand that Draco was alluding to their last one-on-one discussion. The one that had taken place in the changing rooms weeks earlier, during which the latter had confided the fears torturing him.

"The Headmistress is already overworked, it's not her fault if..."

"Stop it, Harry! By Merlin, stop, you don't believe it yourself!" cut in Malfoy, a sudden form of madness in his eyes. The very same that had characterised Bellatrix Lestrange in her lifetime.

"I am sincerely sorry, Draco, I have no solution to offer you at the moment," confessed Hermione, biting her lip until it bled.

"You're lying too," retorted Malfoy, intractable. "The solution, you know it. You all know it."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged a puzzled look. A few yards away, in a world of her own, Ginny was brandishing her Nimbus 3000 to the cheers of the other Hogwarts students. Harry found it hard to believe they could all have been drunk with joy just minutes before.

"Halcard," announced Draco so simply it was disturbing. "Masks off... Harry is too smart not to have worked it out, and he's also too talkative not to have told you. You have nightmares too; we all do in this bloody school. It's Halcard torturing us, pulling the strings; he is the cause of the *Lethargum Tenebris*. And if we do nothing to stop him, we'll end up like Pansy before long."

Hermione had started sweating profusely, Ron looked as if he had been stunned with his mouth open, and Harry, for his part, felt that strange familiar sensation, the harbinger of big trouble.

"Halcard is the Headmaster of Durmstrang, the very establishment that has hosted us all year!" Hermione reminded him vehemently.

"You don't deny it," observed Malfoy calmly, still leaning against the wall. "I deduce I've hit the mark."

"Even so," said Harry. "I don't really see what you could do against him. He's stronger than any of us."

"Or even all of us put together," added Ron with a sigh.

"Maybe, maybe not..." replied Malfoy, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "All together, I tell you we have a chance to destroy that thing."

Lost in thought, he took a few steps to lean against the opposite wall.

"It is absolutely out of the question to destroy anyone!" cried Hermione, watching him. "If Halcard must be removed, it will be through diplomacy."

"The gentle approach against that monster? Don't make me laugh! Half of Hogwarts was demolished last year to fight You-Know-Who and protect the Chosen One, Potter! Where was the diplomacy in that: did you ring the bell before entering?"

"That was different, it wasn't just me! And we had nothing left to lose, I'll have you know!" snapped Harry, stung.

But no sooner had he stopped than he regretted his words.

"Ah... so that's how they were born, the famous heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts," bounced back Draco with a smooth air. "They had nothing left to lose... It sounds less glorious immediately," he added with a sneer. "In that case, you're right: do nothing. But enjoy it while you can; sooner or later, your Blood Traitor girlfriend's turn will come too, believe me."

Bursts of laughter from the end of the corridor reinforced the unease that had settled. Exhausted, out of patience, Ron snapped.

"I've had enough of your insults, Malfoy. After all, go ahead, go for it if you feel the soul of a hero. You'll see if it's so easy, even when you think you've lost everything."

Malfoy stared at them with eyes red from nights upon nights of nightmares, and Harry realised that the fragile bonds they might have established over the last few months had just snapped.

"No way am I sitting around with my arms crossed... waiting for that awful bloke to drag us all into madness. With or without you, I'll make him pay," announced Draco, turning his back on them for good.

Guilt invaded Harry as the Slytherin's silhouette disappeared down the corridor.

"Stop! He's well armed, he's too dangerous, you have no chance!" he shouted. "We asked the Auror Office for help. They... they'll be arriving soon as reinforcements," he added in a lie of last resort.

In vain.

That evening, it was with heavy hearts that Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the party organised in honour of the Hogwarts Quidditch team. Harry did his best to keep Ginny away from the remorse gnawing at him. The manoeuvre succeeded more or less; it must have been around one in the morning when the trio finally explained to her how the situation had suddenly capsized.

"In my opinion, he won't do anything," said Ginny as they returned to their common room. "Malfoy will never have the guts to go after Halcard alone."

"He's not wrong when he says he's changed, though," retorted Harry. "He's become braver than before, much more so. I never would have believed he'd charge at Nipovski during the match."

"At the same time, when you start from zero, it's not that difficult," remarked Ron bitterly.

"We're all exhausted; he probably overreacted," maintained Ginny. "It's his style. I'll bring him to reason, don't worry. We'll have to if we want to win the third round."

But a little later, as the hot shower water streamed down his neck, Harry couldn't help thinking Ginny was taking this whole story a bit too lightly. With so much personal investment, her obsession with the Quidditch tournament was understandable. But would she have held the same discourse if she had lived through the night he and Ron had spent in the infirmary, in the company of the *Lethargum Tenebris* patients?

Chick did his best to distract Harry from his worries. As he slid under his double layer of duvets, the bird executed several acrobatic pirouettes reminiscent of the exploits he had performed himself a little earlier. Finally, yielding under the weight of a day saturated with twists and turns, he fell asleep.

As with every awakening for weeks, Harry opened his eyes with anxiety. While Chick fidgeted and pecked his fingers (a manifest sign that he longed to be in the Great Hall to enjoy breakfast), the dreams of the past night recalled themselves to him, like indistinct wisps of smoke. For once, Halcard seemed absent from them. However, no doubt influenced by the agitated discussion of the previous day and the threats uttered by Malfoy, Harry had again had that disturbing dream in which an alienated Ginny

threw herself on him to bite him until he bled. Shivering, he decreed a new shower wouldn't go amiss to start the new week and got up.

Reaching the Great Hall, Harry was relieved to find Ginny and his companions in good health. In great shape even, in Ron's case, who had probably never done such justice to breakfast, to Chick's great satisfaction.

"I know we have Battle Magic right after, and you won't be able to eat anything for nearly four hours straight, but... is that a reason to take seconds of every dish, Ron?" whispered Hermione indignantly after folding her copy of the *Gazeta Volšebnogo Soobšestva*.

"Hungry! Match yesterday... starving!" replied Ron, placing a ration of scrambled eggs on the corner of his plate for Chick.

"You're going to end up like that lump Nipovski if you carry on," said Ginny, "that goes for you too!" she added to the bird.

Still plunged in the grotesque prospect of an obese Chick, Harry jumped internally upon discovering that Draco Malfoy hadn't come down for breakfast. They crossed paths with him, however, some five minutes later, on the way to the Dueling Tower.

"You don't intend to come to class this morning?" Hermione asked him suspiciously.

"What, you're going to stop me visiting Pansy on top of everything else?" grated Malfoy in return.

"The infirmary is everywhere except in that direction. What are you up to, Draco?"

"Too late for you to get involved. Keep your big head in the sand and get out of my way; I have things to do."

"Stop a second, this is madness!" retorted Harry, trying to hold him back by a piece of his wizard robes. "Halcard reads our thoughts; he'll have guessed your plan before you've even lifted a finger. He'll tear you to shreds!"

"Oh, listen to how noble they are, these worrying Gryffindors!" replied Malfoy, shaking off his arm. "Once again, you're wrong. He won't see anything coming. Snape himself taught me Occlumency..."

"That won't be enough! If your talents were up to his, you wouldn't be having all these nightmares!" flared Harry.

But Draco had already passed them with an exasperated sigh. Soon, his flickering shadow had vanished around the corner of an intersection.

Disconcerted, Harry felt anxiety rise within him as they climbed the steps of the tower. He had always found it hard to remain stoic just before a confrontation with Halcard. This Monday morning, however, things were different. For the first time in nearly a year, he was aware he was preparing not to face a teacher, but the very evil being in possession of the Compass of Chaos.

The very air seemed charged with electricity when they emerged onto the circular plateau, right at the top of the castle's highest tower. Several Durmstrang students had already arrived. Outlined by the clarity of the rising sun, their crimson silhouettes moved in a cloud of breath as Harry and his friends pulled themselves onto the training ground. It was a safe bet many of them were waiting impatiently, considering the coming lesson the perfect opportunity to avenge their defeat of the previous day.

Halcard was there, too. His long silver hair inexplicably spared by the gusts, his wolf curled at his feet, he seemed to be contemplating the Devil's Peak and the rest of the Carpathian landscape with a meditative air. For the occasion, he was clad in a sumptuous black cape with satin reflections, featuring an astonishing lining whose shimmering undulations gave the impression it was made of a tiny layer of powder snow.

As was his habit, he welcomed them by executing a theatrical bow. Halcard reminded the gathered seventh-year students, with the exception of Draco, that exams were close as they would begin at the end of May. Then came the time for duels, and Harry took his place in the centre of the circular plateau facing the enigmatic professor, under the anxious gaze of his friends.

Eye to eye, they circled each other for interminable minutes. Taking advantage of Chick's presence, Harry felt invested with a rare patience. The signals from his limbs still sore from the previous duel and yesterday's match were relegated to the background. As was his apprehension regarding Draco's actions, which he had managed to hide deep in his skull, under a thick layer of worries related to exams or the Death Eaters. A small spiritual block, in short, destined to counter Halcard and his Legilimency powers.

In this moment, however, what Harry was proudest of was the way he had transformed his obsession. Instead of focusing his thoughts on the Compass of Chaos, whose presence behind his opponent's lace collar he

desired to reveal more than anything else, he diverted them to the internal image of a singular scene. If Halcard tried to insinuate himself into his mind, all he would see would be himself, defeated, on his knees, clothes in tatters following a ferocious duel, such as the one that had just begun.

Harry gave his all. Rough as it may have been, the teaching received for nearly a year had undeniably borne fruit. Fighting Halcard, capable though he was of wielding magic with an ease few wizards could claim, now represented a challenge on the edge of achievable.

After two hours of fierce struggle and countless falls from the tower top, Harry was offered a very special opportunity. He had just surprised his opponent by changing tactics at the last moment, favouring the offensive through the *Gliseo* charm over his usual but reliable *Protego*. Transformed into a soapy surface, the ground had thus given way under Halcard's feet, causing him to lose balance. During the short instant his opponent fell, Harry had to choose. Generate a blast powerful enough to slide his opponent off the training ground (which would probably have led to a very first victory)? Or reveal what lay hidden beneath the finely embroidered doublet that had waved under his nose since the start of the session?

Harry found himself overwhelmed by a wave of excitement. For a moment he imagined himself towering over Halcard, ripping the Compass of Chaos from him with a sharp flick of his wand.

"*Diffindo!*" he screamed, carried away by his momentum.

The Severing Charm having been spoken aloud, Halcard could have parried it without difficulty. He did nothing, however, and his pristine white doublet burst into shreds. By way of retribution, he cast a Stunning Spell at Harry who failed to block the shot, so obsessed was he with the idea of seeing the Compass appear, suspended from his opponent's neck.

Harry's limbs stiffened then he sprawled brutally against the cold marble. Torso revealed, barred by three interminable scars suggesting a distant confrontation with a huge beast, his cape snapping like a whip behind his back, Halcard appeared in his field of vision.

"What a pity, you almost had us!" he exclaimed, an appreciative smile on his lips.

Still immobilised, Harry simply stared at him. *The Compass... it's impossible, it should be there*, he couldn't help but ruminate while scrutinizing his opponent's pale chest.

"Looking for something?" an amused voice answered him internally.

Proudly standing over him, Halcard tapped his torn clothes with the tip of his sword to patch them up.

"A little more patience," resumed the voice. "Your curiosity will soon be satisfied, Harry Potter."

"Lost, once again! What a pity, truly," added Halcard aloud. "Which implies—it is to be feared—a new dive."

Then, with a simple push of his musketeer boot, he tipped Harry into the void once more.

It was more disoriented than ever that Harry rejoined his Battle Magic class at the top of the Dueling Tower, a few minutes later. Each new fall might have been traumatic, but the absence of the Compass around Halcard's neck bothered him even more. In all his nightmares, the monster chasing him had worn the luminous artifact on its chest. Furthermore, during their last encounter in a dream, Harry had clearly been able to draw a parallel between the object and the negative imprint observed in the bowels of the mountain, in the secret room marked with the sign of Gellert Grindelwald. No doubt was possible. And yet...

Busy patrolling from one duel to another to dispense advice, Halcard dispensed Harry from another confrontation. After praising his progress, he authorised him to rest until the end of the session. As if to console him for his latest defeat, the big black wolf accompanied Harry as he went to lean against one of the tower's buttresses.

Set back, half-distracted, Harry noticed that Draco had finally joined them. He watched him for a moment as he struggled in a duel against a Durmstrang student, wondering what the Slytherin could possibly have been up to on his own during the entire first part of the lesson.

Fights continued at a good pace for a while longer. Several defeated students, Neville included, met the same fate as Harry and fell from the top of the tower, tirelessly caught by the magical clouds patrolling a good hundred yards below. Wrapped in his cloak, the impressive black beast curled up against his feet, Harry threatened to fall asleep when four or five tiny figures hunched over brooms appeared on the horizon. They seemed to be converging on the castle.

The bell announcing the end of classes rang and the duels stopped. Harry cast a final glance at the figures growing as they approached and joined his friends in the torrent of students rushing down the tower stairs.

"Haha I got him good! Did you see me disarm Mikhailov, Harry?" said Ron, jumping from step to step enthusiastically. "Shame about your last fight with Halcard by the way, I really thought you were going to get him this time."

"I fell again," said Neville sadly behind them.

"Yes, I saw, I watched you all. But I think there's something more important," replied Harry impatiently, "we have visitors!"

Hermione opened wide, stupefied eyes.

"Really? Is it Hogwarts, do you think? Are they coming to bring us home?"

"Or maybe the Aurors?" suggested Neville hopefully. "We asked them for help weeks ago."

"I don't know, they were still far away. A small group, some with white cloaks, I think."

Carried away by their curiosity, they hurried even more.

The leaves of the highest door of the Great Hall had just closed with a crash to shake the ground when they arrived. Preceded by Koulok, bathing in a thick cloud of steam, a small squad of five people—three of them dressed all in white—had just entered. Most students watched the newcomers with interest as they shook their shoulders, sniffing and coughing. In all likelihood, the journey had been particularly trying.

"...didn't even deign to give us access to his Floo network... prefers to send us this drooling, repugnant hunchback... This new Headmaster is decidedly of unparalleled rudeness!" grumbled the one who must have been the leader of the group, and whose tone sounded unpleasantly familiar to Harry's ears.

"Come now, John, I am certain the game was worth the candle," said a second voice, shrill and recognizable among all.

Flanked by two sinister-looking Aurors, John Dawlish gave his interlocutor a sideways glance. Recognising her, Harry thought his heart would stop. In her late forties, she was a blonde woman of average height, wearing an extravagant pair of glasses set with fake diamonds and perched on interminable stiletto heels. From the first day he met her, he had always hated Rita Skeeter.

"Above all, stay behind me," ordered the Head of the Auror Office to the journalist. "And don't forget our agreement... This article had better be

more glowing than the last vintage from your colleague Monty. And no photos without my permission!" he added to the fifth member of the group, a small chubby man carrying a camera around his neck.

"You...?" cried Harry, flabbergasted, moving to meet them.

"Well, well, Harry Potter. Talk about a nasty surprise."

"And there are only three of you?"

"If my calculations are correct, and they always are, there are five of us," affirmed John Dawlish, wiping his nose disdainfully with his fingertips.

After everything he had been through in recent days, not counting the unconfessed hours spent waiting for news from the Ministry, Harry was so disappointed he could have exploded.

"Three... only three Aurors! We'll need far more resources if we hope to corner the Lestranges before..."

"Before what, Potter? Before those two rascals find that funny little trinket from your overactive imagination?"

Harry felt the blush rising to his cheeks. He was about to retort when Hermione's hand landed on his shoulder.

"The Compass is no invention," she replied proudly. "Dumbledore himself told us about it."

"Come now... Dumbledore is dead," replied Dawlish.

"Yes, but... as explained in our last report, he left a part of himself at Hogwarts," remarked Harry, increasingly annoyed. "His portrait is right behind Professor McGonagall's desk. That's where he told us that..."

"Pah! As if the words of that old fool's portrait had any value today!" cut in Rita Skeeter abruptly, eyes overflowing with unhealthy excitement.

"You, be quiet! The Compass is real, and three Aurors won't be enough to find the Death Eaters. I tell you they are biding their time. They will never come out of their lair before... Before..."

The answer to one of the many questions that had been nagging him for weeks, namely: "When will the Lestranges resurface?", had surged for a vague instant in Harry's head. Alas, chased by resentment, it had fled as quickly as it had come.

Jumping on the opportunity, Dawlish displayed a triumphant smile.

"But do go on... before...?"

"Before..."

Before what? The question drummed ferociously in Harry's skull. It was unthinkable to lose face. Not now, not in such company...

"Before... before... the Summer Solstice!" he exclaimed suddenly at the cost of considerable effort.

Hermione, as well as Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna, who had in turn approached the scene, considered him for a moment with apprehension.

"That's it!" insisted Harry, whose brain was now boiling. "The face in the pool of blood said... and never mind that: the Lestranges intend to return to seize the Compass of Chaos..."

"...and it will take place 'on the longest day', that is to say the Summer Solstice!" followed Ron, recalling the Ferryman's words aloud. "Yes... well spotted Harry!"

In a heavy silence, Dawlish turned to Rita Skeeter, looking exaggeratedly sorry.

"I am sorry; these poor boys clearly aren't quite right in the head anymore. Rest assured I will settle this matter as soon as we return. As for you... do you intend to stand there planted like a tree for long? Hurry up and take us to the Headmaster," he ordered drily to Koulok as if Harry and his friends had never existed. "I didn't cross that bloody storm to end up waiting around next to a drooling moron."

Harry would have paid dearly to see Koulok grip his shovel firmly and bring it down on Dawlish's head. But insulting as his superior might have been, he felt a certain unease seeing him leave like that in search of Halcard's office. The fool was walking into risks of which he clearly had no idea. And his recklessness risked costing them all dearly.

"Above all, stay on your guard! The Headmaster, he's the one who has it right now," he threw at them in a deliberately coded manner, for the hall was now crowded with students come for lunch. "It could be dangerous!"

Dawlish stopped and the rest of the squad imitated him.

"You see my dear, I don't know what possessed Kingsley the day he let this assuredly traumatised young man enter our services," he said to Rita Skeeter. "Since Dumbledore is no longer here to contain this boy's countless outbursts, Harry Potter appears as nothing more than one of those raving lunatics filling the beds of St Mungo's."

Dawlish had barely finished his sentence when Neville was already burying his hand in his wizard robes in search of his wand. At the Ministry, it was public knowledge that his parents, themselves former Aurors, had been committed to St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries after being tortured by the Lestranges to the point of losing their minds.

Sensing trouble brewing, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna hastened to restrain Neville to prevent any outburst.

"I repeat one last time, be careful," insisted Harry in as casual a tone as possible.

Whether because he, Harry Potter, had once again interrupted his discussion with the journalist, or because he had just taken the series of pettiness targeted at him with a certain cold blood, Dawlish gave a deep sigh.

"Come here, my boy," he said with an exasperated air before snapping his fingers. "Come closer."

Much against his will, Harry complied. Both furious and worried, he crossed the Great Hall which now bathed in the hubbub of seated students and found himself envying them. If only he could have been a student like the others, whose biggest worry of the moment was limited to passing his end-of-year exams...

"There, that's it. You know, they are adults now, but one shouldn't hesitate to train them a little," declared Dawlish distinctly as Harry joined them. "I always found Dumbledore too soft, and look at the result... Young man, the point of no return has been crossed. Thus comes—an hour or two earlier than I imagined, it is true—that moment you have only postponed until now. That of renunciation."

The Head of the Auror Office drew himself up to his full height while fumbling inside his robe. A few seconds later, he extracted a parchment stamped with the Ministry seal.

"Take this scroll, Potter," he said, waving the object under his nose disparagingly.

Surprised, Harry hesitated. A few yards away, Rita Skeeter seemed to quiver with impatience.

"Come on... take it!" said Dawlish impatiently. "This is the highest distinction to which you could aspire."

"But what can it be, John?" asked Rita Skeeter, wiggling with excitement, her smile painted with candy-pink lipstick stretching over no less than three gold teeth.

She seemed so delighted that Harry had a strange premonition. A bit like the journalist and her boss had prepared this moment even before flying out to join them.

What followed only reinforced his doubts.

"What is it? Oh, nothing other than the second and final warning of Harry James Potter. Which implies..."

"...that young Potter's career within the Ministry of Magic ends this very day! My god, how fantastic!" cried Rita Skeeter, drawing an acid-green quill. "Here is one of those scoops that doubles—what am I saying—triples a circulation! The Paparazzo Prize is not far off!"

There was a powerful flash, followed by the frantic clicking of a camera. Dumbfounded, Harry had the sudden impression of being pulled out of his body. Even his nightmares facing Halcard seemed more real than what he was experiencing in this precise moment.

"'Harry Potter, the Chosen One, Dismissed by the Ministry', or perhaps: 'The Boy Who Lived... Let Go'," perorated Skeeter in front of him, her quill racing across a small piece of parchment that had just appeared at breakneck speed. "No, no, I am capable of much better than that, much worse. Oh, and I can already see what follows: 'Promised a radiant future, Harry Potter, 18, the greatest hope of a whole generation of wizards...'"

Hermione, who had missed nothing of the scene and had a gift for understanding everything faster than everyone else, ran over with tears in her eyes.

"Enough! You old harpy!" she cut in, mad with rage. "You can't do that!" she added to Dawlish. "Harry gave everything for this mission. No one wants to capture the Lestranges as much as he does, and you're firing him? It's scandalous! And her, what is she even doing here? You are on an official mission. She, she was reported. She's an unregistered Animagus! Why don't you arrest *her* instead?"

The remark seemed to displease Dawlish. Under the sudden suspicious gaze of his two colleagues, he put a hand on Rita Skeeter's back and invited her to follow the hunchback. The latter, now bordering on hysteria, broke free from his embrace however:

"Oh, how silly you are, little girl! It's pathetic. Has Miss Top-of-the-Class forgotten that a woman like me knows enough to put most of the Ministry bigwigs in the shade?" retorted the journalist in a shower of spittle. "Oh yes! No one is white as snow; not even that beloved Kingsley Shacklebolt, our Minister and 'embodiment of justice and fairness'. How could you sincerely think you could touch me? Idiot!"

"You disgust me..." threw Hermione, nostrils flared, eyes red and moist.

"Oh, really... Yet I am only the reflection of the world around us. And whether you like it or not, you and your gang of pretentious friends are part of it," bawled Skeeter as Dawlish took her away for good. "Time will prove me right; just wait a few years and you'll see how dirty your pretty little hands will have become and..."

Moments later and they had disappeared into a long corridor: she, the guide Koulok, as well as the rest of the Aurors; Dawlish and his warning included. Half-muffled by the tapestry behind which they had just vanished, the journalist's threats became less and less audible. In the Great Hall, discussions and the clinking of crystal cutlery soon regained their usual intensity.

"I thought we'd finally got rid of her," said Ron, distraught, as Harry and Hermione rejoined the group.

"What an ugly woman," remarked Luna wisely.

"She's worse than a tick!" added Hermione.

"Are you okay, Harry?" asked Ginny, looking crestfallen.

But Harry didn't really know what to answer. Five minutes earlier he was still leaving class, his mind, as always for months, focused on Grindelwald's Compass, and the method to use to reach it before the Death Eaters. And now here he was, no longer even part of the Auror corps, the one and only vocation he had ever seriously considered.

"There are a few too many people here..." Harry finally said, throat dry, while holding the gaze of a first or second-year student staring at him unreservedly. "Could we go somewhere else? I need quiet."

No one argued and they set off in search of a suitable place for a picnic, shortly after giving Ron and Chick time to gather some provisions.

"I'm really sorry Harry," said Neville even as they left the Great Hall. "I wanted to intervene but..."

"It was better this way," retorted Harry bitterly. "Otherwise, he would have kicked you and Ron out of the program too."

Without saying anything, Ginny took his hand and he felt a little less lost. He even managed to unburden himself of some of his pain through a deep sigh. A few steps later, however, and the questions he was asking himself about his future as well as the next actions to undertake returned to charge and torment him.

Harry was still elsewhere, plunged in his worries, when a terrible scream tore through the atmosphere. Everyone jumped. Several even stumbled, and Ron nearly choked on a mouthful of sandwich.

"Wh... what was that?" gasped Hermione.

"I thought it was in my head," said Ginny, massaging her temples.

"Oh really? It seemed to me it came from up there," replied Luna.

Nonchalantly, she pointed a finger at a large stained-glass window overlooking them. More lost than ever, Harry looked up and wondered what the witch straddling her dragon, as depicted by the glass panel, had to do with the cry heard moments earlier.

A few more seconds elapsed before he realised. Further on, through the window Luna was pointing at, was the Dueling Tower.

"Halcard... Malfoy!" he shouted. "The fool, he did it!"

Barely had he finished his sentence when he was already rushing back towards the stairs leading to the top of the tower.

There, transported by adrenaline, he climbed the steps as if his own life depended on it. In doing so, his doubts and fears dissipated. Never mind Dawlish, the Aurors, the Ministry, the journalists, or public opinion, brooded Harry as he climbed. He was who he was. He would stop Halcard, the Compass, and the Lestranges from doing harm; he would pass his exams, and come what may afterwards.

He had almost reached the top of the tower when an invisible force pushed him back brutally. Half-sprawled on the ground, Harry straightened up to discover a strange luminous segment. Surrounded by a light shimmering mist, the object was floating in the air, right above him.

Harry narrowed his eyes and concentrated harder to discover it was a nose. A long, whitish, ghostly nose. The rest of the body accompanying it seemed to have disappeared.

"Whoever you are, so reckless and bold, turn back! Danger lies ahead, of that be told!"

"It's me, Harry Potter," replied Harry, "you remember me, don't you? I need to pass, and quickly!"

By way of answer, he was pushed back again, as if someone had pressed on his chest. Losing patience, Harry was about to force his way through when Chick burst from the collar of his wizard robes. The bird flew at full speed, to perch on the lone nose illuminating them.

"Oh, it is you... A thousand apologies, young friend. I sought the author of evil, to bring it to an end. I was but a breath away from making my plea, When he took me first, and ensorcelled me. Blinded, my day then turned to night. Thus I wander since, alone, in this plight."

Under Chick's beneficial influence, the large plumed hat as well as the rest of the Long-Nosed Ghost's clothes reappeared progressively. The spectre had just regained all his supernatural clarity when a new cry rang out, different this time. Without wasting another second, Harry set off again towards the top of the tower.

He had almost reached the top floor, that vast circular room above which was the training plateau, when Draco Malfoy's strangled voice resonated between the walls:

"What are you going to do now, eh? Kill me, or drive me mad, maybe; like Pansy and all the others you sent to the infirmary?"

Harry had reached the last staircase. In a few seconds, he would have joined his classmate.

"The *Lethargum Tenebris* is not of my doing," he could hear through the trapdoor, the last barrier still separating him from the summit. "As for shortening your existence, you would deserve it indeed... No one attacks me with impunity. It seems, however, that your assault came with certain unhoped-for advantages which..."

"Don't move!" exclaimed Harry, bursting into the centre of the plateau.

Around him, the sky had suddenly darkened. Violent gusts buffeted him and the top of the tower had begun to sway dizzily. Only Halcard and Draco were present. The professor towered over the Slytherin who was lying horizontally, arms spread, suspended over the void. Only his ankles still grazed, barely, the cold marble of the training ground.

"Mr Potter... would you really be ready to run all these risks for young Malfoy?" asked Halcard without even bothering to turn around. "Reading you, however, one finds many painful stories linked to this boy."

From where he stood, Harry noticed that a good part of Halcard's cape and hair had burned. His neck and left shoulder also appeared bare, blackened, charred. A little lower down, at his feet, lay the residue of a glass vial adorned with a silver cross. "*Of formidable efficiency against the Undead*", Holy Water, thought Harry, remembering his Potions lessons. That was what Draco was plotting.

"Think carefully," resumed Halcard, "for I am no more a professor than you are an Auror, if I may say so," he added, chuckling arrogantly. "It will no longer be training, this time."

He then pivoted on his heels and advanced slowly towards Harry, his crystalline rapier pointed at him.

"Stop! Stop!" cried Hermione, bursting through the trapdoor, soon followed by Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, as well as the Long-Nosed Ghost. "Explain yourself instead!" she gasped, panting.

"Yes, who are you!" commanded Ginny, wand in hand.

As if re-evaluating the forces present, and with them his chances of success, Halcard considered them for a moment as they spread out in a semi-circle around him. Behind his back, Draco Malfoy remained suspended over the void, immobilised, silent.

"Who am I? Manifestly... not who you thought," finally replied Halcard with a smug smile. "I was seen walking the corridors of this school only a few years after its creation. I studied here, collecting the highest distinctions along the way. Then, an orphan with a certain penchant for adventure, I travelled the world for more seasons than you could imagine... I have been designated in many ways over the generations. If one can always find me behind the trigram 'H. D. V.', notably in each of my many works, 'Halcard' is a name I hadn't used for centuries... History repeating itself tirelessly, it seems however that it has become topical again."

"To hear you talk, you'd be about seven hundred years old," choked Ron.

"I am seven hundred and twenty, indeed."

For a few moments, only the whistling of the wind was heard. Until Ginny started.

"H. D. V. ... 'H. D. V.'?" she repeated in a shaky voice. "You're the champion of the very first Triwizard Tournament?"

"All those hours spent in the Trophy Room have informed you well, Miss Weasley. That is correct, and this catalyst was given to me as a reward," answered Halcard.

Almost lovingly, he shimmered the blade of his sword in the air.

"Although its power has faded with the ages, it still possesses the gift of ensuring a certain composure to the one who wields it," he added.

"Really? As Undead, I thought precisely that vampires didn't lack cold blood," ironised Harry, tightening his grip on his wand. "Because that's what you are, isn't it?"

Around them, the storm was closing in. Lightning streaked the sky and, for the space of a second, Halcard was reduced to a svelte and menacing silhouette.

"I am but the fruit of a forbidden and despised union," he replied with a certain annoyance.

"Answer the question!" ordered Hermione as a new gust threatened to blow them all away.

"I just did. The answer is at once yes, and at once no."

In a way, Hermione finally held the proof she hoped for.

"You know, however, that it is forbidden for vampires to hold certain positions in the wizarding world. This applies, among others, 'to the functions of teacher and headmaster of a school'," she announced as if she had the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy before her eyes, because "'vampires remain dangerous and unpredictable'."

"By citing the terms of a bunch of cowardly imbeciles, it is your own intelligence you insult, Hermione Granger. Even if I think I guess the bottom of your thoughts, know that there exist certain powers capable of tempering this character... that you evoke."

Thunder rumbled once more and dense snow fell upon them, stirred by the turbulence agitating the tower. Judging by the anthracite clouds dominating them, a formidable storm would soon break over Durmstrang.

"But no matter, it is time for me to abandon you to your sad fate... before that thing catches up with me," resumed Halcard, raising his head to probe the sky.

He took a few steps back, towards the void, and the circle formed by Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna tightened on him.

"Your intentions are laudable. But despite your progress, all of you, you are no match," shouted Halcard to them, for the crash of the gusts was becoming deafening. "This adversary is beyond your measure; leave. Leave while there is still time."

Clouds of snowflakes were now falling on them, making Halcard disappear intermittently.

"What adversary are you talking about?" exclaimed Harry, approaching, one hand clutching his wand, the other as a visor to protect himself from the snow scratching his face. "You're the one behind all this misfortune! Where is the Oracle, where is Grindelwald's Compass? You had it around your neck in my dreams, where did you hide it?"

With the storm, Halcard was nothing more than an indistinct shadow, a collection of dark spots interspersed with lighter notes.

"Oracle... Compass...? You no doubt mean the medallion... That thing is cursed," Harry managed to catch through the whitish wall separating them. "The purest of souls would be turned by its evil influence. Flee instead, and do not meddle with it under any pretext."

There was a bestial growl. Then two grey wings, about five feet in span each, emerged from where Halcard stood moments before. They swept the ground around them, knocking Harry over in passing.

"Halt!" exclaimed the others in chorus as the beast, a giant bat, propelled itself into the air.

Several stunning spells flashed, but in the confusion reigning, it would have been impossible to say if they had hit their target or bounced off its hide.

Taking advantage of his Animagus gifts, Halcard had just escaped them.

"Damn it!" cried Harry, punching the thick layer of snow that had already accumulated. "We had him!"

While, increasingly battered by the storm, Ron and Neville hoisted Draco Malfoy onto the platform by pulling his ankles, the Long-Nosed Ghost floated to meet him.

"This being, Venus whispers to me, is a key. It is time for me to act, to make him see! Until my return, try nothing untoward. Only together shall we strike down this lord."

Helpless, Harry watched the spectre vanish in turn, behind the snowy wisps swirling on all sides.

"He's frozen, we have to get him down, and fast!" came Ron's voice a little further away.

Shivering, they took a few moments to clear the trapdoor leading to the lower floors. They rushed one after another into the interminable spiral staircase, Draco Malfoy still supported by Ron and Neville at the shoulders.

"Are you sure you cancelled the Stunning Spell, Ginny? He's completely stiff."

"Certain. He must be numb with cold."

Barely able to move his lips, Malfoy mumbled something that sounded like an insult.

"He looks much better already!" enthused Luna.

Reaching the foot of the tower, they followed Chick. The bird had received the mission to find them a quiet place, far enough from the Great Hall so they could talk freely.

A few detours later and they entered an empty classroom which featured the amenity of a small fireplace. Located right next to the drawbridge, its large arched windows overlooked the still-frozen lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, trapped in the ice.

"Put him here," said Hermione. "I'll make us a fire."

A few chairs were moved around the hearth. Outside, just behind the panes, nature was unleashing itself like never before.

"Y-y-you let, let... let him g-go!" hissed Malfoy through his teeth after a few minutes.

Curled up under a travel cloak extracted from Hermione's magical bag, his skin appeared bluish-white and he was trembling from head to toe. Harry reflected that the Slytherin had guts. Few people would have lasted, immobilised in a cold bordering on minus four degrees; not counting the amplifying effects of the wind...

"And you attacked a teacher!" cried Hermione vehemently. "Do you know what you're exposing us all to? No school exchange had taken place for over a hundred years!"

"You heard him yourself, from his own mouth, Halcard isn't a teacher," retorted Malfoy.

"Oh no? And who gave us lessons all year then? He said that to confuse us, obviously!"

But Harry doubted those were Halcard's intentions. His last message had been very clear: the place was inhabited by an evil so dangerous it was better to leave.

"Why would he try to mislead us?" asked Harry in all honesty.

Hermione shot him a surprised look.

"Well... because he knows very well vampires aren't supposed to mix with students this closely! It's illegal!"

"In that case, what do you make of his remark about the Compass?" said Ron, perplexed.

"I don't know," admitted Hermione with annoyance. "It's probably still somewhere around here... in a hiding place we failed to find."

"But we've looked everywhere!" flared Harry.

"Getting angry isn't a good idea," remarked Luna as if reciting the slogan of a cheesy advert. "Anyway, he's gone."

"True... Maybe the nightmares will stop now he's no longer here," added Neville hopefully.

Staring blankly, Malfoy jolted between two shivers.

"He denied being responsible for the *Lethargum Tenebris*..."

"Halcard?"

Draco nodded silently, followed closely by Harry who remembered hearing that discussion just as he reached the top of the tower.

"What if it was the Compass?" exclaimed Ron, leaning forward on his chair, head almost at knee level. "What if all this curse was due to Grindelwald's Compass?"

"Except Professor Dumbledore explained to us that the Compass was subject to the will of whoever uses it," reminded Hermione, biting her lips.

"Maybe it rebelled?" tried Ron without real conviction. "Halcard spoke of a demonic influence, or something like that."

Sitting next to Draco Malfoy who was shivering while massaging his fingertips, Harry would have been unable to describe what he felt in that moment. Like the storm rattling the windows in their hinges, his thoughts clashed in the greatest incoherence.

"How did you do it?" he finally asked aloud, anxious to find even one answer to the avalanche of questions assailing him. "How did you manage to hurt Halcard?"

"I got my chance just after the lesson," replied Malfoy. "You all hurried down, his wolf included. It was unexpected, so I acted as if I had a last-minute question to ask him..."

As he finished his sentence, Hermione glared at him.

"He reacted strangely," resumed Malfoy. "He stood still; he looked like his mind was elsewhere. I took the opportunity to take out one of those vials of Holy Water we prepared in Potions, and I threw it at him. He... screamed... I thought he was dying... there, right in front of me..." he added, throat tight. "I had added three dragon ventricles to my preparation, just to be sure it was powerful enough..."

"And where did you find those ventricles?" questioned Hermione, furious.

Draco gave a brief sigh.

"Borrowed from Abrosius..." he breathed. "At the same time, he shouldn't have bragged about having so many..."

"Borrowed?"

Scandalised, Hermione had risen from her chair, searching her wizard robes for her wand.

"Wait, let him finish," intervened Harry. "I want to understand."

"There's not much to add. Halcard quickly found himself covered in black and white flames; he grabbed his sword and cast a spell to put out the fire. The next moment, I was suspended over the void, almost entirely paralysed. You arrived at that moment."

28. LOST IN THE STORM

The hours following the assault and Halcard's flight were more than baffling for Harry and his friends. Faithful to her Head Girl duties, Hermione went so far as to skip Monday afternoon classes to prepare a scroll for Professor McGonagall. Alas, the winds battering Durmstrang had become so powerful that no messenger, feathered or furred, agreed to risk venturing out of the Owlery.

Even more intriguing, when Hermione went to the staff room in search of an alternative, Abrosius told her the stocks of Floo powder had mysteriously vanished.

"Conveniently coincides with Halcard's departure," remarked Neville during a lively discussion that evening.

Nose buried in an old Defence Against the Dark Arts exam unearthed by Hermione, Harry refrained from commenting. He thought no less of it, however. Just after Malfoy's assault, the Dean's gestures and speech had changed. As if a different person had suddenly regained control of his body to flee immediately, though not without issuing a final warning.

With all the conversations they had on the subject until an unreasonably late hour, it became clear that Halcard had been subject to the Unforgivable *Imperius* Curse. A forbidden enchantment capable of bending anyone to one's will.

It remained to be seen who. Who had subjugated Halcard? Who could be pulling the strings in the shadows, and trying to jam all communication with the outside world...?

"To have gone unnoticed until now, you'd have to be pretty damn gifted," remarked Ginny between two peals of thunder.

"What if it was Koulok?" whispered Ron from his favourite wingback chair.

"The drooling hunchback? You're joking!"

"Precisely, maybe that's where the trick lies... What if in reality, he was neither a hunchback nor a cripple?"

"And the Lestranges then...?"

But neither Koulok nor the Lestranges had anything in common with the thing that had haunted Harry and his friends' nights for so long. Not to mention the fact that Draco Malfoy, who had been avoiding them like the plague since the event, had also let himself believe Halcard was the true cause of their woes. All this without any prior consultation.

The next day, despite the apocalyptic atmosphere still reigning outside, the Dean's absence did not create as much of a stir as Harry expected. Facing the crowd of students gathered in the Great Hall, the Durmstrang teaching staff explained as simply as could be that Halcard had had to honour an important appointment abroad. Moments later, the Yggdrasil slumped with a crack so terrifying that half the students jumped.

Neville was particularly affected by it.

"That really doesn't bode well for what's coming," he advised them, head hunched in his shoulders as they set off for their first lesson of the day.

"They can't actually believe what they just told us," followed Ron, incredulous.

"Maybe, maybe not... In any case, it's the perfect opportunity to find out who's behind all this," retorted Hermione before entering the Potions laboratory.

Determined to protect the students under her responsibility and to pass her N.E.W.T.s once and for all, Hermione redoubled her efforts. She had to play on her privileged relationships with the professors throughout the week to finally obtain some additional information.

"I was sure of it! They never spoke to Halcard face-to-face!" she exclaimed in a state, come Friday evening.

"What? So that story they fed us the other day at breakfast, they invented it?" asked Harry, eyes wide.

"I don't think so. In reality, they simply reported the contents of a parchment found in the staff room. A note addressed to them."

"A note? It couldn't have come from him!" cried Neville. "We all saw him run away!"

"Unless Malfoy's attack coincided with a departure planned long ago?" suggested Ron.

Although surprising, Ron's proposal seemed difficult to fault. Hermione, however, gave it no credit.

"Professor Boulik wasn't lying when he told me the message bore Halcard's seal, I'm certain of it. What bothers me, however, is that the note was deposited the very morning of the announcement in the Great Hall."

"You mean... the day *after* Halcard left?"

"Yes," agreed Hermione. "Boulik was categorical; it wasn't there the day before, because that's precisely where the teachers met to prepare the exam papers. Really, it's..."

"It's fishy," concluded Ron and Ginny in chorus, after the wind whistled sinisterly through the library window seals.

Marked by ever more insistent gusts, the weekend was devoted to completing a particularly complex essay on *Animagus Transformation: From Prerequisites to Risks Incurred*. The further he got into his writing, the more astounded Harry was at the idea that his father had been able to fulfill all the required conditions while only in his fifth year of study. This perspective gave him a second wind several times. Especially when fatigue made him dizzy and stung his eyes, and the image of his bed with its double layer of fluffy duvets tried to impose itself on his mind.

By dint of hard work, the Monday of the last week of classes arrived without warning. Although only one session remained before revision began, Professor Van Helsing was designated to replace Halcard in addition to his own Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons. The storm being just as brutal as upon the Dean's departure, the Dueling Tower and its training plateau were abandoned for a relatively vast room, looking like an ancient cathedral.

"It's not even fair, you're crushing them all!" exclaimed Ginny to Harry at the end of their morning of combat.

"You literally blew Nipovski out, like a common candle, haha!" added Ron, drunk with joy. "I wouldn't be surprised if you got an 'Outstanding' in the exam!"

Harry struggled to suppress a satisfied smile. No one had shown themselves capable of lasting more than five minutes against him before being stunned, disarmed, or suspended by one foot.

Although the rest of the lessons unfolded without major surprise, the week ended in a climate of growing anxiety. The storm reigning over the Devil's Horn seemed to have redoubled in violence, plunging Durmstrang and its occupants into a dark and oppressive opacity. The revision period preceding the exams thus began in such darkness that day had become difficult to distinguish from night. Even the torches arranged along the walls, whose hue had always varied according to the time of day until now, displayed only their intriguing indigo shade.

To shake off the tension paralyzing him, Harry had resumed his habits from the previous exam session. Every morning upon jumping out of bed, he grabbed his Firebolt and went to the abandoned cathedral. There, he let off steam by practising Quidditch for a little over an hour.

Anxious to break up the interminable hours they spent slumped over their parchments with a few pleasant moments in his company, Ginny joined him from time to time. They then used her special game case to replay the 1994 World Cup final, as they had done during the past summer, a period of relaxation that now seemed terribly distant.

"It's weird, with everything we've been through these last few months, sometimes I wonder if I'm not stuck in one of those strange dreams," said Ginny, still out of breath, at the end of one of their sessions.

"They're so realistic... I sometimes ask myself the same thing," acknowledged Harry, landing beside her.

Lightning streaked the sky outside, momentarily highlighting the detail of the Gothic columns and other sculptures surrounding them. Leaning against each other, they both contemplated the nearest fresco thoughtfully. Judging by the myriads of cracks running through it, it must have been centuries and centuries old. It featured an imposing black dragon, busy breathing on a seed, in an animated scene likely illustrating the birth of the Yggdrasil.

"What makes you say that's not the case? What makes you say we aren't all trapped in a dream?" asked Harry, turning his attention back to Ginny.

Her face darkened for a moment, then she announced with a smile:

"We would have already won the Quidditch tournament, and the cup. A good hundred times, even. And you?"

"I don't know. The only certainty I have in all this is that *that thing* hasn't visited me since Halcard left."

Indeed, Harry had been able to enjoy a few decent nights after the Dean's departure. With the pressure, he still happened to have absurd or strangely familiar dreams. But when he woke up, it was no longer to find himself frozen and trembling from head to toe. He often went back to sleep without difficulty, only opening his eyes the next morning, relieved to feel the strength to face a new day of intense labour.

This newfound energy brought him sweet comfort, which was nevertheless short-lived.

About a week after revision began, an unusual event occurred at the castle. Ron, Neville, and Harry were returning to their dormitory, lit only by their wand light out of consideration for Dean and Seamus who were already dozing, when a chorus of muffled screams filled the darkness.

Motionless, heart pounding, Harry strained his ears. His hearing sharpening with every passing second, the wails gave way to a familiar litany.

"...Fear our awakening, enemies of the Greater Good. For we have returned..." he could hear a few times, before silence fell again.

The phenomenon recurring the next day, as well as the nights that followed, Harry and Ron finally understood that these tortured screams came from the infirmary, where the patients suffering from *Lethargum Tenebris* remained bedridden, in quarantine.

"Is there really nothing we can do to stop this?" flared Ron one evening, after the lamentations of the sick echoed once again right into their common room.

His outburst woke Chick and Crookshanks who were napping nearby. Both hastened to flee towards Hermione's armchair, sending Neville's notes flying in a firework display of yellowed parchment.

"I dare not even imagine what Draco feels every time this happens," said Harry with a shudder from the sofa he and Ginny were sharing.

"What's Malfoy got to do with this?" grumbled Ron, sprawled in his favourite armchair, inches from the stove.

"Pansy. She's still bewitched too..." muttered Ginny with a grimace.

A gust shook the windows as they exchanged a look that seemed to say "Who will be next?", then a new howl rang out in the distance. A bestial howl, this time. That of a wolf.

"He makes me so sad," sighed Luna. "Without his master, he must feel abandoned. I hope at least Koulok is feeding him properly."

Since Halcard's departure, the route—now a ritual—taking them from the common room to the Great Hall, and finally to the library, had led them to cross paths with the beast on a few rare occasions. Looking haggard, the animal prowled the corridors dragging its leg, a bit like a zombie would have done.

Half-surprised by her reaction, Harry considered Luna for a brief moment. Head bowed, her cascade of dirty-blonde hair streaming over her parchment, she had already dived back into her Charms summary. He reflected that the slight young woman facing him wasn't so different from his giant friend Hagrid after all. Notably in the singular way she had of sympathising with the cause of animals, from the most fantastic to the most disturbing.

Sinking a little further into the sofa, like the big black wolf, Harry's mind began to wander. He thought back to all those people who had disappeared in such a short time. Halcard, followed closely by the Long-Nosed Ghost, the Lestrangle brothers too... not counting Dawlish and his clique. Harry felt his heart clench at the idea that he would never become an Auror, whatever his exam results. All because of a boss whose obsession with conformity and self-promotion had turned into neurosis over time.

When Harry returned to reality, Ginny had abandoned the heavy volume behind which she had disappeared minutes earlier. This time, *he* was the one being observed. Ginny was staring at him with that mysterious look indicating she knew exactly what was going on in his head. Without a word, she took his hand in hers to stroke it tenderly.

A bit like Chick, who had just made a nest in Crookshanks' fluffy fur, Ginny had an irresistibly soothing effect in these moments of doubt.

They remained like that, dozing while watching the flames dance in the stove, until Ron decreed it was time for bed. Harry joined him as he deployed a series of protective charms over the entire common room and dormitories, just in case the *Lethargum Tenebris* patients felt the urge to pay them a visit during the night...

Day by day, the exams were fast approaching. Prey to growing pressure, Ron had yielded to the temptation to imitate Dean and Seamus. Like them, he had started consuming all sorts of potions and other philtres procured under the counter, supposed to make his brain a veritable sponge

for formulas, magical constants, and other historical details. While he extolled the virtues of his new regime to anyone who would listen (notably to Hannah Abbott, Neville's girlfriend, who was suffering from increasingly regular panic attacks), he took great care not to breathe a word of it to Hermione.

Harry, for his part, didn't feel this new treatment was of any efficiency when they swapped roles to recite whole passages of books studied during the year. At most, Dean seemed to blow up a few more things than usual. As for Ron, it was obvious he fell asleep a little more easily in his favourite armchair past eleven at night. Depending on the mood, his snoring triggered either the wrath or mockery of those around him, and Ron often ended up waking with a start. He then never failed to explain to his detractors how his seat had undoubtedly been the object of a most devious Sleeping Charm. An analysis which did not, however, prevent him from settling back into it with renewed vigour the next evening.

The countdown of revision days dwindled at breakneck speed. Meanwhile, Durmstrang and its surroundings were still lost in the middle of the storm, plunged into darkness and cold that had nothing natural for mid-May. As his still-misty eyes drifted over the canopy of his four-poster bed, Harry took stock as he did every time he woke. He strove to mentally review the various lessons revised the day before, until the multiple connections freshly woven in his mind proved sufficiently fluid. Still lying down, the next step consisted of listing the chapters he still had to deepen before the fateful day of the start of exams finally arrived.

Throughout revision, Harry had remained faithful to his daily Quidditch session. Ginny now accompanied him every morning. To tell the truth, this phase of exercise had turned into a real need. Without it, concentrating even for a few minutes, motionless in front of a parchment, had become unthinkable.

Despite all this physical exercise, Harry's appetite had dropped close to absolute zero. Complexions greyish, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna seemed to be in a comparable state. In fact, they only appeared at the table, in the Great Hall far less animated than usual, to force themselves to ingest a few items of food for ten minutes or so, before returning to their quills and parchments.

If everyone in the castle was tense, Hermione had literally metamorphosed. She had become so easy to upset that she often preferred

to take refuge for hours on end in her personal library, at the bottom of her magical bag.

"You are unbearable!" she exclaimed furiously, the eve of the exams.

Chick, who was amusing himself by transporting Crookshanks from one end of the common room to the other by flapping his wings frantically, had just dropped the big cat with a dull thud.

"That wasn't very clever," said Ron, shooting the two accomplices an accusing look. "I needed her, and the way she's gone, not sure she'll resurface today."

"She'll come back tonight, don't worry," mumbled Ginny, hidden behind her Book of Spells.

"How do you know?" asked Harry, for whom every opportunity to think about something other than Conditional Enchantment theory had become welcome.

"She almost always comes back at night, haven't you noticed?"

"It's because she feels more at ease," remarked Luna from a remote corner of the room. "When others sleep, she feels like she's getting ahead."

Intrigued, Harry, Ron, and Ginny judged it best not to question Luna's observation.

"Speaking of sleeping... I find it hard to believe we're already there," bounced back Ron. "Just this night and it'll be the start of N.E.W.T.s, for real."

"Why did we have to get involved in this again, eh?" said Harry thoughtfully.

"Maybe because as apprentice Aurors, it was your one and only way not to spend the night outside when we arrived?" retorted Ginny.

"Yeah, that or something like it," grumbled Ron.

Harry couldn't help plunging back into the circumstances of that time, when the Hogwarts Express had landed at the foot of the Initiate's Cliff. Dawlish's attitude towards him was already troubling him, but he was still full of enthusiasm at the idea of participating in the capture of the LeStrange brothers, so that justice could be done.

His heart began to beat harder and harder and he sat up suddenly.

"Blimey, the Death Eaters... the Ferryman's message! No chance of catching them if they only come back at the Summer Solstice! That's in a month; we'll already be gone!"

"Seriously, Harry?" said Ron. "We're on the eve of the hardest exams in existence, and you want to get worked up about that story again?"

"Obviously! After everything we've been through!"

Sitting next to a pile of books almost as tall as she was, Ginny looked at him with concern.

"Do... do you not think Dawlish will handle it, now?" slipped in Neville in an unsure voice. "After all, that's why he came."

"Of course he'll handle it," added Ron. "It's his problem now, not ours anymore. And even less yours, Harry! I'm sorry to remind you, mate, but he kicked you out of the program."

"So what?" retorted Harry instantly. "What does that change?"

"It changes that you can't always control everything," intervened Ginny. "Remember what Dumbledore told us at Christmas. You also have to know how to let things happen and unhappen by themselves..."

"They killed our parents... our friends!" cried Harry again. "They destroyed the school that taught us everything!"

Several floors below, the *Lethargum Tenebris* patients must have woken up, for their usual macabre chorus began to echo in the common room, adding their share of chaos to the already tense atmosphere.

"They even tortured your parents, Neville!" resumed Harry in a desperate quest for support.

"I know that..." said Neville, upset. "But Hannah is right when she says I have to stop hurting myself with that, that I have to turn the page. Dawlish may be what he is, he hates Death Eaters; he'll do what's necessary."

Harry was about to charge back. He wanted to remind them all that the Head of the Auror Office was no better than the scoundrels he hunted, especially since he had used Dark Magic during the Auror exams, when Hermione burst from her enchanted bag.

"I agree, we shouldn't waste our best chance to make the Lestranges pay for all the harm they've done," she said with such a fierce look it would have been unthinkable to contradict her. "But we must also keep our heads

on our shoulders," she added, turning to Harry. "For now, there's nothing to do but pass our exams. When that's over, we'll still have a week before the Quidditch final to find a solution."

That night, Harry slept badly. The storm outside was so unleashed one had to wonder if the few inches of stone separating him from the outside would suffice to protect him much longer. Symbols and magic formulas kept swirling in his mind as his brain refused to switch off.

Harry must have fallen asleep only a few tens of minutes ago when a shutter began to bang somewhere in the distance, no doubt half-torn off by the storm. The irregular rhythm of the banging quickly turned into an obsession and Harry couldn't help checking his watch ever more frequently; each time in fear that the little time left before the start of exams had consumed itself prematurely.

A wolf's howl rang out... Or perhaps it was the storm? Harry sat up on his bed in a haste. Seven-thirty; he wasn't late. With the time remaining, he could still wash, try to swallow something, and get to the amphitheatre where the very first N.E.W.T. would take place.

Body and mind awakened by a good shower, Harry met his friends in the Great Hall for breakfast. As happened more and more often lately, Hermione must have fallen asleep on her parchment for a good half of her face was still covered in notes written in black ink.

"*Tergeo!*" cast Ginny while waving her wand gently, and the inscriptions peeled off Hermione's skin before flying away, as if an extremely thin layer of skin had just been removed.

A little later, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna joined the other seventh-year students. Together, they headed towards their first exam in a long silent procession. They crossed the thick tapestry adjoining the fireplace of the Great Hall and found themselves in the vast Statue Alley.

As impressed as the first time, Harry couldn't help formulating a prayer as he passed all those former Headmasters such as Piotr Gamp, Harfang Munter, or the dazzling Nerida Vulchanova. In such a moment, asking for a nudge from fate, whatever it might be, was not a luxury he wished to deprive himself of.

One after another, the students entered the amphitheatre. Harry felt sick and looked for his assigned seat with anxiety. Escorted by Koulok, Professor Boulik entered in turn, looking somewhat annoyed. He explained

that due to the storm, the disappearance of the Floo powder reserves, and the powerful enchantments preventing any Apparition within the castle grounds, it had been impossible for the group of examiners to join them in due time.

For a moment, Harry wondered if his wish hadn't just been granted in a funny way. A little further away, diagonally, Ron wore such an expression of beatitude he looked like a prisoner just pardoned from the death penalty. Their relief was short-lived, however. Professor Abrosius had indeed taken the trouble to prepare a Temporary Amnesia potion for each of his colleagues, so as to allow them to evaluate the work of their (temporarily forgotten) students without any bias interfering.

His announcement finished, Professor Boulik distributed the papers and the Charms exam could begin.

Harry noted with relief that the major part of the test focused on artifacts. He therefore applied himself to detailing the complex magical mechanisms governing the functioning of such objects. If wands were at the heart of his essay, he opted for an open conclusion by mentioning a series of exceptional artifacts such as the Deathly Hallows. In a tribute to Dumbledore, he even went so far as to speak succinctly of the fantastic Deluminator now in Ron's possession.

To Harry's great satisfaction, the Defence Against the Dark Arts exam that followed, that very afternoon, went just as decently. And come evening, it was with a frank but tired smile that he took his place next to Ginny in the common room to discuss their day's experiences with his friends.

The next day, in Transfiguration, they were asked to take on the appearance of a simple object of human dimensions. Despite his apprehension, Harry didn't take long to remember the disguise Professor Slughorn had opted for on the eve of his sixth year of studies. Unlike many students around him who chose to turn into a desk, as they had practised doing during the year, he managed to transform into an armchair. His version was, admittedly, not as comfortable and plump as Slughorn's, but it proved sufficiently robust and supple to elicit the jury's approval.

His performance during the Herbology exam was less glowing, however. Part of the questionnaire focused on the Yggdrasil and Harry eagerly described everything he knew about the legendary tree, from the germination of its seed requiring the breath of an authentic dragon, to the link uniting its roots with the Beyond, via the exceptional curative virtues

of its sap and fruits. It was when he was asked to go to the greenhouse and equip himself with his best gloves that things got tough. The ordinary-looking stump he was asked to deal with was none other than a Snargaluff, a formidable carnivorous magical plant armed with multiple tentacles.

The last two exams, Potions and Battle Magic, took place at the end of a most intense week.

In the early morning, Harry had the pleasant surprise of noting that the storm battering Durmstrang for days and days had finally calmed. Thick clouds still crowned the Devil's Horn, but the neighbouring peaks were now clear, and the sun even allowed itself a few timid appearances. The background noise resulting from the incessant gusts had also disappeared. In fact, Harry found himself clicking his tongue several times while getting dressed, simply to ensure his ears weren't playing tricks on him.

Once arrived at the Potions laboratory, he was asked to explain how he would go about preparing a poison capable of plunging its victim into a deep, or even eternal, sleep. Standing before his examiners, arms dangling, Harry suffered an interminable blank. His T-shirt had already had time to soak in cold sweat when the image of a small, plump, deceitful-looking man came to his mind. Hermione had discoursed at length about him during their revisions, and he had recently crossed paths with him again in the long statue alley. Harfang Munter. It was he who had succeeded Nerida Vulchanova under troubling circumstances; he who had put Durmstrang on the tracks of the Dark Arts... he too who had developed poisons so formidable their reputation had endured through the centuries.

After briefly introducing Munter, Harry only had to explain how the latter had diverted the famous Draught of Peace recipe using incantations of his own making to create the requested poison. He was then placed in front of a cauldron full of boiling liquid. The goal this time was to determine the nature of the potion brewing and finish it properly. The mixture had a lumpy and familiar appearance Harry didn't take long to identify. It was Polyjuice Potion, a delicate preparation Ron, Hermione, and he had used many times during their schooling at Hogwarts to momentarily assume the appearance of certain members of their entourage.

All that remained to be done now was to add a stewed lacewing fly, stir a few times counter-clockwise, and...

"One would think you had done this all your life, young man!" exclaimed Professor Abrosius as if seeing him for the first time. "Good, very good, you may go."

The last exam, Battle Magic, was to take place in the second part of the afternoon. Despite the still-threatening presence of a ceiling of black clouds, the storm was no more, and the seventh-year students were invited to present themselves at the top of the Dueling Tower. The test consisted of nothing more nor less than facing a student from the other school for about twenty minutes. All moves were permitted, and it was the responsibility of the two professor-examiners assigned to each fight to ensure no student would be exposed to too great a danger during the duels.

Leaning against a battlement of the tower alongside Ginny, Harry witnessed Neville's violent defeat and Malfoy's merciless duel against Krum before being summoned. Impatient to be done once and for all with his N.E.W.T.s, he stepped into the centre of the training plateau. Professor Van Helsing stared at him for a moment with a look that seemed to say "I've seen this boy somewhere before...", then hostilities began.

Facing Gorgovski, one of Krum's most faithful friends, Harry showed no restraint. Two minutes later and the big burly guy with the crew cut serving as his opponent toppled from the top of the tower screaming blue murder.

"Well, my boy... I believe I have never supervised such a short duel. Except, perhaps, in the time when Gellert Grindelwald himself studied right here. That's saying something!" exclaimed Van Helsing. "Would you be up for another fight, to secure—perhaps—a few extra points?"

Harry accepted and soon found himself facing Nipovski. The latter had doubtless not forgotten his last thrashing and thought it good to attempt the Unforgivable *Cruciatus* Curse from the start of the fight. Harry had anticipated a dirty trick and dodged, as he had so often done against Halcard during the year. A masterful Shield Charm and a Disarming Spell later, and Nipovski had lost without even understanding what had happened to him.

"Remarkable! And that concludes this exam session for you. Go and rest and enjoy the banquet tonight; you've well earned it!" called Van Helsing after a round of applause.

Heart a little lighter, Harry waved to Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Luna who still had to go, and began the interminable descent of the tower. Satisfied with his performance of the week, he felt like enjoying the moment. He therefore stopped on the way to join one of the castle's many balconies. A sumptuous amber moon had risen to the edge of the dark

clouds, illuminating the high walls, the ship trapped in the lake ice, and the Silver Forest as if they were in broad daylight.

Harry contemplated the surroundings for a moment, letting his mind wander where it pleased. He found it hard to believe he had spent nearly a year at Durmstrang. Whether they managed to catch the Lestranges or not, they would have to return home in a little over a week. What would he do then? Would he ask Ginny to come and live with him in the house his uncle Sirius Black had left him? And why not a house-share with Ron and Hermione at the same time?

"And it's over! OVEEEEEEEER!" said a voice behind his back.

Ginny rushed towards him and threw herself into his arms.

"Who did you get?" asked Harry as Hermione and Ron burst in turn.

"Nipovski, again. After the lesson you taught him, Helsing wanted to give him a second chance. You really have become very gifted at dueling, Harry."

"You say that, but the examiners really appreciated your Bat-Bogey Hex," said Ron, smiling.

By all evidence, Ron and Hermione's test had also gone well. Relieved, they took their time getting to the Great Hall where the end-of-exams banquet awaited them. Arriving, they had the pleasant surprise of noting that the place was no longer plunged in the usual gloom. For the first time in nearly a month, the hall was generously lit by the moonlight. Traversed by its rays, the rose window and the numerous stained-glass windows overlooking the staff table gave the place a gently enveloping crimson ambience.

A second surprise was found in the cauldrons that soon appeared before the diners...

"Ah... let's spare a thought all the same for those who ended their duel in the infirmary, while we are here, feasting on delicious cheese fondue," said Ron, preparing another piece of bread. "Shame for you, dear Neville, Malfoy, Krum and company..."

"Listen to him!" choked Ginny. "To think that Mister sulked the last time he was served, I quote, 'soggy cheese!'"

"That was another time!" pleaded Ron before getting his piece of cheese nicked by Chick. "Today, no more revision, no more N.E.W.T.s, no more awful nightmares..."

"Don't relax too much though; we still have the Quidditch tournament final to win. And from tomorrow morning, I want to see everyone on deck for training!"

"There are also the Death Eaters..." whispered Harry so low that only Hermione could hear him; for Ron and Ginny had well earned the right to joke and rejoice a little.

Dessert, a sort of local tart based on grated pumpkin pulp, proved highly refined. Thus, it was with stomachs full of good things and cheerful faces that Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny went to their common room. They found Luna, Dean, Seamus as well as a few others there, all decided to mark the end of exams with a small party. Seamus's bet to stay up until dawn was nevertheless short-lived. With all the fatigue they had accumulated, yawns soon multiplied and the students didn't take long to disperse, small group by small group.

It must have been around ten-thirty in the evening when Harry decreed that the wet firecrackers and other fountains of multi-coloured sparks (no doubt imported clandestinely from the Weasley brothers' shop) had assaulted his senses enough for the evening. He said goodnight to those around him and went to bed, Chick already asleep, curled against his neck.

About five minutes later, Ron had only just entered the dormitories when he felt himself sucked into his pillow...

Somewhere, very close, something moved that woke Harry. To his great surprise, the canopy and curtains surrounding him when he fell asleep had disappeared. In fact, his bed and even the entire room he was in were different. A bit like he had unconsciously Disapparated in his sleep. Senses alert, Harry recognised a familiar scent. It smelled like bergamot. Then, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, the unorthodox configuration of the room he was now in appeared to him little by little.

"Harry, is that you?" said someone very close to him.

A young woman was lying by his side, beautiful, red-haired, with freckles scattered over her face.

"Ginny?"

"Are we in a dream? You... seem so real."

The question, of course, Harry had already asked himself a few seconds before.

"How to know?" he replied. "Usually, I don't think my dreams are this detailed. So..."

"It's weird, I feel like we're home," remarked Ginny in a sleepy voice.

"Home?"

"Yes, at The Burrow, in my room."

Indeed, that was why the place had seemed so quirky to him. As for that smell of bergamot detected earlier, it was undoubtedly Mrs Weasley's favourite laundry detergent.

Decided to scan the surroundings, Harry had stood up when his forehead began to prickle. At the same moment, around them, the room vibrated and darkened. Soon, the walls closed in on each other and a stench mixing mould with rotting flesh filled the atmosphere.

"Even in the attic, where our ghoul lurks, it wouldn't smell this bad," said Ginny with a grimace of discomfort. "We're not at The Burrow anymore," she added, intimidated.

"We've probably been in the same place from the start, that is to say somewhere in our heads," replied Harry, both intrigued and worried. "As for the rest... looks like we've landed in a dungeon cell."

Opposite them, a shadow rushed through the room's only opening, a narrow window fitted with a single bar. It stopped less than a yard from an emaciated figure they hadn't noticed until now and which began to stir under a moth-eaten looking blanket.

"Who is it?" whispered Ginny.

"That is what remained of Gellert Grindelwald, and the shadow is Voldemort," replied Harry in a low voice. "Actually, I already lived this scene a long time ago, and I dreamed of it again quite recently... It's unpleasant but it won't be long. Voldemort wants the Elder Wand, Grindelwald will refuse to tell him more, and he'll end up murdered."

A mocking laugh erupted in the room the very moment Harry stopped.

"So you have come. I thought you would... one day," growled the man under the blanket before revealing a toothless smile.

As in his previous visions, Harry expected Grindelwald to allude immediately to the wand. He did nothing of the sort, however.

"But do not think I do not know why you are here, Tom," he continued in a rasping voice, imbued with malice. "Though I must admit, your lack

of ambition is surprising."

"Silence, old man!" hissed Voldemort coldly.

"And I took you for a great wizard!" resumed Grindelwald, chuckling even more.

Towering over his prey to his full height, Voldemort raised his wand.

"*Crucio!*"

The cell turned red as the bolt flashed and unbearable screams began to echo off the damp, grimy walls. Soon, however, the screams turned into that same mocking laugh that had broken the silence a little earlier.

"You may do whatever you wish to me, haha! Ha! It will not erase the fear devouring you... Nor the defeat awaiting you! "

Grindelwald's body fell back to the floor as if he were a bundle of rags.

"Fear? Me? No other wizard in history has ventured as far as I on the path to immortality, none other than Lord Voldemort."

"And yet... you fear the boy," added Grindelwald, hilarious. "Because his power is beyond your comprehension."

"Silence! I said, silence! *CRUCIO!*"

The dungeon turned red again as the torture resumed. A few steps away, Harry felt petrified. His forehead, his entire head was burning now.

"I know the way... I know how to rid you of the boy..." gasped Grindelwald, shortly after the torture stopped.

"The wand... You know where it is, don't you?" said Voldemort in a honeyed voice. "Speak! And I promise you a quick death; Lord Voldemort is merciful."

"What you really need... is an Oracle. The last Oracle... It is your only chance, and I alone can offer it to you."

The mention of the Oracle seemed to destabilise Voldemort for a moment, until he realised he had just lowered his guard.

"Do not try to deceive me, I know when I am being lied to! In possession of such an object, never would you have lost against Dumbledore... And never would you have known the dishonour of this sordid cell."

A veil seemed to pass over Grindelwald's emaciated face.

"At Durmstrang, in the heart of the rock, that is where you must search," he replied, gaze vague, as if his mind had wandered into distant memories.

"The Elder Wand is at Durmstrang? The rest does not interest me."

The pile of patched capes that constituted Grindelwald straightened up painfully and seemed to shake its head. The next instant he was seized by another uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"You want that wand..." he mocked, holding his sides. "But your journey was pointless. I never had it."

In the darkness, Voldemort's pupils glowed red. His anger was terrible; Harry could feel it in his scar as if he were truly in the room.

"You lie!"

There was a new flash and Gellert Grindelwald collapsed for good, a smile forever printed on the corner of his lips. A magical wave of intense indigo light then burst from his inert body, as if the wizard's last breath had triggered a final enchantment.

The atmosphere darkened around them and the walls of the cell began to shake, as if the dream threatened to collapse. Voldemort dissipated like a cloud of steam and Harry and Ginny found themselves alone facing Grindelwald's remains. Standing, lost in the infinite darkness of the dream, they could both guess it, without really being able to explain why or how. Something even worse than the murder they had witnessed awaited them.

Closely pressed against each other, terror overcame them as Grindelwald's remains were seized with convulsions. Long, black, curly hair grew from his emaciated skull, and nails like claws unrolled from his twisted fingers, clenched by almost palpable suffering. A moment later, the thing rose before them, a blinding indigo light bursting from its chest.

"Oh... no!" choked Ginny in an anguished cry.

"Come on!" shouted Harry. "We have to get out of here. Run, run and don't look back!"

But barely had he darted forward when the unbearable pain of his scar split his skull in two. Helpless, he felt himself recalled to reality as the monster swooped on Ginny.

"Harry? HARRY! Where are you? Don't leave me... No, no... Harryyyyyyy..."

"GINNY!"

Harry was back in the dormitories. Resting on his chest, his ash-black eyes filled with tears, Chick stared at him fearfully.

"Ginny... is in danger," he told him, grabbing his wizard robes. "We need help!"

But Dean and Seamus were sleeping soundly and refused to wake up; Neville was downstairs, somewhere in the infirmary, with Malfoy, Krum, and so many others; and Ron... Ron sat up screaming as if someone had tried to strangle him.

"The... the thing," he panted, "it's here, it's back!"

Harry was about to answer him when a morbid refrain rose from the lower floors:

"...Fear our awakening, enemies of the Greater Good. For we have returned!"

Half-dishevelled, Harry and Ron didn't waste another second. They rushed out of the dormitories and came face-to-face with Hermione, Luna, and...

"Ginny!"

"No, Harry! Don't touch her!" exclaimed Hermione, blocking his way. "All you'll manage to do is get a nasty shock."

"She's been bewitched, and no enchantment has any effect on her," added Luna. "It looks... like she's still in the nightmare."

"So you saw it too, the thing?" asked Ron.

Everyone nodded silently. Imperturbable, Ginny passed them and continued her route to the tapestry marking the exit of the common room. She walked with a shuffling step, eyes closed.

"We'd better follow her. As long as she's with us, she won't risk much," suggested Ron, half-sure of himself.

Guided by Ginny, they crossed several corridors. On her way, the draperies covering centuries-old furniture or the indigo flames of the torches quivered as if an invisible force or presence accompanied her. His forehead hurting atrociously, Harry followed without saying anything. Beside him, Ron, Hermione, and Luna progressed head in shoulders, wand in hand, in case Koulok fell upon them around a corner. Chick kept letting out terrified cheeps.

They soon arrived in the Great Hall, where the Yggdrasil appeared more agonising than ever. Scarlet sap, resembling semi-coagulated blood, oozed from all sides of its blackened bark, forming long viscous threads in places.

"It's draining its last strength!" moaned Luna.

But Ginny gave them little opportunity to pity the tree's fate any longer. She took a new exit, branched off, and they soon found themselves all five at the foot of the Dueling Tower and its interminable spiral staircase. Ginny appeared to float above the ground now, and they almost had to run not to get left behind.

"Harry? Your... your scar..." panted Ron as they climbed the floors of the tower at full speed. "Your scar wouldn't be hurting, by any chance?"

"How would you know?" asked Harry, intrigued, before mechanically bringing a hand to his forehead. "I haven't even had time to tell you!"

"Because I really think we're there... Look outside, the famous 'longest day' the Ferryman spoke of, it wasn't the Summer Solstice... It's now."

Increasingly worried, Harry stuck his head through one of the many arrowslits punctuating their path. If only he could have contradicted Ron... Alas, despite the two-thirty in the morning his watch indicated, the castle buttresses, the Silver Forest, and the vast snowy expanses were lit as if in broad daylight; with the difference that a curious purple veil had spread over the surroundings.

Harry's stomach contracted as he resumed his ascent. Everything his instinct had warned him against since he had signed Halcard's parchment, upon their arrival at Durmstrang, seemed about to happen. Had he devoted himself enough to the task dictated by his heart during the year? Should he have done more, so that this dreaded day would never come? Did they still have a chance to escape the trap that seemed to have threatened them for so long?

Reaching the top floor of the tower, Ginny took the few steps separating her from the summit. The trapdoor opened by itself in her path and they finally found themselves in the open air where a most unthinkable spectacle awaited them.

"It looks like... the Deathly Hallows," shuddered Luna.

"Grindelwald's signature," murmured Hermione, eyes wide.

So large one would have thought one could touch it with a fingertip, or land on it from an overenthusiastic jump, an incredible bloody moon hung

over them. Its outline stood out from the cloudy background in a circle within which was inscribed the dark triangle formed by the tip of the Devil's Horn. Through this powerful contrast, only one of the mountain's ridges remained visible, lit by the star, like a vertical segment. A segment, contained in the triangle, itself contained in the circle of the sign of the Deathly Hallows...

Harry reflected that in the original symbol, the circle, representing the Resurrection Stone, was inscribed *inside* the triangle, not the other way around. His attention returned to Ginny, however. She had advanced to the centre of the training plateau and was now raising her arms towards the sky, as if addressing a prayer to a god hidden somewhere above their heads.

"Ginny? Listen to me..." said Harry gently, approaching cautiously. "You have to get out of this nightmare. You can do it. It's that thing's world, but it's yours too!"

Hitherto impassive, Ginny's face twisted into a terrified grimace.

"Ha... Harry? He... has me..." she sobbed, eyelids still closed.

A tear of distress ran down her cheek. Harry wanted to hug her but received a powerful blow to the stomach and found himself thrown backwards.

"Who? Who has you?" asked Ron after running to help Harry up.

"Mon-ster..."

"It's all happening in your head, you're the master of the game!" insisted Harry. "Imagine you can do anything, and do it! Follow my voice and escape!"

"...can't... do... it..." articulated Ginny painfully, as if pronouncing only a few words cost her considerable effort. "He... chose me..."

She concluded her sentence with a scream of terror. Without thinking, Harry rushed at Ginny again before being violently pushed back, once more.

"And now... everything begins..." she finished by saying before her head fell back onto her chest, inert.

In the purple-tinted sky, the clouds agitated, rumbling. They began to turn, to swirl upon themselves faster and faster and Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna instinctively grouped around Ginny. Transforming into a veritable tornado, the phenomenon stretched down to the ground of a large courtyard located much further away, below.

"Have any of you ever seen that?" cried Ron, his voice drowned out by the ambient racket.

Lightning flashed through the mass of air and debris, and large blocks of stone from who knows where were now mixed in. Perched atop the Dueling Tower with his friends, Harry would have gladly fled. But in her state, Ginny remained impossible to move, whether by physical or magical means.

Struck repeatedly by lightning as if by the claws of a titanic beast, the courtyard floor opened little by little, shaking the castle walls. For a moment, a sort of ovoid pearl emerged from the bowels of the mountain before disappearing, sucked into the eye of the cyclone.

More and more matter was agitated in the maelstrom unleashing before their eyes. Despite everything, the walls and other neighbouring structures appeared intact. It was as if the storm had brought its share of rock, beams, and other tiles with it.

Suddenly, the tumult ceased. The clouds stood still and the wisps of dust dissipated gently. A dark, elongated silhouette emerged in the restored glow of the crimson moon. That of a new tower.

29. THE CARPATHIAN DRAGON

Just as the two highest peaks of the Carpathian range, namely the Devil's Horn and the Devil's Peak, faced each other, the tower revealed by the tornado appeared slightly taller and more curved than its twin sister, the Dueling Tower.

"Impossible," murmured Ron. "It would take dozens—what am I saying—hundreds of master builders to construct something like that in so little time."

At the same moment, a sort of whitish comet split the sky, crossing the immense red moon from one edge to the other. It stopped a few yards from the highest of the many balconies dotting the new tower, spreading two wide wings.

"It's... it's Halcard!"

"He's with the ghost," added Hermione, squinting. "I thought he'd left!"

"Doesn't matter," retorted Harry. "He's here, and he's going to get it," he added, clenching his fists.

Without warning, Ginny started walking again. Eyes still closed, her head swaying lifelessly from side to side with the rhythm of her steps, she approached the void. Harry wanted to scream, throw himself on her to stop her falling. Too late. Ginny had already extended a leg... and crossed the edge.

She hadn't fallen, however. As if by magic, a *Nimbus Liberandum* had materialised under her feet to support her; then a second, and another. Still bewitched, Ginny was joining the twin tower on an almost invisible walkway made of magical clouds.

"I don't like this, not one bit..." said Ron, craning his neck over the precipice.

"We don't have much choice; we're already falling behind," remarked Luna, although she seemed hesitant to start too.

Too worried that Ginny might slip away from them, Harry was the first to take the plunge.

"Come on!" he exclaimed, incredulous, after venturing onto the barely visible footbridge.

Little reassured, the others allowed themselves only a brief moment to gather their courage and follow. The crossing might have been pleasant under other circumstances. Treading on clouds was a bit like walking in infinitely light, even frothy snow. Unfortunately for Harry, the sensation was relegated to the background by the ever-increasing pain in his scar, combined with the bad feeling he had about Ginny which twisted his insides.

"That's strange, this balustrade rings a bell," observed Ron as they approached the tower.

The balcony to which the cloud path had led them did indeed have an air of *déjà vu*. Harry would have been unable to say why and cared little; Ginny had gained too much of a lead for his liking. An inexplicable force was at work that seemed to give her wings.

Forced to speed up, they soon stepped over the balustrade to rush into the intriguing structure. As soon as they entered, the place seemed even stranger to them. Despite a certain architectural harmony, the materials extending from floor to ceiling were totally discordant. Stone mixed with wood or even metal in a sort of surreal patchwork.

"En garde, scoundrels! Vile ruffians, how dare you drag me about like this!"

Harry could hardly believe his eyes. A knight saddled with a donkey and a sword far too big for him was glaring at them furiously from a canvas carelessly hung from the ceiling.

"But, I know him!" exclaimed Luna. "It's Sir Cadogan!"

"Don't tell me..." let slip Ron, perplexed.

"I'm starting to see more clearly," said Hermione as they continued on their way under the character's wrathful gaze. "Do you remember that whole section of Hogwarts that mysteriously vanished at Christmas?"

Harry simply nodded silently. The worry he felt for Ginny, the fear growing within him, prevented him from pursuing any reflection.

"Yes, it was after the passage of that giant veil of darkness," replied Ron. "But then..."

"Don't ask me how, but this tower is entirely made of pieces of Hogwarts!" Hermione announced with anguish.

Signs supporting her hypothesis soon multiplied; whether it was some of the medieval suits of armour that punctuated the school corridors, found half-embedded in the walls; mosaic tiles ornamenting the Prefects' bathroom, scattered on the floor; or the statue of the one-eyed witch, the one that once hid a secret passage to the village of Hogsmeade, now hanging upside down.

Indifferent to these absurd discoveries, Ginny seemed to have taken advantage of the element of surprise to regain a lead. Only her red hair was still visible at times as they rushed up the steps of a new spiral staircase.

"Faster!" Harry ordered the rest of the group. "We're losing her!"

No one answered but it quickly became apparent that everyone was redoubling their efforts as the general pace increased. The ascent seemed to last a whole hour. At each floor crossed, an additional series of steps was revealed, as if the tower had continued to grow since they entered it.

Harry was out of breath with a nagging stitch when he emerged first into the antechamber where Ginny had finally stopped. Head still lowered, she gave him a wave that looked like an invitation. She then turned to the double doors she was facing and walked through them as if they were a simple smoke screen.

"I wouldn't risk it if I were you... at least not immediately. There are things you would be glad to know before crossing that door, for your salvation as for hers," said Halcard's voice just as Harry was about to push the leaves to follow her.

Exasperated, ready to fight, Harry hesitated before tightening his fingers on his wand. From what he had just perceived, the ex-Dean was very close, probably around the small balcony adjoining the antechamber. His estimate was correct for he found him without delay, leaning on a balustrade, busy contemplating the moon, his pearly white cape undulating delicately behind his back.

"I am sincerely sorry for your friend," resumed Halcard calmly before Harry could even open his mouth. "She probably constitutes the best way that thing found to reach you."

"What are you doing here, and what do you mean?" asked Harry coldly. "I don't have time to play guessing games; Ginny needs my help."

"I will explain everything I know, or rather everything I think I have understood, but I would prefer to wait until your friends have joined us. We probably won't come out of what is brewing in one piece, so we might as well put all the chances on our side."

Something gently pecked Harry's neck; it was Chick. After giving him a little peck, he launched himself into the air to land on Halcard's shoulder.

"You have a very intelligent and courageous friend, Mr Potter," said Halcard, stroking the small bird with the tip of his gloved index finger. "I realise how much it costs you to wait like this, but believe me, nothing will happen to Miss Weasley until you personally cross the threshold of that door."

Caught short, Harry resigned himself and leaned against the nearest wall, arms crossed, frowning. Ron, Hermione, and Luna arrived a few seconds later, out of breath.

"Harry, what are you doing with him? And where is Ginny?" panted Ron with a menacing air.

"Patience... we will join your sister soon, you have my word," replied Halcard, moving away from the balustrade, Chick now clinging to the collar of his jacket. "But for now, we have to talk. For the being longing for our visit, behind those doors, is far more dangerous than you suspect. And our defeat against him would mean a fate far worse than death."

"In that case, why would you be ready to take this risk today when you were in such a hurry to flee a month ago?" hastened to retort Harry.

Despite his amiable, almost nonchalant appearance, Halcard's face hardened.

"First of all because one of our mutual acquaintances, that ghost endowed with an extraordinary flair, managed to convey a message to which my heart had remained hermetic until then," he replied, fixing him with his grey, piercing eyes. "Contrary to what my centuries-old existence has taught me, there apparently exist among men a few brave souls for whom it is still worth fighting. You. Secondly, because I am far too old to make the same mistake twice in a row."

Harry had to repeat these last words to himself internally. Hearing someone who looked thirty at most describe himself as "old" had something disturbing about it.

"The same mistake?" picked up Hermione, intrigued, while the dark clouds above their heads began to rumble again.

"When that being came to find me, last spring, never could I have believed what he had become," replied Halcard. "The one I had known formerly, who had contributed so strongly to the creation of Durmstrang, to the flourishing of its students, and whom I had sought for decades after his sudden disappearance, was no more than a shadow of himself. A monstrous thing, thirsty for power, and vengeance. He offered for me to join him, I refused, we fought..."

Despite all his impatience and apprehension for Ginny, Harry projected himself for a few seconds into a scene mixing two men perched at the top of a cliff, braving the elements to engage in a merciless fight. A bit like the way he pictured the duel between Dumbledore and Grindelwald.

"That is not exactly what happened," said Halcard, smiling sadly at Harry, no doubt after using Legilimency to probe his mind. "I was far from supposing that my adversary and old friend was endowed with such a powerful asset... You know what I mean, don't you?"

"The Compass of Chaos, the Oracle?" said Luna in a small voice.

Halcard nodded gravely.

"What do you know of these objects?" he resumed after a short silence. "Rare are those to have even heard of their existence. And often they are old fools, or scholars—if there is a difference between the two—who ended up forgetting where the exit to their own library was..."

Doubtless influenced by Chick's friendly behaviour towards Halcard, Hermione summarised in a few words what they had learned. Whether during their past exchanges with Dumbledore, or what they had discovered next to Nerida Vulchanova's mausoleum, below Durmstrang.

"Gellert Grindelwald supposedly forged his own Oracle in the bowels of the Devil's Horn... on this point, we should be able to agree," said Halcard, looking meditative. "On the other hand, I do not think he contented himself with trapping a soul in it."

"What do you mean?" asked Ron.

"Over the course of his existence, Grindelwald murdered hundreds, nay, thousands of people..."

Lightning streaked the sky, very close to them. Halcard was the only one not to jump.

"Contrary to what you suggested earlier, I did not content myself with 'fleeing' a month ago," he continued, imperturbable. "This story of an Oracle, of a Compass of Chaos, to which you alluded during our last meeting, quickly turned into an obsession. Thanks to you, a new card was revealed, like an ace carefully hidden up a sleeve. For despite my superior experience, I had until then only very succinctly heard of these artifacts. Assisted and encouraged by our ghostly friend, I conducted my investigation in the four corners of the world. It was, however, relatively close to here that I finally found the most complete source of information. In a remote corner of the Restricted Section of the Great Archives Tower of Nizhny Novgorod. Judging by the layer of dust accumulated there, I was probably the first visitor in centuries. It must be said the enchantments guarding the place were particularly devious..."

He stopped and swept his gaze over them, as if to consult their thoughts for a moment, before addressing a smile to them.

"You wonder why anything touching on Oracles is so hard to access, so rare, don't you?" he asked while nodding. "Stealing someone's soul to subjugate it through a magical artifact is nothing glorious. And it would not be far-fetched to think that, strengthened by initial successful experiments, our ancestors at the origin of Oracles were tempted to sacrifice more than one person in their excessive quest for growth. From this perspective, when the time came to transmit their history to future generations, they might have contented themselves with keeping their actions quiet..."

"I don't think so..." cut in Hermione, her face betraying intense concentration. "If they had been ashamed, they would only have had to skew history, to lie about the origins of Oracles, or the necessity of resorting to them. There must be another reason."

Halcard applauded warmly and Chick let out a small cry resembling encouragement.

"Our long-nosed friend was right. There may yet be hope with these young wizards..." he murmured as if speaking to himself. "What other reason are you thinking of, Miss Granger?" he added aloud. "You have the answer. I feel it trying to force a path in your head."

"It's just that... precisely, history is stingy with details," replied Hermione, a little less sure of herself this time, "but it does mention a Great Regression."

"And this is where my retreat last month makes sense," resumed Halcard before inhaling deeply. "In that same way one sometimes finds a puzzle piece in an incongruous place, many years later, I finally got my hands on a few loose parchment pages, in the archives of the Great Tower of Nizhny Novgorod. They said of Oracles that..."

"...that they ended up turning against their users," continued Harry, astonished to have suddenly thought so loudly.

In the silence that ensued, Ron, Hermione, and Halcard considered him with astonishment. Behind their silhouettes, dark snow, like ash, had begun to fall gently against the reddish background of the moon.

"What? You suggested it too a while ago," retorted Harry defensively, pointing at Ron.

"Except I didn't really believe it."

"And why not? With such means and ambitions, the situation could only deteriorate," continued Harry. "That's what ended up happening to the Peverell brothers, the first owners of the Deathly Hallows. Only Ignotus had enough common sense not to abuse the gift he had received. It's also what happened to Voldemort, in a sense..."

"But... if that was all, there would have been more traces. History would mention it," objected Ron perceptively.

"I begin to understand why you form such an effective team," replied Halcard. "You are right, all of you. According to the information gathered, our ancestors of several thousand years ago had reached such a state of dependence that they made one mistake too many. By dint of trapping ever more souls in them, the Oracles ended up assimilating the mechanisms that constituted them. The sage who wrote these pages found in the archives even mentioned 'artifacts taking control of their hosts, and inciting them to commit ever more murders to strengthen themselves'. In short, after being slaves, the Oracles gradually became masters; and faced with this unexpected threat, our ancestors had no choice but to face them, their own creations. If we are still here today, it is obviously because they ended up winning. But... writings suggest rather a half-hearted victory... Only moments before their extinction, the Oracles likely united their forces to 'trigger an exceptional magical phenomenon, causing massive amnesia among the survivors'."

"That means that, all at once, our ancestors completely forgot everything related to Oracles?"

Halcard nodded, looking grim.

"Worse," he resumed. "In that same way one strives to erase all trace of a bad dream, our predecessors in an extreme majority destroyed the archives relating to them. The story could have stopped there, with the Oracles erased forever from collective memory. But that would be underestimating the latter, and their exceptional manipulation abilities... I am almost certain that in their final moments, it was man whom the Oracles ironically designated as their best hope of salvation. They therefore probably scattered tiny proofs of their existence, those famous 'Codexes', before invoking their massive amnesia spell... So that centuries, or even millennia later, when explorers and other archaeologists of a new world unearthed them, a chance would be given to them to return, and reign once more as lords and masters."

"And that chance... with a little help from Dumbledore, it was Gellert Grindelwald who offered it to them," murmured Harry as the extent of the threat hanging over their heads appeared more clearly to him. "It remains to be seen who is using the Compass of Chaos today, and how he came into its possession," he added after a moment of reflection. "A little earlier, you spoke of an old friend, who is it?"

Halcard was about to answer when the powerful blast of an organ suddenly vibrated the atmosphere. Somewhere nearby, a swarm of bats burst from the tower, squeaking with excitement while other notes rang out, like on the eve of a funeral mass.

"Who he is, you will learn soon enough. This melody is an invitation; he grows impatient and the time has come to go, young people. I hope you are ready," he concluded before leaving the balcony to return to the antechamber in a sweeping movement of his cape.

Chick flew off to return to Harry's pocket, right against his heart beating at a frantic pace. In the purple ambience speckled with snowflakes now mixed with bats, Harry exchanged a last look with Ron, Hermione, and Luna, then they rushed after the ex-Dean.

"One last thing," announced Halcard a few seconds later from the threshold of the double doors. "There is a very particular reason for my coming this evening, to the point of risking my immortality... Long before the threat of the Compass of Chaos resurfaced recently, I studied man. During nearly seven centuries of existence, I have seen him tear himself apart instead of uniting, without any of my numerous interventions being able to change anything. To tell the truth, humanity has so stubbornly

striven to decline every opportunity to improve itself that I thought I had lost my reason for being... until our paths crossed, last year, and I got to know you even though I was subject to the *Imperius* Curse. Be very careful, above all. This thing awaiting us desires you ardently. I could feel it many times while I was under its sway and you were braving the trials with which it strewed your nights. Within minutes, it will try to join you to its cause, to win you to its side... in one way or another."

"I'm not sure I understand," replied Harry in all sincerity. "Why us? Why would our company matter so much to this monster?"

"Because you are living proof of love, Harry Potter. And through you, your friends are too," retorted Halcard before turning his back on them without warning and disappearing behind the door, as Ginny had done shortly before.

Brain boiling, Harry stepped forward in turn, one hand out, the other clenched on his wand. Crossing the double doors proved no more complicated than reaching Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ at King's Cross Station; the time to blink and he had passed to the other side. A sumptuous carpet of carmine velvet now stretched before him, along a corridor punctuated by chandeliers and tapestries adorned with a black dragon on a red background.

"I recognise that coat of arms," breathed Hermione as Ron and Luna appeared in turn. "They're old arms, maybe the first Durmstrang ever knew!"

A few yards further on, Halcard was waiting for them alongside the Long-Nosed Ghost who didn't delay in moving to meet them.

"Praised be Venus for guiding me so well. We were parted, now together we dwell! I kept an eye on your muse while you were away, She is with Evil, he awaits us, dismay. Building this tower cost him strength, 'tis true, But his appetite is only fiercer for you! Come, my friends, let us face him with grace, It is time to restore light to this place."

His verses declaimed, the spectre adjusted his large plumed hat and drew his rapier. Together, they advanced silently, letting themselves be guided by the sinister song of the organ, until reaching a vast circular room with a domed ceiling. Although no Yggdrasil root was there, the place looked unmistakably like the mausoleum they had discovered under the castle, during one of their past excursions.

"And up there, isn't that Nerida Vulchanova's body, in that weird golden bubble?" said Ron in a low voice, pointing to the top of the altar rising before them.

Barely had he fallen silent when a raucous, almost bestial voice echoed in the room.

"You doubtless mean the *Sepulcram*, dear friend... Come closer... come now, do not be afraid; and please excuse our English. With fatigue, it is... a little rusty," added the voice with a strong Eastern European accent.

Prudently, the group complied, circling the altar. Ginny soon became visible and Harry felt his heart leap in his chest. Looking absent, she was playing a strange instrument; sitting on a stool, in front of an immense mural depicting hundreds of disturbing faces. The device over which her fingers ran from left to right was close to an organ, except that the interminable pipes with which it was fitted seemed made of glass or crystal. Within them, fine bluish flames could be seen quivering, in rhythm with the melody.

A humanoid creature with dark, curly hair stood beside Ginny, a hideous clawed hand placed on her like a teacher or a benevolent parent.

"Like so many other things here, we built the *Sepulcram*... so that even in death, the beauty of our eternal love be preserved from the ravages of time," said the creature, running Ginny's red hair through its long hooked fingers.

"Leave her alone!" cried Harry, brandishing his wand, without really knowing what spell he could cast.

Hitherto half-hidden behind a majestic red and black cape, the thing turned around. Its face finally appeared to them, so saturated with beard hair it seemed almost blackened by ash.

"It's..."

"The wolf!" choked Ron.

Transfixed, Harry couldn't believe his eyes. He looked like a human being whose transformation into a ferocious beast had been interrupted halfway.

"An Animagus... who abused his gift of transformation," breathed Hermione with anguish.

"Welcome to our lair," said the thing, spreading the folds of its cape, thus revealing a shirt overflowing with dark fur, in the centre of which

shone an indigo glow. "We are... we are Litovoi Drakul of Wallachia... Prince of Carpathians, Founding Father of Durmstrang, Avenging Wolf, Storm Cloud... and much more besides."

With its other paw, the creature clumsily grabbed a chalice resting nearby, on a ledge of the instrument. A thick crimson liquid agitated for a moment in the vessel, so much so that Harry believed with horror it was Ginny's blood. But from the viscous way it began to run down the monster's shaggy beard, then stain its clothes as it gorged itself, it became obvious it was in fact Yggdrasil sap.

Its drink swallowed to the last drop, the thing greeted them through a surprisingly graceful bow, similar to those Halcard had given them throughout the year.

"This school was built by Nerida Vulchanova," dared Hermione despite the crushing aura of power emanating from their host.

Her remark triggered a coarse laugh, close to a growl.

"The castle was designed *with* Nerida Vulchanova. To tell the truth, she was our wife... delightful child. Even if this alliance was never officialised, due to our... respective conditions," added the creature, squinting.

"You say that because you're a vampire?" asked Luna simply.

"A Vampire, and a Veela..." acquiesced the monster slowly. "A union forbidden by man, the very one we were trying—we are trying—to help," he replied before presenting them with a disturbing smile, fitted with four formidable canines.

Hitherto very discreet, Halcard had a coughing fit.

"If fraternity is so dear to your heart," he said, a hint of defiance in his voice, "perhaps you could start by releasing all those students from the nightmare in which you hold them prisoner... Perhaps you could even start with Miss Weasley, here present."

Halcard's words seemed to awaken a terrible resentment in the creature, who began to growl, like a beast whose territory had been threatened.

"THEY ONLY GOT WHAT THEY DESERVED!" it snarled, squeezing the chalice so hard it shattered. "If you knew the truth, you could judge the justice of the punishment afflicting them today. As for Miss Weasley... no harm will come to her. The spell will be lifted as soon as we have obtained your agreement..."

Harry frowned, just as Ron, Hermione, and Luna seemed intrigued.

"What do you expect from us, exactly?" asked Harry, ready to do anything to save Ginny.

"We want... you to join us..." replied the thing in a breath, before extending a hooked hand towards them in a sort of invitation. "Yes... Your friend will be our Valkyrie. You, Harry, as well as Mr Weasley, will be our invincible generals! One a valiant fighter, the other a fine strategist. You, brilliant Miss Granger, will make a perfect Minister! And you, Miss Lovegood, strong with such a particular spirit and such empathy, will watch over the diversity and preservation of our animal species... Together, we will work for the Greater Good!" continued the creature, spreading its arms, as Halcard had so often done during his speeches. "We will begin by bringing back our dearest beings! Thanks to the Yggdrasil, our love, Nerida Vulchanova; but also your parents and your uncle, Harry Potter; your much-missed brother, Mr Weasley..."

"Nerida is no more. And your affinity with the World Tree or your particular ties with the Ferryman can change nothing about that," objected Halcard coldly.

"The dead have no place among the living," murmured Harry bitterly, despite the desire the beast's speech might arouse in him.

The monster did not answer. By way of reaction, a tear of blood welled up before sliding down its hairy cheek.

"You should abandon this false idea," suggested Hermione compassionately. "It probably isn't yours. Just as the Greater Good was the pretext of another man called Gellert Grindelwald."

"Precisely," resumed Halcard, "that medallion under your shirt is his work. He abuses your hope to better exploit your gifts. For behind his false promises, his true goal is to extend his domination over the world of men. Remember who you were, and remove it from your neck, Litovoi. Your inner light alone will be ample to guide those dear to you, in this world as in the other."

Although the room had no windows, powerful gusts began to blow, snuffing out most of the candles lighting them until now.

"Remove it... When it chose *us*?" growled the creature, its sap-stained shirt rising slowly with the rhythm of its wheezing breath. "This artifact will help us bring back Nerida... just like you, for such is our will!"

The events that followed happened too quickly for Harry, Ron, Hermione, or Luna to have time to do anything. The beast leaned over

Ginny, embracing her lovingly with its awful clawed arms. Quick as lightning, Halcard fired two spells but they bounced off the monster's cape as they would have against a magical shield.

Moments later, four fangs sank into the delicate flesh of Ginny's neck...

"NO! You promised her!" cried Halcard, as Ginny let out a terrible scream.

Aghast, Harry watched her fall to her knees then collapse to the floor, inert. Without even having been able to initiate the slightest gesture, one of his worst fears had just come true. In a few hours at most, Ginny would be a vampire too; provided the infection didn't kill her during its spread... She would become, no—they would become—creatures of the night, slaves to a thirst reputed to be unquenchable. For whatever path Ginny took, Harry would take it too.

"You monster! I'll follow her, but I'll never follow you!" cried Harry, throat tight, eyes full of tears.

But as he raised his head, the beast was no more. A man with black curly hair had replaced it. About thirty years old—at least in appearance—both tall and handsome; he looked like Halcard in a subtly different, darker version of himself.

Everything that might surround Harry outside of this newcomer ceased to exist. Although something, somewhere against his heart, still wriggled feverishly in a sort of attempt to reason with him, Harry was suddenly animated by only one will: vengeance. The time was no longer for Disarming Charms, or Impediment Jinxes; it was for the destruction of this evil creature who had just sucked the life out of Ginny.

A huge flaming rock burst from Harry's wand, perhaps even more impressive than the one he had projected when he thought he was facing Voldemort in one of his dreams. Despite his haste, he aimed perfectly. Without an ounce of compassion, he watched the miniature meteor swoop on its target. But while he expected to see the vampire try to avoid the fireball, the latter spread his arms, unfurling his cape; as if reason had suddenly won him over, and he had preferred to embrace the just punishment reserved for him rather than fight any longer.

Litovoi Drakul's cape shimmered for a moment, then the meteor hit its target. There was no explosion, no cry of pain, however. At the moment of impact, the piece of dark cloth, dotted with tiny luminous spots, simply absorbed the rock. It re-emerged a few seconds later on the other side of

the vampire, like a projectile diverted from its trajectory by a star of colossal mass.

"See how you have progressed!" exclaimed Litovoi, this time in perfect English, as Harry dived aside to avoid the incandescent ball returned to him. "Despite your recent successes, you were gnawed by doubt, full of worry about your future... Would you have thought yourself capable of accomplishing such a prodigy before we took you in hand?"

A little further away, struck by the meteor, an entire section of the room burst open to the outside, shattering into pieces, giving way to a portion of bloody moon. Freezing air rushed into the room and Harry became aware of his friends' presence again.

"Nice try," whispered Ron, a sign that no one had been hurt during the retaliation.

"Your mind is beginning to open," continued the vampire aloud, while exchanging a few hexes with Halcard in a surge of lightning and flashes of light. "It opens, and your abilities follow!"

In turn, the Long-Nosed Ghost engaged in the battle against the vampire lord. But although his feints and sword strokes demonstrated rare skill, the monster's clawed guard remained impenetrable. So much so that Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna soon joined their forces in the fight.

"Dreamers have always made the greatest builders!" continued Litovoi despite the deluge of hexes assailing him. "Give free rein to your imagination, to your passion, dear friends... Only thus will your training find its end, only thus will you be able to brave the ultimate trial incumbent upon you."

Now six against one, the master of the place began to disappear and reappear incessantly in the room, as if he were everywhere and nowhere at once. He thus dodged the spells aimed at him and counter-attacked with renewed vigour by invoking various hexes that seemed intended more to wound the group members than to put them permanently out of harm's way.

"For us, you will go to meet the Ferryman," resumed the monster, his dark eyes reflecting with ever more intensity the indigo glow bursting from his chest. "Aboard his vessel, you will rush onto the torrent of sap leading to the Realm of the Dead..."

Amidst the explosions and projections of shattered rock, Litovoi Drakul raised his arms to the sky and appeared to multiply.

"Armed with fully developed gifts, you will brave the obstacles and find her," said the vampire's voice somewhere around them. "She will not be able to resist that flame, that life, that exceptional love dancing within you; she will follow you on the path of return, and will come back to us at last... Nerida..."

A breeze agitated the atmosphere and Harry felt a sharp pain as a sharp object, resembling a claw, lacerated his back. Barely had he dropped to one knee when the monster surged behind his friends to inflict the same spell on them one after another. Last standing, only Halcard managed to deflect the attack just in time.

"Nerida would prefer never to have existed than to serve as a pretext for such madness!" he replied angrily.

About to deal another blow, Litovoi Drakul seemed to hesitate for a moment. Long enough in any case to allow Halcard's blade to find a way to his throat...

The vampire lord stifled a gasp of surprise as a trickle of blood spurted from his mouth.

"You do not understand," he gurgled, swaying, clutching his own neck. "Our will is... unalterable, inescapable..."

Still in shock, Litovoi retreated, staggering. Implacable, Halcard pursued him like a shadow and both were soon bathed in the cone of purple light reflected by the moon. As the master of the place slumped among the debris under the ex-Dean's icy gaze, his face masked by a flood of black curly hair, Harry came to wonder if the two adversaries weren't even more linked than they had let on so far. Was it conceivable they were twin brothers, finally reunited after centuries of existence?

"Be sure of one thing..." choked Litovoi, head down, a pool of blood spreading at his feet. "The more you resist, the more serious the consequences will be... It could even be... that some of you join us tonight, at the end of their last breath..." he panted before a sinister laugh shook his shoulders.

Seized with convulsions, the vampire lost his balance and fell forward, hands in the scarlet puddle that had not ceased to widen on the floor. Under his mass of long black curly hair, a first then a second hump soon protruded, lifting his cape at the shoulder blades. Litovoi's then seductive face distorted, elongated into an inhuman rictus while a new growth sprouted in the middle of his forehead.

"Get up and get ready!" shouted Halcard to the group while distancing himself from the monster which continued to grow visibly. "No weakness can be permitted, not now... It will take your soul if you give it the chance! That goes for you too, Knight," he added to the Long-Nosed Ghost.

As best he could, Harry pulled himself to his feet and joined Ron, Hermione, and Luna who were grimacing in pain. Chick broke free from his collar and flew to join Ginny who lay on her side, a few steps away. Deprived of his comforting presence and overwhelmed by the ex-Dean's words, Harry no longer felt the courage to fight. The thing they were facing was capable of building a tower over three hundred feet high with a snap of its fingers, strengthening itself by drinking the blood of its victims, trapping its enemies in endless nightmares, and even changing shape at will; until becoming...

"No!" cried Hermione.

"A dragon, a bloody dragon!" exclaimed Ron, craning his neck, so much did the monster tower over them. "A Romanian Longhorn! Just like on the frescoes!"

"Not 'just like'," corrected Luna. "It's him, it's the black dragon on a red background of Durmstrang."

With a roar to shake Harry to his core, the beast, at once terrifying and majestic, stretched its two wide wings. It must have been thirty feet tall, and its scales looked as black and resistant as obsidian.

"Submit... pledge allegiance to us this evening, and a life of kings awaits you by our side..." said Litovoi Drakul's voice in Harry's head, while the reptile continued to growl. "Prefer the struggle, and it is death... as a preamble to an eternity of servitude..."

The monster straightened up proudly and glared at them with its large dark eyes. After shaking the ground with a few impatient tail thumps, it asked them in a solemn tone:

"What say you?"

It was obvious to Harry he wished under no circumstances to link himself to the fallen prince and his Compass, but he would have preferred to have a plan of action in mind before pronouncing himself. Alas, no idea came to him; he felt paralysed. Ron, Hermione, and Luna must have been at the same stage as him. As for Halcard, he seemed expectant. As if he had waited to see if this group of young wizards accompanying him was truly up to the peril to which he had deigned to expose himself.

"What say you?!" thundered Litovoi Drakul, his voice resonating in all their skulls.

"Er..."

Hermione had just stepped forward uncertainly, under Ron's appalled gaze.

"I..." she hesitated.

Eager to enlist his first lieutenant, the monster leaned forward. While the huge reptile head was only a yard away from her, Hermione turned around and gave the rest of the group an insistent wink, then a second. She then turned back and announced with an embarrassed smile:

"To tell you the truth, I think we're going to have to decline..."

Harry had only just grasped what Hermione was getting at when Luna was already firing her Conjunctivitis Curse. The hex hit home, right in the dragon's right eye, which let out a deafening scream.

"Cursed wretch! We will tear your soul from your body..." cried the monster, writhing in pain.

Leaving them not a second of respite, the beast anchored its two front legs in the ground and inhaled deeply before adding:

"...from your shredded... and charred body!"

The dragon's maw opened, revealing rows and rows of sharp fangs, as well as an indigo glow that seemed to rise from the back of its throat...

"Get down!" screamed Ron, grabbing Hermione by the waist to tackle her to the ground.

"*Protego!*" rushed Harry, as a veritable torrent of dark blue flames poured over them.

His Shield Charm might have been prodigious, but all would have ended up burned alive if Halcard hadn't pitched in with his own defensive spell to support him. Around them, beyond the thin interface protecting them, the ground crackled and seemed to boil. Frightened at the idea of the fate awaiting them if he faltered, Harry clung to his wand as to his life. Despite everything, he could feel the burning breath gaining ground on the protective dome, little by little.

"We have to find something; I won't hold much longer!" he threw to the rest of the group.

"You must, Harry! You have no other choice!" Halcard reminded him, concentrated on his own charm. "He'll run out of breath eventually!"

But barely had he uttered these words than the deluge of flames intensified.

In turn, Ron, Hermione, and Luna joined forces by invoking an additional shield, but it took less than a second for their attempt to be swept away by the power of the jet.

"What ho, have I been forgot? By gods above, Who better than Spirit to brave this blue stove?" came a voice behind their backs.

Rapier in hand, the Long-Nosed Ghost gave them a bow and dashed off at full speed. He ran, sinking progressively into the ground before finally disappearing, right where the magical barrier and the indigo furnace met. There was a moment during which Harry and Ron's apprehensive gazes crossed, then in the distance was heard:

"Fie, monster! Thy doom is sealed, pardieu! I feint, I lunge... and I strike true!"

There was another terrible roar and the flaming jet turned away from the group to sweep the rest of the room as the dragon shook its head angrily, chasing its assailant who had doubtless reappeared a little further away.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Halcard rushed at the opportunity and rained a deluge of spells on the monster. Their goal was to hit the beast's second eye to handicap it for good. The Long-Nosed Ghost proved his worth once again, for he was the first to succeed, despite the avalanche of claw and fang blows raining down on him.

"It is over," announced Halcard coldly to Litovoi Drakul, as the beast curled up on itself at the back of the room, its burning breath projecting large plumes of steam into the night's purple atmosphere. "Surrender and rid yourself of this Oracle gnawing at you."

The monster gave a plaintive growl. Inky black blood was now flowing abundantly from its eyes. It shook its large-scaled armoured head for a moment, spreading the liquid everywhere around it. It seemed suddenly divided, as if it were still fighting—internally, this time.

"Over?" it repeated after a good minute of silence. "We spared you; we offered you a privileged existence by our side..."

A round object, the size of a Galleon, glittered somewhere above the group. It was hooked, perhaps even anchored to the tip of the horn

protruding from the monster's skull. No one had noticed it until now, so fierce had the fight been.

Becoming bright, the Compass of Chaos continued to glow stronger and stronger. Soon, spectral wisps of an intense indigo colour were escaping from it on all sides.

"I don't like this," said Ron at the sight of the phenomenon.

Like dozens and dozens of morbid balloons, heads with mocking faces took shape in the bluish mist that had escaped from the artifact. Without waiting further, Halcard leaped stunningly to push back with the tip of his sword those whose proximity was becoming a little too threatening.

The heads twisted in pain before dissipating, but no sound ever came from their grotesque mouths. It was Ginny who screamed for them. Ginny, as well as all the other students suffering from *Lethargum Tenebris* whose echo reached them, despite the distance separating them from the infirmary located much further away, a good hundred yards below.

As Halcard landed between Harry and Luna, Litovoi Drakul's voice resumed, less and less recognisable however:

"This offer, you foolishly disdained. And now comes the time to drink of your souls... for such was your choice."

The heads floating here and there extended into a nightmarish vision. Some sprouted multiple legs directly from the skull, like delirious crosses with spiders; others took the appearance of diabolical gargoyles.

"Bow..." said Litovoi's voice, distorted as if composed of thousands of others, "before the master of Death."

The dragon roared and Harry had no choice but to cover his ears. When the beast had finished, it opened its wide eyelids again. New pupils with a blue-violet tint had appeared in the depths of its eyes.

"Th... there are too many!" cried Hermione as the monstrosities converged on the group, clacking their maws lined with crooked teeth hungrily.

"*Sectumsempra!*" cast Harry.

The critter he had targeted stopped on the spot, sliced into pieces; but at the same instant, Ginny started screaming even louder.

"It hurts them, her and the others!" exclaimed Luna pointing to Ginny grimacing a little further away. "They must all be linked, vampirised by

that thing."

"In that case... what do we do?" said Ron, alarmed, while a kind of demonic spider approached dangerously, its chitin legs knitting at full speed on the ground.

Harry felt trapped. They were already outnumbered, and now they couldn't even defend themselves properly. His gaze fell unconsciously on the Long-Nosed Ghost as he pushed back a creature with a good boot to the face, when an idea came to him.

"*Spero Patronum!*" he cried.

Despite the despair overwhelming him, a silver stag burst from his wand.

"Go!" he ordered the summoning.

The stag, which he usually called to the rescue to protect himself from Dementors, charged into the swarming mass of critters surrounding them, throwing and knocking them over in its path by its luminous aura alone.

"It seems to be working!" exclaimed Ron in an unsure voice.

But neither Ron nor any other member of the group had much time to imitate Harry. A huge paw, covered in black scales, had crashed down on them, throwing Luna far away. Her tumbling ceased only once she had brutally hit a wall of the room. She then lay still, unconscious.

"Take care of her, protect her!" shouted Halcard. "And don't let those filth approach her," he added pointing to the swarm of deformed creatures, "they'll suck out her soul! Stay, Harry, I won't make it without you."

The dragon wanted to stop Ron, Hermione, and the Long-Nosed Ghost from reaching Luna, but Halcard had leaped into the air once again to intercept the strike. The shock between the monster's paw and the ex-Dean's blade was such that Harry could feel it in his gut.

"*Incarcerous!*" thought Harry intuitively, and thick ropes shot from his wand to wrap around the beast.

"Now there is an excellent idea," the monster answered him internally.

With a look full of malice, the dragon only had to wiggle lazily to break the bonds, and thereby annihilate Harry's attempt. The next moment, it fainted Halcard who had pushed off the central pedestal and caught him mid-air with a single paw swipe of surprising swiftness.

"It is over, you said?" said the thing in their heads, as the dragon looked down with relish on the ex-Dean, immobilised in its claws. "Oh, Halcard.

You are good to resume your place at Durmstrang. Who could dream of a better puppet, a better facade, to reign in the shadows? Good old 'Halcard De Vulchanova', so tall, so handsome and so generous; always flanked by his wolf, who knows why..."

The sinister laughter of thousands of voices began to echo in Harry's mind, who dared not move a muscle. "'Halcard De Vulchanova', that was his name then?" he ruminated. Ginny had indeed spoken of a certain "H.D.V.", immortalised in the Trophy Room for having won the very first Triwizard Tournament. Ginny who now lay on the ground, consumed by *Lethargum Tenebris*, a few yards from the rest of the group...

The monster must have sensed Harry's thoughts for it soon turned towards him.

"Always so perceptive, Mr Potter. You cannot imagine how impatient we are to absorb that intellect and powerful magic shaping you... And if it now seems obvious you will never join us willingly..."

As these words rang in Harry's skull, the dragon had advanced in his direction.

"...then it is high time to end this!" added the beast, opening its huge maw to devour him.

Harry didn't know what to do anymore; he already saw his body crushed between the monster's fangs before being swallowed while his soul was torn away to bind with the Compass. A flaming red flash shot from one edge of the room to the other as the rows of fangs closed on him, and his friends' screams of horror pierced the atmosphere. It was Chick, who had just joined him in the palm of his hand. His warm and soothing presence was more than welcome in this fateful moment. But barely had the bird landed against him when something heavy had materialised, extending his arm which he had brandished forward by reflex, to protect himself.

The ceiling of flesh representing the monster's palate impaled itself on this extension of Harry's arm suddenly appeared. The maw reopened and disengaged immediately in a bestial moan of pain. Covered in the monster's blood from head to toe, Harry realised he was holding the Sword of Gryffindor, undoubtedly thanks to Chick's intervention. The bird let out a joyous chirp and flew off to rejoin Ginny. He nestled against the back of her neck, at the very spot where Litovoi, in his human form, had bitten her, and seemed to blink his tiny ash eyes complicitly.

A massive scaly tail crashed down with a roar right in front of Harry, making him jump. The gesture didn't seem intended to hurt him, but rather to pull him from his reverie...

"So be it. If you can save yourself, try then to save *them...*" roared the voices in chorus, while the dragon turned on Ron, Hermione, and Luna, its maw distorting into a nasty grin.

The beast took a deep breath and the monstrosities carpeting the floor scattered in haste. Harry, for his part, had started running like never before, wand in one hand, Gryffindor relic in the other. Only then could he measure just how vicious the monster was. The dragon's tail didn't just aim to attract his attention; it was also intended to hinder his progress, to stop him arriving in time to cast that Shield Charm only he was capable of invoking if he wanted to protect them all.

"Don't do that, I beg you!" cried Halcard, still firmly gripped. "You are the puppet! It is that thing speaking... manipulating you! Don't do..."

Insensitive, the dragon reared up, so as to benefit from enough distance to char the rest of the group below in one go. A bit randomly, Harry fired a spell but it was already too late. He dropped to his knees as he watched helplessly the scene of his best friend Ron, crouching, holding Hermione tight against him, Luna at their feet, and the torrent of indigo flames sweeping implacably over them. If only Chick could have done something, again, but he remained ten yards away, settled on Ginny's lifeless body.

A metallic click rang out, somewhere, mingling with the terrifying roar of the fiery breath. The flames began to turn, to swirl for a moment, before being suddenly snatched by an object Ron had raised above his head, a little something hardly bigger than a lighter.

They were still alive.

"Ron! Ron, that was brilliant!" exclaimed Harry, incredulous, eyes filled with tears of relief.

"And it's not over," the latter replied, grinning from ear to ear, while the dragon gasped with incredulity, deprived of its deadly breath. "*Fiat Lux!*" added Ron, activating the Deluminator Dumbledore had given him.

Harry only had time to close his eyes before the room was flooded with intense indigo light. When he reopened them, the dragon, blinded, had dropped Halcard. Bruised by all this suddenly revealed clarity, its head swayed in all directions. Doing so, Harry spotted the opportunity he had hoped for so much. He stiffened, tensed his muscles, and struck the

monster's horn with all his might with the Sword of Gryffindor the very moment it passed his level.

The horn gave way and the Compass dissociated from it. There were thousands of screams. The monstrosities populating the floor found themselves sucked into the disc no bigger than a Galleon that Harry and his friends had searched for so much, for hours on end. Mutilated by this separation, Litovoi resumed his human form. Halcard had already initiated a new blow, however, and failed to hold back his strike which passed through the vampire lord, right in the chest.

"No! No..." cried Halcard, discovering the extent of his action.

Litovoi Drakul collapsed, a purple stain spreading on his tunic.

"Aah..." breathed the vampire in a broken voice.

Despite the tragic aspect of the scene and the trickle of blood sliding from Litovoi's lips, Harry couldn't help thinking the vampire had regained that supernatural beauty he had revealed to them, shortly after biting Ginny.

"My intention was not to deal you the killing blow! I simply wanted to free you from that thing's grip," justified Halcard, kneeling beside the dying man to straighten him up delicately.

Tears with pearly reflections soon began to well up. They slid gently down Halcard's attractive face before dripping from the tip of his chin.

"And I... I simply desired to find her again, were it only for an instant," replied Litovoi after swallowing painfully.

"Deprived of your heart, then of your soul?" choked Halcard, half-incredulous. "Without them, you had no chance of triumphing, however," he added, tenderly wiping the blood flowing from the vampire lord's mouth with the back of his sleeve.

"Here you are, become much wiser than I, my saviour, my friend... my son..." Litovoi answered him, gratifying him with an admiring smile.

Like a cloud of steam, a fog of soft silvery glow had risen into the air as he finished his sentence. Harry, standing two steps away, told himself it must be the dying man's last breath. He recoiled, however, when the strange vapour enveloped them, him and Halcard.

"Have no fear," murmured Litovoi pointing to them both with a barely perceptible hand gesture, "it is... my will. Ah... and here is a warmth I had

not felt for so many years!" he rejoiced suddenly in the manner of a nostalgic and slightly lost old man. "Here I am, Nerida, my love..."

"No, don't leave me! Father... Father! Papa..." sobbed Halcard, as Litovoi Drakul's head fell back onto his chest.

Was it out of compassion or modesty? Harry couldn't have said. The fact remains he preferred to turn his gaze away from the scene of this centuries-old being, mourning the death of a barely rediscovered parent. He stopped for a moment on Ron, Hermione, Luna, as well as the Long-Nosed Ghost, who lay on the ground, too. It was a safe bet their last fight, notably the ultimate magic trick, the one with the Deluminator, had consumed all the energy they had left.

Harry, too, felt exhausted, so much so that he didn't realise when two dark figures burst into the room and stepped over a still inanimate Ginny, wands drawn. Nor did he hear when one of them pronounced the words "*Avada Kedavra!*". He noticed too late, as Halcard's features closed in turn, and his body folded grotesquely over his father's remains.

30. THE LAST DREAM OF LITOVOI

"*Crucio!*" cried the second silhouette, and Harry felt himself lifted from the ground by the power of the curse. A savage pain invaded him, depriving him of the few strengths he still had left. It was like being torn apart by a beast that had been deprived of freedom for too long, and which had patiently waited for its hour...

"Ah!" exulted the shorter of the two men, the one who must have been Rabastan, as Harry fell back to the ground unceremoniously. "The Ferryman did not lie to us!"

"No," sneered his brother, Rodolphus. "And tonight, the bloke risks having a lot of work," he added gaily, pointing to all the beings, already unconscious, sick, or dead, littering the floor. "What a royal welcome! They've already all killed each other; I would have liked to see that."

With great strides, Rabastan joined Harry who remained lying, helpless, and dealt him a violent kick right in the face. His nose broke with a loud crack and his wand rolled away clinking, swept into the distance.

"The worst is yet to come for you, Potter," hissed the Death Eater before spitting on the ground. "Oh, but what do I see..."

He had just noticed the Sword of Gryffindor and seized it greedily, stripping Harry of his last means of defence.

"Rabastan!"

"What...?" grumbled the latter, frustrated to see his torture session interrupted.

"I... It is here! The artifact, I found it!"

Rodolphus's excitement was almost palpable.

"Very well, bring it to me then."

There were a few hurried footsteps, then a voice rang out in the distance.

"Don't move!"

Through the broken lenses of his glasses, Harry distinguished two new silhouettes looming at the back of the room. One looked slim, with fairly broad shoulders; the other was rather thin, relatively tall, and had platinum blonde hair. Neville Longbottom and Draco Malfoy had evidently escaped from the infirmary to join them.

"I recognise you!" flared Rodolphus, annoyed. "Wouldn't you be the Longbottom son, by any chance?"

Neville nodded silently.

"Yes... yes of course," rejoiced Rabastan, turning towards him. "Decidedly, we are spoiled tonight. I am curious to see if you will last as long as your mother, Neville."

"True," added Rodolphus in a baby voice. "Your poor daddy went gaga very quickly..."

There was no answer, and Harry congratulated Neville internally for his composure. The Lestranges must have been destabilised by this silence, for when they spoke again, it was to address the second arrival.

"Draco...! Draco, it's good to see you again!" greeted him Rodolphus.

"Yes... And how about leaving this blood traitor," followed Rabastan, "to join people a little more... respectable?"

Draco took a hesitant step sideways, marking a symbolic distance from Neville.

"We found it, Draco!" resumed Rodolphus, showing him the Compass resting a few yards away. "With this object, we will fulfill the Dark Lord's last wishes... our family will be reunited!"

"You will be honoured more than any other," added Rabastan, "it is high time your generation took over."

Malfoy's breathing could be heard throughout the room now. His head as well as the hand holding his wand went back and forth from Neville to the Lestranges repeatedly, proof that the seed of discord had germinated in him.

"Are you really going to join them?" gulped Neville with disgust. "After everything they put us through?"

"With them... I could free my parents."

"But it wouldn't stop there, you know that."

"That's all that matters!" exclaimed Malfoy, before freezing his wand towards Neville, looking determined.

Taking advantage of the dispute, the Lestranges had discreetly moved closer, like two wild beasts ready to pounce on their prey.

"You know it's impossible," maintained Neville perseveringly, "Voldemort, the Death Eaters... that path, you've already followed it, you know where it leads... You're better than them!"

"And what makes you say that? YOU DON'T KNOW ME, Longbottom," spat Draco.

"I don't know you very well," admitted Neville, throat dry, "but he does," he resumed, nodding towards where Harry lay. "He... has faith in you. And I believe him, like many others."

Hearing his words, Harry would have liked more than anything in the world to hug Neville. Or even more... to warn him. For Rabastan had stepped forward, a maniacal grin printed on his face.

"*CRUCIO!*"

The curse hit its target full force. Neville fell, twisting on himself, his features disfigured by the suffering coursing through him from all sides.

"Haha! Well played Draco!" congratulated Rodolphus, before applauding heartily.

Impassive, Malfoy watched the scene of Neville arching, rolling on himself for several seconds that stretched into minutes, until the torture finally stopped.

"Good..." said Rabastan, out of breath from his performance. "Now Rodolphus, go get the Oracle while I finish with our friend Longbottom."

Murder in his eyes, he raised his wand over Neville, still curled up and moaning. This time however, Draco grabbed him by the arm, stopping him dead.

"Go to hell, you crazy, torturing... masochists!" he hissed, voice vibrating, before landing a violent punch to his temple.

Having always been of a somewhat fragile stature, Rabastan sprawled full length. By the time Rodolphus understood what was happening, Malfoy had thrown his wand to Neville and was shouting: "Get up!".

Neville didn't need telling twice. And as soon as he was back on his feet, the Lestranges could measure just how different the one facing them had

become. It was no longer the gently rebellious teenager, the pale reflection of the Longbottom line they had perceived until now, but a mature man, a real threat reminiscent of that hero of the Battle of Hogwarts who had sliced off the head of their beloved master's snake with a single sword stroke.

Visibly decided to draw a line under his Death Eater past, Draco was not to be outdone. His wand slashed the air as any suspicion of doubt had vanished from his pale gaze. Seeing him fight so fiercely, he seemed more impressive still than all the Malfoys combined.

"Take him, and smash them to smithereens!" cried Rabastan to his brother.

Forced back under the heavy fire of lightning bolts and other shards of shattered rock, they had moved closer to the Compass. Neville had to dive aside to avoid a Killing Curse that missed him by a hair's breadth. He was still rolling on one shoulder when his Disarming Charm shot out and sent Rabastan's wand flying into the air. Meanwhile, Draco narrowly missed Rodolphus...

"It is mine! MINE!" exclaimed the latter, brandishing Grindelwald's Oracle.

Intimidated by the powerful magical aura suddenly emanating from the Lestrangle brother, Neville and Draco held their breath.

"Ha! I can feel its power flowing into my very veins," boasted Rodolphus.

But a fraction of a second later, his face was distorted with horror. Indigo flames had burst from the Compass, spreading over his body as if his clothes had been soaked in petrol.

"It... it burns! No, not this! Rabastan, help me!" he pleaded, turning to his brother.

Rodolphus struggled in vain; the Compass seemed stuck to his hands as if he had received a Permanent Sticking Charm. A column of bright blue fire soon enveloped him, tearing a scream of agony from him. The next instant, calm had returned, and Rodolphus had disappeared, consumed by the flames.

Harry eventually passed out with the vision of a devastated battlefield, in the middle of which Rabastan had no other choice but to submit to Neville and Draco's orders. When he regained consciousness, he was lying down.

Someone had presumably conjured a sort of invisible stretcher to support his weight for he felt himself floating as if he were as light as a feather. Blurred silhouettes passed above him, some leaning over for a moment to identify him or check his state of health.

"Take care of the others, be very careful, they are out of danger but still in a pitiful state..." said a deep and familiar voice. "And for the Weasley girl, let him handle it; he seems to know what he is doing."

"Minister? One of them was carrying this with him."

"The Sword of Gryffindor? Yet I would swear I saw it before leaving my office..." said another voice, crisp and female, which Harry immediately identified as Professor McGonagall's.

He didn't understand much of it, but if he had one certainty, it was that the fact his friends were being treated with the utmost care reassured him. As for Ginny, he had finally accepted it; she was now a vampire and he would do what was necessary so that both would never be separated again.

Corridors passed by for a good while, until the group was stopped again. Sometimes his stretcher stopped a bit abruptly and his wounds painfully reminded him of their presence.

"Minister, we found Dawlish!" someone announced in a grandiloquent tone.

That tone too, Harry knew. It could only belong to Percy Weasley, Ron's big brother who worked at the Ministry of Magic.

"About time! And where..."

"In a broom cupboard, Sir, right here. See for yourself."

They advanced a few more steps. There was an embarrassed silence then Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister, ordered:

"Someone release him."

Eyes half-closed, Harry took advantage of the swaying of his stretcher to pretend his head had tipped to the side. A gap of a few inches, between two of the wizards crowding around, allowed him to observe the scene.

"*Finite!*" cast Percy Weasley, waving his wand with a sharp gesture.

To general surprise, his spell didn't just revive the Head of the Auror Office; it also revealed a woman of a certain age who had until then been

metamorphosed in the form of a beetle, clinging to Dawlish's shoulder.

"Minister?" choked the Head of the Auror Office as he regained consciousness.

"Yes, Dawlish?" replied Kingsley in a suspicious tone. "Are you finally going to explain to us what happened? I haven't heard from you for weeks. I had to go to your office personally, and get my hands on the reports transmitted by Potter and his comrades, to see a little clearer, and guess where you had gone. When I understood the Hogwarts students were in danger, I also dispatched Professor McGonagall. This matter is of the highest importance, why didn't you warn me earlier?"

"I..." stammered Dawlish. "I was going to do it, Sir!"

"Really? Before or after Miss Skeeter could prepare her scoop? And what is that parchment you are clutching to yourself? Come on, give me that!"

Dawlish recoiled, but faced with this assembly of wizards staring at him, their magic wands pointed at him, he had no choice but to hand over the scroll with a trembling hand. Unable to suppress a smile, Harry closed his eyes and turned over discreetly to enjoy a more comfortable position. He knew what it was about.

"So... you intended to fire Potter?" said Kingsley after a few moments.

"I fear that boy is not up to the expectations of my department, Minister," retorted Dawlish coldly, stung. "If he had shown himself more competent..."

"I have just been treated to Miss Granger's account, as well as that of young Longbottom and young Malfoy, thanks to whom the Lestranges are now out of harm's way. To hear them tell it, we would be in fine mess if Potter hadn't fought tonight, not to mention the rest of the year."

"They are nothing but children, Sir. Their word is worth..."

"Enough, Dawlish! As for you, Miss Skeeter..."

"Minister," intervened Percy Weasley, "I can almost affirm that this person is unregistered. You see, I have been personally in charge of the Animagus Registry for years..."

"Take Potter to the infirmary," ordered Kingsley whose impatience and anger seemed about to overflow.

The tone rose another notch as the doors of the store room they were in closed on them. On the way, they were soon led to cross the hall with the

countless statues and Harry couldn't suppress an exclamation upon noting that a new sculpture was erected between those of Harfang Munter and Nerida Vulchanova. The work presented a tall man, with attractive features and long curly hair...

Alerted by his cry of stupor, Professor McGonagall, who was escorting him personally, leaned over him. She must have thought Harry had just regained consciousness, for the next moment she answered him, eyes full of pride:

"You were wonderful, Potter."

Reaching the infirmary, she levitated him to his bed, right between Ron's and Hermione's.

"Your companions have been administered a Draught of Peace. They were a little too agitated when they woke up, given their state of health. Stay calm if you don't want to suffer the same fate," she added with a discreet smile. "I leave you; someone would like to speak to you before you join Morpheus."

Harry greeted her with a nod and closed his eyes for a moment. The person who had taken care of his nose and back wound had worked miracles. And this bed was so cosy...

Something passed nearby, gently displacing the air around him.

"You? But..." exclaimed Harry with surprise, discovering Halcard, patiently sitting at his bedside. "Don't tell me all this was just a bad dream!"

Despite his advanced state of weakness, an anger as sudden as it was irrepressible had sprung up in him. He hadn't lived through this whole adventure, suffered these countless pains, to be told none of it had been real.

"Would you not prefer my father to still be of this world? That he had never fallen under the influence of the Compass of Chaos?"

"Yes, of course, but... I don't understand... Yet I saw you die!"

Halcard chuckled.

"Is that really what you saw?" he replied mischievously. "Allow me to doubt it."

"I saw you, hit by the Lestranges' Killing Curse," retorted Harry before realising the import of his words. "Then, you collapsed..." he continued

more measuredly.

"That seems already to correspond better to reality," emphasised Halcard. "Indeed, I was hit by the *Avada Kedavra* curse, but for it to kill me... I would already have had to be alive!"

Harry considered him with wide eyes.

"Precisely, Mr Potter. The Undead are not affected in the same way as the living by this kind of spell. I won't pretend it didn't cause me terrible pain, to the point of losing consciousness; but you see, the only way to finish off vampires for good is either to behead them, or pierce their heart."

His head lowered as he added sadly:

"A fate which, alas, I involuntarily inflicted on my father, Litovoi Drakul."

"I am sorry," finally replied Harry, a little embarrassed. "Have you been able to read his will? He must doubtless have had many things to tell you."

He was burning to talk to him about Ginny. After all, who better than Halcard could explain to him what the undead existence his friend would have to adapt to consisted of? But his interlocutor visibly had other concerns in mind.

"It is precisely to discover the will in question that I came to find you, Harry," replied Halcard. "I fear, alas, that it is not possible for us to wait any longer. The essence we absorbed at Litovoi's last breath would be altered by it."

"You mean..."

Halcard nodded.

"It is a somewhat special will, no written parchment. But thoughts, memories, which I propose we explore right now. If you permit, I will insinuate myself into your mind to guide you to them. We will then discover them together."

Harry's curiosity was far too aroused for him to think even for a moment of sleeping, as per Professor McGonagall's recommendation. Something held him back, however...

"Are you sure you want to share this experience with me?" he asked.

"I would be honoured," replied Halcard gently. "What is more, Litovoi knew what he was doing when he impregnated you with his essence. Who

would I be to thwart this final wish? Come now, relax and close your eyes," he added, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Harry complied. The infirmary, with its rows of juxtaposed beds, disappeared, replaced by a universe of inky blackness, studded with tiny luminous spots. The image he had of Halcard, on the other hand, persisted.

"Here we are in what one might call our 'collective imagination', in a more literal sense," explained Halcard. "Come, you should be able to get up without feeling any pain now, for here we are in a world commanded by the mind alone."

Both walked in the void for a good while, lost in the middle of the stars. Harry had come to wonder if his companion had the slightest idea of the direction to take when a strange echo reached him. It sounded like a heartbeat.

"You noticed it too?" said Halcard, turning towards him. "You possess a rare sensitivity, that is beyond doubt."

In the distance, a star had begun to twinkle. It seemed to rotate on itself, like a lighthouse, emitting now a white glow, now a bluish glow.

"It is that one, without a doubt," said Halcard.

He only had to point at it for the star to approach, growing visibly to such a point it became almost distressing. They soon found themselves inside the star, blinded by its dazzling light, until their eyes acclimatised and Litovoi Drakul appeared, more handsome even than in Harry's memories.

"Halcard, Harry," the vampire welcomed them solemnly. "After causing you so much harm, I dare hope the explanations I am about to share with you will attenuate your resentment, allowing you to draw a line under this tragic adventure that brought us together."

In a manner more than familiar now, he spread his arms unfurling his cape and Harry felt himself sucked through the fabric thus revealed, alongside Halcard then even Litovoi.

"You will have your answers," said the vampire, as if he had foreseen or felt his two guests' thoughts, "but if you permit, let me start at the beginning."

They were on a sort of hill. The lush grass that had doubtless abundantly covered the place once appeared only in rare spots now, the rest being

nothing but churned mud and puddles stained with blood. A terrible battle had manifestly taken place a few hours earlier.

"King Ladislaus of Hungary—the fourth of the name—and myself always had our differences, since our earliest age," explained Litovoi with a certain weariness while slowly following the slope now stretching before them.

Lower down, among the corpses, broken spears and shields littering the ground, a man still stirred weakly, in fits and starts, doubtless under the impulse of the last life signals his nervous system was sending.

"Both presented the same hot-blooded temperament, both were born princes, so much so that one saw in the other a sort of brother... Until one fine day, I made—very certainly uncontrollably—the wooden sword my playmate held in his hands disappear. Ladislaus never recovered from the double injury to which I exposed him; both by depriving him of his favourite toy and by bringing my own weapon down on his skull, the only obstacle to my gesture having just vanished. We were only seven years old then."

They deviated from their trajectory to avoid the large carcass of a collapsed mount and Litovoi turned to Harry to add in a conversational tone:

"I believe I know, given the numerous excursions I was able to conduct in your mind, Harry Potter, that this kind of adventure is not foreign to you..."

"My cousin Dudley largely paid the price," agreed Harry. "And me too, for that matter..."

"Obviously," said Litovoi, "such is the common lot of wizards when they discover themselves in an environment unsuited to their extraordinary gifts. You imagine without difficulty, however, how dangerous it could be to manifest such abilities in my time. And to survive, I had to convince myself I was not what I was. If I succeeded over time, Ladislaus, as I said, never forgot. Many years later, the powerful of the region turned him against me out of greed, to such an extent that a war broke out. We are on the battlefield through which everything both ended, and began."

They had arrived at the level of the dying man. Impassive, Litovoi considered him for a moment and resumed:

"After hours and hours of disembowelment and other mutilations, Ladislaus proposed to end the battle through a duel. A masterstroke, for

while we confronted each other, he managed to bring out the wizarding talents I thought I had buried deep within my being. After that, he no longer had to worry about defeating me. The crowd of soldiers pressing around us, allied or opposing, guided by the numbing superstition in which high society had arranged to keep them since the dawn of time, took care of it for him."

Harry cast a sideways glance at the broken man lying at his feet. It was hard to believe he could have survived more than a minute given the countless spear wounds he had received. In the falling night, a shadow then made its entrance at the edge of a nearby wood. It passed from corpse to corpse, until reaching them to stop facing the dying man, and finally lean over his throat...

"If this bite offered me a sort of second chance by making me a vampire," said Litovoi pointing to the creature from which emanated awful sucking noises, "my true resurrection would never have taken place without the intervention of the most beautiful soul it has been given to me to meet. She chased that thing away before it had drained me of my last drops of blood and took me home to heal me..."

The setting changed, and the nocturnal battlefield morphed into a mountain forest imbued with the clarity of a sun at its zenith. Somewhere among the fir trees stood a very peculiar little house since it rested on an imposing chicken leg. Litovoi climbed the steps of the dwelling to open the door, before inviting them to follow him inside.

"So this is where the Magic happened?" said Halcard admiringly, stooping to enter. "Mother often told me about this place."

"Nerida lived alone before taking me in," agreed Litovoi. "She didn't take long to understand what I had become and fed me the blood of beasts she hunted in the surrounding woods. But she did much more than that... Half-Veela, Nerida was above all a witch."

The interior of the hut wasn't very big. At the back of the single room they had entered, Harry didn't fail to recognise the young Litovoi Drakul (who looked exactly like the one standing by his side) as well as Nerida Vulchanova, both lying on a rudimentary bed, hand in hand.

"Her mastery of magic was prodigious," resumed Litovoi, "and her teaching talent peerless—a quality no doubt linked to her very great empathy. We discovered quite quickly, while she was ensuring my training, that my gifts were no less exceptional than hers. After only a year of

apprenticeship, I was just as capable of turning into a wolf as reading others' minds. We then amused ourselves roaming the forest at night, me transformed, her on my back, while conversing mentally. The following year, my Legilimency talents had developed to such a point I could control my dreams, and breathe them into others."

"Is that what you are doing?" asked Harry, amazed, pointing to the couple sleeping before them.

"Yes, Harry Potter. We are fully evolving in a world apart, a world of our own creation. We dreamed by day, of course, for my vampire condition condemned me to a nocturnal existence. Could you imagine what happened next?"

Harry didn't have to project himself very long to find the answer. Anyone who had benefited from such gifts would have been tempted to do the same...

"The passage from dreams to reality?"

"Absolutely. And what we desired most was to have a place of our own. We, that is to say those who also possessed an affinity with magic. But we didn't take long to run into a major problem."

Litovoi inhaled. His hitherto impassive face displayed a certain annoyance.

"Very quickly, we succeeded in our first experiment by making our home a more spacious place, without its external form being affected for all that. But as I drew on my strength, my thirst for blood grew. To the point where one night, I feigned a need for solitude and went to the neighbouring town, a little lower down, at the bottom of the valley..."

"You ended up losing control," said Halcard thoughtfully, "and that's where you made that promise never to feed on any human being again."

"If Nerida didn't stop me taking revenge on Ladislaus, many years later, she proved intractable regarding my primal instincts. In her eyes, the fact that I used my powers to drink the blood of men lowered me to the level of those who persecuted us."

"In that case," intervened Harry, intrigued by this news, "how did you manage to build the castle? You didn't bleed half the beasts living in the region dry, did you?"

Litovoi Drakul burst into happy laughter.

"Forgive me," he said, composing himself. "The parallel is amusing; in your place, Nerida would doubtless have had the same reaction. But rest assured, never would she have allowed me to act thus. Brilliant and in love as she was, she soon presented me with her own solution. It was a very ancient seed her grandmother had bequeathed to her. According to her, its germination would lead to the growth of an exceptional tree whose sap could finally quench my thirst."

Neville and Hermione's words about the Yggdrasil resurfaced in Harry's mind. Making the magical tree grow implied a dragon...

"Yes, Harry Potter, your thoughts reflect the next step of our plan," approved Litovoi. "Vampire that I was, I had very particular facilities regarding transfiguration. And that is how, through obstinacy and repeated failures, I managed to change into what you designate today as a Romanian Longhorn. The rest, I believe I know you know as well. We planted the seed on which I breathed until the Yggdrasil finally was."

"Yet... Durmstrang is located at the top of a mountain, and not just any mountain," remarked Harry. "I thought you had planted the seed in the forest."

"That is correct. We needed isolation to guarantee a certain degree of security. We therefore joined our efforts and made the ground rise beneath our feet. Thus the Devil's Horn rose according to the image we had of the peak facing us and which had itself seen us grow; namely, the Devil's Peak."

Harry remained stupified. He had been taught that the founders of the great wizarding schools possessed gifts defying understanding, but to make an entire mountain emerge from the ground...

"Neville also told us that drinking the sap of this tree entailed a curse," he added after a moment.

"Your friend is perfectly informed. But a being as complex as the Yggdrasil presents many exceptions. As far as I am concerned, I am its father, in a way, and thus find myself exempt from such punishment."

"From there, you turned this little house into a real castle, didn't you?" asked Halcard with undisguised interest. "I always believed you had identified the Devil's Horn after many explorations before finally building your school there. But I was far from imagining it was in reality the same place as the woods in which your love was born. Why hide it from me until now? Never would I have betrayed your secrets..."

Litovoi's face conveyed annoyance once again.

"It was not a lack of trust. We simply thought it was healthier for you to be unaware of how powerful we were. We wanted to see you develop for and by yourself."

"Is that why you abandoned me, Father?"

As he finished his sentence, Halcard's voice had broken.

"Abandoned you?" repeated Litovoi, flabbergasted. "How could we? You represent what we hold most dear. No... We simply... disappeared. That traitor Harfang Munter is the cause," he added with contempt. "A few years after being admitted, his post of Potions Master was no longer enough for him..."

Harry's image of the cabin dissipated like a wisp of smoke. A new set fell into place, that of a room he knew well. They were now in the centre of Nerida Vulchanova's Mausoleum, perched at the top of her altar. Before them, the Litovoi of yesteryear carried the founder in his arms and placed her in her golden bubble with infinite care.

"Nerida showed herself increasingly anxious as responsibilities, that is to say the number of students admitted to Durmstrang, grew. I see her again that evening, asking Munter to prepare her a Draught of Peace."

Harry's lessons came back to him at the same moment. If Harfang Munter had marked history, it was notably for his uncommon ability to divert the most benign potions into powerful poisons.

"He overdosed the brew by adding a few ingredients of his own making," resumed Litovoi coldly. "His preparation no longer had the effect of soothing; instead, it plunged its victim into a deep lethargy. As soon as I realised the gravity of the situation, I carried the unconscious Nerida with me to the castle basements. I was so focused it took me only a few hours to create this room and the path to access it. I shaped the *Sepulcram* to protect your mother from the disastrous effects time, through the potion, might have on her. Sad to death, I kissed her one last time before leaving, ready to avenge us, and force Munter to prepare an antidote. But in doing so, I forgot to take the most elementary of precautions. My tender love's lips still being impregnated with the poison, I lost consciousness and fell asleep in turn..."

"I looked for you for so many years," choked Halcard, eyes misty. "There was no trace of you when I passed through Durmstrang, not even a

portrait, or a statue. You promised me the Headmasters would always be present there, in one way or another, even after their death. But..."

"But we were not dead yet," concluded Litovoi sadly, "only trapped, asleep in this place known to no other."

"I deduced you had left, that you had abandoned me... that I had disappointed you," said Halcard, face covered in tears.

"You have always lived up to every one of our expectations; far beyond!"

There was a long silence during which Harry kept quiet and tried with all his might to clear his mind. If he could have, he would have disappeared on the spot, so the two beings accompanying him could enjoy the reunion they deserved.

"What happened next?" finally asked Halcard, wiping his eyes with incomparable dignity.

"I was woken with a start by a strange bluish glare," replied Litovoi bitterly. "As for Nerida, she was dead; her pulse was no more."

"That light, it came from a conditional spell prepared by Grindelwald, right?" Harry permitted himself to ask.

He saw again the indigo glow the dark wizard's body had emitted, just after his assassination by Voldemort.

"Doubtless, for thinking about it again, everything seemed to have been staged for me to discover the artifact. I was mad with rage, and far too confident... the opportunity was obviously too good... I seized the Oracle and put it around my neck without even thinking of the consequences. It didn't take long for that thing to guess the evil gnawing at me. Of formidable help, it allowed me to identify every one of Harfang Munter's descendants, so I could make them pay for their relative's treachery."

"You mean... by plunging them in turn into a deep sleep, filled with nightmares of your invention?" said Harry.

"Yes. The *Lethargum Tenebris* was supposed to be limited to my targets, but very quickly, the influence of the Compass of Chaos took over. It needed souls, always more souls to subjugate, to torture before absorbing them, to satisfy its ambitions of the 'Greater Good'. That is how we crossed paths, the Compass and myself," said Litovoi. "We were flying over England to meet a new Munter to curse, last summer, when the Oracle spotted you. You were asleep, dreaming peacefully alongside your own love, young Weasley. You represented so many things dear to us, to me as to this

entity, that we desired you immediately. We then acted so you would join us at Durmstrang of which we had already regained control through Halcard... If your near future was uncertain, that of your dear friend seemed already mapped out. She knew deep down she would have to resume her studies. All that remained was to make Hogwarts sufficiently inhospitable by ravaging its construction site, then extend a helping hand to its Headmistress by offering to host her most mature students..."

"With all those teenagers at your mercy, the opportunity was too good, I imagine," mused Harry.

"Assuredly, young souls remain more impressionable than their elders; they constituted privileged prey. And although, troubled by Durmstrang's reputation, Minerva McGonagall would have preferred another establishment such as Beauxbatons, her mail to Madame Maxime quickly found itself in our hands, intercepted... Ultimately, you gave us the pleasant surprise of presenting yourselves of your own free will at the foot of the Initiate's Cliff at the start of term in September. The presence of Death Eaters at the castle, reason for your visit, did not worry us in the least. It constituted rather a formidable opportunity. Your boss, that... Dawlish, did try to interfere; but he is vain, and manipulating him too proved to be child's play."

"Do you know why he has it in for me so much?" Harry took the opportunity to question.

"Do you doubt yourself to the point of ignoring it?" retorted the vampire. "No need for Legilimency gifts to guess the answer... Aged only seventeen, you succeeded where a whole office of seasoned Aurors had failed. You embody a future this man will never be able to offer, to himself or to others. He is aware of your potential but refuses to accept it. He therefore prefers to use the little power at his disposal to prevent you from overshadowing him, rather than work so both of you rise side by side. A miserable attitude, reflecting how opposed you are; one only has to see how you tried to help young Malfoy this year, whose girlfriend, Miss Parkinson, is incidentally just another descendant of the Munters..."

Harry shivered at the thought of the number of students in the infirmary, subject to *Lethargum Tenebris*.

"With your defeat and that of the Compass, will your victims wake up one day, freed from the curse?"

"We are no longer there to feed their imagination," replied Litovoi thoughtfully. "Those who find the strength should manage to exit the labyrinth of nested nightmares in which they are trapped, and extract themselves from their torpor. After-effects are to be expected, however."

Noting the troubled look Harry wore, Litovoi continued.

"I am aware this account constitutes only meagre consolation after so much damage caused... I beg you to believe me, however. If I could for a moment madly bank on your assistance to bring back my lost love, my actions had long ceased to be the fruit of my will. For in a comparable quest, that thing enslaving me intended to pursue the dreams of 'Greater Good' of its beloved creator, who had formerly managed to find enough reason and strength to separate from it."

They had returned to the heart of the star. The world around them was nothing but pristine whiteness. Despite all the answers he had just obtained, Harry felt sadder than relieved.

"Your compassion is palpable and honours you, Harry Potter. For despite the worries nagging at you since we joined, not for a single moment have you manifested yourself."

Aware of the ease with which some managed to read him since he arrived at Durmstrang, Harry had practised masking his most intimate thoughts throughout the year, so the exercise became almost mechanical. The preoccupations inhabiting him in this moment, however, crashing frantically against the walls of his skull, remained impossible to hide. And after repressing them for so long, the words burst from his mouth with disconcerting spontaneity:

"I intend to become a vampire in turn, to be with Ginny," he announced. "Even if... I don't know what that really implies..."

Halcard and Litovoi, like an angel alongside his fallen twin, considered him gravely.

"You can believe me," he added, "I'll do it."

"One would have to be mad to question your bravery and determination after seeing you at work," admitted Litovoi. "I beg you, however, to reconsider this project. The vampire's thirst for blood knows no cure; it is enough to damn oneself..."

"With your permission, I could drink the sap of the Yggdrasil," retorted Harry. "One more curse doesn't scare me," he continued, pointing to his

scar.

Halcard still hadn't said anything but was now staring at him with a strangely delighted expression.

"You would become a sort of monster in turn... that option is not one," replied Litovoi in a tone brooking no reply.

"But... what about your son then?" persisted Harry. "He drank it all year..."

Halcard's smile widened.

"Once again, you draw the wrong conclusions from your observations," he said with amusement. "What you saw me consume had all the hallmarks of a sacred liquid, I grant you, but of another kind. As a hybrid, half-vampire and quarter-Veela, my constitution allows me prolonged exposure to sunlight, while imposing a most peculiar diet. Richebourg, La Romanée, Montrachet... My thirst can only be quenched by *Grands Crus*; my preference of the moment going to Burgundy wines, depending..."

Harry felt his heart clench at the obvious lack of solution. He was upright and honest, he favoured justice over ease and had always put his strength at the disposal of those dear to him. But because he was what he was, he had to suffer the (sometimes murderous) assaults of all beings of lesser value whose plans he threatened. What was the point of being great when life repaid you so ungratefully?

"Chase those nasty thoughts from your head," said Halcard, still smiling. "You seem to forget your nature also attracts powerful allies..."

Harry had to force himself not to answer "what's the point".

"That tiny bird accompanying you, for example, has not ceased to brood over your friend's wound," continued Halcard.

"What do you mean?"

"She is not out of the woods yet. The formidable powers of that fledgling will have at most hindered the spread of vampirism... As for me, I immediately placed her in the *Sepulcram* alongside Nerida, to limit a little more the rate at which the disease would operate in her. It would therefore be more accurate to say Miss Weasley's state currently situates her between life and un-life. But..."

"But...?"

Without even realising it, Harry had stopped breathing. Did the detached, almost delighted expression Halcard had worn since they broached the subject have a hidden meaning? Was there still a chance to save Ginny?

"I do not know the Yggdrasil as well as my father, but I am certain of one thing... The tree cannot show itself insensitive to what you have done for Durmstrang and its inhabitants this year. And that is without counting the demonstration of true love you have just given, only moments ago. For animated by your flame, you ceased not to project yourself to your friend's side... whatever the price to pay."

As Halcard spoke, the white light enveloping them had begun to fade. The lighting flickered more and more weakly, comparably to the beats of that invisible heart Harry had noticed earlier and which seemed on the verge of stopping.

"My last dream is coming to an end, my friends," said Litovoi. "It is time to say goodbye."

Darkness was almost total now. Only a small luminous bead remained, undulating delicately in the centre of the triangle described by Harry and his two companions.

"After so many centuries, Nerida must be burning to find you again," replied Halcard, embracing his father one last time.

The vampire lord ran his long fingers over his son's face in a final caress then turned to Harry.

"Meeting you has been an honour," he said, bowing.

With a gesture imbued with gratitude, he held out his hand. Harry was astonished to find it agreeably warm.

"No life without death... no death without life," slipped Litovoi with a peaceful smile. "Although all this happens in your head, and I have already ceased to be for a while now..." he added, looking falsely enigmatic.

Litovoi Drakul stepped back a few paces, adjusted the collar of his cape as if preparing for a long journey, and waved to them. He then walked away, darkness swallowing his graceful silhouette.

"Be chivalrous, be beautiful, my friends... Good night to you," he called to them without turning back.

Harry only had time to meet Halcard's gaze before the bead went out for good.

"We will take care of Miss Weasley tomorrow, I promise you. Now, let go and sleep, Harry," he could hear as sleep overcame him.

31. PROMISES KEPT

Despite all his worries, Harry didn't remember ever having known such restful sleep when he woke at dawn the next morning. Lying in the next bed, Ron must have noticed he was stirring, for he hastened to turn towards him, as quickly as his still-fresh wounds allowed.

"How do you feel?" he asked, finishing sitting up, chest covered in bandages.

His face displayed the incredulous look of someone who is there when he thought he would never make it.

"Better than yesterday," replied Harry, mouth pasty, back still sore from their adventure of the previous day. "And Hermione? And the others?"

"She'll be fine," said Ron, nodding towards the neighbouring bed. "She saw herself dying... maybe even worse. She went back to sleep an hour ago, I think. Luna is in a comparable state; as for Neville and Draco, they're a little further down. They came to see you when they came to bed," he added, "each on his own side, of course. Apparently, the Death Eaters didn't go easy on you."

The memory of the torture Rabastan had inflicted on him seemed terribly distant and more than secondary now.

"I have a lot to tell you," said Harry, thinking back to the conversation he had had with Litovoi Drakul during the night. "But before that, I have to see Ginny."

Ron lowered his eyes, looking sad.

"I heard the teachers talking amongst themselves. Van Helsing seemed to be telling McGonagall that Ginny's fate was sealed, that she would be a vampire for the rest of her days. Assuming she survives her transformation..."

"There might still be a chance," replied Harry. "Do you feel up to walking?"

Without further explanation, he slid out of bed and put on his wizard robes, still torn and stained with yesterday's blood, while inviting Ron to do the same. Curled up on a duvet, Crookshanks meowed lazily as they passed Hermione and Luna who were sleeping soundly. No one else noticed them. A contained agitation reigned at the back of the room, doubtless linked to the fact that the first victims of *Lethargum Tenebris* were finally emerging from their torpor.

"Ginny is still up there, at the top of the new tower," pointed out Ron upon leaving the infirmary, before pointing towards a path that had nothing to do with the one they were taking.

"We're making a detour via the tree," was the only answer he got.

Ron followed without bothering to ask for details of the plan and Harry thanked him internally. If he had been relieved for a brief moment to learn that Hermione, Luna, Neville—and even Draco—were out of the woods, the anguish specific to Ginny's situation had twisted his insides as soon as he woke up. As they crossed long corridors, lined with medieval suits of armour bowing as they passed as if aware of the feats accomplished a little earlier, he couldn't help praying for the Yggdrasil to appear fresh and resplendent as soon as they entered the Great Hall.

When they emerged into the vast room, still empty due to the early hour, they found alas nothing of the sort and Harry nearly fainted. Discovering the tree in a state of putrefaction comparable to the one they had always known was like seeing Ginny bitten a second time. And yet... something had changed. A single branch stood out despite its recessed position compared to the others. Judging by its verdant, almost translucent appearance, it must have grown recently. As their inspection revealed new details, Harry and Ron noticed a golden pearl, suspended at the end of the plant.

There was the sound of a door closing gently somewhere behind them, then light, almost imperceptible footsteps. It was Halcard.

"Well... I am delighted to see the Yggdrasil has answered my call," he said after approaching them.

He had leaned forward to admire the fruit but had recoiled almost immediately, surprised by a deep yawn.

"Please excuse me, the night has been long... And I spent almost all that remained of it pleading your cause to the tree," he added as if to justify himself.

Led by his curiosity, Harry delicately brought his hand close to the fruit which began to shine.

"Take it, it is there for you," urged Halcard.

He only had to reach out a little further. The golden pearl fell of its own accord into Harry's hand.

"Thank you," he replied to the tree with the sincerest gratitude, and all three hastened to leave the Great Hall towards the new tower.

Reaching the foot of the edifice whose mismatched appearance was even more striking with the rising day, Halcard brought his hand to his scabbard. He described a few complex figures with the tip of his sword and one of the magical clouds floating around the Dueling Tower detached itself to come down to their level.

"This should save us a bit of time and spare us some exercise," announced the vampire, jumping aboard the vehicle gracefully.

"The occasion might be ill-chosen but... your wand..." said Ron, looking questioning, as the cloud took off.

"It is in the handle of this artifact, absolutely," replied Halcard, shimmering his sword lovingly. "By the way, my congratulations again for your presence of mind yesterday," he added in a solemn tone. "Using that magic lighter to suck up the dragon's breath, then blinding it by demonstrating the potential of its own light... what audacity!"

Ron stammered a few words of thanks but didn't really know what to answer, and blushed to his ears. Carried by the *Nimbus Liberandum*, Litovoi Drakul's last creation appeared to them in its entirety. There was something strange about climbing the floors like this, watching these pieces of Hogwarts assembled in a motley fashion pass by; all against the mountainous background of the Carpathian range, tinted pink by the sun rising in the distance.

The air was surprisingly mild when they reached the top, right at the level of the breach opened in the cupola the day before by a powerful spell from Harry.

"That too, was something," noted Halcard as they entered the vast room. "Few wizards would be capable of such a feat."

Perhaps Harry would have been proud of himself in other circumstances, but all that mattered to him in this moment was rescuing Ginny. So he rushed up the spiral staircase facing them, his two companions on his

heels. At the top, next to the golden bubble constituting the *Sepulcram*, Professor McGonagall and Kingsley Shacklebolt awaited them, features drawn by lack of sleep; as well as the Long-Nosed Ghost, motionless, silent, his plumed felt hat screwed onto his skull so tightly only his impressive appendage remained visible.

"Do you have it?" asked Professor McGonagall, moving to meet him.

Hand moist with apprehension, Harry spread his fingers to reveal the intriguing pearl the Yggdrasil had just offered him.

"Then do what you have to do, by Merlin. Do it quickly, do it well, Potter."

Without further ceremony, Harry stepped forward and reached out to cross the interface separating him from Ginny. But the magical barrier proved as hard as stone.

"You will only manage to penetrate this bubble by disregarding your prejudices about what is real—and therefore achievable—and what is not," Halcard pointed out to him.

"Easier said than done," said Harry impatiently. "I thought every second counted... What if you gave her the pearl, you who know how to enter?"

"The Yggdrasil gave you this gift," retorted Halcard. "Even with the best of intentions, the fruit would decompose if I undertook this task in your place."

After taking a deep breath, Harry tried to empty his mind of any trace of annoyance and leaned against the bubble again. Gently at first, then with all his might. In vain. When he turned to share his distress with the rest of the group, Halcard wore his usual enigmatic smile.

"I don't see what's cheering about the situation! In what..."

But something unexpected had happened. By the time Harry opened his mouth again, a soothing warmth had seized him. Hitherto nestled against Ginny's neck, Chick had extracted himself from the *Sepulcram* to snuggle against his cheek.

"Do not be too quick to discard the few memories you hold from your dreams, Harry Potter, for they could contain many interesting answers..." Halcard told him, "even after time has passed, and you thought you had become someone else..."

Carried by Chick's gentle presence and guided by Halcard's words, Harry saw himself again as he tried to escape the clutches of Litovoi and

his evil compass, in a comparable imaginary room. Yes... How many times had he tried to blend into the scenery to escape his pursuer, before finally sinking into the strange marble lining the floor?

When he was done, Harry couldn't believe his eyes. He was on the other side of the interface, immersed in a dense liquid treating him like a large air bubble. Ginny might have been less than a yard away from him, but he had to paddle with all his might to reach her level. Thus asleep beside Nerida Vulchanova, her hair gently animated by the eddies he had caused, he found her more beautiful than ever. He delicately opened her mouth and inserted the pearl offered by the Yggdrasil. Her face speckled with freckles animated as if by magic.

Extracting himself from the protective dome proved far easier than entering it and the next moment, Harry, Ginny, and Chick had emerged from the *Sepulcram* and everyone rushed to meet them. Dumbfounded, Harry watched the reunion without daring to believe his happiness. How many times had he seen the curse, vampirism, fall upon his couple since last summer? His nightmares had been so numerous he had ended up convincing himself they announced the inevitable.

Yet, Ginny was there. In better shape even than he had seen her for months.

"I... I dreamed!" she exclaimed after kissing Harry tenderly.

"Dreamed? You mean had a nightmare," corrected Ron in the tone of one addressing a convalescent patient.

"Not only... It happened when I was alone, beside the founder... I saw *you!*" she hastened to add pointing to the Long-Nosed Ghost. "I saw you, alone, against a hundred armed men!"

"Such ire at that, was I so enraged?"

"Not to have had two hundred to fight? Maybe..." replied Ginny. "But above all, you were madly in love!"

"Could it be true, I who feel so empty inside? Lost, without even a flame, sad stateless guide?"

Harry had known melancholic spectres in the past, but the distress of a Nearly Headless Nick had never particularly touched him. What's more, Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor ghost at Hogwarts, had chosen to stay among the living. Conversely, it was difficult not to feel sympathy for this funny amnesiac musketeer. Despite his annoying habit of expressing himself in

the weirdest way possible, he had rescued them many times during the year; to the point of risking his soul in their favour during the last confrontation, against the Compass of Chaos.

Ginny advanced until she was nose-to-nose with the spectre. That is to say neither too close, nor too far.

"Come on, straighten up, and lift that hat blocking your view!" she cried. "There is much more than that fight story... I know the name of your beloved."

The ghost stiffened, as if suddenly called to attention.

"Wonderful child! Would you know who is my dear? This soul... Oh, whom all my life I held near? While one night, a bad blow to the head condemned us, my heart and I, to oblivion's bed?"

"I know it," confirmed Ginny, radiant.

The Long-Nosed Ghost held out his arms in a cordial invitation. While he held her tight, Ginny rose on tiptoe to whisper a few words in his ear.

"Go on, you are free now," she said loosening her embrace. "And thank you for everything, we would never have succeeded without your help."

"Some paths in life make spirits rise and soar, My friends, to cross your own was joy galore. Allow me now to take my leave, and dash... Not on the sly, but rather... with Panache!

With a theatrical gesture that had nothing to envy Halcard's bows, he lunged and threw his hat in the air. Everyone watched the plumed felt hat rise before floating gently down. The very instant the object touched the ground, it vanished. The ghost, for his part, had already disappeared.

"Nice, but a curious character all the same..." concluded Ron, still under the shock of surprise. "By the way, may we know how you learned the name of his beloved?"

"Sometimes, it's better not to explain everything," replied Ginny mischievously.

Perched on Harry's shoulder, Chick warbled in delighted approval.

"You're not going to leave us too, are you?" said Harry.

The bird let out a brief cheep that sounded like a "no" and went to take refuge in the collar of his tunic.

"No need to search any longer for how the Sword of Gryffindor landed here," remarked Professor McGonagall in a falsely overwhelmed tone.

"What do you mean, Professor?"

"Come now, it's obvious. Your little friend is a phoenix."

"And not just any phoenix," approved Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Chick must have understood they were talking about him, for he stared in turn at each member of his entourage with his small ash eyes. Doing so, his head made almost a complete turn, comparably to that of an owl.

"I suspected he was a phoenix," said Harry. "But if you're implying he's Dumbledore's companion, you're mistaken. Fawkes was very different from Chick."

"Yet it is him, or her, without a doubt," affirmed Professor McGonagall.

"I don't understand. How can you be so sure?"

"Because you have once again demonstrated—throughout this year—that you were Dumbledore's man, Harry," cut in Kingsley. "The accounts given to us by Messrs Longbottom, Malfoy, not forgetting Miss Granger, are eloquent!"

Despite the unwavering certainty shown by his interlocutors, Harry struggled to imagine that Fawkes and this tiny fluffy animal that had climbed up his arm in the Weasley brothers' shop were one and the same creature.

"Some say phoenixes emerge from the very essence of magic. For others, they come from a lost desert somewhere in Arabia... The fact remains that this being is reputed to change appearance according to the person to whom it binds itself as well as the experience accumulated with them. That could explain why yours still looks like a fledgling," intervened Halcard. "In seven hundred years of existence, I have only rarely had the chance to read about phoenixes. If there is one thing I have retained, however, it is that these fantastic animals seem to live up to the myths and legends surrounding them..."

Silence fallen again, eyes turned to Chick. Comfortably settled against Harry's chest, the bird had fallen asleep.

"I... owe you an apology," finally said Kingsley after a moment.

"What are you going to do with Dawlish, after all this?" asked Harry, who knew exactly where the Minister was going.

"I don't know yet," admitted Kingsley. "After such a blunder in this matter, it is unthinkable he keeps his post any longer."

"Since his beginnings at Hogwarts, John Dawlish has always lacked intelligence when it came to using his intellectual abilities—of which he is far from devoid!" deplored Professor McGonagall.

"Alas... in a way, his appointment was the price to pay for mine," retorted the Minister.

Harry felt anger rumble in him. He had already heard enough remarks of the same kind from the mouths of a Rufus Scrimgeour or a Cornelius Fudge, the previous Ministers for Magic.

"Politics..."

"...is a matter of compromise when one is not an extremist," cut in Kingsley. "And I implore you to continue your Auror training within the Ministry, Harry. We need men like you, like Ron or even Neville, as gifted as they are humane and empathetic, if we want to access a more favourable future one day."

"In that case, be kind enough to keep me out of your little manipulative calculations in the future, Minister," retorted Harry tit for tat.

"Gently... This grudge you hold against the Ministry shouldn't affect your judgment, to the point of confusing allies and enemies," replied Kingsley calmly. "Don't forget where we come from, you and I. And don't blame me for counting on you—for that is what I did by placing John Dawlish at your head—as that man we both cherish and to whom we owe so much did in the past. Do not forget, Harry, for trust is made thus."

"When you appointed Dawlish, did you know to what extent..."

"I knew he would give you a hard time. Just as I knew you would survive him with flying colours," replied Kingsley in a tone brooking no reply.

His hand clenched in Ginny's, Harry accepted the answer given. He had found deep in Kingsley's gaze that honesty he held so dear. Accompanied by Ron, they took their leave and hastened to find their classmates and friends in the infirmary. Hermione and Luna woke around four in the afternoon, just as Neville, wrapped in his duvet, took a seat on Ron's bed. Everyone could then exchange their impressions in a lively retrospective, punctuated by shivers and relieved laughter. After so many doubts and repeated efforts, they had managed—to use the words of an old friend—to rid Durmstrang of the Evil inhabiting it, and much more besides.

In the days that followed, a summer of welcome and unexpected mildness settled in the Carpathian Transylvania. The tree in the Great Hall welcomed this change of climate by producing new shoots, of the same kind as the one that had offered its magical fruit to Harry. Ginny and the majority of the other students back in shape (even her canines, which had started to grow, had more or less returned to their initial length), Quidditch training resumed during the two weeks separating the occupants of Durmstrang from the last round of the tournament.

That day, it was fine and almost warm, although the tip of the Devil's Horn was still as white as at the start of term last September. Professor McGonagall had been invited by Halcard to stay at the castle while Kingsley Shacklebolt had joined them as a special guest. The rest of the Ministry employees had long since left, taking Dawlish and Rita Skeeter (her magic wand confiscated pending the correctional court hearing awaiting her) with them.

"So, have you made your choice for next year?" asked Hermione to Halcard.

"My request is currently being examined by a special commission."

"What do you mean?"

"After seeing you at work all these months, I decided to stay at Durmstrang," replied Halcard. "As teacher and Headmaster."

"But you're already all that," retorted Harry, surprised.

Ready for Quidditch from head to toe, Ginny had asked him to fetch Ron who was chatting with Hermione before being joined by Halcard, Professor McGonagall, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"I wasn't of my own free will until today," replied Halcard. "Do not forget that it was subject to the will of the Compass and Litovoi that I had assumed this responsibility."

"And what does it change, that you now wish to assume these functions voluntarily?" said Ron.

"The appearance of my father's statue alongside Nerida Vulchanova's, in the hall of this school, risks raising many questions as to the origins of its heir... Sooner or later, someone will discover that Litovoi Drakul was a vampire, and the connection with my hybrid status will not fail to be established."

"Sure Van Helsing risks pulling a funny face," approved Ron, "him who claims to know everything about vampires."

"What is more..."

"What is more?" picked up Hermione in a sort of encouragement.

"I am weary of hiding my true identity," confessed Halcard. "Having become a vampire and discovered himself a wizard, my father always strove to cover his tracks, for fear that the powerful of the non-magical world he had left behind would resurface to make him pay for his differences. For nearly seven centuries, I roamed the world with the intimate conviction of having been abandoned by my missing parents, reproducing this same pattern. These wanderings were supposed to bring me a peace I finally only ever brushed against. Thanks to you dear friends, my parents are reunited again in the other world and my pride has been returned to me. The tainted blood of vampires flows in my veins, yet I can be in broad daylight; thus the hour has come to present myself under my true face, not that of 'Halcard De Vulchanova', but that of 'Halcard Drakul Vulchanova'."

There was something peculiar about conceiving that a being as gifted as Halcard could have doubted himself so much, to the point of torturing himself for several hundred years. Harry understood it only too well, however. The ex-Dean must have sensed his thoughts for he gave him a pointed look.

"Sometimes, our greatest enemy is not a demonic wizard with powers defying imagination, nor an omnipresent and corrupt system, but only oneself," he heard him agree in his mind.

Harry returned a subtle smile to Halcard before the latter turned to Hermione.

"And you my dear, what future for such a prodigious student?"

Hermione suddenly became so red she would doubtless have preferred to slip away to the bottom of her magical bag.

"I think I'm going to study law," she finally replied. "Hoping to manage to brush against justice," she added, determined.

"You would make a formidable defender of the oppressed," acknowledged Halcard, nodding. "You will doubtless have to redouble your strength and courage if you wish to maintain this exemplary line of conduct to the end, however."

Doubtless influenced by the discussion, Harry thought back to the "Greater Good". A notion that had caused them much trouble this year.

"Any news of the Compass of Chaos?" he asked.

"Our best experts have analysed the traces of residual magic at the top of that new tower," said Kingsley Shacklebolt with a certain unease. "It wasn't easy; the place is saturated with atypical sorcery. We've never seen anything like it..."

"Rodolphus and the Compass weren't consumed, right?"

"It seems not," admitted Kingsley. "The information gathered suggests rather an Apparition, although the thing is theoretically impossible inside the castle itself."

"Then it's not all over..." deplored Harry.

"No... indeed!" said an annoyed voice behind his back.

Ginny had just joined them. She wore that terrible look of one who must absolutely not be crossed.

"It's not all over," she repeated. "And Rodolphus Lestrangle can run all he likes, we still have a match to play! Come on Harry, Ron, mount up!"

Half-annoyed, Harry joined the team. The double doors at the back of the Great Hall opened onto a radiant sun and Chick flew off gracefully, cheeping happily. Without him even being aware of it, the last worries troubling Harry had vanished. There was nothing like a good game of Quidditch to take your mind off things...

.....
Far, very far away... in a remote and almost forgotten land, a vaguely familiar silhouette stood out against the pristine whiteness of a high mountain landscape. Surprisingly, no trace presaged its coming. As if this being, stocky in appearance and with clothes in such a pitiful state he was almost naked, had suddenly emerged from nothingness.

Indifferent to the biting cold reigning over the place, the arrival scanned the slope stretching before him. It was still night but the sky was clear, dotted with twinkling stars joined by a huge red moon. The last time he had trodden the thick snow covering this place, Rodolphus Lestrangle was a confused, lost man. A storm was then raging, both outside and within him.

That morning, however, Rodolphus embraced a serenity such as he hadn't known for months. His objective spotted, the Death Eater brought his hand to the medallion as big as a Galleon suspended from his neck and

brandished his wand. In a crash recalling that of an avalanche, the mountain split in two as a blinding cloud spread, engulfing everything in its path. When it had finally dissipated, a small refuge had appeared, surrounded by impressive mounds of ice.

Dragging his feet, sinking into the powdery ground, Rodolphus advanced towards the little house. When he had crossed the threshold, a new gesture sufficed to revive that saving fire which had once welcomed them, him and his brother, and a distant smell of onion soup marked the atmosphere.

It would have been logical to feel a certain melancholic loneliness in such circumstances. Yet, Rodolphus felt nothing of the sort. He was him, he would soon be them, he would soon be thousands.

"Speak, formulate your dearest wish and we will grant it," murmured something somewhere in the room.

Anyone other than Rodolphus Lestrage would have jumped, wondered if fatigue and cold hadn't driven him a bit mad. He, on the contrary, took his time before sitting on a bench; right in the place his brother Rabastan, that eternal leader, had once occupied.

"Speak... With us, your acts will know no limit but your own imagination," resumed an incalculable number of voices in his head.

Suddenly seized by a flush of mingled fright and excitement, Rodolphus concentrated with all his might. This wish demanded of him had haunted him since Rabastan had informed him of it months earlier, when their fall seemed as imminent as it was inevitable, shortly after fleeing this same refuge in which he found himself today.

"My Master, our Master... The Dark Lord supposedly has a daughter, hidden somewhere in this world..." he finally formulated aloud.

"You have our word, we will find her," hastened to answer the voices. "On one condition."

"What do you want?" replied Rodolphus, drunk with power.

"Your soul, Rodolphus Lestrage. For eternity..."

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A PROPOS

J.K. Rowling was born on July 31, 1965, in Chipping Sodbury, Gloucestershire, England. She studied at the University of Exeter and at the Sorbonne in Paris, graduating in French Literature and Classics. She first worked in London for Amnesty International.

The idea for Harry Potter and his wizarding school took root in her mind in 1990, during a train journey. The following year, Joanne moved to Portugal to teach English. Then, in 1992, she married a Portuguese journalist and gave birth to a daughter, Jessica. Following her divorce a few months later, she settled in Edinburgh with her baby. Living in precarious circumstances, she immersed herself in writing Harry's first adventure, finishing the manuscript that had accompanied her from London to Porto, all the way to the cafés of Edinburgh.

What followed resembles a fairy tale. The first agent to whom she sent her manuscript accepted it, and a small British publishing house decided to publish the book.

The rights were then auctioned in the United States for the largest advance ever paid to a children's author at the time!

Upon its release, the first volume of *Harry Potter* met with growing success thanks to word of mouth, eventually becoming a phenomenon both in Great Britain and abroad. Within eighteen months, it had been translated into thirty languages and had sold twenty million copies worldwide.

J.K. Rowling remarried in 2001 and gave Jessica a brother, David, in 2003, and a sister, Mackenzie, in 2005. She still lives in Scotland with her family, keeping as far as possible from the media and the dizzying success of her books.

Note: Author biography based on the 2007 version of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" published by Gallimard.

C.P. Chaumien was born on July 31, 1987, in Épinal, France. After growing up in the French Chablais region, he left at the age of eighteen to study Microengineering in Lausanne, Switzerland. Although his student life was as intense as one might imagine, from the very start Camille refused to abandon his favourite pastime: daydreaming.

It was only many years later, after countless hours spent marvelling at and finding solace in the Wizarding World, that he embarked on his very first book and fanfiction: *Harry Potter and the Compass of Chaos*. The project began in late 2016, when his girlfriend lamented having finished reading the saga yet again. The writing continued for five years, punctuated by a few breaks lasting several months. The passage of time in no way affecting the author's determination to offer his friends, J.K. Rowling, and her fans a sequel as entertaining as possible.

This fictional eighth episode of Harry Potter was written to respect the first seven novels as faithfully as possible (both in substance and form, echoing the style of J.F. Ménard's French translation and J.C. Götting's illustrations for the Gallimard editions of the 1990s and 2000s). The release of an eighth instalment in the form of a play, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, in late 2016 disrupted the project to a certain extent (a choice still acknowledged as debatable today). The more recent *Fantastic Beasts* film series, however, has been entirely ignored.

A lover of good food, Camille took gourmet pleasure in inserting certain elements of Swiss and Burgundian gastronomic culture into the story. His sources of inspiration do not stop there but cover a much wider spectrum, ranging from music tracks listened to while writing, to mythology and video games, as well as, naturally, more personal events.

C.P. Chaumien still lives in Switzerland, where he works as an engineer. He has no need to worry about the media or dream of any dizzying success, and that is just as well.

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- au site *scribblab.com* et son app *syllaber* ;
- aux sites *larousse.fr* et *lerobert.com* ;
- à mes parents et mes amis pour leur soutien et leur patience.

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